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Political Insiders and Social Activists: Coalition Building in New York and Los Angeles

Abstract

[Excerpt] Why have labor movements in New York City and Los Angeles changed so dramatically? And more specifically, why have the activist social coalitions that revitalized the labor movement in Los Angeles not played the same kind of role in New York? Our research persuades us that the relationship between contrasting coalition types—political and social—is central to explaining the differences. *Political coalitions* refer to cooperation between unions and parties, politicians, and other social actors, focused largely on elections and policy-making processes. *Social coalitions*, by contrast, include labor and other social actors such as community, religious, environmental, and immigrant rights groups, focused on a range of political, economic, and social campaigns.

A comparison of the two metropolitan areas over the past two decades reveals distinct patterns of coalition building in New York and Los Angeles. In New York, the labor movement is dominated by several powerful local unions, often at odds with one another in contending political coalitions. New social coalitions have developed but are not central to organized labor's political action. The focus of most unions on narrow interest representation contributes to a disconnect between social and political coalitions in which the latter dominate. In Los Angeles, by contrast, the significance of social coalition building stands out as the labor movement has coalesced over the past fifteen years. To be sure, labor in Los Angeles participates actively in political coalitions. In contrast to New York, however, political coalitions move beyond narrow union interests, building on social coalitions that broaden the influence of labor as a whole.

Keywords

political coalitions, social coalitions, labor movement, unions, cities, New York City, Los Angeles

Disciplines

American Politics | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

Suggested Citation

Turner, L. (2007). Political insiders and social activists: Coalition building in New York and Los Angeles [Electronic version]. In L. Turner & D. Cornfield (Eds.), *Labor in the new urban battlegrounds: Local solidarity in a global economy* (pp. 129-143). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

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POLITICAL INSIDERS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

Coalition Building in New York and Los Angeles

Marco Hauptmeier and Lowell Turner

Labor movements in New York City and Los Angeles, as we know them today, emerged from very different historical trajectories. New York has remained a solid union town throughout the postwar period. As in earlier years, labor unions have been a consistently important political force in New York politics, and many social policies in areas such as public housing are products in part of labor's influence (Freeman 2000). The labor movement gained its strength from a highly unionized industrial workforce, which then supported union growth in the public sector. By comparison, Los Angeles throughout most of the twentieth century had a well-earned reputation as a business town with an antiunion climate. Labor in Los Angeles never gained the strength of urban labor movements in large industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest or up the coast in San Francisco. In part this was because sprawling Los Angeles lacked a concentrated industrial workforce and public sector, but more important because business and political interests marketed Los Angeles as a wide open, union-free environment and made a determined effort to keep it that way.

Today the images presented by these labor movements are reversed. Los Angeles has become a poster child for labor movement revitalization. With innovative strategies and high-profile organizing victories, the labor movement has emerged as a powerful force in L.A. politics and has reshaped the political landscape, advancing progressive policies just as New York's unions did in the 1950s and 1960s. Compared to Los Angeles, New York's labor movement appears aged and traditional today. Still strong in size and political influence, New York unions have lost membership slowly but steadily in the private sector. With stable membership in the public sector, unions still successfully represent the interest of their

This chapter has benefited from a research stay by Marco Hauptmeier and discussions at the New York City Extension office of the ILR School at Cornell University. In particular, Sean Sweeney, Pam Whitefield, and Jill Kubit provided valuable support. We would also like to thank Ben Day, Dan Cornfield, Janice Fine, Ian Greer, Paul Hayes, Ruth Milkman, and Ralph Turner for their advice and useful comments.

members, yet they no longer play a central role as movers and shakers for a broader social agenda beyond their own constituencies.

Why have labor movements in New York City and Los Angeles changed so dramatically? And more specifically, why have the activist social coalitions that revitalized the labor movement in Los Angeles not played the same kind of role in New York? Our research persuades us that the relationship between contrasting coalition types—political and social—is central to explaining the differences. *Political coalitions* refer to cooperation between unions and parties, politicians, and other social actors, focused largely on elections and policy-making processes. *Social coalitions*, by contrast, include labor and other social actors such as community, religious, environmental, and immigrant rights groups, focused on a range of political, economic, and social campaigns.

