

VI. Assessing the Efficacy of “Union Organizing” Strategies in Union Revitalization Projects in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States

Union Organizing and Union Revitalization in the United States

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Abstract

This paper examines evidence on union organizing activity for 1990–95 and 1999–2004. Despite increased organizing rhetoric and prominence during this time, the data show little change in aggregate organizing activity levels. Disaggregation to the national union level, however, reveals considerable variation. Many national unions increased both organizing activity and organizing success. A concluding section calls for more attention to organizational and environmental differences among national unions, and renewed efforts to model union organizing efforts.

Union organizing via National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) certification elections dropped sharply in 2006 to 1,648 elections, down from 2,142 in 2005 (Bureau of National Affairs 2007). This is one of the steepest drops in a decline dating to the early 1980s, when unions participated in over 6,000 elections

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annually (Chaison and Dhavale 1990). When Congress created the NLRB in 1935, elections were intended to be the primary means by which private-sector workers could decide on union representation. Explanations for the decline in elections are especially needed in that union leaders, notably AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, have publicly championed intentions to boost organizing for more than ten years. Yet neither organizing nor membership trends clearly show a turnaround (also see U.S. Department of Labor 2007).

Beyond a bleak aggregate picture, however, it is hard to know the reasons behind what has happened. Unions' membership reports are often suspiciously inconsistent across sources and time. Data on union organizing activity are scattered across at least three federal and numerous state agencies. These sources record votes but not membership. It is unclear how much organizing takes place outside "official channels" (for example, the NLRB). Self-reports from the AFL-CIO's now-defunct *Work in Progress* suggest, however, that organizing via elections still represents a large share of organizing activity, roughly 85 percent.

Fuller understanding requires attention to the role of *national* unions, their decision processes, structures, and environments. Some assessments have recognized this (see, for example, Chaison 2007; Hurd 2007), but most analyses still rely heavily on impressionistic, indirect, and anecdotal evidence. More systematic analyses of national union organizing records may illuminate the nature and causes of continuing union decline. This paper systematically examines national union data from the late "Kirkland era" (1990–1995) and the first years of the "Sweeney era" (1999–2004). After establishing "the facts" as best we can, our attention turns to inferences on union organizing and revitalization.

A Partial Organizing Record for National Unions

Table 1 shows indicators of membership, membership growth, NLRB organizing win rates, NLRB elections and relative organizing effort, and leader views on organizing effectiveness, commitment, and expenditures during 1990–2004 for national unions with 50,000 or more members in 2004. Other than NLRB-based data, these data are from self-reports. Data of this kind may be self-serving, as suggested by an average organizing effectiveness score of 3.6 on a 5-point scale for 1990 and 2.5 on a 4-point scale for 1997 (figures differ slightly for Table 1's large unions). Yet, self-reports may have some advantages over objective data in netting out environmental influences (for example, employer resistance, employment changes).

Membership data reveal diverse union experience and reflect many influences, including mergers, absorptions, "automatic" growth and decline through union security clauses and bargaining unit changes, as well as effects of orga-

TABLE 1
 Membership, Organizing Outcome, and Organizing Effort Measures
 for Twenty-Five Largest U.S. Unions, 1990–2004

