

Commentary

The power of union-community coalitions

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For decades, unions around the world have been struggling. Across advanced English-speaking countries, we have seen the rising power of capital and its increasing influence over government. By the mid-1990s, unions faced declining membership, weakening political influence, and poor collective bargaining outcomes.

This created sufficient difficulties that many national labour councils initiated internal debates that considered the need for widespread revitalisation strategies (1). These strategies sought to break with 'business' or 'arbitration' unionism to build a 'social movement unionism' in which unions rebuilt their power. Numerous unions have experimented with a broad range of strategies. One of these is building coalitions with community organisations.

This is nothing new. For a few, coalitions are familiar. For others, coalitions are a technique exhumed from long, often-neglected union traditions. The reasons to work in coalition are particularly powerful at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Unions are isolated and no longer strong enough on their own to confront the power of employers at work and in politics.

We can see the need for, and potential of, union-community coalitions currently in the United Kingdom, where the pressures of massive public sector cuts threaten union jobs as well as the social services upon which most working people rely. Unions alone do not have the power to confront these political and economic threats. Building popular support will require the development of relationships with other civil society organisations.

However, coalitions are not a magic bullet. The simple existence of union-community alliances will not guarantee victory. If coalitions can help unions confront the difficulties they face, the challenge is how to make coalitions powerful.

Too often coalitions have been just another media stunt, an opportunity to list a large number of organisations on a letterhead in support of, or against, an issue. The perceived strength of these coalitions is frequently and incorrectly equated to the number of organisations assembled. These relationships come together and fall away based on the issues at hand, and the coalitions have no greater purpose than to generate publicity for an issue. There is often tension between the organisations, but strategies are rarely developed to overcome these differences. These coalitions are merely an alignment of organisational leaders. They do not engage, let alone politicise or enhance the campaigning skills of union or community organisation members. Unsurprisingly, this kind of coalition rarely supports sustained campaigns on an issue. Sometimes letterhead coalitions deliver a veneer of success, but it is not enough to change unions' political and economic environment.

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Some unions, however, have engaged in a different kind of coalition practice, involving campaigns underpinned by a long-term commitment to build relationships, managing distinct interests and creating common concern. They engage leaders and their rank and file, building enduring strategies that win on issues and promote their own social agenda.

Power in Coalition (Tattersall, 2010) draws together the literature on union-community coalitions (2) and documents the trials and successes of three long term coalitions: in Australia, the Sydney-based Public Education Coalition in New South Wales (3); in the US, the Grassroots Collaborative in Chicago (4); and in Canada, the Toronto-based Ontario Health Coalition (5). It identifies five principles that help coalitions to straddle the challenge of achieving social change goals at the same time as they attempt to strengthen the organisations that participate in them.

Principles of strong coalitions

1. *Less is more*

Coalitions are more successful when organisational membership is restricted and there are fewer groups making decisions and sharing resources. Bigger is not always better. A narrower agenda made it easier to more deeply engage the commitment of members and leaders. A 'less is more' approach helped avoid lowest common denominator positions where coalitions risk being a 'mile wide and an inch deep' and tend to only be able to agree on what they are against rather than what they are for.

This strategy runs counter to typical coalition practice where 'letterhead coalitions' are popular. But in the case of the Ontario Health Coalition and the Chicago Grassroots Collaborative, it was only when the coalitions restricted membership that they built sufficient trust to keep organisations working together. Similarly in Sydney, a coalition of only two organisations (the teachers' union and parents' federation) built an unprecedented independent public education inquiry, staging hearings across the state, mobilising parents and teachers in dozens of local communities, and ultimately winning \$250m in reforms to public education through a reduction in class sizes for young children.

Less is more requires coalition organisers to be strategic with 'the less'. There is a need to identify partners that have the right mix of power, diversity, interest and, potentially, unpredictability. With fewer people around the table, there is an incentive to do 'more' together – like building strong public relationships that understand personal and organisational interests. In Chicago, this took the form of informal breakfast meetings where people got to know each other over several years before they started campaigning together (6).

2. *Individuals matter*

Despite coalitions being defined as an alignment of organisations, alliances live or die based on effective leadership from organisational leaders, champions inside of organisations and coalition coordinators and staff. Their most important qualities are the ability to build bridges across different types of organisations and act as campaign strategists.

Coalitions are more effective when leaders directly participate in coalition decision-making. In Sydney, the public education coalition had strong commitment and effective decision making because it was a table of leaders. In Toronto, the table of staff struggled at times to engage the unions. Strong leaders were supported by champions in their ranks who helped develop and implement coalition strategy.

Coalition coordinators hold together organisational relationships. Coordinators smooth over differences between organisations, and seek to mitigate union dominance when it arises.