A comparison of the two metropolitan areas over the past two decades reveals distinct patterns of coalition building in New York and Los Angeles. In New York, the labor movement is dominated by several powerful local unions, often at odds with one another in contending political coalitions. New social coalitions have developed but are not central to organized labor's political action. The focus of most unions on narrow interest representation contributes to a disconnect between social and political coalitions in which the latter dominate. In Los Angeles, by contrast, the significance of social coalition building stands out as the labor movement has coalesced over the past fifteen years. To be sure, labor in Los Angeles participates actively in political coalitions. In contrast to New York, however, political coalitions move beyond narrow union interests, building on social coalitions that broaden the influence of labor as a whole.

Our argument favors two related causal factors. The preexisting position of organized labor in urban political structures and the strategic choices of union leadership together provide an explanation for the differing characteristics of contemporary union coalitions in Los Angeles and New York, as well as for relative gains or declines in union influence. In New York, where the labor movement is dominated by several large locals and entrenched in the political structure, union leaders have to a large extent chosen to participate in political coalitions that in some ways inhibit the development of social coalitions. By contrast, unions in Los Angeles lacked a strong position in industry or city politics, resulting in a sort of "advantages of backwardness" (Gerschenkron 1962; Milkman 2002) that gave a new generation of labor leaders space to experiment with innovative strategies based on new social coalitions.

POLITICAL INSIDERS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

Coalitions organized around specific issues by unions and other social actors are often part of a broader effort by outsiders to break into inner circles of political influence. The irony is that once unions become insiders they find themselves in a position to block future social coalitions struggling to join the inner circles of influence. Thus in New York, a few strong union locals long ago became insiders entrenched in local politics. Although they often fight among themselves and thus weaken overall union influence, their powerful presence tends to close off the space available for a socially activist unionism. Although labor-inclusive social coalitions have emerged over the past decade, this has usually happened outside the dominant framework of union power and to a large extent without the participation of the strongest local unions. Although social coalitions have had some success in particular campaigns, they have remained for the most part outsiders with limited political influence.

In Los Angeles, by contrast, a history of weak unionism characterized by minimal consolidation of local union political power left the field wide open for social coalition building. Thus the story line in the 1990s: Justice for Janitors and other coalition campaigns, spilling over into local politics with a renewed union influence based on social activism. The result by the early 2000s was an unprecedented position of political influence for the central labor council and various union locals, based on a continuing series of social coalition campaigns.

The Los Angeles story thus mirrors the New York story. While in New York City powerful local unions with political insider status and narrow bargaining strategies have limited the influence of emerging social coalitions, labor in Los Angeles, in the absence of postwar consolidation or insider status, has built increasingly successful social coalition campaigns that have led to new positions of political influence. In a context of divergent opportunity structures, unions in Los Angeles and New York made different strategic choices in the 1990s, resulting in significantly different outcomes for labor influence by the early years of the twenty-first century.

LABOR AND GLOBAL CITIES: NEW YORK AND LOS ANGELES COMPARED

Similar in many respects, New York and Los Angeles have been described as the quintessential American global cities (Abu-Lughod 1999). Roughly equal in population, the New York metropolitan area has 8.7 million residents while Los Angeles has 9.3 million. Both cities have served as a major port of entry for im-

migrants that have become central components of local population and culture. Representing over 30 percent of New York City's total population and 45 percent of the city of Los Angeles, Hispanics are by far the largest of immigrant groups. Other large ethnic populations come from various Asian countries such as China and South Korea (Abu-Lughod 1999), and about a third of the population of each city is foreign born, reflecting the international status of these global cities.

Los Angeles and New York City are agglomerations of great wealth and corporate power. Both cities are central nodes in the global economy, fulfilling important capital market functions. Wall Street's stock exchange is the largest in the world, while many multinational companies locate important business services in one or the other of these cities. New York is home to twelve of the twenty largest international law firms in the world (Yaro, Hiss, and Regional Plan Association 1996). As much as these two cities are centers of power, they are also places of much poverty and social exclusion. With poverty rates of 18.6 percent and 17.7 percent respectively, New York and Los Angeles stand far above the 2003 national rate of 12.5 percent (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2004). Extremes of poverty and wealth make economic and social inequality a defining characteristic of contemporary New York and Los Angeles.

