

# Solidarity Whenever?

**A framework for understanding when unions are likely to join long-term union-community coalitions**

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## *Abstract*

Union renewal and union collaboration with the community is widely considered necessary. Consequently the different opportunities and choices that create the structure and agency for unions to renew is an important but under-theorised area of scholarship. This paper develops a framework using the term community and the dialectic of opportunity and choice to explore likely factors for long-term union coalitions with community organisations, then explores this framework by a comparison of union engagement in long-term coalitions in Australia and Canada. The paper finds that the dialectic of opportunities and choices is critical, and in particular emphasises the role of pre-existing union identities and decentralised union structures, the existence of crisis and opportunity, the importance of common interest and the different roles that union leaders or union factions, organisers and delegates can play in pushing for change. The paper finds that different passages for community unionism are possible, and they can be both internal to the union and come from coalitions. It also finds that the different passages for community unionism directly affect the kinds and depth of union engagement that results.

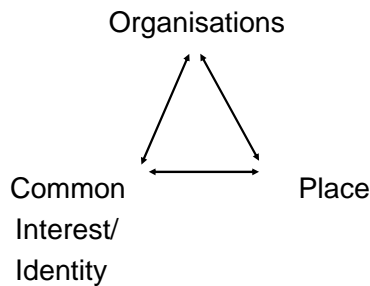
There is a hope that union renewal is possible. Terms such as social movement unionism, community unionism and organising unionism try to envisage what a renewed union movement would look like. Yet indicators of when a shift to renewal is likely are uncertain, and are often a secondary focus of renewal scholarship. Some suggest that union-community coalitions (labour-community coalitions) are one example of renewal (Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Reynolds 2004; Turner forthcoming). Long-term coalitions between unions and community organisations, or community unionism, are said to be an important source of power and renewal for unions who are suffering from a crisis of density, lack of political influence or needing to build a broader social agenda (Tattersall 2005).

This paper focuses on the question of coalitions and union collaboration with the community and considers first the meaning of the term community, and then the opportunities and choices that make collaboration more likely to occur in an individual union. The paper seeks to establish then test some possible indicators for likely union collaboration with community that are explored in two comparative case studies of unions shifting to engage with long term coalitions – the NSW Teachers Federation’s collaboration with the Public Education Alliance in Sydney Australia and the Canadian Union of Public Employees collaboration with the Ontario Health Coalition in Canada.

### **1. What is Community?**

Terms such as union-community coalition and community unionism have a contested and uncertain meaning, in part due to the ambiguity of the term ‘community.’ The amorphous definition of the term community makes it difficult to assess what collaboration with the community looks like. However, while the term community is loosely deployed across union renewal literature, there are some consistent themes (Tattersall forthcoming). Most commonly, the term community is used as a surrogate for the phrase community organisation, for example in the term union-community coalition (Brecher and Costello 1990a; Tufts 1998). Secondly community is used to describe a group of people who have common interests or identities, such as a community of women or environmentalists (Cranford and Ladd 2003; Fine 2005). Thirdly, community is used to mean place, as in a defined geographic area such as a local neighbourhood community (Ellem 2003). These three discrete definitions can be seen as complementary and supplementary, defining the attributes of community and providing a concrete anchor for exploring terms such as union-community coalitions and community unionism (Tattersall forthcoming).

*Figure 1: The threefold dimensions of community*



Thus, union collaboration with the community, or what I term community unionism, can include one of three different practices (Tattersall forthcoming). It can include working with community organisations. It can include acting with a broad common ‘community’ or class interest or acting with people with a specific identity. Or, community unionism can include acting with a place-specific strategy where unions seek to work across a specific geographic area, using local support to enhance union influence and power. This paper explores one of these practices in detail – union collaboration with community organisations, asking under what circumstances is long term collaboration likely to develop.

## **2. When are unions likely to collaborate with ‘the community’?**

Union strategies rarely develop evenly across national or international union movements; rather many internal union and environmental factors affect when the strategies unfold. Community unionism, and coalition practice in particular, has an uneven development, revealing variation within nations and between them. Yet this variation has received only limited attention, making it difficult to explain why for instance, community unionism appears more prevalent in the United States compared to the United Kingdom, or in the service industry rather than traditional blue-collar industries.

This paper presents and explores a framework for examining when long term community unionism is likely to develop in an individual union, by adapting two analytical devices. Firstly, I borrow from a recent approach of Turner that categorises the pressures that generate union change as arising from both the opportunities that surround unions and the choices internal to unions (Turner forthcoming). Secondly, I structure this approach using the three-fold definition of community. Thus I argue that there are three different community-based factors that create environmental opportunities and influence internal union choices that make union collaboration with the community more likely. When unions possess these ‘community’ attributes, I argue that community unionism is more likely to develop. Furthermore, I argue that the concept of opportunity highlights structural features that contribute towards a breadth of community unionism practice, in either places or industries, while the concept of choices highlights how internal union elements, agents or structures affect the depth of community unionism practice and engagement within a union.

