

A Strategy for Labor

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Labor's decline is advanced, disastrous for democracy, and unlikely to be relieved by labor law reform at the national level. Unions need a strategy for revival that does not premise such relief, and that takes account of the deeper changes in social and economic organization that have undermined their strength. Such a strategy is available, but it requires a sharp break with the uncoordinated, firm-centered, and politically nonindependent "service model" unionism, exclusively preoccupied with units where majority status has been achieved, still generally practiced today.

IT IS OBVIOUS THAT unions are in desperate trouble in the United States—hemorrhaging members, losing political clout, not appreciated by a public unsure of their indispensability. Obvious too—or should be—that unions are in fact indispensable to democracy and a well-ordered economy; neither is possible without independent worker organizations operating in day-to-day contact with employers. Obvious finally that labor's troubles will not soon be relieved by pro-union national labor law reform—neither by a Democratic administration deeply ambivalent about the worth of unions, nor by a Republican congressional leadership unambivalently intent on their destruction. Whether the prospect of such reform was ever realistic or would alone have substantially revived labor's fortunes, it is simply not now in the cards.¹ Any illusion of external assistance—at least in this form and from this quarter—must be lost.

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¹ Elsewhere, I've argued against both propositions (Rogers, 1994). One consequence is that a book like William Gould's (1993)—containing much of interest and much worth contending—grows old before its time. At least for the moment, its time has passed, since it premised an immediate chance for constructive reform now clearly unavailable.

It follows that labor must revive itself, and with a strategy premising no near-term improvement in legal aids or protections.

In what follows I offer some suggestions as to what such a strategy might be.² First, I indicate the general conditions for union organizing success, how they were once satisfied, why they are not today, and how they might be again. Second, I offer a stylized model of "traditional unionism," as practiced in the United States in the postwar period, and use it to frame the recommended alternative. Finally, I provide an example of the alternative's operation, and speculate on the gains that might follow from its wider adoption.

How Unions Win, Why They Are Losing, What They Must Do to Win Again

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.

Losing ground. In the New Deal and postwar era, unions achieved these conditions by functioning as the redistributive agent of the working class. By delivering rising wage floors to their members, they helped boost and stabilize aggregate demand; this gave firms markets for sales and reasons to renew investment; and that increased productivity and lowered the costs of mass consumption goods, which was good for everyone. Through the alchemy of Keynesian economics, the particular demands of workers were thus translated into general interests. This particular strategy for meeting the general conditions of union advance, however, is today less available, since its most important organizational preconditions have been undermined.

The strategy premised the existence of a *nation-state* capable of controlling the environment of economic production within its territory. Most important within the Keynesian synthesis, this meant a national economy sufficiently insulated from foreign competitors that the benefits of demand-stimulus could be reliably captured within its borders, and a monetary policy

apparatus sufficiently insulated from worldwide financial flows to permit unilateral correctives to recession. But today, while product and capital market integration is less than complete,³ *economic internationalization* has proceeded far enough that Keynesianism is limited as a state strategy, and simple wage improvement is impossible as a union strategy. For the state, the permeability of national boundaries removes assurance that the benefits of demand stimulation will be captured nationally, and compromises efforts at unilateral monetary correction. For unions, even national wage norms no longer succeed in effectively "taking wages out of competition."

The strategy also relied on the existence of *large, lead firms*, often organized into massive production units, dominating industry clusters. Large lead firms provided ready targets for worker organization, and levers in extending the benefits of organization throughout the economy they dominated. Firm stability—itsself underwritten by the stabilization of demand that was the goal of the Keynesian system—meant stability for the career paths of workers within them; also facilitating organization, this underwrote the evolution of the "industrial" model of union organization centered on administration of the internal labor market. Today, by contrast, a worldwide *reorganization of production* has upset these arrangements. The dominant "Fordist" production model associated with the postwar years—high-volume, assembly-line production of standardized goods, and steadily rising productivity with benefits captured in higher wages and lower-priced mass consumer goods—has widely collapsed. Some firms are simply "sweating" labor in old-style production, albeit increasingly tailored to niche commodity markets. Others are pursuing one or another variety of "lean" production—a strategy characteristically featuring more advanced attention to logistics and quality, and more intensive utilization of frontline workers (usually organized in teams), but putting just as fierce downward pressures on wages, and showing just as much hostility to collective worker representation. Worldwide, both sweating and lean firms are increasing their market share at the expense of older, generally larger, unionized rivals. They have become the icons of a new age of "flexible" production, with most of the costs of flexible adjustment to unstable demand visited on workers. Firms have also heavily