The transformation of these cities from industrial toward more service-based economies has been more dynamic and encompassing than in most other American cities (Sassen 2001). Different sectors of the service economy, however, have offered vastly different opportunities. Winners of the restructuring process in both cities include professionals in finance, insurance, real estate, business services, and information technology, while workers in low-wage service industries, many of them immigrants, have been the losers, often unable to earn a living wage.

With nine hundred thousand union members, New York's labor movement is the largest in the country. Los Angeles has about six hundred thousand union members. Union density in the metropolitan area in 2004 was 24.5 percent in New York and 15.5 percent in Los Angeles. New York has large public sector unions with a membership density of about 66 percent, while the level in Los Angeles is 53.3 percent. Private sector union density in 2004 was about 10 percent in Los Angeles and 17 percent in New York City. Since the late 1980s, overall membership density in Los Angeles stabilized and then grew modestly in both public and private sectors, while in New York union density in the private sector declined slowly but steadily from 23 percent in 1989 to 17 percent in 2004 (Hirsch and Macpherson 2006).

COALITION BUILDING IN NEW YORK: THE POLITICAL TRUMPS THE SOCIAL

A primary strategy of labor unions in New York is to advance their interests through political coalitions. This has been a highly effective strategy, making labor unions influential players in the political power structure of the city. This is related to the high unionization rate as well the role played by unions at critical moments in the city's history. When the city was threatened with bankruptcy in the late 1970s, unions helped out with money from their pension funds. The most important factor for the political access of unions has been their actual or expected leverage in elections (Mollenkopf 1992). Despite a loss of influence compared to the 1960s and 1970s, unions along with political parties are unrivaled at voter mobilization. With their highly regarded phone banks and organizers, New York City's unions are well aware of their appeal to politicians. After successful contract negotiations for seventy thousand members of SEIU/1199 in 2002, in the biggest collective bargaining agreement ever signed in the U.S. health-care industry, Dennis Riviera wrote in a letter to SEIU members: "We also won this agreement for another very important reason—our political strength. . . . When tens of thousands of our union members volunteer to get out the vote on election day, our elected officials notice. And they respect us."¹

In standard political exchange arrangements, unions expect politicians to promote labor interests. These interests, however, are defined with considerable variation, including the traditional divide between the interests of public and of private sector unions. Unions in New York tend to formulate their interests narrowly in favor of their own constituencies, often resulting in support for different candidates and a fragmentation of political influence. In the face of powerful local unions, the central labor council is all too often unable to unify divergent positions. In addition, narrow interest formulation and political insider coalitions result in hidden or sometimes open conflict with social groups. Seldom in recent years has a unified labor movement acted as part of a broader social or political movement.

In the Democratic primary for the mayoral election in 2001, unions endorsed four different candidates. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) supported City Comptroller Alan G. Hevesi. UNITE, UAW, and SEIU/32BJ endorsed Public Advocate Mark Green. Most of the locals in AFSCME District Council 37 backed Council Speaker Peter Vallone, while others such as the cafeteria workers and crossing guards supported Fernando Ferrer—creating conflicting endorsements within the same union (Greenhouse 2001). SEIU/1199 stayed neutral for

1. Quote from an undated letter to union members by SEIU 1199 president Dennis Rivera in 2002.

a long time, as Dennis Rivera argued that his union would gain nothing by endorsing a Democratic primary candidate. In the final weeks before the election, however, when Ferrer appeared the likely winner, Rivera made a last-minute endorsement. He bet wrong as Mark Green finished first in the Democratic primary.

Labor's political fragmentation could not be bridged before the runoff election between Green and Republican candidate Michael Bloomberg. Although most unions officially supported Green, the two largest unions, SEIU/1199 and UFT, sent out mixed signals. Neither union mobilized organizers or used phone banks to turn out the vote for Green. The absence of a unified mobilization resulted in a marginal impact for labor and opened the door for Bloomberg's victory (Robbins 2001).