### **2. a Opportunities**

A union's environmental and organisational context shapes the kind of strategies that it is likely to develop. The term opportunity structure, adapted from social movement theory, stresses the importance of structural and environmental factors in social movement emergence (McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001; Turner forthcoming). In the coalitions literature, there are three important 'opportunities' that are identified and I structure these using the three definitions of community. Firstly there are opportunities in the political, economic and social environment, secondly a union's relational opportunities, and thirdly opportunities arising from a union's pre-existing identity.

Commonly, the external environmental context and shifting alignments of the political and economic environment is said to spur opportunities for changes in union strategy, including community unionism (Hyman 2001)[62]. A decline in legal regulatory support for unions is cited, where traditional arbitration or court-like procedures for dispute settlement become less supportive of unions, such as in the United States where comprehensive campaigning has sought to replace traditional National Labour Relations Board routes for unionisation (Savage 1998). The demise of traditional political routes for power create similar crises and opportunities for shifts towards collaboration, particularly with the rise of 'new labour' policies that distance social democratic parties from unions, reducing a traditional route for political influence in countries such as Australia, the United States (Wills 2002; Fine 2003; Wills 2003). It is argued that the decline of these traditional sources of union state 'relational' power may encourage unions to experiment and engage in collaboration as an alternative source of power.

The economic context, including collapsing union density or industrial location may particularly influence the likelihood of coalition practice. Crises such as contracting out, attacks on the public sector, privatisation or manufacturing plant closures, or opportunities for rebuilding a strong regional economy, have been met by coalitions because of the joint effect of economic policies on workers and surrounding communities (Craypo and Nissen 1993; Johnston 1994; Nissen 1995; Reynolds 2002; Greer, Byrd et al. forthcoming; Tattersall forthcoming). The direct crisis of declining union density may also influence coalition practices, seen particularly in the United States (Banks 1992; Bronfenbrenner, Freidman et al. 1998). Labour geographers have argued that industries with a spatial fix, such as some primary industries such as mining or certain human service work such as cleaning, may provide distinct opportunities for collaboration with community because this work is embedded in fixed local communities (Walsh 2000; Ellem 2003; Ellem 2005). Similarly, where work itself is decentralised in communities rather than workplaces, such as with house-bound homecare work or some front line public sector work which is located in local communities, there also may be opportunities for collaboration with other place-based organisations (Savage 1998).

Consequently, the external economic and political crisis posed by neoliberalism may in part explain why there is increasing discussion of coalitions in the last 15 years. While coalitions are certainly not new, speculation of their centrality to strategies for rebuilding union power has become more robust, more recently (Frege, Heery et al. 2004). The historical unevenness of coalition practice, and particularly current experimentation in

places like the United States and Australia, may be in part shaped by this harsh economic and political context.

A union's organisational relationships, both within the union movement and within civil society may also create opportunities for collaboration with the community. Peak councils or other unions may create an environment that supports collaboration. Ellem and Shields argue that peak councils can play a role as an agent of mobilisation, creating a culture of alliances which may in turn support individual unions engaging in alliances (Ellem and Shields 2004). Similarly, central labour councils have been held out as an agent for change in the US system, with programs such as Union Cities that employ community collaboration as a key strategy (Ness and Eimer 2001; Byrd and Rhee 2004; Luce and Nelson 2004; Reynolds 2004). Relationships with other unions may also support collaboration, through national union policies or a unions sharing strategies and learning tactics bilaterally (Garner 1989; Obach 2004). Similarly, community collaboration also requires available community allies (Tarrow 1994). Johnson argues that allies are prevalent in the public sector, where consumer groups share common interests with workers (Johnston 1994; Carpenter 2000). Community organisations vary between nations, with US organisations having a strong history of Alinsky-style community organising, yet the prevalence of Government funding or foundation funding, may limit or at least shape potential partnerships with unions. Alongside community organisations, the emergence of tightly-knit identity based networks, particularly amongst immigrant workers, may also provide opportunities for community collaboration, where ethnic identity can supplement and support the development of union identity (Clawson 2003; Fine 2003; Turner forthcoming).

Finally, pre-existing union identities may also create opportunities for collaboration. In particular, a union will be more likely to collaborate if they have an ideological or attitudinal commitment to collaboration or if a union has had past experiences with collaboration. Unions with a history of militancy, ideological radicalism or broad interest representation beyond wages and conditions may be more likely to engage in future collaboration (Hyman 1994; Robinson 2000). Whether this is political commitment to a united front, a commitment to issues beyond wages or conditions or a social justice outlook, alignment with community may be easier because a broad interest (class) perspective makes it easier to cultivate common interest (Waterman 1998; Bramble 2001; von Holdt 2002). Similarly, if union collaboration is a familiar tactic – part of a union's 'repertoire of contention' – then it is more likely to be used as a strategy in the future (Tarrow 1994; Frege, Heery et al. 2004).

