

# Getting it together:

## Understanding the practice of political coalitions across the industrialized Pacific Rim

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### **Abstract**

*A key issue for 21<sup>st</sup> century political activism is how union and community organizations can work effectively together in political coalition. The 1998 ‘turtles and teamsters’ alliance in Seattle popularized coalitions between community organizations and unions as an effective strategy for political change. Since then, political coalitions have become a common feature of movements seeking political power. In particular in industrialized nations, unions are turning towards ‘the community’ to build alliances to increase their power in negotiations with employers and the state. Yet research on political coalitions is inadequate; there is insufficient analysis of when alliances are likely to effectively deliver political outcomes or stronger social movements. This paper develops a framework for political coalitions in order to explain when and how they are likely to be effective. It reframes existing literature by organizing current debates into a typology that analyses ascending categories of coalition effectiveness. It identifies four different types of political coalitions: ad hoc coalitions, support coalitions, progressive coalitions and deep coalitions. The article then identifies four key criteria that vary the effectiveness of coalitions – the issue/common interest that unites the coalition, the structure and strategy that links the parties, the extent of organisation/union participation and the scale of the campaign and the coalition.*

Political coalitions are increasingly used as a strategy for community-based movements, where organizations unite to fight for a broader base of concerns. They are also increasingly common union strategy, as unions reach out to build powerful alliances to rebuild their influence. Yet the existing literature on coalitions insufficiently analyses how and when alliances are likely to effectively deliver political outcomes or stronger social movements. This paper develops a

framework for political coalitions in order to explain variations in form and power by reframing existing literature into a framework that analyses ascending categories of coalition effectiveness.

### **Political Coalitions: an introduction**

Political coalitions are the engine room behind many successful social movements and community campaigns. Yet, the current literature on coalitions tends to treat coalitions as a end in itself rather than as a complex medium that varies in different circumstances (Brecher 1990).

Political coalitions are idiosyncratic and have differing capacities and orientation. They can be evaluated from a range of perspectives: from how they engage and transform their participants to how they achieve power. Their power is affected by external political opportunities and their political and economic environment. This paper concentrates on the question of the internal relations and the capacity of coalitions. I develop a framework that differentiates coalitions according to the types of issues they engage in, the structure and strategy they use, the kinds of participation they engender from their participants and the geographic space in which they act. My framework explores these four variables and how they vary coalition effectiveness.

### **Ad hoc coalition**

The most common form of interrelationship between unions and community organisations is an ad hoc, episodic engagement. These relationships do not involve significant interaction; they are one-off requests for support, such as invitations to participate in events (such as a picket line or a rally) or provide financial assistance.

Ad hoc coalitions are limited by the simple and distant nature of their interactions. As Lipsig-Mumme notes, these relationships are often instrumental (Lipsig-Mumme 2003), where one organisation requests transactional support from another organisation on its own terms. These

relationships do not involve joint decision making. Furthermore, the distant nature of the interaction means that the relationship between union and community organisation is often very separate from the union membership, with the campaign carried out by union officers.

At the same time, ad coalitions are filled with possibility. They build relationships between different organisations, sustaining and feeding informal connections through one-off joint actions. The very existence of ad hoc coalitions demonstrates a desire for alignment between unions and community organisations. The simplicity and short-term nature of the alignment means that organisations with very different cultures and practices can come together with relative ease, with less chance of conflict or tension. They provide tangible patterns for seeking and providing tactical solidarity. These relationships create opportunities for greater solidarity between unions and community organisations, which may lead unions or community organisations to more powerful coalitional arrangements in the future. It is to the more powerful arrangements of a support coalition that we now turn.

### **Support Coalition**

The term support coalition describes coalitions which operate as short-term, structured coalition between unions and community organisations. In terms of issues and common interest, support coalitions share features with ad hoc coalitions, as the interests at the heart of the coalition tend to either support a specific group's personal agenda or issue. The coalition can be initiated by a union or by a community organisation. Support coalitions can be staged on any issue; indeed issue choice is indiscriminate, ranging from a specific concern from one organisation to an abstract issue such as peace. These coalitions are often reactively formed in response to a crisis (Brecher 1990; Craft 1990; Banks 1992), and tend to be based on a single-issue.