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3. *To wield self-interest with a 'sword of justice'*

Coalitions are most successful when they work on issues that feed the direct strategic needs of their organisational partners and simultaneously connect to the public interest or common good. Organisational self-interest is necessary, but not sufficient, to build a strong coalition. In Canada, the health coalition struggled to connect with union self-interest. At the same time, self-interest alone has a limited political impact. In Sydney, the media and politicians dismissed the teachers' wages contract campaign, portraying it as only about union self-interest.

Self-interest opens up to public interest when a coalition can negotiate a shared interest between diverse organisations. The New South Wales Public Education Coalition found a mutual self-interest in the issue of reduced class sizes. Teachers wanted smaller classes because it made their workload more manageable, and parents cared about smaller class sizes because they improved educational outcomes for their children.

Mutual self-interest can be creative. For instance, in Chicago, an anti-Wal-Mart site fight was translated into a campaign for a living wage ordinance for retail workers that covered union and non-union workers, helping the union and the coalition win massive public support.

Coalitions are also most able to shift the political climate when their issues are positively framed demands (like a new demand for new class sizes or living wages), rather than negatively framed 'no campaigns' (like no to hospital privatisation).

4. *Timely exercise of power through conscious planning*

Sustained coalitions have long-term plans that define how they will build and use their strength.

The Sydney public education coalition created a two-year plan that included an independent inquiry, with reports released periodically in the lead up to a state election. Similarly, the Chicago living wage campaign was timetabled to move its ordinance six months out from aldermanic elections. Disciplined planning ensured the coalitions could deliver political pressure rather than just reacting to the media cycle.

5. *Multi-level coalitions*

Most issues cannot be solved at a single level. Political and economic power is multi-scaled – traversing the local, regional, state, national and international – and to be most effective, coalitions frequently need to act at multiple levels. Coalitions are most effective at acting at multiple scales when city-wide or national coalitions also support the establishment of local city or neighbourhood coalitions. These local coalitions can act in partnership with more centralised coalitions to help enhance leadership development inside organisations and maximise the political influence of coalition campaigns.

The Ontario Health Coalition established forty coalitions around the province so it could run a campaign that collected hundreds of thousands of petitions and then move issues in a coordinated way across the province. Town-based coalitions were led by union members, retired teachers and community activists, providing a space for organisational members to build their skills and capacity to campaign.

But multi-level coalitions need to be well managed. There is a need for a feedback loop between the different levels. It is not just about setting people up locally to run a state or national agenda, there needs to be local control. Second, there is a need for local coalitions to have some relative autonomy – to pursue local demands in conjunction with national/state demands.

What can coalitions mean for unions?

That coalitions may strengthen organisations holds particular promise for unions. Coalitions can provide a means for re-establishing unions' ability to exercise political influence and control over work practices. Likewise, civil society relationships may reverse unions' social isolation and reshape their organisational capacity. In these ways, coalitions may be a source of union revitalisation.

It is critical to note that unions are more likely to win social change and enhance their organisational strength when they work in coalitions that are long-term and mutual in the way in which they plan and execute their goals. In the case studies in *Power in Coalition*, unions gained more power from working in coalition when they had less direct control over the coalition. Thus for the Sydney public education coalition it was the inquiry into public education and not the salaries campaign that had the greater political impact on government; similarly it was the Chicago Living Wage Coalition and not the No-Wal-Mart campaign that most aggressively challenged Chicago's retailers.

This finding runs counter to much of the common wisdom about coalitions. Popular union conceptions are that coalitions are a means to supplement union goals, that community organisations are an add-on to union power and strategy. This approach sees relationships with community organisations in a zero-sum framework, where the purpose of a coalition is to enable 'power for' unions through a transfer of resources from community organisations to unions. There were examples of this kind of instrumental power in the book's case studies. Community organisations helped unions mobilise people to attend rallies in Chicago, run media events and lobby in Sydney, and build public awareness in Toronto. These kinds of instrumental support, however, pale in comparison with the deeper exchange of power that occurred when the relationships and campaigning goals were more mutually constructed.

A more powerful way for unions to organise in coalition is to work to build positive-sum relationships. This is where community organisations build 'power with' unions (Kreisberg, 1992; Chambers, 2003). In contrast with the way community organisations provide support for union goals, positive-sum coalitions enable unions and community organisations to jointly craft issues and campaigns that work to build each other while also meeting each other's direct interests. We see that when coalitions operate in a way that generates reciprocity of decision-making and a mutuality of interest, organisations are much more likely to share power, resources, and skills for the long haul.