² My suggestions make no pretense to exhaustiveness or to actual demonstration of the feasibility of what is recommended. In an area of bitter conflict and high stakes, where participants understandably want some real confidence in the details, this may annoy. But it is unavoidable given my own ignorance and limitations of space. For more details and (we hope) a more convincing version of the argument, see Rathke and Rogers (1995).

³ This issue deserves more attention than can be given it here. Briefly, however, those who argue that capital and product markets are now completely integrated mistake stylized facts for reality. Cross-nationally, savings and investment rates still correlate closely by country, and within the United States, manufacturing tends overwhelmingly to trade with itself. Even within sectors directly exposed to international competition, moreover, the home economy retains considerable discretion in shaping their strategy of response. For purposes of this essay, I assume residual social capacity to set the terms of economic activity.

greater uniformity in the conditions of compensation (itself increasingly tied to skill) and employment, and both pushing and assisting employers to meet them—through programs aimed at mass modernization of existing facilities going hand in hand with the new demands placed on them.

Here again, notice that unions have unique capacities to perform this role. If they are in touch with their members, they will have a much better idea than government or managers of just what underlying standards of equity need to be respected in establishing “comparable” work settings. As institutions spread across firms, they will have wider-ranging experience of the different kinds of jobs that cluster into careers than even the most decentralized, joint-venturing corporation. Firms and groups of employees trying to reconcile differences sufficiently to establish a workable workplace could thus well look to the unions when conflicts arise over the definition and application of rules. Moreover, as institutions of workers in the economy itself, unions are indispensable vehicles for enforcing standards—with the local knowledge and capacity for disruption needed to play that role.

Next consider how the interests of firms are advanced by this twofold strategy of new-model unions. On the first—training and counseling—while members want a combination of technical and managerial skills to protect themselves against the risks of the labor market, firms would like to wave a magic wand over their current workforce and have employees with precisely these skills costlessly appear. If the unions can help firms figure out how to make effective use of the vast public funds available for training, they can be the magic wand.

On the second—achieving comparability across firms in conditions of work and compensation—employers too have an interest in this goal. As firms decentralize and cooperate more and more closely with outsiders, there is less connection between who employs a person and where and with whom that person works. If an automobile firm and an air bag manufacturer codevelop a new product, a project group from one might easily spend six months on the other’s site. Or if a manufacturing firm subcontracts its information-system work to a data-processing firm, technicians employed by the data processor might work full-time at the manufacturing site. In such cases, cooperating firms are in trouble if they tell their respective employees to treat their new co-workers as partners, and then themselves treat the partners very differently. Without some generalization in work conditions, rules, and compensation, advanced forms of cooperation are far more difficult to enter into, manage, and fold when the task is done.

Just as in the old system, then, unions can play an economic role that

both advances their members’ interests and solves economywide problems beyond the capacity of any firm. Organizationally, their doing so will inevitably require them to be attentive to a wider variety of worker interests than they are identified with at present, and—to get deals cut across diverse firms—to be more defined by geographic region and less by economic sector. At the same time, since people still work in particular settings (and the places are still largely described by firm ownership) it is vital that unions extend the reach of worker power in such settings throughout the economy—including sites where unions themselves have relatively few members. And this will require getting state supports for generic baselines of worker representation. All three changes will give unions more of a political flavor than they have at present. Moreover, the reemergence of unions as innovative, moral, and rational social agents of general benefit will award them a fair degree of political capital with the general public. People will see the contribution of unions more clearly than they do now.