## **2. b Choices**

However the development of union practice is not simply a force of nature; a union must also exercise a choice in determining whether it commits to coalition practice given the surrounding opportunities (Kochan, Katz et al. 1986; Pocock 1998; Hyman 2001; Turner forthcoming). Union choice is variable, and union strategy literature highlights the diversity of actors that can shift union strategies. This section explores these variable influences, and also considers how the kind of actors that influence union choice may

shape the depth of collaboration. This issue is further explored in the comparative case studies in the second section.

Specific union actors are held out as key for causing the development of community collaboration. Leadership support most often argued to be critical for organisational change, and leadership support for collaboration practice is said to make it more likely to occur (Nissen 2000; Voss and Sherman 2000; Cooper 2001; Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Crosby 2005). Leaders can at one level support collaboration, or at a deeper level choose to directly participate in coalition decision making (Nissen 2003). In contrast, some scholars argue that 'bottom up' pressures are primary, presenting an idealistic picture of rank and file democratic pressure as key for promoting sustained collaboration (Moody 1997). In addition, Rose identifies an important layer of 'bridging building' officials that support collaboration (Rose 2000). Bridge builders have experience in the union movement and social movements which they use to facilitate collaborative relations by translating cultural and class barriers and internally influence a union to change its strategy by bringing to the union movement social movement tactics (Rose 2000; Voss and Sherman 2000). Separate to bridge builders, Cooper argues that union officials play a key role in supporting the adoption of new union strategies and countering internal resistance, and Kelly stresses the role of workplace leaders as agents who support new strategies (Kelly 1998; Cooper 2002).

A common criticism of this literature is that it identifies a particular agent as primary; that somehow leaders, the rank and file or bridge builders are the most important for achieving shifts to collaboration (Carter and Cooper 2002). As Hyman emphasises, unions contain a complex set of relations, decision making bodies and political forces that all influence the development of strategy (Hyman 1975; Hyman 1989). In the case studies I explore this question of agency, and rather than simply considering which union agent 'causes' the shift to collaboration, I consider how the alignment of particular types of actors affects and shapes the quality, and in particular the depth of community unionism, or long term union-community coalitions. I do this because while joining a coalition may be an act of collaboration, not all coalitions or union engagement in coalitions are the same (Tattersall 2005). In the two case studies I explore the passage of supporters and union engagement in the coalition that changes over time to try and understand how deep union collaboration develops.

There are three additional factors that shape whether a union is likely to choose community unionism: the common interests and or identity of the existing and potential union workforce, the type of coalition the union is working with and the organisational scale of the union.

The identity or common interest elements of community affect the likelihood and depth of community unionism, and the ability of the union to develop a broader class consciousness from collaborative experiences. Many scholars argue that membership diversity, and in particular a non-traditional workforce (with women or immigrants, for instance) can generate both a commitment to a broader range of issues and a depth of

engagement in those issues (Needleman 1998; Nissen 2001; Clawson 2003). Member engagement is also affected by the type of issue selected for collaboration, and the ability for a burgeoning political awareness and solidarity to be connected to that issue. Thus the connection between issue and direct interest is relevant; a teacher is likely to connect to a campaign on public education because there is a direct connection between working conditions and education funding (Johnston 1994; Tattersall 2005; Tattersall forthcoming). Union education may enhance political awareness and breadth of concern, cultivating a political concern beyond issues of wages and conditions, creating a basis of solidarity beyond individual concern where personal interests are more broadly connected to industry, region or class (Freire 1972; Spencer 1994). This may also be impacted by the relative homogeneity or heterogeneity of the union itself, with unions which have a more homogenous membership having a greater ability to cultivate deep common concern than general or highly heterogeneous unions (Delaney, Jarley et al. 1996; Turner forthcoming).

The type of coalition may also affect whether it can act as a change agent, and deeply sustain and engage union participation. Union coalitions with separate, independent coordinators may have greater sustainability as they have autonomous resources that can act above vested organisational interest and assist in the creation of compromise and a sustained campaign agenda (Lipsig-Mumme 2003; Reynolds 2004; Tattersall 2005). The relative independence and separation of a coalition from a union may enable it to in turn influence the union, possibly generating change and a depth of engagement.

The organisational scale and decentralisation of decision making and leadership within a union may also vary the depth of member engagement in collaboration. At the scale of a union office, effective collaboration requires resources and dedicated staff, which also may require that larger resource rich unions are more able to afford collaborative practice (Tattersall forthcoming). The decentralisation of organisational scale and workplace leadership however, are also critical for depth of member engagement. Political consciousness and class consciousness are developed not only through vision, but through personal relationships (Thompson 1963; Wills 1998). This makes the local – local participation, decision making and leadership – critically important in order for union collaboration to reach deeply into a union (Kelly 1998). The extent to which unions have rank and file decision making structures, space for delegates or stewards to make decisions, and whether they are involved in the collaboration or the issue at the heart of collaboration will affect the depth of coalition engagement. Thus internal union decentralisation, and coalition decentralisation (and the existence of broker, locally scaled coalition organisations) are important elements that affect the depth of union engagement in coalitions (Tattersall 2006).