Support coalitions have a far more integrated structure and strategy than ad hoc coalitions. They develop a coalition structure, where face to face meetings and/or regular communication allows for shared decision making between participant organizations (Banks 1992). While the structure remains short term, the interlinking of organisations in a decision making process allows groups to share ownership over strategy and the types of events organised. However, the organisation that initiated the coalition tends to have the greatest ownership and influence over the structure (Fine 2003). If the coalition is union-formed it will often be dominated by unions, with unions exercising both formal and informal influence over the type of action taken (Waterman 1991; Munck 1999). If the coalition is community-initiated, it will struggle to get significant participation from unions, with unions often sending junior staff as coalition decision makers (Clawson 2003).

Short-term, reactive support coalitions tend not to play close attention to multiple levels of scale or locality, focusing on a single spatial level where the key decision maker is based (Lipsig-Mumme 2003). Thus while a support coalition may be able to engage in forms of action at the level of decision makers, it will struggle to connect the forms of support action with meaningful forms of member participation. This is compounded by the haste in which support usually coalitions act, because they are often reactive. Thus the people mobilised are used as a 'rent-a-crowd' rather than given access to more locally based forms of meaningful political action.

A support coalition has a limited ability to build organizational participation, and in particular union participation, from coalition partners. A coalition's power comes from its ability to mobilise a movement of people, and to harness the skills and capacities of different organisations in the pursuit of a single goal. However, because a support coalition has a relatively short-term, remote form of organizational buy-in, building and sharing power becomes difficult.

In particular, support coalitions struggle to build union participation. While union involvement in coalitions usefully provide social movements or community campaigns with greater power, financial resources, support leverage or influence (Tattersall 2004), they often incompletely engage the resources or capacity of unions. Support coalitions are staged on any issue, and consequently there is little regard to the types of issues that politicize union members. Often a support coalition will not directly engage union members, as the issue may be disconnected to union member's to their lives, experiences or concerns. Furthermore, reliance on a coalition structure limits in-depth participation by organisations, particularly unions. Coalitions alone do not provide significant space for union delegate or activist participation in decision making (Clawson 2003), as they limit planning to officials. Without ownership or involvement it is difficult to spark locally based organising amongst union members inside unions on community issues.

Support coalitions are useful structures for reactive, single-issue campaigning, but they remain closed to building significant mass-based engagement in action. Organizational involvement is focused on the form of the coalition, which can become reified as a structure rather than treated as simply a space for mobilising support and action. Support coalitions are able to capture and coordinate a diverse array of different types of organisations, however they regularly are victim a of factionalism and splits, and are often short-lived, because of the unequal dominance of particular parties through an imbalanced structure, and unequal ownership over the issues at the heart of the campaign. A more effective form of coalition sees unions and community organisations activated on issues jointly, while engaging in a longer term structure. This brings into focus the third category – progressive coalitions.

### **Progressive Coalition**

A progressive coalition extends and deepens the common interest and structure of a support coalition by extending the frame of issues, the length of campaigning and the form of decision making. A progressive coalition is more likely to develop as a longer-term support strategy for a group of organisations who recognize that they can not achieve broader political goals acting on their own. To move from a support coalition to a progressive coalition requires unions to consciously reorient themselves to external allies. If unions willingly open up their frame of vision and allow other organisations to have greater control over decision making, they can help build stronger political coalitions that can more readily achieve progressive change

The most significant difference between a progressive coalition and a support coalition is the type of issues that are campaigned on. A progressive coalition stretches the bounds of common interest, so the issue at the heart of the campaign is in the mutual self-interest of the participating organisations, not simply the direct concern of one of the parties (Clawson 2003; Fine 2003).

Thus each of the participating groups has a direct interest in the success of the coalition, because that success supports its personal political aims. The need for joint direct interest means that the 'issue' at the heart of the coalition is often drawn broadly. For example, rather than the aim of the coalition being to 'stop a fee increase' it may instead be 'more funding for public education.'

This expansion in the breadth of issues at the heart of the campaign allows different organisations to see their personal interest in the coalition's common interest.

For unions, the broadening of common interest is significant for two reasons. It firstly demonstrates that a union has consciously transformed how it frames its concerns, placing itself inside a community movement and not remaining a separate union. The union actively recognizes its role as a social actor, rather than just a bargaining agent. This transition is not equally easy for all unions, and may be an easier shift for unions engaged in public service, such as public sector unions (Johnston 1994), or service delivery, where the work of union members directly affects

members of the general public (Walsh 2000). Secondly, it means that the types of issues that a union selects are more likely to be in the direct, material, self-interest of the membership, such as when teachers campaign for public education funding. Thus the union may find it easier to engage its membership base in the coalition's agenda.

