

*Summary of***A Strategy for Labor**

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Despite the importance of unions to democracy and a well-ordered economy in the United States, it is obvious that organized labor has been in decline in terms of membership, clout, and public opinion. This article offers suggestions for a strategy to revive labor by examining the general conditions for successful union organization and then presenting a stylized model of “traditional unionism” to contrast with the recommended alternative. An example of the alternative model’s operation is discussed, and the gains that might follow from its wider adoption are considered.

How Unions Win and Lose

Unions advance when they put forth practical programs of action that (1) benefit their members or potential members; (2) solve problems in the broader society—often, problems for capitalists, on whose well-being the rest of the society unfortunately depends; and (3) by doing both these things achieve the political cachet and social respect—as carriers of the ‘general interest’—needed to secure supports for their own organization. [368]

In the New Deal and postwar era, unions achieved these conditions by functioning as the redistributive agent of the working class, translating particular worker demands into general interests. This particular strategy is now less possible, however, since its most important organizational preconditions have been undermined.

These preconditions included the existence of a national economy sufficiently insulated from foreign competitors; large, lead firms dominating industry clusters and providing ready targets for worker organizations; and a more or less determinate working class, whose distinctiveness and integrity was assured by the leveling organizations of mass production. They have since been replaced by economic internationalization, a worldwide reorganization of production, and workforce heterogeneity.

It is hardly surprising, then, that even the strongest unions are on the defensive. To survive and prosper in the new restructured system, they need to create and occupy a place analogous to their old one. For example, unions can serve members’ interests by aiming for career security rather than job security and by providing all workers with the advanced training and counseling they

In Ackerman, Frank, Neva Goodwin, Laurie Dougherty, Kevin Gallagher, eds., *The Changing Nature of Work* (Washington: Island, 1998).

need and want, services rarely provided by employers or by government. This will ensure worker power in the more fluid, less fixed structures of the modern labor market.

Even if skills are made more versatile, careers independent of particular firms are impossible if workplace standards are so diverse as to be barriers to worker mobility. Therefore, unions should also press industry and government to establish and meet uniform conditions of compensation and employment. Unions have unique capacities to perform this role, combining first-hand knowledge of workers "needs" with the institutional ability to enforce uniform standards.

The interests of firms are advanced by this twofold strategy of new model unions—first because employers will benefit from an increasingly skilled labor pool, and second because they will enjoy advanced forms of cooperation and comparability across firms in the face of growing decentralization.

Just as in the old system, unions can play an economic role that both advances their members' interests and solves economywide problems beyond the capacity of any one firm. Organizationally, this will require them to be attentive to a wider variety of worker interests, and to be defined more by geographic region than by economic sector. It is also vital that unions extend the reach of worker power, seeking government support for generic baselines for worker representation.

The reemergence of unions as innovative, moral, and rational agents of general social benefit will reward them with a greater degree of political capital, stemming from a greater degree of identification in the eyes of the general public. This suggests a basis for a new political role for unions, locally and nationally, as advocates for the legislated social protections and supports needed to ensure equity as well as innovation.

The Old Model and the New One

Union activity in the United States remains largely defined by a series of practices that comprise a distinct model of "traditional unionism." To prosper in the new order, unions must abandon this model. The traditional union model was characterized by four basic elements.

First, unions were narrowly focused on simply providing services to members. Organizing expenditures stagnated or declined. Where new units were targeted for organizing the goal was simply to win an election and secure a contract. Where organizing failed to achieve majority support within a limited time frame, it was generally abandoned.

Second, unions stayed clear of issues involving control of production. They did not typically seek to take responsibility for steering the firm's product strategy or organizing the inputs necessary for preferred strategies. Since unions

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were in a weaker position than employers, such assumption of responsibility was seen as promising only responsibility, never power, and blurring the distinctions between "us" and "them" critical to maintaining solidarity among workers.