### **3. Case Studies**

Thus, the definition of community and the dialectic of opportunity and choice are factors that may indicate a likelihood of collaboration and the likely depth of that collaboration. These indicators are explored through a comparison of two case studies of shifts towards community unionism in public sector unions in Australia and Canada respectively. These

case studies highlight both similarities and differences between union change, signalling the similar role of external crisis and opportunity, but the different roles of leadership and membership support for community unionism, differences in organisational scale and the important role of issue and interest engagement for generating union commitment.

### **3. a NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Public Education Alliance**

The NSWTF is the largest public sector union in NSW, representing teachers in the public education school system and the NSW-based 'Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system (O'Brien 1987). The union has strong density, with over 90% of full time teachers in the union (White 2004).

The union has union identity and a decentralised internal structure that create opportunities for community collaboration. The union has been a leading advocate for peace and feminism, as well as having a history of campaigning in coalition with parents on issues of public education (O'Brien 1987). Indeed, the NSWTF, the Federation of Parents and Citizens (P&C) and the Federation of Community Organisations (FOSCO) have, since WWII, met as the Three Federations, to report on issues of concern and priority to each other as an ad hoc coalition. Also, the structure of the union is decentralised and the union runs a comprehensive training program. The union has a 300 person rank and file council that meets eight times per year and over 2000 union delegates and 2000 women's contacts, one in each school across the state (Federation 2005). The union has a regional structure, with over 150 regionally-based Teacher Associations that meet monthly. All union delegates and councillors attend skill and industry union training during work hours, 'booked off' by the union (participant observation training, 2005).

However, despite these strengths, the union found itself in an escalating crisis in the mid 1990s, as public education funding was cut and the union was increasingly unable to affect that agenda. In the 1990s ideological and financial attacks on public education became severe (interview National Officer AEU, 2005).<sup>1</sup> At a Federal level, there was a privileging of private education and a shifting of funds to private schools (Watson 2004). At a State level, the desire for reducing budget deficits generated school restructures and a need to reduce recurrent expenditure – the greatest item being teacher wages (interview, former Minister for Education, 2005). 'Tense and aggressive' salary battles developed over the 1990s, 'with condition stripping becoming the basis for award negotiation' (interview, O'Halloran NSWTF President, 2004). The conflict escalated in the 1999 salaries campaign. This campaign was aggressively fought in the media. For example, *The Daily Telegraph* ran a front page campaign attacking the credibility of the NSWTF and their wage claims, culminating in a tabloid front-page article on the day of a strike that featured a cartoon of the NSWTF President who was drawn wearing a dunce's cap with the slogan 'if the cap fits!' (Daily Telegraph 1999).

This salaries campaign generated significant disquiet amongst union members, in particular raising the concern amongst teachers, because there was a sense 'we were

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, State and Federal Governments are responsible for education funding, with the State Government primarily responsible for running the public school system.

being denigrated by talk-back radio' (interview, NSWTF Organiser 4, 2005). Organisers recalled members contacting them at this time 'worried and angry' about the 'berating' of teachers they would hear on talk-back radio on their way to work (interview NSWTF Organiser 4, 6, 7 2005). This despair sometimes turned to anger at the union, particularly that the NSWTF did not have a sufficient media campaign or presence, with motions moved at State Council calling on the union to investigate a more effective media strategy (interview, NSWTF Official 2, 2005; O'Halloran, 2004).

A group of organisers and delegates, all located in South-Western and Western Sydney, and all in a similar loose faction within the union began strategising about how to shift the union's capacity. At the same time, an organiser Gary Zadkovich, wrote a paper calling for a series of internal reforms that would support 'social movement unionism', inspired by a study trip overseas (Zadkovich 1999). This group became an agent of change within the union. Working off the widespread anger around media messaging and strategy, delegates from South-West Sydney moved a motion at the 1999 Annual NSWTF Conference calling for the formation of a Public Education Levy – a membership fee that would create a dedicated union resource for public education campaigns.

At the same time, the South-West Sydney group proposed the need for formal education coalitions with parents and school principals. Zadkovich's paper called for the formation of Public Education Lobbies in local electorates (Zadkovich 1999). This was formally supported by the leadership, but it gained its momentum after the first Lobby meeting was held in Campbelltown in 1999 which was attended by over 600 people (interview, NSWTF Organiser 5, Principal Representative, 2005). The ability to establish Public Education Lobbies in South-West Sydney was assisted by the existence of the Public School Principals Forum. This was a 'radical' grouping of principals, who broke away from the Primary Principals Association in the mid-1990s (interview, Principal representative, 2005). This group was internally well organised, had a public media presence and offered the local teachers a ready ally in their desire to organise across the education community (interview, NSWTF Organiser, 2005).