National Union	Members		Membership Change		Membership Change		NLRB Win Rate		NLRB Win Rate		Self-Rated Organizing Effectiveness		NLRB Elections		Relative Organizing Effort		Self-Rated Organizing Commitment		Organizing Budget Share	
	1990	2004	1990-2004 (%)	1990-1995 (%)	1999-2004 (%)	1990-1995 (%)	1999-2004 (%)	1990-1995 (%)	1999-2004 (%)	1997 (1 to 4)	1990-1995	1999-2004	1990-1995	1999-2004	1999-2004*	1997 (1 to 4)	1996-1998			
NEA	2,000,000	2,698,504	34.9	10.0	8.1	—	40.0	3.8	4.0	—	15	—	1.0	3.0	—	—				
SEIU	892,000	1,551,319	73.9	18.0	25.8	64.6	72.4	3.6	—	1,101	1,208	85.3	113.1	—	—	—				
AFLCME	1,185,250	1,324,932	10.9	5.0	4.0	58.7	64.7	3.6	—	167	334	12.1	22.0	—	—	—				
IBT	1,410,000	1,324,927	-6.0	-3.3	0.7	43.3	45.2	2.9	—	5,707	4,114	193.5	163.8	—	—	—				
UFCW	1,136,500	1,205,269	6.1	-12.3	-4.1	49.5	52.9	3.5	—	988	980	73.8	61.4	—	—	—				
AFT	666,750	915,537	37.3	13.7	24.3	58.7	81.9	3.6	4.0	46	46	7.6	16.4	—	—	—				
IBEW	754,666	658,647	-12.7	-10.4	-4.4	43.8	56.3	2.9	3.0	892	823	53.5	59.3	3.0	3.0	26.7				
UAW	893,000	644,725	-27.8	-15.4	-14.3	46.5	54.7	2.9	—	658	479	89.9	103.9	4.0	4.0	—				
CWA	583,500	624,079	7.0	-6.6	24.7	53.1	53.5	3.4	3.0	326	333	34.4	42.7	—	—	—				
USA	473,666	557,727	17.7	-2.9	1.0	41.8	42.7	2.1	4.0	971	633	227.0	152.9	4.0	4.0	15.0				
LIUNA	453,000	528,045	16.6	19.3	-1.6	53.6	52.8	3.0	4.0	489	415	50.8	36.9	4.0	4.0	20.0				
UBC	564,250	524,237	-7.1	-24.3	24.8	44.1	45.7	2.9	—	395	352	38.2	40.9	—	—	—				
IAM	575,250	480,200	-16.5	-3.8	-19.5	48.5	65.9	3.3	3.0	747	630	92.7	77.1	3.0	3.0	31.7				
IUOE	345,000	334,402	-3.1	-4.2	1.1	57.8	58.7	3.6	1.0	823	878	80.1	80.6	2.0	—	—				
PPF	247,500	272,178	10.0	5.0	4.9	57.7	44.8	3.3	—	182	203	16.3	20.8	—	—	—				
PACE	208,500	252,393	21.1	19.3	-13.3	41.6	43.3	2.3	1.0	279	215	135.1	63.9	2.0	2.0	4.0				
NALC	259,303	250,054	-3.6	0.5	-3.4	—	—	4.0	3.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.0			
HERE	280,000	249,746	-10.8	-15.5	5.1	41.2	53.6	2.5	4.0	425	138	99.1	30.6	4.0	4.0	53.3				
IAFP	146,500	241,841	65.1	23.2	18.8	—	100.0	4.0	4.0	8	14	3.7	1.9	—	—	—				
APWU	288,666	229,993	-14.4	-2.0	-22.9	—	75.0	3.6	4.0	1	24	0.1	10.9	2.0	2.0	—				
AFGE	180,500	215,476	19.4	-1.1	15.7	50.0	60.0	3.1	—	16	10	10.9	5.0	—	—	—				
UNITE	210,750	201,605	-4.3	25.7	-4.2	51.8	62.9	3.7	3.0	251	105	170.0	85.8	4.0	—	—				
ATU	129,750	151,073	16.4	-26.3	12.1	56.2	55.4	3.3	3.0	105	92	56.2	72.1	3.0	3.0	—				
OPBU	110,750	123,726	11.7	-23.7	18.6	56.9	58.4	—	4.0	123	101	68.6	93.9	4.0	4.0	7.3				
SMW	123,000	118,740	-3.5	-15.0	0.8	53.4	41.4	2.9	2.0	234	222	73.4	74.0	4.0	4.0	28.3				

Note: NEA=National Education Association, SEIU=Service Employees, AFSCME=State, County, Municipal Employees, IBT=Teamsters, UFCW=Food and Commercial Workers, AFT=Teachers, IBEW=Electrical Workers, UAW=Auto Workers, CWA=Communication Workers, USA=Steel Workers, LIUNA=Laborers, UBC=Carpenters, IAM=Machinists, IUOE=Operating Engineers, PPF=Plumbers, PACE=Paper, Allied, Chemical, Energy Workers, NALC=Letter Carriers, HERE=Hotel and Restaurant Employees, IAFP=Fire Fighters, APWU=Postal Workers, AFGE=Government Index = 1,000 (eligible voters in NLRB elections divided by membership).

