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Labor's place in coalition:

How and when unions build powerful labor-community coalitions

Abstract

Thomas Kochan (2005) argues for a union revitalisation that emphasises the importance of unions reaching out to the community and forming labor-community coalitions. Yet analysis of how this process of 'reaching out' can be most effective for building union power and advancing union renewal is inadequately understood. This paper presents a framework for assessing union-community coalitions and what makes them powerful. The framework extends from ad hoc coalitions to complex integrated 'deep coalition' forms. I identify a series of coalition features - common interest, structure, organizational buy-in and scale – and argue that they are key determinants of coalition variation and effectiveness. I then explore how these different coalition forms increase possibilities for labor union power, and promote strategies for union revitalisation. I argue that the possibilities for union power and union transformation are increasingly likely when there is broader and deeper interconnection between unions and community organizations within the coalition form. In discussing this framework I draw on examples of labor-community coalitions from Australia, Canada and the United States.[1]

[1] Acknowledgement: this paper is an adaptation (for a US audience) of a published journal article: Tattersall, A (2005) 'There is Power in Coalition.' Labour and Industry, 16 (2), 97.

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The crisis in union density has led to a broad debate about the possibilities for union renewal, and includes a speculation about new sources of power for unions. Amongst the litany of strategies promoted for rebuilding union power, some speculate about the promise of coalitions between unions and community organizations. Yet often analysis of effective coalition practice derives from best-practice examples rather than an analytical framework that distinguishes between the key elements of coalitions and how variation affects coalition success. This paper presents an analytical framework of four ideal-type coalitions that attempts to distinguish between coalitions according to their tactical or strategic capacity, their capacity to build short or long term power and their contribution to union renewal.

Labor-community coalitions have been identified as an important element of union strategy since the early 1990s. While not a new strategy, they have become increasingly popular in a period of declining density. High profile campaigns such as Justice for Janitors and the Living Wage campaigns have popularised coalitions (Reynolds 2004). Similarly, many Central Labor Councils have strengthened their political, electoral and social influence through building webs of labor-community networks to support working family agendas (Ness and Eimer 2001; Reynolds and Ness 2004).

Thomas Kochan, one of the US’s leading industrial relations theorists has recently called for union revitalisation that places coalition practice at the centre of a reformulated strategy for rebuilding the American Dream (Kochan 2005). Kochan’s call for coalitions represents a mainstreaming of this form of union practice, at least within industrial relations scholarship. He argues that coalitions are a vital source of power and change for unions, as they open up a broader frame of issues for union action and shift the sources of power unions’ use for campaigning; calling for union’s to help build social pressure from mobilised communities in addition to traditional tactics such as strikes.

Kochan's claim echoes union revitalisation literature more broadly, which suggests that coalitions provide four key sources of power for unions. Firstly, labor-community coalitions provide an instrumental form of power for unions – complementing union capacity by increasing a union's financial and physical resources, providing expertise and influence, and enhancing the number of supporters for unions (Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Tattersall 2005). Secondly, labor-community coalitions provide a legitimising form of power, where union action is framed as a 'sword of justice' with broad community support and not simply the vested interest of unions (Flanders 1970). Thirdly, labor-community coalitions can help unions build an agenda for change, particularly if they are long term relationships formed around a transformational issue-based agenda (that not only shifts policy but the principles under which policy is formulated) (Reynolds 1999). Finally, it is argued that labor-community coalitions, by creating influential relationships between unions and community organizations and by mobilising union members on a variety of issues can create change in unions themselves – union-community coalitions may be an agent of revitalization (Moody 1997; Waterman 1998; Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Tattersall 2005).

Yet, despite the potentially important sources of power that labor-community coalitions offer unions, not all coalitions are the same and thus the potential power they offer is highly variable. Yet this variation in practice has only recently begun to explain how differences in coalition form or practice affect coalition effectiveness or union power (Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Nissen 2004; Tattersall 2005) .

