



Can U.S. Unions Learn to Mobilize Workers in New Ways?

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Analogous to a fishery that crashes when its population is too small to effectively reproduce itself, labor unions in the United States find themselves in a downward spiral. Membership in old and admirable unions is declining as their industries shrink – leaving the escalating cost of organizing new workplaces to be paid by ever fewer dues-paying members. Political attacks on unions have become fierce, even as employers circumvent or ignore labor laws with nearimpunity. Matters have reached the point where it is effectively impossible for existing unions to reverse their decline – *if we imagine that workers must be organized into conventional unions for the sole purpose of collective bargaining*. Drawing on new research, we explore possibilities for bold new kinds of labor movement action.

The Need to Escape a Broken System

U.S. industrial relations institutions are broken, no longer serving the interests of workers or a great many employers. The tools of resistance available to employers determined to avoid unions have proliferated. Punishments for retaliating against workers who consider unionization are trivial and rarely enforced. Once able to support union organization and functioning, the National Labor Relations Board has been fettered and undercut to the point that it hardly helps – and there are larger problems as well. Now that supply chains for companies are often global and work can be shifted around at will, the potential gains to workers from plant-by-plant collective bargaining are less obvious than in the past. Many people in the American public, even those who previously supported unions, have serious questions about organizations that protect economic benefits for narrow slices of unionized workers when so many U.S. workers lack jobs or find themselves working far more hours for far less money. Given all these adverse circumstances, it is little wonder that the beleaguered U.S. union movement is engaged in an arduous – and losing – defensive struggle to save or modestly reform existing institutions.

Workers must therefore find new organizational forms and repertoires of action that free them from the bureaucratic and legal restrictions on collective bargaining and conventional strikes. Future gains in labor protections and worker clout will usually come from social movements that combine a quest for labor improvements with efforts to further human rights, immigrant standing, the environment, and other broad public goods. In the twenty-first century United States, and beyond, protection of workers' economic well-being increasingly requires the fashioning of broad-based coalitions fighting to improve many aspects of contemporary life.

Organizational Principles to Meet Daunting Challenges

To succeed in the future, existing unions will need to channel their resources into building

alternative arrangements – a challenging task for any organization and a difficult thing to convince existing union leaders and members to try to do. Existing union members and leaders will need to see their own welfare and leverage as increasingly bound up with a broader “community of fate” that includes other people and organizations. The challenges involved are difficult but not impossible to meet. In our new book, *In the Interests of Others*, we explore the strengths and weaknesses of political mobilization in several labor unions over many decades. Our research pinpoints the circumstances under which leadership, organizational practices, and political opportunities can combine to enhance (or hinder) mobilization by the labor movement as a whole, not just from the perspective of particular unions. Here are the key lessons:

- **Leaders can point the way, within bounds.** Union leaders can successfully ask members to contribute to broader projects on behalf of others. But their ability to do so rests on first addressing their unions’ own needs – and they must also articulate principles that explain why their members’ interests are aligned with others and what union contributions can be expected to accomplish within realistic limits.
- **Leaders must limit their own perks.** Union leaders face a fundamental trade-off between collecting personal perks and inspiring political action. Leaders who ask members to contribute to political causes or efforts on behalf of non-members lack credibility if they themselves earn far more than rank-and-file members and enjoy excessive perks of office. This means that unions turning to mobilization must reform compensation structures.
- **Members can be inspired, to a point.** Our research shows that asking union members to contribute to larger campaigns can actually transform the political beliefs of some of them. Campaigns provide an opportunity for unionists to learn about public issues and realize they can make a difference. But not everyone will agree with a political project and leaders are well-advised to respect, not coerce, persistent opponents.
- **Organizational rules and norms matter.** Claims by leaders are never credible just because they are made. Sound rules of organizational governance can enhance leadership credibility on matters ranging from salaries to political objectives. Tying their own hands by submitting to transparent and democratic rules – and engaging in openly visible decision-making – can allow members to witness one another’s engagement and enhance leaders’ capacities to persuade members to contribute to big undertakings.

America’s New Labor Movement Must Look to the Innovators

Some highly threatened unions will not be able to mobilize members for outward-looking projects. The labor movement as a whole must therefore look to the strongest and most adroit unions to lead the way – not necessarily the biggest unions, but those that retain leverage in pivotal economic niches and effectively revamp goals and practices.

As innovative social and political strategies are rolled out, the leadership and organizational principles we propose can prepare America’s beleaguered unions to represent a wider range of interests than most currently do – and help them to counteract the current public worry that unions focus too much on defending narrow interests. To gain clout and credibility, tomorrow’s unions must have the leadership and organizational capacity to work effectively and visibly on behalf of broad cross-sections of workers and American citizens. Getting there will be challenging, but the only alternative is continued union decline.

Read more in John Stephen Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton University Press, 2013).