

THE NEXT UNIONISM: STRUCTURAL INNOVATIONS FOR A REVITALIZED LABOR MOVEMENT

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My focus today is on the ways in which innovations in union structure can help contribute to the revitalization of today's labor movement. Clearly, rethinking union institutional arrangements is only *one* element in any overall program that aims to strengthen collective representation. A revitalized labor movement, for example, will have at its core a powerful legitimizing ideology—a central message embraced to some degree by all classes and groups—that details how the labor movement not only advances the goals of workers but benefits business and society as a whole. Such a program also would include many of the other admirable initiatives now being debated and implemented by the new AFL-CIO: increasing organizing expenditures, revamping public relations, and moving beyond contract unionism.¹

Moreover, like David Brody and other historians, I would emphasize that many of the crucial economic, political, and cultural forces that can prompt the birth of a mass social movement are beyond the control of the labor movement as an institution.² It seems unlikely, for example, that we will see the kind of insurgency from below that occurred in the 1930s without a more widespread sense of economic crisis. Yet at the same time, from my reading of history, factors internal to the labor movement itself—specifically institutional flexibility and structural innovation—have been and will remain necessary for the expansion of unionism. In other words, if the labor movement is to lead (or even to ride) the next wave of social reform it must position itself structurally. It must have organizational and institutional vehicles appropriate to the transformed economic and political context of the late 20th century. In short, structural flexibility by itself is not sufficient to bring about a revitalized labor movement but it is an essential precondition.

I want to look today at the kinds of structural innovations the labor movement relied upon in the past. In particular, I want to analyze two crucial eras of union growth: one, the early decades of the AFL characterized by slow but steady membership expansion, and two, the New Deal era characterized by the spectacular rise of the CIO.³ These are both historic moments in which a new labor movement was born and in which labor made significant progress. Both periods, I will argue, were accompanied by wide-ranging experiments with union structure.

First, in both of the periods the labor movement rejected the one-size-fits-all approach to unionism. Old models of collective representation were not wholly discarded but they existed side by side with new. Indeed, the labor movement

¹ See John Sweeney, *America Needs a Raise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996).

² David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chs. 2, 3, and 7 in particular.

³ The surge in union membership from the 1930s to the 1950s is well-known. The expansion in membership

from 1897 to 1920 receives less attention. In some ways, however, the AFL era with its modest expansion may be the more realistic and instructive model. For membership data, see Leo Wolman, *Ebb and Flow in Trade Unionism* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1936), Table S, p. 16.

allowed multiple and competing models of union representation to co-exist. Second, in both of these eras of union expansion, the Federation itself took on significant responsibilities for organizing. Rather than limit itself to assisting the organizing efforts of various Internationals, both the AFL and the CIO initiated organizing campaigns, chartered new International and local bodies, and helped expand the labor movement by redefining the basis for union membership.

THE CIO ERA

Let me turn first to the CIO era. Much of my research has centered on the twentieth century labor movement and the ways in which the dominant form of unionism in the pre-New Deal era—what I call occupational unionism—was gradually eclipsed by the newer industrial model, a model which first became widespread in the 1930s.⁴ What is important to my argument today, however, is that both models of unionism flourished side by side in the period from 1933 to 1953 during which union membership grew from less than 10 percent of the workforce to nearly one-third. The newer industrial model was relied upon in organizing mass production workers in auto, steel, rubber, electrical and other manufacturing industries as well as in factory-like settings like hotels and later hospitals and large government offices. The older model of occupational unionism continued to be a viable form of representation outside of large bureaucratic enterprises, that is, among small employers with a more mobile work force and a less developed internal labor market.

Building tradesmen, garment workers, restaurant employees, performing artists, and others recruited and gained recognition on an occupational/local market basis rather than by industry or individual job site. I've called this occupational unionism because it was not necessarily exclusive or limited to skilled craftsmen. Rather, it flourished wherever workers identified more with their occupation (a more horizontal cross-firm orientation), than with their individual worksite or firm (a more vertical orientation).

By the 1950s, however, changes in labor law made it increasingly difficult for occupational unionism to survive. The dominance and success of industrial unionism also helped marginalize the older institutional practices of occupational unionism. Many occupational unions emphasized employment security through training and "human capital" development rather than firm-based job security through seniority provisions. They also embraced "peer discipline" or "self-management" governance structures rather than the industrial union model in which management disciplines and the union grieves. These and other occupational union deviations from the industrial model came to be seen as outside the church of labor. A single model, that of industrial unionism, was conflated with unionism per se.