This paper explores a framework of labor-community coalitions that attempts to categorise different types of coalition practice in order to understand how these variations contribute to variations in union power. The paper develops four ideal types of labor-community coalition forms – ad hoc, simple, mutual-support and deep-movement coalitions (Tattersall 2005). These four coalition types are analysed as increasingly interdependent, powerful coalition forms. I argue, that coalitions become increasingly capable of sustaining long term powerful relationships if they both support the capacity

of coalition unity and organizational autonomy in their structure, concerns and strategy (Hyman 1989). Furthermore, coalitions are most powerful if they are able to both promote a breadth of organizational participation while also stimulating a depth of organizational participation.

Yet, even where coalitions are temporal and short, they may still be powerful tactical sources of power. Indeed, in certain circumstances such as when reacting to a strike, a tactical community coalition involving religious leaders speaking against an employer abuse may be the most useful and influential form of action possible.

The purpose of the framework in this paper is to provide a method for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of labor-community alignment. It attempts to provide a framework for union practitioners and scholars to reflect on the strategic strengths and weaknesses of various forms of alignment, and to understand how these different forms of alignment provide different forms of power. The discussion of the framework features case studies and quotations from 30 interviews with unionists and community organizations in the United States between May 2005 and Jan 2006, and over 80 interviews in Australia and Canada with participants in long term labor-community coalitions.

Ad hoc coalitions

The most common form of labor-community coalition is an ad hoc, episodic coalition (Tattersall 2005). These are one-off requests for support, such as invitations for participate in community pickets or forums or provisions of financial assistance. The coalition formed is a temporal one, lasting for the duration of the event at the heart of the relationship. Ad hoc coalitions often occur in reaction to a crisis, where a crisis is turned into a political opportunity to reach out to like-minded organizations and ask for support (Tarrow 1994).

The interests and decision making within ad hoc coalitions are coloured by the party who initiates them – being dominated by the initiating community organization or union (Fine

2003). Ad hoc coalitions are limited by the simple and distant nature of their interaction. The relationships can be instrumental, where one organization requests transactional support from another on its own terms (Lipsig-Mumme 2003). The distant nature of the interaction often means that the relationship is very separate from the union membership, which may be executed by union officials acting alone. The instrumental form of the relationship, if repeated and one-sided may create animosity between partners, where community organizations feel used rather than equal. For instance, the term 'rent a collar' is widely used cynically in the religious community to describe the ad hoc speaking requests made by unions (Anonymous Interview, Community Organization, Chicago).

Yet aside from this instrumental base, ad hoc coalitions may create possibilities for further, stronger collaboration. Importantly, they establish and build relationships between organizations, sustaining informal connections through one off joint actions. They are regularly a first step towards stronger collaboration.

For unions, ad hoc coalitions provide a valuable tactical source of power while not creating long term strategically powerful relationships (Tattersall 2005). These episodic coalitions often keep community organizations at arms length, where they are often 'told' not asked what to do (Anonymous Interview, Community Organization, Chicago).

Simple Coalitions

Simple coalitions operate as short term, formally structured coalition relationships between unions and community. They are often issue based, like the Living Wage campaign, coalitions around anti-Wal-Mart site fights or plant closures.

Simple coalitions share some similarities with ad hoc coalitions, as the issues and interests at the heart of the coalition tend to derive from a single organization's interests or agenda, rather than being shared between the groups (Frege, Heery et al. 2004). In addition, simple coalitions tend to be organized around single issues, and continue only while that issue is in contention (Banks 1992).

Simple coalitions are different from ad hoc coalitions because they have a formal decision making structure, which allows organizations to connect and share strategy. Formal features such as face to face meetings are supplemented by ongoing informal communication (such as through email lists, telephone trees or fax streams). Even though the coalitions are short-term, the joint decision making processes allows for some sharing of coalition planning and strategy. However, this formal joint ownership is often mitigated by the informal dominance of decision making by the initiating organization (Fine 2003). If the coalition is union-initiated it will often be dominated by unions, with unions exercising both formal and informal influence over the types of action taken. If it is community-initiated, it will probably struggle to get significant participation from unions, with unions sending junior staff to coalition meetings and committing limited resources (Clawson 2003).

