

Comparative Coalition Building and the Revitalization of the Labor Movement

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Abstract

This paper draws on material from Germany, Britain, and the United States to reflect on the contribution that coalition with other groups in civil society can make to the revitalization of the labor movement. It presents an analytical framework for the analysis of coalition-building that covers the functions and types of coalition and the factors that prompt unions to make use of this method. The paper ends by arguing that there are distinct national patterns of coalition-building that reflect enduring differences in union identity and the institutional context in which unions operate.

If mature trade union movements are to undergo revitalization, it has been argued, they must recreate themselves as social movements (Turner and Hurd 2001). They must broaden their goals to encompass change beyond the immediate employment relationship and rediscover their capacity to mobilize workers in campaigns for workplace and wider social justice. Integral to this prescription of “social movement unionism” is the belief that unions should act in concert with other progressive social forces and particularly the “new social movements,” grounded in the politics of social identity, the environment, and globalization. In short, unions must form coalitions if they are to achieve revitalization.

The purpose of this paper is to present a framework for the analysis of union coalition building and demonstrate its utility by use of comparative

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empirical material from the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In what follows, we seek to define union coalitions and specify their functions and identify a variety of types of coalition and the variety of factors that encourage unions to forge coalitions. We conclude by considering the role that coalition building should and could play in the revitalization of national labor movements.

Definition and Functions

At the heart of coalition lies joint working with nonlabor organizations in pursuit of shared goals. It can be defined as follows: union coalitions involve discrete, intermittent, or continuous joint activity in pursuit of shared or common goals between trade unions and other nonlabor institutions in civil society, including community, faith, identity, advocacy, welfare and campaigning organizations.

This is a broad definition, but it excludes joint union action with state agencies and political parties and also excludes joint action between unions and between unions and employers. Union coalitions may draw state bodies, other unions, and employers into joint activity, but they are not defined by the involvement of institutions of this kind. The definition also specifies that coalitions require joint working with other institutions, however loosely formulated or nonbureaucratic these may be. As such, it excludes union attempts to engage with other "social movements" where this does not result in joint working with other organized groups or institutions. Finally, coalitions between unions and other groups rise and fall and come and go, and neither permanence nor success is required by our definition.

Coalitions, or rather coalition partners, provide unions with resources, which help them secure their goals. As such, they are one of a series of resources that unions potentially can access. Others include the collective willingness to act of the union's membership, the resources of the employer, accessed through collective bargaining or labor-management partnership, the framework of individual and collective employment law, accessed through the courts, and the resources of the state, accessed through union involvement in politics. Typically, unions are more practiced at accessing these traditional resources and as a result eschew coalition. Nevertheless, many unions do seek coalition partners. Their prime motivation, we feel, is to access the following five resources:

- Financial and physical resources. Coalitions can yield material support for trade unions, most obviously when women's and other support groups provide cash and food to sustain strike action. They may provide other valuable physical resources to trade unions, however, including networks of activists, paid staff, and premises.

- **Communications.** Many coalition partners have a constituency, membership, or client base, and the purpose of coalition can be to allow union access to those affiliated or belonging to or served by nonlabor organizations. Thus, community-based organizing often relies on ethnic or faith-based partners to facilitate union access to minority workers (Bonacich 2000).
- **Expertise.** Coalition partners may also possess specialist expertise on which unions can draw. At the level of policy formulation, a number of German trade unions have developed policies on sustainable development for the sectors they organize in conjunction with environmentalist organizations. At an operational level, coalition partners may supply technical advice in the fields of immigration, welfare, and other law that facilitate union organizing and servicing of members (Milkman and Wong 2000).
- **Legitimacy.** The presence of a coalition partner can confer legitimacy on a trade union and its activities. In many cases, the function of a coalition is to endorse trade unionism, particularly when faith or ethnic organizations provide backing for union organizing campaigns. Unions may also gain “reflected legitimacy” by association with organizations that have a positive public image. Moreover, association can allow unions to shake off public suspicion that they act as a (nonlegitimate) “special interest,” while joint campaigning in concert with other bodies can add weight to the union cause.
- **Mobilization.** Coalitions may facilitate the mobilization of popular support for trade unions in demonstrations, voting, or consumer boycotts. Action of this kind has been apparent in union-organizing campaigns in the United States, where faith and community organizations have rallied their supporters against the employer. It has also been seen in the antiglobalization movement: the pivotal demonstration at Seattle brought together demonstrators organized by unions and a range of environmental, religious, human rights, and other groups.