Yet, as I've detailed more fully elsewhere, many of the institutional practices associated with occupational unionism take on renewed appeal as the workforce and the economy shifts.⁵ With the increase of a mobile, contingent workforce, the decline of internal labor markets, and the rise of new crafts, occupations and professions in which worker identity is primarily horizontal rather than vertical, a unionism emphasizing cross-firm structures and occupational identity appears

⁴ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991); Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Making Post-Industrial Unionism Possible," in Sheldon Friedman, et al., eds., *Restoring the Promise of American Labor Law* (Ithaca: Cornell ILR Press, 1994), pp. 285-302.

⁵ Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Organizing the Postindustrial Work Force: Lessons from the History of Waitress Unionism," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 44 (April, 1991): 419-36.

viable once again. Occupational unions, for example, set up institutional structures on a regional or local labor market basis, offering portable benefits for members and administering multi-employer hiring halls and training consortiums. They served the "professional" or "occupational" needs of their members by setting performance standards for the trade, offering training and up-grading services, and monitoring job performance. They rejected the rigid divisions between employee and boss and claimed for themselves many of the personnel matters that later were ceded to management. Many of these approaches are particularly well-suited to organizing women because of their predominance in service and contingent work. As work continues to "feminize" and men increasingly are in the same structural position as women, they too will benefit from a labor movement that offers diverse routes to representation.⁶

THE AFL ERA

Now let me turn to the AFL era. The AFL emerged in the late nineteenth century as the first labor federation to establish itself permanently—not a small achievement for a labor movement that for its first 100 years had to reinvent itself from ground zero time and time again. Its growth in its early decades may not have been as dramatic as that enjoyed by the CIO; nevertheless, given the opposition of employers, the state, and the courts in this period, the AFL's gradual but steady expansion from the late nineteenth century to the end of World War I is impressive.⁷

But what structural innovations aided this growth? Earlier chroniclers of the AFL have noted the rise to dominance of national union structures, the rejection of the community-based unionism of the Knights of Labor, and the central Federation's willingness to grant autonomy to its affiliates.⁸ My own research suggests a somewhat different story.⁹ The AFL in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was characterized by multiple centers of power. The rise of the national union and its dominance over subnational structures such as community-based local unions and joint councils happened slowly. And, of equal importance, the Federation defined its mission broadly: it took the initiative not only in politics and public relations but in organizing.

For example, for much of its history, the Federation coordinated a far-flung network of AFL volunteer and paid organizers. These AFL organizers helped build up the membership of existing Internationals. They also were authorized to charter new local unions and directly affiliate them with the Federation. Indeed, from its founding in 1886 to the merger with the CIO in 1955, by my estimates the AFL chartered some twenty thousand directly-affiliated local unions.¹⁰

The history of this anomalous structure—an AFL-affiliated local union without a parent International—is both fascinating and instructive. The first AFL

⁶ Dorothy Sue Cobble, "The Prospects for Unionism in a Service Society," in Carmen Sirianni and Cameron MacDonald, eds., *Working in a Service Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 333-358.

⁷ Wolman, *Ebb and Flow in Trade Unionism*, pp. 15-21. See William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991) and David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979) for the obstacles facing the AFL.

⁸ For example, Lloyd Ulman, *The Rise of the National Trade Union* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955); Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the*

United States, 1860-1895 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1929); and Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).

⁹ For a fuller treatment of this research consult Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Lost Ways of Organizing: Reviving the AFL's Direct Affiliate Strategy," *Industrial Relations* 36 (forthcoming July 1997) and Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Reviving the Federation's Historic Role in Organizing," Institute for the Study of Labor Organizations Working Paper, March 10, 1996, available from the author.

¹⁰ Cobble, "Lost Ways of Organizing," figures 1-4.

Constitution in 1886 provided for the formation of "a local body, to be know as a 'Federal Labor Union' " and authorized any group of "seven wage workers of good character, and favorable to Trade Unions" to petition the national Federation for a local union charter.¹¹ And, as the AFL charter books reveal, thousands did petition for AFL membership and the vast majority received charters. Many groups of workers simply self-organized; others had assistance from an AFL organizer or a subnational body such as a central labor council, state federation, or affiliated local union.