Simple coalitions tend to limit their operation to the scale of decision makers. For instance, if a campaign is organizing against a State Government, the coalition will tend to concentrate on shifting the Government at the scale of the state – with protests and actions based in the capital city, rather than supplementing that action with more local and participatory forms of organizing. For instance, the 2003 minimum wage campaign in Illinios culminated in threatened civil disobedience and arrests inside the Capitol Building by ACORN members, with lobbying support from several key unions, as opposed to more mass-based action in congressional districts (Author interview, Community Organization, Chicago). Limiting a coalition to a single scale makes it difficult for support coalitions to deeply engage the members of participant organizations. Support coalitions use participant organizations to mobilise for short-term goals, rather than working with those organizations to sustain campaigns that achieve long term shifts in power relations.

Support coalitions tend to overly rely on the coalition structure as a space for organizational participation, limiting decision making to officials and tending to exclude union delegates or members from meaningful involvement (Clawson 2003). Thus in the

Wal-Mart site fight campaign in Chicago in 2004, union members were used to collect petitions against a Wal-Mart development, rather than participating in strategy development or implementation at a local scale (Author interview, union official, Chicago).

Support coalitions are effective at coordinating organizations for short-term, action intensive, single issue campaigns but they struggle to sustain mass-based engagement. By organizing around issues, and not necessarily connecting those issues to different organizational interests, they struggle to build deep organizational commitment.

For example, many Living Wage campaigns are run by support coalitions. They are often coordinated by a long list of organizations, yet informally dominated by a few key community organizations or unions who have prioritised the issue of living wages amongst their membership, often because those members are directly affected by the issue. This was the case in Chicago, where the two major organizations involved were ACORN and SEIU 880 who each had members directly affected. Once Living Wage campaigns achieve their goal of an ordinance, it is often difficult to sustain the coalition. In the case of Chicago, some of the key organizations learnt from the 'exhausting' experience of the Living Wage and formed a new coalition called the grassroots collaboration, with more individual organizational autonomy (Anonymous interview, Community Organization, Chicago).

Mutual-support coalitions

A mutual-support coalition expands the capacity of a support coalition by extending the frame of common concern at the heart of the coalition to be in the mutual common interest of all participating organizations, while also deepening the forms of decision making and union engagement within the coalition (Brecher and Costello 1990a; Frege, Heery et al. 2004).

Mutual-support coalitions are distinct because the issue at the heart of the campaign is in the mutual self-interest of the participating organizations, not simply the direct concern of

one or two of the parties. This complementary base of support makes it more likely that each of the participating groups has a direct interest in the success of the coalition, because the coalition's success supports the organization's direct organizational and political aims. The need for joint direct interest means that the 'issue' at the heart of the relationship is often drawn broadly. For example, rather than the aim being to demand 'a wage increase for childcare workers' it may be 'better quality childcare services.' In this case, parents and childcare workers have an equal interest stake in the issue at the heart of the coalition, because the issue is framed widely. However, the specific issues campaigned on within this frame will still need to tangibly connect to the different organizations needs. Thus, for example, a campaign for smaller worker-to-child ratios will more successfully engage the mutual interests of parents and workers than simply wage increases alone (Author interview, NSW Teachers Federation). Alternatively, as was shown in the Illinois Childcare organizing campaign, a campaign for subsidised quality meals for children in childcare mutually engaged parents and workers alike (Author interview, SEIU 880, Illinois Hunger Coalition)