The political fragmentation of the labor movement in New York is a recurrent theme, contributing to the election of Republican Rudi Guiliani in 1993 and 1997. The central labor council's endorsement has little influence on the decisions of the powerful locals. The last time labor united to support a mayoral candidate was in 1989 when a broad liberal coalition with labor at its center swept into office David Dinkins, the first black mayor of New York City.

Lack of unity continued as Governor George Pataki, a Republican, used legislation and policy to win the support of several large New York unions in his 2002 election campaign. Rivera's SEIU/1199 struck the best deal when a state bill allocated \$1.8 billion over three years to finance raises and job creation for health-care workers. UFT's Randi Weingarten, UNITE's Bruce Raynor, and Roger Benson's Public Employees Federation also endorsed Pataki, in part because of union-friendly legislation: all three were present when Pataki signed a bill preventing employers from using state funds to fight union organizers. UFT was also able to negotiate an additional \$200 million in raises for school teachers (Dewan 2002).

The decision to support Pataki was opposed by rank-and-file members in SEIU/1199 and UFT, and the deals were widely criticized by other unions as well. SEIU/32BJ's Mike Fishman, who endorsed Democratic challenger Carl McCall, said, "Pataki did a great thing for 1199. But that contract was just one issue, just one fight. Our members are some of the newest citizens, with a wide range of needs. They need somebody consistent on all issues, who's consistently pro-union and pro working people" (Meyerson 2002, 28).²

Pataki's election victory resulted in part from the unprecedented deal between Governor Pataki and 1199's Riviera, an agreement that helped workers and families in the health-care industry, many of them low-wage workers. At the same

2. SEIU/32BJ is the high-profile building services union from which John Sweeney launched his successful campaign for SEIU national president in 1980 and from there to AFL-CIO president in 1995.

time, unions and other social groups opposed this political-insider coalition with a governor who had cut a range of programs for the socially excluded in New York (both city and state). Despite Pataki's election success, however, unions lobbied successfully to raise the minimum wage in the state from \$5.15 an hour in 2004 to \$7.15 in 2007 (Cooper 2004).

Social coalitions have played a significant but limited role in advancing union goals in New York City, while relationships between labor and community groups have often been contentious. The low point may have been when construction workers attacked antiwar demonstrators during the Vietnam War. The affluent lifestyle of some union leaders—in some cases with Mob connections—has also historically distanced unions from social groups. Confronted with “big labor,” social activists have sometimes had trouble seeing labor as a natural ally for progressive forces in New York City (Mantsios 2001).

Despite this history, coalitions between labor and social groups have expanded since the mid-1990s, when new leadership at the AFL-CIO opened up space for new social coalitions. Although such initiatives and the social movement strivings they represent have remained secondary in the New York City labor movement, some promising examples have emerged, including Make the Road by Walking, Workplace Project, Domestic Workers Alliance, and the Taxi Workers Alliance–NY. In addition, the Working Families Party and the local chapter of Jobs with Justice have served as meeting points in various campaigns.

When the new AFL-CIO leadership initiated Union Summer in 1996, UNITE brought campus activists to New York City to work on anti-sweatshop campaigns. From this union-campus collaboration came the United Students against Sweatshops (USAS), which spread quickly to over three hundred campuses around the country. One of the two national offices of USAS is located at the headquarters of UNITE (now UNITE HERE) in New York City. Together USAS and UNITE forged broad coalitions with other groups such as Jobs with Justice and the New York Labor Religion Coalition. One of the goals of such coalition efforts was to get anti-sweatshop legislation passed by the city council, assuring that the \$70 million spent annually on uniforms by New York City agencies are not produced under sweatshop conditions. This initiative resulted in the Anti-Sweatshop Procurement Law, passed by the city council in March 2001.³

Another coalition effort developed around the greengrocer campaign in 1998, supported by a wide range of groups including the Lower East Side Worker Center, UNITE, Jobs with Justice, and Casa Mexico (Ness 2005). Greengrocers are small retail stores that started out as corner produce stores and over time broadened their range of products. The campaign protested widespread violations of

3. Interview with Ginny Coughlin (UNITE HERE), 2003.

minimum wage and overtime laws—with employees forced in some cases to work up to seventy-two hours per week. The campaign attracted media attention and brought working conditions to the attention of the attorney general for the state of New York, Eliot Spitzer. An investigation by his office revealed a widespread pattern of labor rights violations and led to negotiated settlements with individual greengrocers and development of a code of conduct for the industry. Established in negotiations that included store owners, coalition campaigners, and the attorney general's office, the code was subsequently accepted by over two hundred greengrocers.