nizing and decertification. Membership growth *can* reflect organizing, but it is by no means a clear indicator. In any case, on average unions increased their membership by 3.1 percent over the 1990–2004 period; however, membership declined during the Kirkland era by 5.3 percent and increased during the Sweeney era by 2.7 percent. Consolidation, rather than organizing, however, is the principal explanation for this “growth.” Overall membership declined from 16.7 million in 1990 to 15.5 million in 2004 (Hirsch and Macpherson 2007), but average national union size increased from 142.6 thousand to 172.9 thousand.

NLRB win rates are more precisely about organizing success but are limited to elections actually held. They do not reflect non-NLRB jurisdiction organizing, card checks, or differing propensities to pursue campaigns to elections (for example, based on authorization card signings). Win rates may connote strategies as well as effectiveness. Caveats noted, there are clearly NLRB win rate differences across unions and time. The SEIU nears the top of the list in both eras and improved its win rate noticeably, from 64.6 to 72.4 percent. The IBT shows a low win rate in both eras and improved its rate less than most unions, from 43.3 to 45.2 percent. The average win rate for the Kirkland era was 51 percent, versus 61 percent for the Sweeney era. Trade-offs between NLRB organizing activity levels and win rates are apparent in the SEIU vs. IBT comparison, and for unions generally in the correlation between activity level indicators and win rates for the Kirkland era ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.01$) but not for the Sweeney era ($r = 0.06$, NS).

Correlations among alternate organizing success indicators are generally modest or weak, for example, $r = 0.08$, NS, for Kirkland era win rate and membership growth, and $r = 0.24$, $p < 0.10$ for the same indicators in the Sweeney era. This is disappointing but underscores differing information content and perhaps data limitations.

Although the NLRB win rate and membership growth rate improvements between the Kirkland and Sweeney eras suggest success in refocusing unions on organizing, the organizing self-rating on a same-unions basis dropped significantly. Also, organizing *activity* is arguably more relevant, and the evidence on it is mixed. The number of NLRB certification elections rose during Sweeney’s early years then seemingly returned to a long-term downtrend. The average number of elections per union dropped from about 260 in the Kirkland era to about 139 in the Sweeney era. These figures overstate the decline due to sample composition changes, but even a same-unions comparison shows that the average union participated in about 59 fewer elections in the latter period.

Comparing numbers of elections across unions is of limited value. Organizing requires resources, and unions vary greatly in size and resources. Conse-

quently, emphasis here is on *relative* organizing activity, that is, numbers of workers “tried” via NLRB elections per thousand current members. Relative organizing activity rose from an average of 62.4 eligible voters tried per thousand members to 73.4, but it is virtually unchanged on a same-unions basis. For several seemingly “organizing-active” unions such as the IBT, UFCW, USWA, and LIUNA, relative organizing activity fell. On average, although win rates rose by five to six percentage points on a same-unions basis, relative organizing activity did not change significantly on that basis. Organizing budgets averaged only about 14.5 percent of total union spending (for a relatively small number of reporting unions, $N = 44$), in contrast to Sweeney’s 30 percent goal, and showed a mild upward trend over three years, 1996–98 (Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 2007). Here, too, there is considerable variation across unions, consistent with distinctions drawn between “organizing,” “organizing-driven,” or “organizing-active” unions (or similar terms) and other unions (see, for example, Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004). Relative variability in organizing activity is far greater than that in win rates. The coefficient of variation (CV) for NLRB elections is in the 600–900 percent vicinity, and even after adjusting for union size and taking into account size of units targeted for organizing, relative organizing activity’s CV ranges from 85 percent (Kirkland era) to 194 percent (Sweeney era), but for win rates the CV range is only from 24 percent (Kirkland era) to 28 percent.