Why did the AFL initiate such a structure? Some saw federal labor unions as a temporary home for workers until they could be divided up among the existing craft Internationals. Others saw federal locals as more permanent structures, allowing workers to organize locally on an industrial, community, or regional basis, or to provide the nucleus for new Internationals. Samuel Gompers, AFL president for most of the years between 1886 to 1924, hailed federal labor unions as the "recruiting grounds for the trade unions, both of the skilled and unskilled workers" and as a way to open up membership in the labor movement to those who fell outside the existing jurisdiction of International unions or who were refused admission to certain Internationals on the basis of race, sex, or skill.¹²

The AFL relied upon the federal labor union structure most heavily in its early years as evidenced by the relatively large proportion of AFL members who resided in federal labor unions.¹³ But the federal labor union structure also resurfaced in the 1930s in another period of expansion. The AFL needed a simple, inexpensive way of affiliating vast numbers of sympathetic workers without having first to sort out all the jurisdictional disputes. The Federation under president William Green also chafed at the resistance of some craft Internationals to organizing. The federal labor union structure offered a way around this dilemma, at least temporarily. From 1933 to 1945, the AFL chartered between 5,000 and 6,000 federal unions. Many of these federal locals fell apart relatively quickly, but some merged into existing or newly-established Internationals. Others survived the 1930s intact, becoming the nucleus of major mass production unions as was the case in electrical, auto, rubber, and other industries.¹⁴

THE MODERN RELEVANCE

But what relevance is this AFL history to today? The direct affiliate structure I think has much to offer a labor movement now committed to expanding its reach beyond that minority of workers covered by contracts or eligible for coverage. The federal locals of the past were self-constituted communities; membership was not dependent on securing employer recognition or qualifying as an "employee" under the law. Rather, the labor movement *itself* determined who was eligible for membership. The AFL issued charters not on the basis of bargaining unit status or legal classification but because a group of workers pledged and demonstrated their allegiance to the principles and practices of the labor movement.

¹¹ AFL Constitution, 1886, Article VIII, Sect. 3.

¹² AFL *Proceedings*, 1897, pp. 15-16; AFL *Proceedings*, 1898, pp. 16-17; Letter from Samuel Gompers to Louis Hartman, June 30, 1888 in Stuart Kaufman, et al., eds. *Samuel Gompers Papers*, vol. 4 *A National Movement Takes Shape, 1895-98* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1989), p.128. In the vast majority of cases, the Federation refused charters to petitioners when International unions or other affiliated bodies objected, but in a number of instances (many involving black workers), Gompers approved petitions over the protests of International unions. See Cobble, "Reviv-

ing the Federation's Historic Role in Organizing," pp. 16-21.

¹³ Cobble, "Lost Ways of Organizing," figure 4.

¹⁴ Cobble, "Reviving the Federation's Historic Role in Organizing," pp. 10-13; See also Philip Taft, *The AFL from the Death of Gompers to the Merger* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959); James Matles and James Higgins, *Them and Us* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974) and Craig Phelan, *William Green: Biography of a Labor Leader* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

One could say, then, that the federal local mechanism operated somewhat like the AFL-CIO's associate membership program does today, making union membership available to those not normally eligible. Yet federal labor union membership differed from today's associate membership in two significant ways. First, membership was group-based rather than primarily individual, and second, membership was accompanied with an expectation that as affiliated bodies the federal locals would participate fully in supporting the economic and political agenda of organized labor. Thus, reviving the federal labor union structure would offer a new kind of affiliation: one that is collective rather than individual and that recognizes that improvements in working conditions comes as much through workers own self-activity as through access to AFL services and benefits.

Moreover, the direct affiliate structure would bolster the AFL-CIO's current efforts to reinvigorate its local and regional bodies. Central labor councils and state feds often organized federal bodies as a simple way of expanding their dues-paying ranks and increasing their economic and political clout at the local and regional level. As decision making is pushed to the local and regional levels in response to economic restructuring and state decentralization, community-centered unionism and community-based organizing efforts become increasingly important. The federal labor union structure could help foster this necessary resurgence of localism.

Lastly, this history reveals a Federation whose historic role in organizing was not just to service Internationals but to initiate organizing directly and to offer workers experimental new forms of membership. The early AFL, like the CIO in the 1930s, depended on the creativity and initiative of individual Internationals for its success. Yet just as critical was the role of the Federation in initiating organizing, in experimenting with organizational structures, and in empowering its local and state bodies.

Certainly, these kinds of structural innovations have the potential to create institutional headaches, re-opening long-settled questions of jurisdiction and autonomy. Yet the birth of something new is frequently painful. The question of industrial organizing in the 1930s, for example, was furiously debated and resisted. The tension then (in the 1930s) was between craft and industrial Internationals as well as between the Federation and its affiliates.

Today, it's not clear how the lines would be drawn or even if a battle need be fought. But what does appear true is that union expansion occurred in periods in which multiple models of unionism could thrive—industrial, occupational, or community-based—and when every part of the union structure—International, local, central body, and federation—was empowered to become a center of organizing and innovation.

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