The Restaurant Opportunity Center (ROC) was set up in the wake of September 11, 2001. The attacks killed seventy-three employees of the restaurant Windows of the World, located at the top of the World Trade Center, and left another three hundred workers without jobs—all of them members of HERE Local 100. ROC was founded by HERE to help the relatives of the victims and displaced workers. ROC helps displaced workers find new jobs and offers training courses for workers in the restaurant industry. ROC and former Windows of the World employees opened a new restaurant called COLORS in January 2006, organized as a cooperative and owned by the workers themselves. ROC has also become a voice for unorganized immigrants in the restaurant industry, in several instances forcing restaurant owners to reinstate workers and pay back wages. However, the relationship between ROC and UNITE HERE has become somewhat fragile, as activists at the immigrant-led worker center have criticized union leadership dominance by white males, despite the great importance of immigrants and women in the hotel and restaurant workforce.⁴

In the fall of 2003, the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride brought nine hundred immigrants and their supporters from across the United States in caravans of buses, ending in a rally of over one hundred thousand in Flushing Meadow. New York's central labor council, with the support of most member unions, spearheaded organization of the rally, one of the largest and most unified labor mobilizations of the past decade in New York City. The freedom ride was important not only for demonstrating new union support for immigrant rights (codified in an AFL-CIO policy change in 2000) but for possible ramifications for future coalition-based campaigns. Spillover from the mobilization along with massive immigrant rights demonstrations in the spring of 2006 have shown the potential of expanded social coalition activism.

4. Interviews with ROC organizer, 2003 and 2004.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL UNIONISM IN LOS ANGELES

Since the 1930s, when workplace and social unrest propelled union organizing campaigns across the country, on the West Coast centered in the port cities of San Francisco and Seattle, Los Angeles has gone a different route. From the current era of global liberalization we can look back on the L.A. experience as what Joseph Stiglitz (2002) has called “market fundamentalism.” In a journey that paralleled the “grapes of wrath” migration that transformed farmers from Texas, Oklahoma, and other states into job-seeking foot soldiers for Western fields and factories, Southern California offered a welcome union-free destination for a triumphant “cowboy capitalism.”

Although in the postwar period unions organized heavy industry (such as automobiles and aerospace) and eventually reached union density rates comparable to national levels, Los Angeles remained a center of economic development in which unions played only a minor role. A lengthy story can be told (e.g., Gottlieb et al. 2005; Milkman 2006), but the weak-union pattern persisted through the 1980s. Modest union growth in the public sector could not offset the loss of union jobs as large industrial factories closed, and labor continued to play a marginal role in L.A. politics. The difference between this situation and strong union insider status in postwar New York City would be hard to exaggerate.

Quite surprisingly then, a 1990s resurgence of the labor movement has made Los Angeles a prominent case of successful union revitalization. To a national labor movement in crisis, Los Angeles now offers the possibility of union-based solidarity, an unexpected revitalization of social forces in which coalition building is the key ingredient. Although union density remains low in comparison to New York, trajectories of union political and social influence have reversed quite dramatically over the past fifteen years.

In labor circles the contemporary L.A. story is widely known (Pastor 2001; Milkman 2002; Frank and Wong 2004; Gottlieb et al. 2005). The defining moment came in 1990 when several thousand janitors, mostly Latino, joined a union-led comprehensive campaign—with grassroots organizing, mass demonstrations, and other innovative pressure tactics—to win a dramatic strike victory in a decidedly union-unfriendly context. Framed as a battle for social justice, this Justice for Janitors campaign was backed by a broad social coalition including immigrant rights, religious, and community groups, and in the course of the struggle it won widespread public support. In addition to winning significant organizing and bargaining gains for janitors, the campaign mobilized L.A.’s large Latino community and brought together a variety of social groups in coalitions

that would spill over in subsequent years into an array of other campaigns (Pastor 2001; Milkman and Wong 2000).⁵