The greatest achievement of the NSWTF's community unionism came during the Vinson Inquiry, the success of which was assisted by the dialectic of support for community unionism that grew from the rank and file to the leadership of the union (Tattersall forthcoming). From the 1999 Levy, the union amassed over \$1 million for public education campaigning, and in 2002 used that money to launch an Independent Inquiry into Public Education. At the time the Deputy President Maree O'Halloran was responsible for the day-to-day affairs of the Inquiry. Later that year, she was elected President. O'Halloran's connection and commitment helped connect union resources and priorities to the Inquiry (interview, NSWTF Organiser 4, 6). The issue of public education deeply connected to teacher's concerns as professional educators, and engaged them about how to repair the system (interview, NSWTF Official, 5, 2005). As O'Halloran describes, the Inquiry 'touched the middle teachers who normally doesn't [sic] get involved in their union' (interview, O'Halloran, 2004). The campaign was connected to members through the union's decentralised structure. It was regionally-

based organisers, regional teachers associations and local school delegates who coordinated school visits, public meetings and hearings and media interviews as Tony Vinson toured the State promoting and investigating the issue of public education (interview, Irving, NSWTF Official, 2005). This organisation was enhanced because the issue had been fought for and debated amongst the membership, giving not only members but key organisers and leaders a sense of ‘ownership over the public education campaign’ (interview, NSWTF Organiser, 2005). In addition, the Vinson Inquiry raised the profile of a long running campaign for reducing class sizes of Kindergarten to Year Two Students, which was successfully lobbied for and achieved just before the 2003 election.

However, it should also be noted that the community unionism did not sustain at this pace or depth. Two years after the Inquiry, the coalition with the parent groups fell apart. At this time the union moved into a campaign on salaries and while it continued to use the frame of public education, the issue was limited to wage claims. The leadership of the parent group also shifted, and a new leader who prioritised a relationship with Government rather than the union took away a traditional ally (interview, parent representative 2, 2005). Furthermore, it was during the salaries campaign that the union moved out of ‘community-focused’ mode and into an ‘industrial mode’ – organising itself around the Industrial Relations Commission hearings with rallies that sort to influence the IRC and the Government (Tattersall forthcoming). It did not seek to sustain the regular but ad hoc meetings that had occurred during the Inquiry, and these coalitions fell away. More recently coalition work has rekindled, but not to the magnitude, depth or policy success that was achieved during the Vinson Inquiry.

### **3. b Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Ontario Health Coalition**

The Canadian Union of Public Employees is the largest union in Canada, representing public sector employees. Its main constituency are the general staff of the public sector, including non-clinical workers in hospitals. It is one of seven unions that unionise health care workers.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly to the NSWTF, CUPE’s internal decentralised structure and union identity created opportunities for community unionism. CUPE has a structure of two central Ontario-wide leadership units, a central office led by President Sid Ryan and the Ontario Council of Hospitals (OCHU), the bargaining unit for hospitals led by President Michael Hurley. Beneath these structures are CUPE’s local, which are separate union branches, often based around workplaces or regional areas (interview, CUPE Official 3, 2006). In addition, CUPE’s identity predisposes it in part to community unionism, it is a ‘left, nationalist, social union,’ meaning it operates in the traditions of Canadian social unionism, and in resistance of US ‘international’ unionism (interview, Ryan, CUPE, 2006). There is a long standing tradition in Canada, sparked particularly during the

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<sup>2</sup> , Other unions in health care include traditional health care unions such as the Ontario Nurses Association, Ontario Public Sector Employees Union and the Service Employees International Union, as well as less traditional private sector unions such as the Canadian Auto Workers, who have come to represent health care workers in a context of union competition.

depression, of unions agitating on concerns broader than wages and conditions. CUPE's public sector status has meant it regularly campaigns in elections and with the New Democratic Party (interview, CUPE Official 2, 3, 2006).

Despite these pre-existing features, it was not until the Ontario Health Coalition reformed in response to expanded attacks on public health care, that CUPE began engaging in long-term health care coalition work. The Ontario Health Coalition was first formed in the early 1980s, but was rekindled in December 1995 by the Ontario Federation of Labour to respond to pressures for privatisation and hospital closures (Tetley 1995).

At first, CUPE's participation was limited to membership on the Administrative Committee meetings, financial donations and ad hoc participation in campaign events (interview, CUPE Official 4, 2005). It was only after an internal development of the Coalition that union participation was enhanced (interview, coalition participants 1 (union), 2 (local community), 3(CUPE), 2005). In 1998 the Coalition formalised its internal decision making structures and created dozens of local 'broker' coalitions around the Province, and it was after these organisational changes that union engagement deepened (interview, coalition participant 1).

Even with these structural changes, a long term campaign did not occur until a major political crisis and opportunity for the Coalition. In early 2002, a public campaign for privatisation intensified, with consistent public calls for the privatisation of health care and statements that Medicare was unsustainable (Mackie 2000; Fraser 2001; Kirby and Le Breton 2002). These escalating attacks had a direct effect on the Coalition, 'we were so panicked, we thought we were going to lose Medicare' (interview, coalition participant 2). Then, a further opportunity arose when the Liberal Federal Government announced a Royal Commission into Health Care, charged with investigating the viability of universal health care.