In combination, these changes suggest a basis for a new political role for unions, at both the local and national levels, as advocates for the legislated social protections and supports needed to ensure equity as well as innovation. The welfare state needs to be moved from a jobs-based system to one of more generic social entitlement. Public programs—as in unemployment insurance and training—need to take full measure of increases in job mobility and risk. And, especially in the United States, the state needs to help spur industrial upgrading of the desired sort not only by rationalizing its services to firms, but by using its residual powers of direction (purchasing power, direct regulation of wage and production standards) to encourage movement in the right direction. New-model unions, as agents of the general interest, could play an important role in making sure that all this happens.

The Old Model and the New One

Postwar union operation in the United States was (and still largely is) defined by a series of practices that together comprise a distinct model of “traditional unionism.” To prosper in the new order, unions need to abandon it.

The traditional union model had four basic elements:

Just providing service, just in majority settings. “Provide members with good wages and benefits and the unorganized will join up.” Effectively, this was the theory of union growth that trade union leadership offered in the postwar period. With the exception of a 1960s explosion in the public sector, organizing expenditures as a percentage of total revenues stagnated

or declined throughout the period—even as, for the reasons indicated above (e.g., decline of the “ready-made” working class), the effective costs of organizing were rising. The union wage and benefit premium rose; but the new members did not come as fast as the old ones were disemployed. Where new units were targeted for organizing, the basic pitch was “first contract and, thereafter, peace.” The basic goal was majority status—seen as necessary to the economics of servicing, contract enforcement, and, of course, the protections offered only to “exclusive bargaining representatives” that had demonstrated such status. Dues were seen to be collectible only following achievement of majority status, and after contract negotiation union members were asked for little else. Where organizing failed to achieve majority support within a limited time frame, it was generally abandoned.

Staying clear of production control. Encouraged by law and their own organizational sense, with rare exceptions (in particular, the building trades) unions steered clear of making demands on issues lying at the “core of entrepreneurial control.” They reacted to firm decisions on training, technology, investment, relocation, product strategy, and work organization; they negotiated job descriptions and defended their boundaries in administration of the internal labor market; they engaged in “productivity bargaining” tying compensation to success in raising the rate of output. But they did not typically seek to take responsibility for steering the firm’s product strategy or organizing the inputs necessary to preferred strategies. In a weaker position than the employer, such assumption of responsibility was seen as promising only responsibility, never power, and blurring the distinctions between “us” and “them” critical to maintaining solidarity in the unit.

Centered on specific firms or employers, and not coordinated. Despite lead agreements, pattern bargaining, and the sectoral jurisdictions of the CIO, 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 (again, the prevailing wages of the construction trades loom as an exception) was made to generalize wage or benefit norms beyond organized employers. Efforts at multi-union bargaining, much less organizing, were infrequent. Murderous jurisdictional disputes were not. And if relations among unions were not close in regional labor markets, relations between the labor movement and community organizations were generally confined to charitable giving, with no coordination of organizing strategies.

National liberal democrats or bust. With very rare exceptions, unions were loyal supporters of the Democratic Party and deeply hostile to independent politics or even sharp programmatic definition. In contrast to the weight of union activity and need, political work—understood throughout as support for candidates—was also heavily skewed toward national, as against state or local, government.⁴

Why does this model—here, of course, caricatured—function so poorly in the present climate? The *service model* proves hopelessly expensive, and does not engage the membership; the two conditions together inhibit organizing, which will either (or both) require a vast increase of expenditures on paid organizers or recruitment and mobilization of the existing base. At least in today’s organizing climate, the preoccupation with *majority status* imposes too demanding a condition on the needed coordination across sites. It also carries enormous opportunity costs for membership growth, since in virtually all workplaces some significant percentage of workers now wish to belong to unions; to gear organizing only to those sites where such workers are in the majority is to abandon a huge market.⁵ Economic restructuring has made employer investment, relocation, technology, and training decisions decisive for member well-being; unions can no longer afford to *ignore control of production*. But achieving influence in production and harnessing the distinctive contribution unions can make to higher-wage and more democratic production systems in turn requires coordination on a sectoral or spatial basis, not just within the *individual firms*—themselves increasingly elusive organizing targets given more permeable boundaries and decentralization. Within local and regional markets, finally, the defense of unions is unthinkable without substantial *local* political power. In metropolitan regions⁶ and elsewhere, state power is necessary to protect wage norms, to