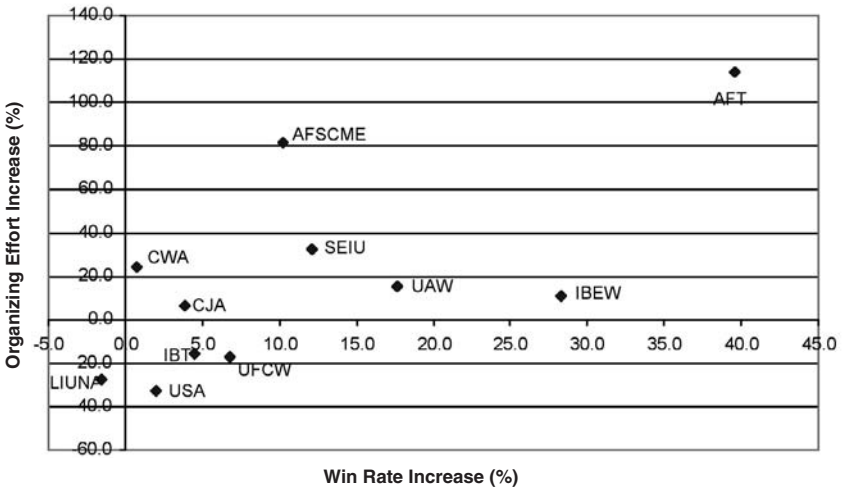
Is there intra-union consistency over time, that is, evidence of stable types? Although there is little consistency over time in membership growth ($r = 0.12$, NS), this indicator is contaminated by mergers, absorptions, and such. Consistency over time for win rates ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), relative organizing effort ($r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$), and self-rated organizing effectiveness ($r = 0.41$) do suggest this possibility. There has been *some* shuffling of the ranks. Some unions’ win rates changed by 10 percentage points, and some unions’ growth rates changed dramatically. Relative organizing effort rose or fell 30 percent or more for some nationals.

Obviously, there are many indicators one might consider, and unfortunately they sometimes diverge and some may involve trade-offs that complicate interpretation. NLRB win rates and relative organizing effort measures represent conceptually and practically important indicators in a potential trade-off relation. A union might be able to organize more extensively, but with lower success. Conversely, it may scale back its efforts but improve its success rate, that is, focus its efforts more intensively. If a union increased *both* its organizing effort *and* its win rate, that would seem unambiguously positive, and, in contrast, if its effort and win rate *both* fell, that would seem decidedly negative. Figure 1 plots changes in relative organizing effort and win rates for the 11 largest U.S.

unions, those with 500,000 or more members in 2004. Most of these “giants” improved *both* their relative organizing effort and their win rates between the Kirkland and Sweeney eras. Only one had decreases in both, three improved win rates while diminishing organizing effort, and none expanded efforts with reduced success. The trade-off referenced earlier is not apparent in Figure 1; rather, win rates and effort improved together on average. This positive relation does not hold in a similar plot for “all” unions (all those for which data are available), but even among all unions, a plurality of unions fall in the first quadrant, coupling increased efforts and improved success.

These plots put a rather different light on changes in organizing efforts. Although the aggregate figures show improved win rates, they show diminished or unchanged efforts. In contrast, Figure 1’s data emphasize diversity among unions and suggest that many unions, particularly larger unions, have coupled increased efforts with greater success. How does one reconcile these seemingly inconsistent perspectives? One answer is “Blame the Teamsters.” As Table 1 shows, the Teamsters “drove” about 1,600 fewer elections in the Sweeney era than in the Kirkland era. Some other large unions also showed large decreases in organizing effort, and collectively these cases offset increases by many national unions.

FIGURE 1
 NLRB Win Rate Increase and Organizing Effort
 Increase, 1990–1995 vs. 1999–2004
 (Unions with over 500,000 Members in 2004)



Prior Research and Modeling Efforts

The organizing record underscores that there are important differences among unions. We do not have a clear understanding of the observed differences or reliable models to aid understanding. There have been some notable attempts to describe, analyze, and interpret *aggregate* union organizing activity (for example, Farber and Western 2002), or to explain U.S.-Canadian differences (for example, Rose and Chaison 2001). These have highlighted the importance of the supply side for union growth and noted the comparatively low level, stagnation, and decline of union organizing efforts. Others have focused on why unions are not organizing more and whether and how organizational change within unions can boost organizing (for example, Hurd 2007). Key issues are why some unions seem far more committed to organizing than others, reasons for differences in organizing strategies, and how high commitment to organizing can be diffused. Much of this work is descriptive and impressionistic, but it offers insights toward a more systematic understanding.