The mutual interest in the coalition's cause flows over to create a close knit structure, generating strong bonds of trust between coalition partners. The mutuality of interest becomes a vehicle for sharing decision making between the groups and negotiating issue-based demands and tactics to ensure each group has their specific concerns addressed. The structure of the relationships can also be expanded through the participation of individual bridge-builders who have experience in both community organizations and unions, who can help translate contrasting cultural practices and broker informal personal relationships to supplement formal decision making processes (Rose 2000). This is certainly the case in the Grassroots Collaborative in Chicago, where several community organizers within seniors groups and homeless organizations were previously union organizers, creating strong bonds of trust and understanding between the partner organizations (Anonymous interview, community organizations). A flat open coalitional structure can allow organizations to learn more about each others capacities, allowing the coalition to maximise, for instance, a community organization's relationship with the media and a union's relationship with Government (Obach 2004). Sharing decision

making allows mutual-support coalitions to share power. The demands of mutual-support place a burden on community organizations and unions to recognise that other organizations have different interests, and to accommodate those needs in coalition practice. Thus, the goals of mutual-interest coalitions must adapt and change as the coalition continues.

The deeper bonds of interest and trust required for a mutual-support coalition may narrow the types of organizational partners who participate. Mutual-support coalitions may be exclusive. These coalitions are more likely to develop between organizations with long preceding informal relationships or organizations with similar cultural practices, where predictability and reciprocity are more likely (Dreiling 1998; Obach 2004). Rather than hoping organizations will 'buy in', a mutual-support coalition is more likely to evolve by hand-picking partner organizations that satisfy a certain threshold, such as a standard of trust, commitment to the issue or capacity to mobilise people. This is the case with Chicago's Grassroots Collaborative which requires any potential partner to commit money to the coalition and to mobilise its members for agreed aims before it is entitled to decision making power (Anonymous interview, community organizer).

A mutual-support coalition places demands on unions. The broadening common concern requires a union's leadership to consciously transform how it frames issues, connecting the union to a community movement and expressing demands beyond pure and simple 'wages and conditions' (Rose 2000). In the NSW Public Education Alliance in Australia, the President of the NSW Teachers Federation began talking on behalf of 'parents, principals and teachers for public education' rather than simply on behalf of the union for wages claims (Author interview, Union official, Sydney).

An advantage of a mutual-support coalition is that by engaging a union's direct interest it is easier to activate and mobilise union members. The direct connection between a coalition campaign and member concern provides a greater incentive for a union to commit and work support the coalition. Thus for the NSW Teachers Federation, it was significantly easier for the union to resource and mobilise member participation for a

campaign to reduce class-sizes and funding for public education than it was for building and sustaining union member participation in the Walk against the War Coalition, even though both in-principle were considered important (Tattersall forthcoming). The issue of public education directly tapped into deep seated concerns for 'professionalism', deeply engaging members 'who don't usually get involved in the union', in contrast the peace campaign which engaged a 'smaller, more political layer' of union stewards and activists (Author interview, senior union officials).

Deep Movement Coalitions

Coalitions are usually defined by their breadth – breadth of common interest and breadth of organizational diversity. A deep coalition supplements this breadth with a depth of organizational support. There are two key features of deep movement coalitions, first is their capacity to sustain deep organizational participation at multiple scales, particularly the local scale. Secondly, a movement form of coalition is also an episodic form, achieved through intense local campaigning and mobilisation, but difficult to sustain on a permanent basis.

Deep movement coalitions are defined by an increase in participation by supporting a more complex organizational structure that can act and organize at a variety of scales (Tattersall 2005). Scale is a term used by labour geographers to understand how power is conditioned by the place in which it is contested (Sadler and Fagan 2004). The multi-scaled nature of power is self-evident in politics; political power is geographic with congressional districts and states creating the scales of popular influence over representatives. Similarly, corporate power is multi-scaled, particularly in industries such as human service work or resource extraction where there is a capital-fix that ties even global capital to specific local places (Jonas 1998; Walsh 2000; Ellem 2003; Ellem 2005). In addition, the local is an important site for participation for unions and community organizations as it is where people live, work and can directly participate in decisions and action (Jonas 1998; Wills 2002).