Transactional 'power for' coalitions, or what Carola Frege, Ed Heery and Lowell Turner describe as 'vanguard coalitions' (Frege et al, 2004), are easily severable. They may allow a union to obtain short-term support from a community organisation, but the assistance is not likely to last because there is little motivation to sustain the relationship. Organisations do not have to share power, they need a reason to do so. When a union cultivates a relationship with a community organisation based on the organisation's self-interest, that community organisation is likely to strengthen its commitment to joint work.

Positive-sum coalitions of unions and community organisations provide several sources of power for unions.

First, coalitions that have a mutual purpose, values and issues (common concern) help broaden a union's vision and thereby build the political agency of unions. This develops when a coalition assists a union to set out a public agenda by articulating its vested interests as a social interest (a 'sword of justice') or where participation in a coalition helps a union to politicise union members. The power of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) was enhanced by the public education coalition and in particular the

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Inquiry into Public Education. The coalition generated political influence for union issues such as class sizes and salaries. It activated union members who had not previously been engaged by industrial work but who were committed to taking action around their professional identity. This broader understanding of union purpose made it easier for the NSWTF to build relationships with parents and principals.

Second, when a coalition has strong organisational relationships and structure, unions gain public legitimacy and enhanced power from the shared resources. For instance in Chicago, the Collaborative's strong relationships allowed its living wage campaign to harness the lobbying relationships of labour, the field campaign of ACORN, and the strategic planning work of the coalition as a whole. This coalition's open and trusting relationships produced a climate where organisations were prepared to share power. Thus collective resources benefited the union specifically because the work of the Collaborative was in its strategic interest. The United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW) was directly affected by the issue of living wages, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) was directly interested in building political influence in the city.

Third, a coalition that operates locally as well as more centrally (such as across a city or country) can provide unions with opportunities to increase the campaigning skills of union leaders and members. For instance, the Ontario Health Coalition engaged unions like the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in unfamiliar campaign strategies, such as a canvass, provincial tours, and plebiscites. These campaigns were successful because they broke the mould of the traditional union response to political threats, which was to organise rallies. The coalition's local coalition partners provided a resource base for catalysing new forms of member participation that left lasting skills among the union stewards and members who participated. The union was able to take advantage of this multi-scaled campaign opportunity because it was a multi-scaled organisation with locals that matched the local scale of the health coalition across the province.

These three types of union power represent three ways in which unions can take up the challenge posed by Allan Flanders and wield a 'sword of justice' (Flanders, 1970). He implied that there was a 'choice' for unions, between acting in their vested interest or acting with a sword of justice. My argument moves beyond this dichotomy. Experience suggests that coalitions are most powerful when these two factors are combined, when vested interest coincides or is expressed as a sword of justice.

Powerful unionism, through a connection between vested interest and a sword of justice, can develop in three distinct ways. First, mutual relationships create space for social legitimacy by offering an antidote to union domination. By connecting union self-interest with other organisations' interests, unions can align their own vested interest with the common good. Intense collaboration opens up vested-interest decision-making by exposing it to the rigour of debate and negotiation. Second, a shared agenda connects vested interest to social interest by opening up campaign goals to broader constituencies and bringing in non-union advocates to promote these concerns. Third, innovative campaign strategies become an antidote to predictable repertoires of contention (like demonstrations), adding new activities that can surprise opponents and wield new types of influence. In these three ways, as Lowell Turner argues, coalitions play a central role in union revitalisation (Turner, 2001).

Coalition participants, and in particular union organisers, will make decisions about the kinds of union power they build. They are strategic choices. Context and objectives shape the way coalitions prioritise and achieve different kinds of power. But the central principle is that more mutual, reciprocal, and creative relationships qualitatively enhance the kind of power unions gain from coalitions. When unions work in coalitions that simultaneously

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enhance the strength of their community organisation partners, there is a cumulative expansion of resources across the coalition, as well as an increase in power for unions.

Beyond the internal renewal of unions, we can see that coalitions also produce political power in the interest of unions. This kind of political power is unlike the insider influence associated with union affiliation with labour parties. Coalitions generate a potentially more short-term and temporary exercise of political pressure that is limited to moving specific issues and agendas, as opposed to a sustained institutionalised influence of the broad policies of a political party. Nevertheless, that pressure has a qualitatively different effect on the state than labourism, as coalitions are able to shift the decision of a broader class of politicians. Thus in Canada, the Save Medicare campaign shifted the Liberal Party, and in Australia the public education coalition enlisted the support of the conservative opposition as well as the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Beyond the traditional strategy of union-party relationships and labour parties, coalitions potentially provide a supplementary source of political power for unions. Moreover, when coalition strategies are used in concert with union-party relationships, they can strengthen those relationships. For instance, in Chicago traditional lobbying was coupled with direct action in individual aldermanic wards, with the result that Democratic aldermen were more likely to support the coalition's policy reforms.