The emergence of a coalition-based social unionism contributed to a succession of organizing, bargaining, and public policy victories—in the health-care and hospitality industries, in transportation, construction, and building services. In health care, for example, SEIU organized seventy thousand home-care workers in Los Angeles, which included a successful campaign for enabling state legislation and then a sustained effort to sign up members. Case-by-case hospital organizing campaigns by SEIU and the California Nurses Association also resulted in breakthrough victories. Catholic Healthcare West, for example, fought unionization campaigns vigorously until key defeats led the company to sign agreements providing for management neutrality throughout its numerous hospitals and health-care facilities. Between 1995 and 2003, the unionization rate in the L.A. health-care industry rose from about 25 percent to over 50 percent.⁶ In the hospitality industry, successful hotel organizing campaigns since the late 1980s laid the groundwork for a major strike/lockout victory in 2005. Led by UNITE HERE, the new hotel contracts not only raised wages and benefits for housekeepers and other employees but won a contract expiration date synchronized with New York City, Boston, Chicago, and Honolulu, laying the groundwork for a nationwide “Hotel Workers Rising” campaign in 2006.⁷

In 1996, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor elected a new president, Miguel Contreras, trained in social movement unionism during his years as an organizer for the United Farm Workers, who brought unions and community groups together in a series of successful campaigns and local political elections. By the turn of the century, the city council was dominated by union supporters, while campaigns in 2001 and 2005 each resulted in the election of a pro-labor Democratic mayor (the second, Antonio Villaraigosa, is a former union organizer).

Specific effects of the spread of social coalition building in Los Angeles include organizational revitalization for SEIU and UNITE HERE locals (among others) and the county federation; institutional and policy change such as the implementation of new minimum wage standards by aggressive living wage boards; and the building of enduring coalition-based organizations for economic development such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, or LAANE (Frank and Wong 2004, 173–77). At the same time, however, we do not want to idealize

5. Social networks of Mexican Americans and Mexicans, with and without legal status, provided a strong base for union revitalization in Los Angeles. Immigrants from Central America, many socialized in antiauthoritarian struggles in countries such as El Salvador, also played an important role.

6. Interview with SEIU lead organizer, 2004.

7. Talk given by UNITE HERE president Bruce Raynor at Cornell University, October 20, 2005.

the growing influence of the labor movement in Los Angeles. Tensions developed, and remained to be resolved, between unions and a series of new worker centers such as the Korean Immigrant Workers Association, which are run for and by underrepresented immigrant workers (Fine 2006). And a major defeat for striking grocery workers in 2003 indicated both the power of employer countermobilization and the failure of the United Food and Commercial Workers, in a context marked by public support and union solidarity, to mobilize the strategies and coalition efforts necessary for victory.

Nonetheless, the overall pattern of growing labor movement success in Los Angeles stands out as an example of union revitalization in the United States. There were several key ingredients in this transformation. The Justice for Janitors strategy was developed at SEIU national headquarters. Although the traditional local leadership held back (at one point the local was placed in trusteeship), grassroots activists embraced the strategy, mobilizing workers and supportive community groups for the struggle. Framed in terms of social justice for low-wage service workers and immigrant rights, the campaign targeted large building owners (and their contractors), which were sensitive to their public image as stable providers of Pacific Rim offices for multinational corporations. Mass demonstrations and civil disobedience attracted public support (Milkman 2002). And in subsequent years, social actors built on the victory in a cascading series of campaigns that, whether successful or not, contributed to political transformation and the development of a "social justice infrastructure" (Nissen and Russo, chapter 8 in this book).

The unexpected transformation of the past fifteen years shows that significant social and labor gains are possible across a large urban region, in a city closely linked to the global economy, with weak labor institutions at the outset and a long history on the front lines of market liberalization. Beyond the fact of transformation, the Los Angeles case suggests explanations for both the emergence of social unionism and its success. Strategic choice is obviously at the center of both explanations. Given the weakness of labor institutions, the possibilities ranged far and wide; it is difficult to see how choices could be derived from institutions or from economic, political, social, or cultural circumstances. In a context characterized by weak labor standards and institutions, union leaders made real, often surprising, choices that mattered.