Deep coalitions move beyond mutual-support coalitions by creating decision making structures at multiple scales. While a coalition may operate as the key decision making space between organizational leaders, deep coalitions also resource, support and encourage action and connection between unions and community groups at a membership level. Social movement theorists use the concept of 'broker' to understand how a movement can operate at a variety of scales – brokerage is the process of linking action across scales (McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001; Martin and Miller 2003). They use the concept to describe individuals who act across scales, but the term can also be adapted to organizations. Coalitions may form organizations that operate at different scales to enable them to act at multiple scales. For instance, in Canada, the Ontario Health Coalition (OHC) has a province-wide coalition and 40 locally based coalitions who operate in small regional centres across the province (Author interview, OHC Coordinator). These local coalitions are able to locally direct coalition strategy, creating an agenda for action that is conscious of the idiosyncrasies of the local environment while also allowing individuals from that area to shape the strategy of the broker organization.

The second feature of deep coalitions is their movement capacity. As Flanders argues, there is a dependent relationship between 'organization' and 'movement' (Flanders 1970). While all coalitions are capable of mobilisations – turning out members to large demonstrations – a deep coalition is able to provide a meaningful engagement in the development of a movement by decentralising some decision making to union and community organization members rather than only organization leaders. In Ontario, this decentralisation in the Ontario Health Coalition allowed for sustained local participation and engagement in two episodic movement-based campaigns, firstly a door-to-door canvas campaign in 2002 and secondly a plebiscite campaign in 2005-6. Each of these campaigns were multi-scalar, with a central coalition initiating the idea, seeking buy-in from local coalitions at a Coalition Assembly and then implementing the campaign plans at a local scale (Author interview, OHC Coordinator, local coalition participants). The canvas saw the coalition conduct door-to-door canvassing in over 50 regional centres around Ontario, collecting over 300 000 signatures on a petition to save Medicare. The Plebiscite campaign has been run in six small cities, with over 80 000 people now having

voting to keep hospitals publicly owned and managed, in opposition to proposals for privatisation (Author interview, OHC Coordinator). Each of these mass-based campaign were locally directed, and because they were targeting health policy at a Provincial and or national scale and replicated across the Province, they had influence at multiple scales. These 'social movement-like' mobilisations were not permanent; they had peaks and troughs as they escalated according to a timeline of action (Author interview, Union organizer). However, because they were participant-led mobilisations, they were able to deeply engage union and community organization members and sustain action across the Province for several months.

Finally, deep coalitions frame their issues as broad transformative agendas. As Flanders argues, unions can act with a 'sword of justice as well as vested interest' and a deep coalition activates that broader concern for unions to act with community organizations with a social or class-based agenda. Transformative agendas work best when their core messages are positive and rights enfranchising, as opposed to negative or exclusive. For instance, the Big Box campaign in Chicago shifted from a negative message that called for 'no-Wal-Mart' in the 2004 site fights to instead campaign for a Living Wage for all Big Box workers. This rights enfranchising positive message helped transform the policy making agenda in Chicago, promoting the idea that if companies are large employers in the city limits, then they have a responsibility to their workforce to pay decent wages that the city will enforce (Author interview, Community Organizer, Chicago). It was also more widely supported by City Councillors when proposed (Author interview, union organizer).

Deep movement coalitions are also powerful for the impact they have on unions. They not only create strategic relationships that enhance union power but support a process of union renewal. To act with depth, unions must create the space and capacity for union stewards to be involved in decision making and take action. A union must also commit to shift their frame of vision to community wide concerns.

Conclusion

Labor-community coalitions are potentially an important source of power for unions, however as this paper has argued, their potential varies significantly. The paper isolates several key features of coalition practice – common concern, structure, organizational buy-in and scale – and argues that variation across these features varies the source of power that a coalition can provide a campaign and unions.