Conclusion

Coalition success is far-reaching but complex. While I identify several core principles that produce powerful long-term relationships, the constraints of political and national context often force coalition organisers to make trade-offs in their strategies, for instance forgoing a desire to renew internal organisational strength in order to just pursue social change outcomes.

Yet it is possible for coalition organisers to mitigate some of these tensions. Coalitions can learn from the experiences of others, and indeed from the principles of strong coalitions. My book's case studies continually showed coalition organisers developing new strategies in response to hostile contexts. For unions, the principles of strong coalitions and positive sum coalitions are vital. When these kinds of coalitions are built, unions are most likely to reinvigorate their relationships, agenda, and campaigning capacity while rebuilding their political power.

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Notes

1. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)'s 2008 *Union Organising and Working for a Fairer Australia* framework called on unions to 'build coalitions with community and faith groups', building on a decade of support for community outreach (ACTU, 1999; 2008). Similarly, in 1996 the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO)'s 'Union Cities' programme included a call for coalition-building, reinforced by the 2001 AFL-CIO's mission statement that appealed for a 'strengthening of the ties of labour to our allies'. Likewise, the 2005 Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) argued that 'it is important to protect workers and their families where they live by working with like-minded community allies' (CLC, 2005).

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2. Scholarship is most widespread in the United States, appearing at first through a wave of edited books that describe the essential characteristics of best-practice coalitions. These began with Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello's *Building bridges: The emerging grassroots coalition of labor and community* (Brecher and Costello, 1990), Bruce Nissen's *Fighting for Jobs: Case studies of labor-community coalitions confronting plant closings* (Nissen, 1995), and later David Reynolds's *Partnering for change: Unions and community groups build coalitions for economic justice* (Reynolds, 2004). A series of special edition journals have also brought together coalition scholars and practitioners (Banks, 1992; Sneiderman, 1996; Reynolds and Ness, 2004). Since 2000, coalition scholarship has expanded to focus on classifying different types of coalitions (Frege, Heery, and Turner, 2004; Obach, 2004; Tattersall, 2005), issue-specific coalitions like living wage coalitions (Luce, 2004), unusual alliances such as those between environmentalists and unions (Rose, 2000; Obach, 2004), and the uneven development of coalitions across different national contexts (Frege, Heery, and Turner, 2004; Turner and Cornfield, 2007; Greer, 2008).
3. For more information visit <http://powerincoalition.com/2010/05/sydney-the-public-education-coalition/>
4. For more on the Chicago Grassroots Collaborative visit <http://www.thegrassrootscollaborative.org/>
5. For more on the Ontario Health Coalition visit <http://www.web.net/ohc/>
6. For more on this innovation visit <http://powerincoalition.com/2010/09/doing-breakfast-with-the-grassroots-collaborative-in-chicago/>

Other union-community coalitions have challenged anti-worker and anti-community public policies in an era of conservative retrenchment.⁷ In Los Angeles, for example, the Janitors for Justice union organizing drive has worked closely with advocates of public transportation reform.Â Power of unlikely coalitions. social justice that challenges public policies that are detrimental to working people and their communities. These are three small examples of how unlikely coalition building can push beyond the parochialism of trade unions and community organizations. These examples help us answer three important questions. First, can unions overcome the racial divisions that are deeply entrenched in working class communities? If community unionism describes the process of unions â€reaching outâ€™ to community, then it can include one of three different practices. It can include working with community organisations. It can include acting with a broad common â€communityâ€™ or class interest or acting with people with a specific identity.Â After all, not all forms of community unionism or union-community coalitions are the same nor create the same forms of power for campaigns or unions (Tattersall 2005). If community unionism has three elements, then variations in these elements may be indicative of variations in success and power. The above definition points to three elements, a relational dimension, an. A comprehensive campaign is labor union organizing or a collective bargaining campaign with a heavy focus on research, the use of community coalition-building, publicity and public pressure, political and regulatory pressure, and economic and legal pressure in addition to traditional organizing tactics. The comprehensive campaign is a labor tactic primarily used in the United States, where labor unions lack many of the legal protections accorded their counterparts in the European Community and where... Union-community coalitions are an increasingly frequent phenomenon in the industrial landscape. In 2005, â€There is Power in a Coalitionâ€™ sought to build a typology to understand various kinds of coalitions and define their different features. This article reviews that typology then applies it to the Sydney Alliance. The Sydney Alliance is a broad-based coalition of religious organisations, unions and community organisations that uses community organising to make Sydney a better place for everybody. It has included up to eleven unions at its peak and is an example of a Deep Coalition.