The shortcomings of traditional union strategies in Los Angeles opened the door for strategic innovation by union reformers. Strategic support from national unions such as SEIU and the activism of local bridge builders combined to shape the choices and the implementation of innovative strategies. The emergence of social unionism is thus consistent with an explanation based on the weakness of insider unionism and the innovative strategies of union leaders and activists. In

contrast to New York City, no powerful union locals and political insiders blocked the open field for innovative union strategies in Los Angeles in the 1990s.

The accomplishments of social unionism in Los Angeles can be measured specifically in gains by janitors and subsequent groups of workers and more broadly by a sustained process of economic and political transformation. The SEIU and Justice for Janitors found corporate vulnerability in the image concerns of large building owners, their inability to relocate, and their obvious ability to pay more for janitorial service (opportunity). Subsequent campaigns by unions targeting other employers sought similarly vulnerable targets in business and government—a learning process in which university-based researchers played a supporting role (Frank and Wong 2004). Also essential were the decisions of local union activists to build on this initial breakthrough, to replace traditional leaders with innovators, and to promote strategies based on rank-and-file mobilization and community coalitions (actor choice). Lacking the dynamism of a broad social movement context, labor nonetheless found an ethnic workforce and community ripe for mobilization, based in social networks that linked established residents with recent immigrants, legal and illegal. As initial successes ballooned in spillover processes, bridge builders mobilized the Latino community, while more unions tried out the new strategies and joined the widening circles of coalition campaigns.

Conditions for the emergence and spread of social unionism found in Los Angeles are also present, or at least latent, in other cities, including Miami and Nashville (see chapters 8 and 9). Where they are not blocked by entrenched insiders, unions pursuing social-movement-type strategies such as grassroots mobilization and coalition building may generate momentum for significant social gains. So much so that in Los Angeles unions have gained new insider status, entrenched in new bargaining relationships with employers, incorporated in a central position in local politics and government, and solidly established on a range of policy boards and agencies.⁸ Yet this insider status is so far quite different from the entrenched version found in New York. On the contrary, this new institutional position, which is far more substantial than labor has ever had in Los Angeles, is being defended and expanded in continuing processes of strategic innovation and coalition campaigns. And social unionism has expanded beyond social movement strategies to include participation in economic development (Frank and Wong 2004).

8. See, for example, an in-depth article on L.A. County Fed president Miguel Contreras by Matea Gold, "L.A. Power Broker Faces Test," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2005. In a sad twist of fate, Contreras died unexpectedly at age fifty-two in May 2005, thus opening the question of the influence of this one key person in the revitalization of the labor movement in Los Angeles.

URBAN COALITIONS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR LABOR MOVEMENT REVITALIZATION

We began this chapter with a puzzle: Why have unions in New York City, long powerful players in the political economy of this global city, declined in numbers and influence over the past fifteen years while unions in Los Angeles, historically a marginal player at best, have experienced a dramatic expansion of political and economic influence? And more specifically, why has an expansive, socially activist labor movement come to prominence in Los Angeles while a similar sort of social unionism remains to some extent marginal in the political economy of New York?

Based on our examination of coalition-building efforts and labor's role in politics, the evidence persuades us that the decisive explanatory factors are union centered: the structure of existing union incorporation in the urban political economy along with the strategic choices of union leaders and activists. In New York, powerful local unions, often at odds with one another, have long played the role of political insiders. Union leaders have used these positions of influence to negotiate contracts on behalf of their own members while showing less interest in sustained coalition building with other actors. Limited political coalitions have dominated the union landscape, narrowing the space for the potentially transformative effects of a more socially activist unionism. By contrast, a generally weak union presence, including the absence of labor integration in the centers of power, in L.A. politics left the field wide open for social mobilization. A new generation of union leaders and activists stepped forward in the 1990s to fill the vacuum with ambitious campaigns focused on organizing, collective bargaining, and politics. Based in large measure on the mobilization of a growing Latino community and the building of coalitions with social actors such as immigrant rights and religious groups, the labor movement has now become a central player in the political economy of modern Los Angeles.

