



What it Takes for Unions to Enlarge Their Mission beyond Servicing Existing Workplace Contracts

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America's peak union federation, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, is engaged in a wrenching – and crucial – campaign to revitalize the labor movement. Faced with rapidly declining membership, up against unrelenting employer hostility, and unmoored by waning public appreciation for what unions can do, the Federation plans to open its rolls to people not covered by collective agreements. Union leaders are searching for new forms of organization and representation that will allow the Federation and its constituent unions to advance the interests of all workers, including those not currently enrolled in unionized workplaces.

Labor activists and leaders are painfully aware that changing the deep-rooted structures of the union movement will be far from easy. Existing unions will have to move away from a “servicing” model of representation – in which officials and staffers primarily focus on negotiating and implementing contracts with employers and on handling member grievances under those contracts. Traditionally, doing such tasks well has been the foundation of union strength, so what happens when unions try to develop different sources of clout?

Can We Learn from Earlier Attempts?

This is not the first time that activists have diagnosed labor's troubles as being rooted in over-reliance on servicing models. In the 1990s, a few influential international unions talked about building new models in a language that reverberates much of what is being said today. Along with Rachel Sherman, I closely examined these earlier efforts to increase the focus of labor organizations on building a broader social movement. Our research asked why some local unions were able to successfully remake themselves while others were unable to change. Using in-depth interviews with organizers and union officials, we investigated locals affiliated with three different internationals: the Service Employees International Union, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees, and the United Food and Commercial Workers. At the time, each of these unions was advocating innovative and aggressive organizing in northern California, where our research took place. In total, we talked with 29 organizers and union officials, and collected information on fourteen local unions from a wide variety of sources.

How can researchers objectively measure the changes involved in breaking away from the servicing model of unionism? Multiple indicators are needed. We looked at the ratio of union staff involved in organizing versus servicing existing contracts, and we also considered the types of training and educational programs various locals mounted – ranging from programs to train members to resolve their own shop-floor grievances, to programs to educate members about the need for new kinds of unionism. We probed whether local unions used nontraditional tactics such as building alliances with other groups in communities, targeting corporations in public campaigns, and mobilizing alliances in support of efforts to get recognition outside of the National Labor Relations Board process. We aimed to develop a complete picture of how various local unions deployed their resources.

Explaining Success and Failure

Our research revealed just how difficult the process of transformation can be. In the locals we studied, members and union staff alike often resisted change. Members often clung to established expectations about union services and were hesitant about doing unfamiliar things like engaging in civil disobedience or identifying new targets for union campaigns. Fearful about losing power or even their jobs, many staff members avoided doing new and daunting tasks. A majority of the locals we studied were unable to overcome institutional impediments like these.

But a third of the local unions *did* overcome resistance, successfully shifting the local away from the servicing

model. When we sought to pinpoint the factors that explained the difference between the locals that clearly changed and those that remained entrenched in the servicing model, three factors turned out to be jointly important.

- **A crisis that facilitated the rise of new leaders for the local union** – either through an election in the local or through intervention from the international union higher-ups.
- **Local staff members who had experience with social movements beyond organized labor.** In all the fully transformed locals, at least half the staff had been hired from outside the rank and file and almost all arrived with prior experience in other social movements.
- **Support for change from the local's International Union.** Locals did not change all by themselves; those that were transformed got trained organizers and financial resources from their international federation. In some cases, in fact, internationals put local unions under trusteeship and installed new leaders with a commitment to organizing.

These three factors – crisis, activists with broader perspectives, and international union influence – combined to make the difference. In essence, crises created openings for new local union leaders with fresh interpretations of the situation of the labor movement and innovative ideas about strategies for increasing union power – leaders who had often come to such new understandings in other social movements. In many instances, though not all, international union leaders used the crisis to install the new local leaders. But even in cases where new local leaders emerged from within, the full combination of factors we identified was crucial. Change did not get accomplished unless local unions experienced the jolt of a crisis, the rise of activists with perspectives beyond the local itself, and sustained support for change from the international.

Looking Ahead

Today, union leaders and supporters are scrambling to reinvent, broaden, and enhance the leverage of the U.S. labor movement. Breaking away from inward-looking organizational efforts focused on servicing existing members is one of the perquisites for the labor movement's reinvention. Our research underlines how difficult this organizational shift will be – and also shows that it can be achieved. The future of the labor movement may well hang in the balance.

Read more in Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, "**Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Union Revitalization in the American Labor Movement.**" *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 2 (2000): 303-349, and Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss, *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement* (University of California Press, 2004).