The shift from single interest to direct interest creates space for a closer structure and strategy in a progressive coalition. The mutuality of interest becomes a vehicle for sharing decision making between the groups; because each group has a vested interest in the outcome, the coalition becomes a space for negotiating demands to ensure each group has their concerns included. Direct interest and mutuality increase trust and exchange between the partners (Tuffs 1998; Nissen 1999; Nissen 2003). This relationship of trust includes formal equal participation and may extend to the participation of individual bridge-builders who have experiences in both community organisations and unions, who can help translate contrasting cultural practices (Estabrook 2000; Rose 2000). A flat coalitional structure is able to effectively harness the contrasting power sources of community organisations and unions (Fine 2003). For instance, a union may be most capable in mobilising people, where one community organisation may have the most authoritative voice in the media, and another greatest informal influence over a Government department or employer. Sharing organizational power allows joint decision making to operate at the level of strategy formulation.

Strategy sharing and mutuality also hint at boundaries of exclusiveness for a progressive coalition. The deeper the exchange between organizations, the higher threshold for trust and familiarity between organizations (Lipsig-Mumme 2003). A progressive coalition requires long informal relationships to underpin it, and a high degree of trust, predictability and reciprocity. In particular, there is a need for recognition between the parties that different organisations have limitations, and that these boundaries need to be respected. The level of trust required may also

mean that the organisations in progressive coalitions may either have a history of relationships and/or a similar political practice (Dreiling 1998). The need for this deeper level of trust also implies that a progressive coalition will often be an exclusive place, where there are limitations on participation.

Finally, a progressive coalition is defined by deeper union participation, transforming how it campaigns on issues. Progressive coalitions express their demands as common issues, often framed as 'community' concerns rather than simply union concerns. This is in part from necessity, where unions learn to express their concerns as issues that the other community partners in the coalition can agree to. Thus demands for wages become demands for valuing quality services. This shift in framing flows through to the public framing of union demands, where the coalition opens up a union's vision to express its demands as community concerns beyond the language of wages and conditions (Rose 2000).

In addition, even while the issue at the heart of the coalition is expressed as a community issue, progressive coalitions work because the issue is also of direct concern to the participant union's members. Consequently it is easier to activate and mobilise members in a progressive coalition because they have a greater sense of ownership over the issues being campaigned on. This increased capacity for union mobilisation further increases the strength of the coalition, providing it with greater movement power (Nissen 2003).

There is a further level of coalition practice that opens up the levels of participation to a variety of levels, increasing the capacity of a coalition to achieve power at different scales of decision making. I call these deep coalitions.

## **Deep Coalitions**

Deep coalitions are an extension of progressive coalitions. Coalitions are usually categorised as having breadth – breadth of common interest and breadth of organizational diversity. A deep coalition adds to that breadth a depth of organizational support. The depth comes from the increased capacity to mobilise delegates and rank and file members because the coalition is able to activate participation at a variety of geographic levels, from the local to the state/national/global.

Deep coalitions achieve this greater level of participation by integrating a more complex organizational structure that can operate at a variety of scales. Scale is a concept used by labor geographers to understand how political power is organised at different geographical levels (Fagan 2004). Labor geographers analyse how scale is a relevant factor in mobilising political power, firstly because it is necessary for unions to be able to interfere with capital at the scale of capital's decision making power (Ellem 2003), and also because unions have the capacity to act effectively at a local scale because it is at the local level where people live, work and can directly participate in decisions and action (Wills 2004).

Deep coalitions are able to operate at a variety of scales because they open up their decision making structures; instead of relying on only one coalition structure they facilitate action at a variety of levels. While a coalition may operate as the key decision maker between organisations, deep coalitions also resource, support and encourage action and connection between unions and community groups at the membership level. This decentralized structure is critical for allowing individual union and community organisation members to participate in decision making (De Martino 1999; Clawson 2003).

Opening up participation for individuals increases the extent to which a coalition is connected to union members, rather than just union leaders. A key weakness of coalitions is that it only

provides for the limited engagement of union members, focusing agency in union leaders (Clawson 2003). Social movement unionism writers stress that unions must move beyond centralized hierarchical decision making to effectively engage their membership in coalition activity (Moody 1997; Nissen 1999). Deep coalitions require unions to undertake a further level of transformation to create spaces for membership participation. This may require unions to shift. Unions could move from a focus on only bargaining to engaging their members in social questions through education programs, increasing their members ability to take action through skill development, and support delegates taking some form of autonomous action through locally decision making structures (Waterman 2001). To organise local power unions must not only organise union members, but organise power from local communities, such as through locally-based political coalitions (Jonas 1998). The effect of this is that a deep coalition builds the capacity to mobilise large numbers of rank and file members at the same time as building their ability to connect to their local community as activists and leaders.