Although a more rigorous testing of a systematic comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this two-city study, we have emphasized existing structure and strategic choice because these factors have emerged prominently in contrasting labor movement trajectories in contemporary New York City and Los Angeles. These findings are consistent with the evidence from other cities presented in this book.

The easiest alternative explanations to rule out are those for which similar circumstances are joined by contrasting outcomes. Political institutions and orientations are in many ways similar in both cities. Strong mayors share power with city councils elected by district, often in adversarial relationships with each other. Both cities are located in liberal "blue states" where large majorities vote Demo-

cratic (except when celebrity “Terminators” enter the field). While New York was for many decades a more politically liberal city than Los Angeles, it is hard to see how this difference could explain contemporary differences in labor movement revitalization.

Economic differences, both institutional and structural, also offer little help in explaining variation. New York and Los Angeles are both global cities of great wealth, financial centers for the global economy with world-class ports and expanding construction industries. Although light manufacturing is important in both cities, employment has shifted in recent decades to service industries at the high end (business and financial services) as well as health care, building services, transportation, public education, hotels and restaurants, domestic services, and other areas. In both cities, unions today are based primarily in services, in both the public and private sectors.

Social conditions are also similar in many ways. Both cities are major ports of entry for immigrants and have unusually large foreign-born populations. Hispanics make up the largest part of both of these groups in each city. As for other global cities (and most U.S. cities for that matter), social structure is characterized by vast inequality, with extremes of great wealth and poverty. Apart from wealthy owners and investors, large cohorts of well-paid professionals provide the services necessary to administer capital flows in an increasingly global economy. At the same time, growing numbers of lower-paid service workers, many of them immigrants, work in the buildings, hotels, hospitals, homes, schools, buses, and gardens of an expanding global city.

There are of course differences not included in our union-centered explanation. New York is an established union town while Los Angeles entered the 1990s as a “frontier,” wide open for new developments such as labor movement revitalization. Although conceptually useful, especially in understanding the political insider concept, this difference in itself provides only limited explanatory value—and here we must look beyond the two-city comparison. In other chapters of this book we see clearly that frontier cities such as Miami and Nashville have as yet no L.A.-type labor resurgence, while in union towns such as Seattle and Buffalo unions have built on existing strengths to revitalize the labor movement and develop new influence in politics and society.

Perhaps the most compelling alternative explanation is social and demographic. Labor movement revitalization in Los Angeles has been built to a large extent on the mobilization of the Latino community. Although New York also has a large Hispanic population, it is more diverse, spanning a wide range of countries from the Caribbean through Mexico, Central America, and South America, and thus it is harder to mobilize in a cohesive way than the more homogenous Latino population of Los Angeles, which is largely of Mexican and Central Amer-

ican origin. This difference in immigrant and ethnic composition is important for understanding contrasting outcomes for labor in the past fifteen years. Still, there are large concentrations of particular ethnic groups in New York such as Haitians, eastern Europeans, Koreans, and Pakistanis that are quite capable of mobilization, especially in alliance with similar groups and supportive social actors. By contrast to salient labor strategies in Los Angeles, however, most unions in New York have limited their efforts to serving the interests of existing memberships. Finally, other large metropolitan areas such as Houston also have large and relatively homogeneous Hispanic populations without having experienced anything like the labor movement resurgence of Los Angeles.

Thus we are left with a union-centered explanation based largely on structure and strategy.⁹ The bad news for unions is that they are to a significant degree responsible for the declining influence they have faced in cities such as New York. It won't do to blame employers, government, globalization, economic restructuring, or opportunity-seeking immigrants and individualist young workers. The good news is that unions, as they have done in Los Angeles, have real opportunities for expanded influence, if and when they step back from insider stagnation or outsider irrelevance to pursue innovative strategies based on union unity, coalition building, and social activism.

9. There is, of course, always the cultural explanation advanced by unreconstructed L.A. chauvinists: uptight, belligerently set-in-their ways New Yorkers versus loose Angelenos used to innovation, wide open for whatever the world brings along.