The OHC, led by CUPE, embraced a radical strategy to 'canvas the Province' on Health Care, by going door to door (Mehra 2005). This idea came from Ross Sutherland, a member of the Kingston Health Coalition and a CUPE activist. As a bridge builder between a local community group and a union, he sought CUPE's support, taking the idea to Sid Ryan, the President of CUPE Ontario. Sutherland was a trusted and influential union activist (interview, Ryan CUPE, 2006). Moreover, the idea was a tactical opportunity consistent with Ryan's own beliefs about social union strategy (interview, Ryan CUPE, 2006). With the backing of the leadership, the canvassing idea was supported internally by the health care council, and then taken by CUPE to the Administrative Committee of the OHC. Despite some initial opposition from some unions who thought it was too ambitious, the idea was supported (interview, Harris, coalition participant 2, 2006).

CUPE participated in the canvas which was a dramatic Coalition success, courtesy of Coalition volunteers and union institutional support. Through over 55 local coalitions, the OHC collected over 300 000 signatures on petitions, displayed thousands of lawn signs and ribbons across the Province (Mehra 2005). Yet this was driven by local

coalition volunteers, while union participation tended to remain centralised. CUPE ‘booked-off’ many activists, who supported local volunteers in preparing and executing the canvas. They, along with other union locals, provided financial support for lawn signs, photocopying and printing of materials. However, it was difficult for the union to engage other members in the campaign. One local group recalled trying to get a CUPE book-off to call all the CUPE members, but was blocked from getting a list of union members by the local union leadership (interview, local coalition participant 2, 3, 2005). A lack of union participation was reported from several other local coalition groups (interview, local coalition participant 1, 2, 6, 7, 2005). Where there was significant union participation, which was an exception, this was repeatedly explained because the place was a ‘union city’ and that the volunteer activist base was rooted in the unions (interview, local coalition participant 4, 5, 2005 and 2006).

It was not until the Coalition’s next campaign – against the privatisation of hospitals – that CUPE’s leadership of the coalition began translating to local union support. In December 2002, Ontario’s Conservative Government announced that it would build two hospitals as public-private-partnerships (P3s) (OHC 2003a). P3 hospitals are privately built, privately administered hospitals with contracted out non-clinical services. Public-private-partnerships were ‘core’ for CUPE because they could directly reduce the employment standards of CUPE hospital workers (interview, Allen CUPE, 2005). The issue of privatisation caught the attention of the union leadership – this time – Michael Hurley, the head of OCHU, CUPE’s hospital bargaining unit (interview, Allen, CUPE 2005). Doug Allen, the CUPE representative on the Ontario Health Coalition, believes that the union’s commitment to the coalition increased during that campaign, and cites a specific incident that directly engaged the leadership:

I remember ... Michael Hurley went out to Brampton ... it was a community sponsored event by the Brampton Health Coalition ... and I think that point, it really clicked to Michael that hey this is a powerful force here ... from there OCHU’s involvement gelled, where they would invest resources, it just blossomed from there in a bigger and bigger way (interview, Allen CUPE 2005).

The direct engagement of the leadership in the campaign had a direct flow on effect to local union engagement. This occurred in two key ways – through the role of coalition tactics, and through direct union leadership intervention into the campaign.

Firstly, tactical events such as rallies held by the Coalition created opportunities for CUPE’s Provincial leadership to encourage its locals participate. This was most pronounced in Brampton in October 2002, when a large 3000 person rally was held, with mainly union participation (not just from CUPE, but from all unions). In Brampton, the Provincial union office ‘booked off’ a CUPE member to help organise the rally, also undertaking a call around of union stewards and activists, to encourage them to attend (interview, CUPE Official 3, 2006).

Secondly, Hurley’s engagement had a ripple effect for union participation, directly encouraging local unions to participate in coalition events, particularly in several

Coalition sponsored education tours of the Province. Between 2003 and 2004, the OHC organised a series of Province wide tours to educate coalition supporters about the impending threat of P3s (interview, Mehra, 2005). The first of these events was a speaking tour by Maude Barlow, President of the Council of Canadians (Barlow 2002). Hurley believed that this event ‘was quite successful, partly a function of the union structure’ (interview, Hurley, 2006). In contrast to other unions ‘which have one provincial local and centralised resources we have a local structure where locals retain half the money’, which allowed for CUPE to connect local union structures to local union campaigns, like the Barlow tour (interview, Hurley, 2006).