Types of Coalition

Not all union-backed coalitions are the same. Coalitions differ in life span, the identity of the coalition partners, their goals, methods, and degrees of success. Given that coalitions rest on an exchange between unions and nonlabor organizations, however, the task of classification can best begin by noting the variable pattern of interaction between coalition partners. At one extreme, the interests of the union may dominate, while, at the other, unions may accede priority to the interests of their coalition partner. In between, a number of intermediate positions are possible. We believe that three main types can be identified, depending on the extent to which unions seek coalition on the

basis of their own interests or objectives or accept it on the basis of the interests or objectives of nonlabor organizations. The three types are as follows:

- **Vanguard coalitions.** Under this arrangement, unions seek coalition on the basis of partners accepting a subordinate role, in which they offer solidarity and support for union objectives. In this situation, it may be assumed that the activities of the union embody a general progressive or class interest to which other groups and institutions should lend support. The union, in other words, constitutes a vanguard, which demands or is deserving of solidarity.
- **Common-cause coalitions.** This second type of coalition is characterized by an attempt to identify separate but associated interests behind which a coalition can form. The union enters the coalition to advance its distinctive interests, while its nonlabor partners do the same. The two sets of interests are complementary and as such provide a basis for cooperative, joint action. In the United Kingdom, common-cause coalitions dominate in what is probably the most frequent context for coalition building: attempts by unions to win client support for attempts to halt the restructuring of public services. The distinct but complementary interests of workers in preserving jobs and conditions and clients in preserving service quality allow coalitions to form.
- **Integrative coalitions.** The third type of coalition arises when unions offer unconditional support to their nonlabor partners. In this situation, the union effectively “takes over” the objectives of nonlabor organizations and accepts them as its own. Integrative coalitions of this kind are particularly apparent in Germany, where the union movement has responded to appeals for solidarity from environmentalists and antifascist campaigners and participated in joint action.

A second way of thinking about types of coalition is in terms of the methods they use. In particular, coalitions differ in how they interact with the state, the primary target of much coalition activity. According to McIlroy (2000), trade unions can intervene in politics as “insiders” or “outsiders.” In the first case, they are accepted as legitimate representatives and engage in dialogue with ministers and civil servants to refine public policy, whereas in the second they are excluded from influence and seek to exert pressure on state agencies through industrial action or generating popular protest. This kind of distinction can be applied to labor-backed coalitions.

On the one hand, it is possible to identify “coalitions of influence,” in which unions seek coalition with other “insider” organizations in order to make use of their expertise and legitimacy in advancing their own policy to government. In Germany, for instance, unions have largely rejected joint working with the radical, antiglobalization protest movement in favor of more limited campaigns

to secure social trade clauses and codes of conduct. On the other hand, we can identify “coalitions of protest,” which seek to mobilize union members and other constituencies to generate external pressure on government. The U.S. living-wage and antisweatshop campaigns take this form, as do the attempts at community-based organizing used by SEIU, UNITE, HERE, and other U.S. unions (Needleman 1998; Bonacich 2000). Coalition partners in this case may often be loosely structured, local organizations, while the union initiative may come from the activist base rather than the center. The latter is not a hard-and-fast rule, however, and national union leaders may sanction “coalitions of protest.” The Sweeney leadership of the AFL-CIO has adopted this position, perhaps most notably in the Union Cities campaign (Kriesky 2001). Choices over coalition tactics do not map one-to-one onto structural positions within the labor movement.