⁴ While labor in the United States remains strongly local, with relative weak national coordination, and while 99.5 percent of the roughly 100,000 elective offices in the United States are not national, political monies are disproportionately spent on national races. From January 1991 to June 1994 (i.e., even before the fall elections), for example, of the 151 million spent by union political action committees, nearly half (43 percent) was spent on federal races.

⁵ In repeated polls, about one-third of private, nonmanagerial, nonunion workers—a population better than twice the current membership of all private-sector unions—report that they would vote for a union tomorrow if given the chance. Surely some significant portion of them would be willing to pay for a union attempting to organize their workplace. And certainly, not all those who actually vote union in an unsuccessful drive change their preferences immediately afterward; they provide the natural ongoing core for a minority union.

⁶ The vast majority of union members are located in such regions, which are the site of most of the decline in unionization in recent years. Consider manufacturing, an area of particular concern to “traditional” unions. Over 1978–88, sixteen cities accounted for 70 percent of the jobs lost in manufacturing, and virtually all the loss was in union jobs. It was the failure to defend metro manufacturing that accounted for the 40 percent decline in unionized manufacturing employment over 1980–90, a period when overall manufacturing employment declined just 6 percent.

secure the physical and institutional infrastructure needed to support advanced production, and to influence private-sector decision making through public-sector procurement policies. Getting that power in turn requires forging alliances between unions and a range of community groups and populations (in particular, of color populations) traditionally operating at some distance from unions. Such new programs and alliances, however, not uncommonly put unions on a collision course with the local Democratic Party—which is typically uninterested in defending union strength in the metropolitan cores and more interested in building new prisons than in generating jobs—thus eroding the traditional *liberal* Democratic urban coalition.⁷

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

Organizing everywhere. Member organizers are a cheaper and more effective way to organize than parachuting international representatives in for hot shop campaigns. Imagine a union movement that took the development of in situ organizing capacity—among rank-and-file members, stewards, local unions—as its maxim, building on the one signal strength labor still has: the loyalty of its own people. With such built-in capacity more or less permanently in place, the logic of majority-only organizing and short time cycles on achieving it—mistaken, in any case, given the need for expansive reach—fails even more. It becomes possible to contemplate truly long-term campaigns and, within them, clearer focus on the real goal of organizing—which is not to get to contract per se but to build the union presence in the workplace. Employees in units still lacking majority status would be given the full rights and responsibilities of other union members, and accreted to the organizing machine of which they are one extension; inside the firm they could immediately busy themselves monitoring and enforcing statutory workplace rights. Reciprocally, the job of “organizer” would become less “parachutist” and more “member of the community”—an on-the-scene full-time union activist without service responsibilities. The organizer would help direct the training and administration of the local organizing machine, do ongoing targeting for new outreach (itself improved by longer presence in the community), strategize political supports for campaign efforts, and so on.

Seeking to control production. In the supply-side kingdom, the bourgeoisie is king, but only if the serfs let him be. Operating across firms as well as

within them, a union movement seriously interested in affecting the design and utilization of human capital systems, technology, and work organization could in fact do so. Power in these areas, moreover, could be used to bargain for power in decisions further back in the production chain—investment, new technology, and product strategy. And especially in the United States, where employer associations are little more than trade associations, coordination across firms to supply the needed inputs for advanced production—regional training systems, one-stop shopping for labor market services, intermediaries for economically targeted investment, modernization assistance of all kinds, early warning networks, production networks, search assistance for needed employees, among others—is something that unions are uniquely positioned to provide. Imagine then, a labor movement that did provide them—that offered itself as another force of production—but only to employers prepared to share power in decision making and comply with specified wage and production standards. Imagine that this was sought not just in lead firms, but their primary and secondary suppliers, that support to lead firms was in part in fact conditioned on their assistance in extending such standards to suppliers.