However, while leadership engagement assisted, there was unevenness across different locals. Reasons cited by CUPE and Coalition organisers include whether the locals had full-time or part-time officials, the attitude of those officials to coalition work, the degree of union participation in coalition meetings, and how well-organised the local was (whether they had a strong steward network, had been through training) (interview, local coalition participant 6, Ryan, Hurley, union participant 2). Thus, whether the local actually did a call around for a specific event, and the success of local mobilisations were affected by these structural and attitudinal attributes of the locals (interview, Hurley 2006). In addition, variation was also explained by the scale of the city in which this organisation was occurring: union and coalition engagement was easier and deeper in smaller cities compared to Toronto, where many union and coalition interviewees confirmed that they ‘struggle to find capacity in Toronto’ (interview, Hurley, 2006; Levis, 2006; Ryan, 2006).

This pattern changed during 2005, provoked by the Coalition. The OHC was struggling to build or sustain momentum in the P3 campaign, so decided to intensify its efforts locally by organising community-wide plebiscites in areas where P3 hospitals were planned (interview, Mehra, OHC, 2005). Between May 2005 and May 2006, six plebiscites have been held with over 80 000 people voting against closures. Mehra, Hurley and Ryan agree that the plebiscites have been most successful in the smaller cities – with events in St Catherine’s and North Bay for instance drawing out a greater proportion of the population to the ballot box compared to Hamilton, a larger city of 500 000 (interview, Mehra, Hurley, Ryan, 2006). Hurley in particular, cited St Catherine’s as an example of successful CUPE engagement. Several other factors were influential there, including that the plebiscite had occurred only recently after a recognition election campaign between SEIU and CUPE at a local hospital (which SEIU had won), which had propelled each of these unions ‘to be visible’ and created ‘a motivation for part of the local union’ in that area’ (interview, union 3, 2006). However, this engagement was also enhanced by the fact that the main local coalition coordinator was a unionist and able to play an important bridge building role between these union forces and the community representatives (interview, Mehra, local coalition participant, 8). Overall, the privatisation plebiscite campaign shifted coalition resources to a local scale, and this shift provided a direct mechanism to engage union members as volunteers as well as paid staff in the coalition. Engagement varied on the variations between locals, depending on the extent to which they ‘bought into’ the campaign or the size of the city, however in general CUPE officers and activists reflected that this campaign achieved the deepest

form of union engagement for the privatisation campaign with the Health Coalition (interview, Hurley, Ryan, Allen, Sutherland, 2006 and 2005).

### **3. c Evaluation**

These two case studies highlight some consistent themes, as well as important differences that help explain both variations in how unions engage in long-term coalitions, and how those variations can affect the depth of union engagement in community unionism.

Many of the similarities across the cases were opportunity based, highlighting the important role of structure and the external environment for community unionism. Similarities included the central importance of opportunity and crisis for promoting initial engagement in coalition work, that each union was a public sector union involved in spatially-tied social service work, that each union had a union identity pre-disposing it to broad beyond wages and conditions campaigning with pre-existing community organisation relationships. In addition, each of these unions had decentralised elements to their union structure, either through regional Teachers Associations and organisers or union locals, which facilitated a deep union connection when those institutions were engaged.

However, an important similarity across the cases was also choice based; each campaign had a deep common interest connection that directly engaged these public sector unions in these public service coalitions. For the NSW Teachers Federation, the issue of quality public education was directly in the interests of their members. This was not done in a crude sense, where merely the frame of public education was used to argue for more money for teachers pay, but as a broad campaign to create common interest across the public education community – in particular with the class-sizes campaign, where parents and teachers had a strong mutual-common interest. For CUPE, the connection to health care was equally important. However, it was on the issue of privatisation, where there was a direct and deep connection between OHC policy and employment standards. Each of these unions had already engendered member awareness of the industry around them through union training programs, and systematically provided their members with organising skills, which may also be critically important for sustaining engagement in these long-term coalitions.

Moreover, these case studies illustrate that agency is not only a necessary prerequisite to change, but that the kind of union agency employed affects the depth of union engagement. Furthermore, both actors within the union and the coalition can operate as agents for change.

The two case studies varied in terms of the agency role played by either union actors or coalition actors. For the NSWTF, the coalition was union initiated; and it was internal union change, particularly the activity of a key faction of organisers and delegates that was responsible for generating pressure to create the shift to community unionism. This initial agitation was then consolidated into a deep, whole-of-union, commitment to the public education campaign when it was consolidated by leadership change and when it mobilised union finances to sustain the campaign. While the presence of external actors

supported the creation of ‘broker’ Public Education Lobby organisations, and enabled the union to act coalition to represent the concerns of ‘parents, principles and teachers’ the actual decision to engage in this long term collaboration was primarily and significantly a product of internal union change (interview, O’Halloran, NSWTF, 2004). Moreover, it was the union’s teacher association, delegates and organisers that were the key resources for the local lobbies as the long-term coalition continued (interview, NSWTF official 2, 2006).