Factors Promoting Coalition

It was noted above that unions can secure access to a range of novel resources through coalition and that joint work can contribute to labor revitalization. This raises the question of the origins of coalition and the factors that encourage unions to make use of this particular method. Our analysis of the three national cases suggests that two types of pressure encourage unions to enter coalitions. The first type arises within unions themselves and effectively “pushes” union strategy toward coalition. The second type of pressure arises beyond trade unions and has to do with the supply of coalition partners and political opportunities for using coalition to effect change. The critical variables in this case therefore are the strength of civil society and the structure of the state, factors that can “pull” trade unions toward experiment with coalition.

Decline and Exclusion

Accounts of union-backed coalitions often stress the difficulties encountered in marrying different structures, cultures, and goals (Needleman 1998). For this reason, unions may eschew coalition when they have ready access to other resources and traditional methods continue to yield results. The search for coalition therefore may be a function of union decline, a method adopted in extremis. This principle can be illustrated with two examples. Accounts of coalition in U.S. literature are most common in two circumstances: living-wage campaigns and attempts to organize low-wage workers (Turner and Hurd 2001). It is when unions seek to represent workers with low “organizational power” (capacity to sustain collective organization) and low “positional power” (low skills and secondary labor market positions) that they are most likely to turn to coalition. In other words, when unions cannot rely on the organiza-

tional and bargaining strength of workers themselves, they look for other resources, for coalition partners, to advance their goals.

In Britain, experiments with coalition developed after the election of the radical right-wing government of Margaret Thatcher. The 1980s were characterized by Crouch (1986) as a period of "union exclusion," when unions were denied legitimacy and access to political influence by the governing party, and it was in this context that experiments with coalition began. Unions tried to use vanguard and common-cause coalitions in a series of largely unsuccessful attempts to block the privatization and restructuring of public services. Significantly, with Labour's return to power in 1997, there has been some slackening of this effort as unions have partly reacquired "insider" status. Although there is an incipient living-wage campaign in Britain, the core union effort on wage regulation has been exercised within the tripartite Low Pay Commission, which recommends the level of the minimum wage to government. Labor-backed coalition in Britain therefore has followed the political cycle and has risen and fallen as unions have lost and gained access to political resources.

Interest Representation

German unions have turned to coalition partners as they have broadened their policy of interest representation to embrace international labor standards, antifascism, and environmental protection. The same pattern can be seen in Britain, where unions have worked with coalition partners to secure work-life balance and family-friendly legislation. It can also be seen in the United States, where coalition building has also occurred on the questions of globalization and environmental protection. The development of new policy in nontraditional fields may promote coalition for two reasons. First, unions may lack expertise in these areas and depend on their partners to supply resources they lack themselves. Second, environmental protection, international labor standards, and the integration of work and family are all issues that have been colonized by nonlabor organizations in advance of labor's interest. As the agenda of interest representation extends beyond the immediate employment relationship, unions almost inevitably become drawn into contact with preexisting campaigning and advocacy organizations.

Union Identity

In a recent analysis, Hyman (2001) has argued that national labor movements have approximated to one of three primary identities: business unionism, integrationist or social partnership unionism, and class-based militancy, based on a challenge to the existing social and political order.

Unions that approximate to the first type are least likely to seek coalition. In the United States, it is notable that experimenting with coalition has been

advocated by critics of business unionism and that use of the method has grown as its failings have become more apparent (Turner and Hurd 2001). Coalition is one of a series of methods favored by those promoting social movement unionism, in deliberate opposition to the business union tradition. It can also be noted that in Germany and the United Kingdom, it is unions on the political left, with a broader conception of union purpose, that have been most ready to work with coalition partners.

There are differences between left unions in the two countries, however, which have influenced the type of coalition formed. In Britain, the union left has a strong syndicalist current, informed by class politics. The class identity of traditional left unions typically finds expression in militancy rather than coalition building. Where the latter occurs, as during the mining strike of the 1980s, it tends to take the form of a "coalition of protest," with the union in a vanguard position. Union goals are assumed to have primacy because the union serves as a vehicle for class conflict; the appropriate role for other progressive forces is to lend support.