Third, organization centered around specific firms or employers and was not centrally coordinated. Collective bargaining agreements were generally negotiated on a firm-by-firm and, often, plant-by-plant basis. Contract administration was highly decentralized, with wide variation in agreements across sites. Within regional labor markets, little effort was made to generalize wage or benefit norms beyond organized employers. Efforts at multiunion bargaining, much less organizing, were infrequent. Murderous jurisdictional disputes were not.

And fourth, unions were unconditionally aligned with the Democratic Party, while showing open disdain for independent politics. Political work was also heavily skewed toward national, rather than state or local, government.

This model functions poorly in the present climate because service provision is extremely expensive, while the absence of workplace or political activism means there is no way to engage the membership. Together these conditions inhibit a union's organizational capacity. Economic restructuring has made employer decisions decisive for member well-being. Unions can no longer afford to ignore control of production. But achieving influence requires coordination on a sectoral basis, not just within individual firms.

Within local and regional markets, the defense of unions is unthinkable without substantial local political power. Obtaining the necessary local and statewide political power requires forging alliances between unions and a range of community groups and populations, which would frequently defy the conventional strategy of the Democratic Party.

Imagine, then, the traditional model turned on its head.

First, the unions would organize everywhere. Imagine a union movement that took the development of grassroots organizing capacity—among rank-and-file members, stewards, local unions—as its maxim, building on the one great strength labor still has: the loyalty of its people. The organizer would be an on-the-scene, full-time union activist without service responsibilities. It then becomes possible to contemplate truly long-term campaigns and a clearer focus on the real goal of organizing—to build the union presence in the workplace.

Second, the unions would seek to control production. This power could then be used to bargain for more power in decisions further back in the production chain. In the United States, coordination across firms to supply the needed inputs for advanced production is something that unions are uniquely positioned to provide. Imagine, then, a labor movement that offered itself as another force of production—but only to employers prepared to share power in decision making and to comply with specified wage and production standards.

Third, unions would be spatially and sectorally coordinated, centered

around markets rather than firms. However, this simply cannot be done by a single union. Imagine, then, a labor movement that devised joint organizing strategies for entire economic sectors and for regional labor markets. It would be natural for regional labor bodies to assume supervision of such organizing.

And finally, the unions would be independent in their politics. Imagine a labor movement that was governed in its political endorsements and supports not by party label, but by the values and priorities of those seeking its help. Imagine too that labor invested heavily in developing its own capacity to shape the terms of political debate and action, focusing more on membership training, internal candidate recruitment, the development of precinct-based labor-neighbor political machines, and ongoing work with progressive caucuses of candidates elected. This effort is most feasible in local and state politics where costs are cheaper, the immediate relevance of office is greater, and the vast majority of politics is nonpartisan. It would again be possible for labor to help set, and move, the public agenda.

Could It Happen Here?

Is it possible to imagine unions adopting this new strategy? In fact, certain elements are already appearing, albeit in modest, isolated examples. One place where the new strategy is most advanced is in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The city's central labor council has revived itself as the key arena of cross-union coordination on all manner of organizing campaigns, solidarity activities, and joint political work. Among its activities is leadership of a labor-community coalition. A group of unions and local employers have established a sectoral training consortium in manufacturing. The agreement is now being extended to the suppliers of consortium members, while the standards of the training are increasingly taken over by the local technical colleges. Unions have taken leadership in the design and administration of one-stop shopping centers for the delivery of labor market services and income assistance for dislocated workers. With strong labor leadership, an independent political arm has been formed and has successfully run a range of candidates for state and local office on its pro-labor platform. Broader goals are also now being contemplated.

If union leadership took examples like this seriously and targeted their efforts and expenditures to make such configurations stronger and more widespread, unions could then reemerge as carriers of the great popular political message of our time: that human values should be imposed on the economy, and that the way to do that is to mobilize the people themselves as a force of production and social authority. Labor would have the wherewithal to take a leading role in a new national future.

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