In the CUPE case study, while the coalition was union initiated (at least union ‘rekindled’), it was the coalition itself that was the primary agent for engaging the union, and then deepening the union’s engagement. Without the coalition, it is highly unlikely that CUPE would have engaged in this unusual, social movement form of campaign (interview, CUPE Official 4, 2005). In this case, the coalition had significantly more independent resources than in the NSWTF case, with a separate coalition office, a larger number of contributing unions and a paid independent coordinator. It also had a growing number of ‘broker’ coalitions which were resourced with local volunteers. These independent resources enabled union engagement in response to crisis, and then, when the coalition engaged in the issue of privatisation that was also in the mutual self-interest of CUPE, the union engagement intensified. As time passed, it was the existence of broker organisations, combined with engaged, resources, decentralised union locals that deepened the campaign to a scale closer to the membership.

A second difference between the two case studies was the contrasting role of multiple union actors as agents with the NSWTF case study, in contrast to the CUPE case study which was primarily supported and encouraged by union leadership. In the NSWTF, the union began to change its policy, structure and orientation when a faction of organisers and delegates began meeting and agitating in South-Western Sydney. This was then consolidated first in a policy change at the 1999 Annual Conference, and then institutionalised by a new leadership team. Once the leadership team came to power, the independent inquiry into public education accelerated and ad hoc alliances with parents and principals institutionalised into the Public Education Alliance (interview, parent representative 2, 2005). Importantly it was when a movement inside the union aligned with leadership support that created a deep and ‘whole of union’ commitment to community unionism.

In contrast, in the case of CUPE, the union was brought into the Ontario Health Coalition by its leadership. Its leadership committed significant resources to the coalition, firstly because the issue closely related to union issue concerns, and secondly because of the influence of a member bridge builder. Leadership support intensified over time, particularly as the issue agenda of the coalition – privatisation – aligned with the union’s own strategic interests. Eventually, but slowly, a deeper form of union engagement developed as the Coalition shifted its strategy to a local scale – engaging in plebiscites of local towns. It was at this local scale that CUPE’s union locals, for the first time, intensified their commitment beyond individual events and instead committed to the strategic development of the local plebiscite campaign.

This variation in multiple union agents versus more leadership intense agency starkly demonstrates that while leadership support is a critical agent for supporting and engaging long term community unionism, it appears, in comparison to the NSW Teachers Federation, to achieve a more limited union engagement. This finding significantly contrasts with much of the common wisdom surrounding the ‘shift to organising’ literature, which argues that leadership change is often singularly the most important factor for creating change. This case study does not directly contradict those findings, as in each study, leadership change was critically important for initiating or sustaining community unionism. However, these studies strongly suggest that while leadership is a necessary element for long-term coalition engagement, it is *not a sufficient* factor for achieving it. In each case study it was leadership combined either pre-existing member agency or an independently resourced, multi-scalar coalition that created the capacity for sustained coalition work.

Finally, there are some questions that arise from this study that call for further research. In each of these studies, the workers in question were women. It would be useful to consider if it is the case that female, or other non-traditional workers are more likely to engage in Community Unionism practices. There was also variation in the case studies in the role of ‘consumers’ or service users – in the NSWTF case study it was parents as consumers as the primary allies, whereas with the CUPE case study, consumers figured as a less important ally. For CUPE, Seniors’ groups were an important ‘consumer based ally’, however other patient groups were not strongly present. Rather it was more abstract spatial communities surrounding hospitals (rather than patients specifically) who were the allies. This could have implications for the role of the ‘consumer-employee alliance’. Finally, each of these unions had union education programs. The literature on how union education relates to and effects union engagement in community unionism could be further explored in the context of long-term collaboration, as it might be another factor that a union can use to create a more supportive context for collaborative practice to flourish.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The dialectic of opportunity and choice provides an important mechanism for understanding how community unionism develops in a union. This paper has explored one example of community unionism, union engagement in long-term coalitions, and developed and explored a theoretical framework for understanding the operation of this dialectic. Importantly, it is a conjuncture of both structure and agency that figured prominently in these examples – union identity, crisis and decentralised union structure were important contextual elements. However, union strategies do not happen by change, as in these case studies where union agents – including member faction and leaders played important roles provoking change. Yet within this context, the actions of individuals were not the only important ‘choices’, it was also a common interest coalition that campaigned on issues of union interest combined with a connection to union actors or coalition actors at multiple, particularly local, scales, that generated deep union engagement.

The theoretical framework combined the dialectic of structure and agency with a definition of community. In doing so, it highlighted that community collaboration is more likely when a union has opportunities for horizontal community engagement, for instance because of 'place based' issues such as economic or political context, 'common interest or identity based issues' such as union identity or 'organisational' based issues depending on the availability of community partners. It also emphasised that these broad opportunities must be translated by local unions, in partnership coalitions, and the type of engagement, whether by leaders, members, factions or coalitions will provide variations in the length and depth of engagement.

This paper attempts to open up discussion on coalition practice, by focusing on the passage of organisational change that occurs to promote long-term coalitions and community unionism more broadly. Too often, the specific process of change is assumed to be a function of crisis or creative leadership. In contrast, this paper has identified a series of concepts to assist further research into how this process of change develops in order to generate a greater understanding of union renewal and possible routes for deeply engaging unions in collaboration.

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