There have been previous efforts to *model* differential union organizing efforts. Both Block (1980) and Voos (1987) were able to explain only small portions of inter-union variance in organizing activity. It may be that organizing efforts reflect many random or idiosyncratic influences such as the ideologies or strategies of particular union leaders. It is hard to interpret these modeling efforts as highly successful. Indeed, they offer “thin” conceptual models, low “explained” variance, and anomalous results and are based on data from the 1960s and 1970s.

More recent and mainly qualitative assessments have been offered by several scholars. Bronfenbrenner (2001) stressed a harsh environment, political distractions, union education cuts, polling excesses, and failure to undertake cultural change. Farber and Western (2002) noted that “[E]xplanation is difficult to come by” (398) but suggested that key factors might include a harsh political or economic environment and differential union- and non-union-sector growth. Hurd (2004) suggested that contributing influences include excess emphasis on the “organizing model,” dysfunctional and jealously guarded union autonomy, excess focus on numeric goals, and too little focus on “spirit and purpose.”

Preliminary Conclusions

One can quibble about the adequacy of NLRB data and other indicators of union organizing activity, growth, and vitality. Despite data limitations, however, it is hard to escape the view that aggregate U.S. union organizing activity and union vitality continue long-term downtrends. There are, however, encouraging exceptions to this gloomy generalization. Many national unions

have increased organizing efforts *and* success, no small accomplishment in the political economy of the early twenty-first century.

Despite growing recognition of and rhetoric about the importance of organizing, modeling efforts designed to establish fuller understanding seem to have been largely abandoned. This results in a “doubly grim vineyard” in addressing a somewhat necrotic topic with limited explanatory success. Better data would help. Trite as this may sound, it is important. Consider that when Sweeney called for unions to boost organizing budgets, no one could offer a solid estimate of a baseline of organizing expenditures. It is hard to assess progress when we do not know the starting point. Broader conceptualizations are also needed. Amidst the focus on quantitative organizing goals and the confusion that has often accompanied “organizing model” rhetoric, means and ends have often been confounded. Organizing is a means for improving worker well-being, not an end in itself. Union density may be the single best indicator of union capacity to improve worker well-being, but it has limitations (Sullivan 2007) and is not synonymous with vitality. Broader conceptualizations are needed as well in terms of union environments. It is said that a national union leader vowed to fire any organizer who organized a workplace in the union’s (declining) traditional jurisdiction. Is this refocusing gone berserk or a rational response to the futility of organizing workplaces almost certain to disappear in the face of daunting global competition? Similarly, union decisions to organize or not have to be considered within specific worker and employer attitudinal climates. We cannot gain a solid understanding when we simply compare Union A and Union B, or even Federation A and Federation C, without considering the differing environments they face.

Finally, as Hurd (2007) suggests, unions and those who wish to understand them must give more attention to “spirit and purpose.” This alludes to ongoing debates about social movement unionism and business unionism, or, more broadly, what type of unionism, and how does it resonate with worker representation desires? A “Great Myth” of organizing in the United Kingdom and United States is that millions are ready to join unions and just need to be asked. Polls do indeed show that millions say they would vote for a union in a hypothetical election, or possibly even join one—but again, this is *in the abstract*. Even though unions enjoy their support to a degree, for many workers, unions are still a long way from providing something that they want to be part of badly enough to commit their votes in real campaigns, much less their dues and their continuing activism. National and local unions are experimenting, as they should. Both success and failure can be instructive. In the long term, it will be unions that create an internal climate that fosters innovation and accepts occasional failures that are likely to find the revitalization formula that works for their circumstances. Scholars would do well to study these

experiments, not only in careful case studies and impressionist assessments but also in broader attempts to model union processes and outcomes.

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