The paper argues that coalitions potentially provide four sources of power for unions. All coalitions provide a basic form of power, an instrumental power, where enlisted community organizations increase a union's capacity by offering their resources. Secondly, all labor-community coalitions provide a legitimising and moral form of power, where the enjoined community partners create a broader constituency of support for union agendas, activating a sword of justice through community spokes people and champions. However, the deeper sources of power from coalitions require more than a superficial engagement from unions. If unions commit to a broader issue base in coalition, a coalitions can help a union build a broad based social agenda, activating political awareness amongst union members and connecting union concerns for increased wages to social concerns for increased social services or standards. Finally, coalitions can, particularly when they engage union members as mutual-interest or deep coalitions, can create change in unions themselves, activating union members and enhancing union capacity.

Labor-community coalitions are not simply a static tactic in the arsenal of a comprehensive campaign. They are a variable beast, capable of supplementing the power of unions at a simple level, or transforming the capacity and agenda base of unions at a deeper level. Unions, particularly in the United States where density is such as small percentage of the workforce, are unlikely to achieve the kinds of social change required on their own. Coalitions and collaboration will be an essential ingredient of union action if unions are committed to altering the conditions of working people in the process of rebuilding their size, power and influence.

Figure 1: A framework of union-community coalitions

	Ad hoc Coalition	Simple Coalition	Mutual-support Coalition	Deep 'Movement' Coalition
Common Concern	• Initiated by request to support a specific group's agenda/issue/event • Initiated by either union or community organization	• Driven by the issue or interest of a specific organization's agenda • Issue not necessarily connected to union members	• Mutual direct interest of participating organizations is the basis of coalition • Issues have direct connection to organization members	• Issues are direct to interest of participating organizations <u>and</u> to a broader social vision for all working people
Org. Commit-ment and Capacity	• One organization requests others to support their strategy • Campaign distant from members	• Coalition dominated by initiating organization • Campaign distant from members	• Union issues framed as "community issues" • Deeper mobilization and participation of organization members • Greater member and organizational buy-in	• Union/ organizations actively engaging rank-and-file members • Significant buy-in and financial and staff resources committed
Structure and Strategy	• Episodic and tactical rather than strategic engagement • Initiating organization develops strategy • No joint decision making or coalition organizational structure	• Some formal organizational structure and shared decision-making • Informal union dominance of coalition <u>or</u> limited union engagement • Hasty, reactive engagement – short term • Organizations do not necessarily share similar political practices	• Joint decision-making and strategy setting structure involving leadership and officers built on trust between partners • Participating organizations share similar political and cultural practices that lead to mutual interests • Shared power; each organization brings significant resources to coalition	• Decentralized structure based on deep connections between union and community groups at membership level • Long term strategic plan to build power • Movement building
Political Opportunities	• Reactive and short-term and limited to specific immediate opportunity or threat	• Formed around immediate opportunities or threats, but set medium timeframe for influence	• Opportunities for engagement calculated and strategic and created by coalition/movement	• Creating opportunities for movement and new vision/agenda through coalition strategy
Scale/ Power	• Engagement of power occurs at any level – can be at a level not related to actual decision-making	• Engagement of power occurs at the same level as the decision makers	• Engagement of power is sustained and long-term on level of the decision makers	• Engagement of power occurs on various levels including the level of decision making and the local level
Strength/ Weakness	• Can provide valuable tactical resources, boost campaign morale, and lead to longer term, more strategic coalition relationships • Do not themselves build powerful strategic relationships and may create resentment over being "used"	• Can effectively coordinate and direct resources to a reactive, single issue campaign but reflect a relatively superficial solidarity • Can be one-sided and make deep participation more difficult	• Deeper bonds may narrow the number of organizational partners • Easier to activate and mobilize membership due to direct interest connection – can open up deeper coalitions	• Build upon a shared social vision – is decentralized and can be explosive, but difficult to "direct" because of decentralized actions on multiple levels • Require organizations to see themselves in a broad social vision beyond their own self-interest

Adapted from: Amanda Tattersall (2005), *There is Power in Coalition.* <u>Labour and Industry</u>, 16(2), 97.[2]

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