Spatially and sectorally coordinated, and aiming at markets—not just firms. To shift strategies and wage and benefit conditions in large industries, those industries need to be organized. Growing variation across firms increasingly recommends that that organization really be “wall-to-wall.” Frequently, this simply cannot be done by a single union. Imagine, then, a labor movement that recognized this fact and devised joint organizing strategies for sectors; instead of policing existing jurisdictional boundaries, central bodies would monitor their deliberate mutual transgression. Recruited members could be divided up by unions on any number of imaginable justified bases, or thrown into a new pool jointly administered by those contributing to it. The same holds, a fortiori, for the organization of regional labor markets. With critical mass provided by pooled resources, organizing campaigns can facilitate the development of regional skills standards and other aspects of “effective supply”—not least simply by foreclosing low-wage (“sweating”) restructuring that now suppresses the demand for democratic high performance that it aims to meet.⁸ As regional labor bodies come to take a more active role in securing the infrastructure of advanced, high-wage production, it would thus be natural for them also to assume supervision of such organizing, making explicit both terms in their double-barreled

⁷ While not pursued here, what is true of the Democratic Party locally is truer still nationally. Owing to a generation of economic decline and failed government response, issues of class (social control of the economy) and democracy are again on the table of American politics. These issues cannot be addressed without direct contest of corporate state mobilization. Traditionally and today, the Democratic Party leadership is extremely reluctant to do either.

⁸ More than anything else, it is the continued availability of a profitable sweating option that slows more general movement to high-wage, high-productivity, more democratically organized production. The most important union contributions to production become visible only after that route is foreclosed.

strategy of imposing norms on the economy (and thus punishing “bad” firms) while assisting firms in meeting them (rewarding “good” firms).

Independent in its politics. Finally, imagine a labor movement that was genuinely independent in its political operations—governed in its political endorsements and supports not by party label but by the values and program of those seeking its help, discounted of course by the plausibility of their implementing those. Imagine too that labor invested heavily in developing its own capacity to shape the terms of political debate and action—spending less on “hand-it-over” PAC contributions to individual candidates and more on membership training, candidate recruitment (and more training) from among its own ranks, program, the development of precinct-based labor-neighbor political machines, and ongoing work with progressive caucuses of candidates elected. Imagine that this effort was made first where it was most feasible and traditionally neglected—in local and state politics. There, the costs of elections are infinitely cheaper, the offices at stake of immediate relevance to improving labor’s organizing terms,⁹ and the vast majority of offices (70 percent) nonpartisan; so support for a more labor-friendly formation than the Democratic Party need not even raise concerns about traditional national loyalties. For relatively modest expenditures, in most American cities, it would again be possible for labor to help set, and move, the public agenda.

What’s the Movie?

Member-led organizing drives, minority unions, intervention on the supply, coordinated regional and sectoral organizing campaigns, independent political action, particularly at the metropolitan level—are we dreaming?

Not at all. Even a superficial canvass of current union activities shows examples of all these things. The problem is that they are usually pursued on a piecemeal basis, and still appear as interesting exceptions rather than the rule; nor have they been deliberately targeted as joint activities, particularly in the metropolitan regions where the possibilities of synergy among them seem greatest. So, the Auto and Communications Workers can claim success with a number of member-driven organizing drives; Service Employees Locals 880 and 100 in the private sector and the National Education Association in the public sector suggest the feasibility of

minority unions; in very different settings and industries, Steel, Clothing and Textile, and Ladies Garment Workers show the possibilities of more concerted union attention to supply-side power; the Los Angeles Manufacturing Area Project at least suggests what multiple-union organizing might look like; the San Francisco Central Labor Council shows just how far a labor-community precinct network can go—but the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

Consider, however, as one example of where these parts are coming together, the case of Milwaukee. There:

- The central labor council has revived 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, known as the Campaign for a Sustainable Milwaukee, intent on the development and implementation of a comprehensive alternative economic development plan for the greater metro regions. Elements in this plan, which has already generated enormous community enthusiasm and support, include new generic wage and benefit floors applied to all public contracts and development expenditures, an early warning system to ease industrial dislocation and spot opportunities for community ownership, a community bank for economically targeted investment, revived mass transit, a “green jobs” program for the inner city, a labor-community compact on job access and training, expansion of Community Reinvestment Act coverage to nonbank financial intermediaries, and a range of modernization services supplied to area firms complying with desired wage and benefit terms.
- A group of unions (Machinists, Auto and Steel Workers, among others) and local employers have established a sectoral training consortium in manufacturing. Under the terms of the agreement, firms benchmark a certain percentage of payroll to training frontline production workers, train according to common standards jointly set by themselves and the unions, and administer the training programs through joint labor-management committees within individual firms. The standards are increasingly taken over by the local technical colleges, yielding a labor-friendly human capital system that immensely improves worker mobility and security. The agreement, now covering two dozen firms and approximately 35,000 workers, is now being extended to the suppliers of consortium members. That labor found allies among metro firms—generally unionized, unable to move out from under accrued capital investments and pension and other liabilities, and looking for help in

⁹ There should be no confusion about this. To get social services to members, assure reasonable police behavior during conflicts, build effective regional training systems and other elements in egalitarian effective supply, impose local wage norms, and end “subsidy abuse” in local economic development, the most important stroke to have is local.

fending off competition from the low-wage ex-urban producers that is killing them as well as labor—bears note.

- 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. The Help in Refinding Employment (HIRE) Center, an alliance of unions, state service providers, and community agencies, is widely looked to as the model in the proliferation of such centers around the state.
- With strong labor leadership, an independent political arm—Progressive Milwaukee (affiliated with the national New Party)—has been formed, and has successfully run a range of candidates for state and local office on its pro-labor platform. Among other activities, it is currently building precinct networks, à la recent efforts in Los Angeles and San Francisco, that draw on union members (and nonunion community activists) living in those precincts as leaders of the independent political machine.
- With better cross-union coordination on all these things, joint organizing campaigns, with heavy reliance on community supports and minority union membership, are now contemplated. The broad goal is to bring the totality of the regional labor market under common wage and benefit norms, while establishing at least minimal union presence in all key firms. Again, the central labor council is the natural site for coordinating this “big reach” effort, both because it is the arena for general cross-union coordination and because it is the node for the multiplying linkages into the “effective supply” system and the community.¹⁰

What it takes. Imagine then, finally, that union leadership took examples like this seriously, and targeted program monies to make this sort of configuration stronger and more widespread. Within present limitations, operating below the current terror screen of national politics, unions could reemerge as carriers of the great popular political message of our time: that values should be imposed on the economy that is wrecking us, and that the way to do that is to mobilize the people themselves as a force of production and social authority.¹¹ And while the natural immediate sites for such an effort

are indeed local, metropolitan regions, notice that that is where the bulk of the population—and the overwhelming share of those likely to support a more egalitarian national politics—currently reside. If labor took leadership in establishing an attractive “metro future” (MCEDA, 1995) for America, it would have the wherewithal to take leadership in a new national future as well: foreclosing the low-wage option on industrial restructuring that national policy now encourages, asserting greater popular control over the economy even as it forsook exclusive reliance on statist means to that end, moving beyond the barren choice between a defunct liberalism and a resurgent corporate right—as well as its own self-understanding as manager of its own decline—that is killing American labor today.

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¹⁰ Not explored here, but consistent with all the rest of the analysis, I see accumulating evidence from around the country that CLCs, long simply the graveyard for those who ran unsuccessfully for local union office, are making a comeback as central coordinating institutions for labor. As the relative weight of this more *spatially* defined institution grows, the sorts of interventions described in the text—from the provision of regional institutional support to support high-wage production to the development of independent political machines—become more plausible. For more extended argument, see Rathke and Rogers (1995).

¹¹ Well, not yet a bumper sticker.