In Germany, left unions have been more ready to embrace common-cause and integrative coalitions, reflecting the country's tradition of social partnership. Coalition here reflects acceptance of plural interests and an established commitment to working with other groups. The nonmilitant tenor of coalition, moreover, is reflected in the preference for "coalitions of influence," not protest, seen most clearly in German unions' refusal to endorse radical antiglobalization protests. Unions with a broad conception of their purpose, therefore, are more likely than business unions to engage in coalition building but attachment to class or partnership conceptions of this broader role exert an additional influence.

Availability of Partners

Unions require partners if they are to form coalitions and the supply of partners is therefore an additional factor promoting coalitions. Trends here seem to face in opposing directions. On the one hand, the privatization of social life, the decay of traditional occupational communities, and the emergence of more dispersed patterns of settlement have probably served to reduce the number of potential coalition partners. On the other hand, the strengthening of forms of identity, grounded in gender, demography, sexuality, consumption, and issue-based politics are providing a source of fresh coalition partners. Coalitions on environmental questions can be readily concluded by German (and to a lesser degree U.S.) unions because of the strength of the country's Green movement.

The differential supply of coalition partners may also explain differences in the extent of coalition across countries. In the United States, unions have

been able to ally with student organizations in the antisweatshop campaign, reflecting the continuing vitality of student politics. In the United Kingdom, where student radicalism has substantially declined, the union-backed No Sweat campaign has failed to elicit a similar response. More generally, the greater religiosity of the United States, when compared with Europe (Crouch 1999), and the historical strength of American civil society probably furnish a stronger basis for coalition than exists elsewhere.

Political Opportunity Structure

The final factor that helps promote coalition is the structure of political opportunity: unions will form coalitions when the structure of governing institutions encourages them to do so. Unions will be encouraged to form coalitions (and coalitions will be more successful) where states are structured to provide multiple points of access to policy. Thus, it is notable that living-wage coalitions have developed most strongly in the United States, where there is scope for influence at the city level. In Britain, where there is a national minimum wage and local government has less autonomy, similar coalitions have been attempted but have not flourished. The centralized nature of the British state, coupled with an election system that tends to produce strong, majority governments, has not provided fertile ground for labor-backed coalitions. In Germany, a third pattern is apparent. Here, the consultative style of government, with its emphasis on involving social partners in dialogue, has supported "coalitions of influence." On the issues of international labor standards and environmental protection, the state has endeavored to involve all relevant stakeholders, including trade unions and nongovernmental organizations.

Conclusion

What lessons can be drawn from this survey of coalition building for the revitalization of labor movements? We feel several rather mixed conclusions present themselves. First, coalitions are to be welcomed, because they represent innovation in union strategy both in the sense of a novel development of tactics and a broadening of objectives. The search for coalition partners often occurs because unions are extending the reach of their policy to embrace issues that cannot be addressed at the workplace level. Second, although unions seeking to recreate themselves as social movements have turned to coalition, we believe there is no one-to-one association between social movement unionism and coalition. Social movement unions may build coalitions, but so do unions with other "identities." Third, the upward trend toward coalition is likely to continue, and we predict that coalition will become more widely used by labor movements. This is partly because internal factors are pushing unions toward coalition: union movements are in decline across the developed world

and are under pressure to develop new tactics and access new resources. Partly, too, it is because developments beyond the labor movement are likely to pull unions toward coalition. Coalition partners will remain readily in supply as the issues of globalization and the regulation of labor standards, gender equality and work-life balance, internationalism, environmentalism, and antifascism continue to loom large in progressive politics. Our final conclusion relates to national differences in the level and form of union coalition building. Advocates of social movement unionism propose coalition as part of a universal solution to labor's ills, appropriate to the general context of globalization. But developments in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany suggest a need for caution. Coalition building by unions reflects enduring differences in union identity and the institutional context of politics and industrial relations. It is unlikely that these national patterns will disappear.

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