Deep coalitions are also categorised by a deeper union participation in the external coalition. Nissen argues that union buy-in/participation in a coalition is a central determinant of its success (Nissen 1999; Nissen 2003). He argues that buy-in is evidenced by a union's willingness to mobilise in support of a campaign, the seniority and number of members or officials it gets involved in the coalitions decision making structure and its willingness to provide financial resources. Thus a deep coalition is categorised by high levels of union participation in the external coalition structure.

Deep coalitions build a structure that has the capacity to develop strategy and to campaign on broad issues for the longer term. They harness a breadth of resources across movements to build increased power and resources for their social change goals. The issues at the heart of deep

coalitions are expressed broadly, not only as the mutual interest of participating organisations but as issues framed as a social vision for working people.

Deep coalitions describe a committed and long-term relationship between unions and community organisations, where a breadth of activity between groups is complemented by a depth of activity by participating organisations. This is the most innovative form of political coalition as it not only provides a serious commitment of union resources, but requires several levels of union transformation for it to be achieved. It requires unions to have, firstly, committed their leadership to reaching out to external organisations to achieve greater political power, secondly unions must shift their frame of vision, and thirdly unions must empower their own delegates and members to simultaneously engage in the campaign to. Deep coalition practice seeks to return trade unionism to its movement origins (Nissen 2003).

**Figure 1: A framework of political coalitions**

	<b>Ad hoc Coalition</b>	<b>Support Coalition</b>	<b>Progressive Coalition</b>	<b>Deep Coalition</b>
<b>Issues and common interest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific group's agenda/issue/event</li> <li>• Can be initiated by union or community organisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific group's agenda/issue/event</li> <li>• Issue indiscriminate, no necessary connection to union members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual direct interest of participating organisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issue framed as social vision for working people</li> </ul>
<b>Structure and strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Episodic engagement</li> <li>• Tactical not strategic engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-term coalition</li> <li>• Some formal shared decision making</li> <li>• Informal union dominance OR limited union engagement</li> <li>• Hasty, reactive engagement</li> <li>• Between organizations with different or similar political practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coalition includes leadership and officials</li> <li>• Joint decision making structure, trust</li> <li>• Mid-term focus and planning</li> <li>• Participating organisations have trust, similar culture/political practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decentralised structure, connections between union and community groups at membership level</li> <li>• Long term strategic plan to build power</li> </ul>

<b>Organisation/ Union participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instrumental engagement</li> <li>• Campaign distant from members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union officials, campaign distant from union members</li> <li>• Rent-a-crowd</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union vision framed as 'community' issues</li> <li>• Some mobilisations of members through union</li> <li>• Greater buy-in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union actively engaging rank and file</li> <li>• Significant buy-in, financial resources</li> </ul>
<b>Scale</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coalition operating at same scale as decision makers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective longer term scale at site of decision maker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilising capacity at several levels, including local</li> </ul>

**Conclusion: A framework for political coalitions**

The central argument of this paper is that political coalitions come in different shapes and sizes and that these different forms have a variety of distinct characteristics and access to varying forms of power. The different categories of political coalitions seek to link variations in coalition practice to a schema that demonstrates how coalition practice varies in effectiveness. It is important to recognize that while these categories are distinct, they must not be seen as black and white descriptors. Instead they operate on a continuum of possible coalition practice. They demonstrate passages to deeper practice.

Political coalitions of unions and community organisations are increasingly a feature of social movement behaviour and union renewal strategy. The framework in this paper seeks to explain how different practice - from ad hoc engagement to deep alignment - varies the capacity of a coalition and how it engages union members, organisations and individuals in the process of a campaign. Importantly, this paper also emphasizes that a critical element of an effective political coalition is an active and engaged union. The passage to deep coalitions requires union transformation that opens up union structure, first at the level of 'issues and vision', and secondly at the level of membership participation. This transformation not only increases the movement

capacity of a union but increases the power of a political coalition. Thus this paper aims to expand our understanding of political coalitions, as a fruitful trend in contemporary political activism.

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