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## Building Social Movement Unionism: The Transformation of the American Labor Movement

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# Building Social Movement Unionism: The Transformation of the American Labor Movement

## Abstract

[Excerpt] In the United States, the renewed energy displayed by the labor movement is particularly promising. From organizing drives to strike victories to legislative campaigns, labor's renewed influence in the American political economy is clearly seen. A labor movement that was left for dead by many in the Reagan era has developed new leadership and innovative strategies for rank-and-file mobilization and political clout. In a global economy dominated to a large extent by American-based multinational corporations, the world needs a strong American labor movement. The goal of the new activists, young and old, who drive today's labor campaigns, is the rebirth of modernized, mobilized, powerful American unions.

We suggest that innovations at the heart of the current revitalization are part of a broad shift away from traditional postwar unionism to a new social movement unionism. The transformation occurs in a weak institutional context in which experimentation and innovation are possible. Driving the change are two generations of activists: veterans of the social movements of the 1960s, now in leadership positions at the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and in many member unions, and a new generation of campus and workplace activists.

## Keywords

labor movement, unions, organization, labor rights, revitalization

## Disciplines

Labor and Employment Law | Unions

## Comments

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## **Building Social Movement Unionism**

### *The Transformation of the American Labor Movement*

**Lowell Turner and Richard W. Hurd**

**L**abor movements long in decline in many industrial democracies are now on the move. They are developing new strategies, pursuing internal reform, restructuring, and seeking new ways to gain members and influence. This is an exciting and, in some ways, unexpected development, and it is an important one in this global era in which governments and unions appear to have lost much of their power in regulating markets. The modernization and revival of national labor movements, which has expanded through cross-national collaboration, could offer a much-needed democratic counterweight to the growing power of capital in today's world economy. The "battle in Seattle" in late 1999 offered a dramatic picture of the alliances and active labor participation that could shape a new democratic force on the global stage.

In the United States, the renewed energy displayed by the labor movement is particularly promising. From organizing drives to strike victories to legislative campaigns, labor's renewed influence in the American political economy is clearly seen. A labor movement that was left for dead by many in the Reagan era has developed new leadership and innovative strategies for rank-and-file mobilization and political clout. In a global economy dominated to a large extent by American-based multinational corporations, the world needs a strong American labor movement. The goal of the new activists, young and old, who drive today's labor campaigns, is the rebirth of modernized, mobilized, powerful American unions.

We suggest that innovations at the heart of the current revitalization are part of a broad shift away from traditional postwar unionism to a new social movement unionism. The transformation occurs in a weak institutional context in which experimentation and innovation are possible. Driving the change are two generations of activists: veterans of the social movements of the 1960s, now in leadership positions at the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and in many member unions, and a new generation of campus and workplace activists.

### **Strategies for Revitalization**

The 1990s witnessed the growth and expansion of important strategic innovations in the U.S. labor movement (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Fraser and Freeman 1997; Nissen 1999). The most significant of these are organizing of the unorganized, grassroots political action, coalition building, labor-management partnership, union mergers and internal restructuring, and international solidarity.

Most of the new strategies are connected, directly or indirectly, to a new emphasis on rank-and-file participation or mobilization, the essence of social movement unionism. Current organizing and grassroots political efforts are founded on expanded member activism. Coalition building mobilizes other groups and their members to support union campaigns such as organizing and trade legislation. Environmental, campus, religious, human rights, and other groups have increasingly joined with unions and their members in campaigns and actions from local to national levels. Successful partnerships encourage expanded workplace participation, and national level agreements at firms such as Kaiser Permanente and Levi Strauss provide for company neutrality in union-organizing drives. Much of today's internal restructuring in unions is aimed at reforming the organization to make expanded rank-and-file participation and new organizing drives possible. Growing international solidarity ranges from high-level junkets to networks of activists, with various types of rank-and-file mobilization typically necessary in winning campaigns.

Mobilization efforts have clearly led the recent revitalization, mark-

ing off current AFL-CIO strategies from those of previous decades. Although rank-and-file and grassroots mobilization produces excitement and great promise for the future, the road to a fully revitalized labor movement is a long one full of obstacles—from employer antagonism to internal resistance to change. Transformation may well require the powerful cleansing action of a broader society-wide social movement upsurge, well beyond specific efforts to build social movement unionism.

## **Social Movement Unionism and Organizational Change**

Broadly speaking, the shift to an emphasis on rank-and-file mobilization in organizing, grassroots politics, and elsewhere can be characterized as a shift from business to social movement unionism. Both business and social movement unionism are “ideal types,” but the direction of change in the 1990s is of great historical and current significance. From the point of view of today’s union activists, the transition from the social movement unionism of the 1930s to the business unionism of the 1950s to 1980s left American unions demobilized and to a large extent defenseless in the face of growing employer opposition from the 1970s on. One could also argue that labor law reform failed in 1978 and 1994 because unions lacked the will or capacity to mobilize large-scale support. Leaders of the current shift in union priorities, from John Sweeney on down, aim to revitalize the labor movement through active organizing, political action, and the rebuilding of a strong social movement dimension, a capacity for rank-and-file mobilization and ongoing involvement (Sweeney 1996).

There is a difference between social movements and social movement unionism. Social movements are broad society-wide phenomena that rise and fall in unpredictable historical waves. Social movement unionism, by contrast, is a type of unionism based on member involvement and activism. Although it is possible to build social movement unions in the absence of the broader social movement, as many local unions have shown, the broader movement more easily sweeps away obstacles and breaks down resistance from entrenched office-holders and conservative forces inside and outside of unions. Current strategies aimed at building social movement unionism thus address

an interactive process: broad, powerful social movements, when they do come along, can drive institutional change (including labor law reform), thereby supporting activists at the local and national levels. By the same token, current efforts to build social movement unionism, by opening up possibilities for involvement and mobilization, may help lay the groundwork for the next social movement wave.

American unions, both local and national, are in effect joining in an attempted expansion of democratic participation in the workplace and society. The preponderance of elements in current strategies contributes to the push in this direction. In the end, the success of each strategy may well depend on the success of the others in a broader social movement context.

### **From Business to Social Movement Unionism**

The history of the American labor movement is long and varied. At one extreme, labor activism has taken shape as vast, turbulent, and short-lived social movements; at the other, unions have consolidated their influence over the decades as stable institutional forces. In the rise and fall of the labor movement, these two forces—social movements and institutions—have repeatedly interacted to shape union prospects and the range of strategic choices available to union leaders and their activist members.

Over the past hundred years, the American labor movement has gone from craft-based occupational unionism to transforming social movement (1930s) to social contract incorporation (1940s) to business unionism (1950s–1990s) to a major contemporary push toward renewed social movement unionism (Brody 1980; Green 1980; Fraser and Freeman 1997; Boyle 1998). Labor's upsurge in the 1930s helped to build new institutions for collective bargaining as union membership and influence grew (Gross 1974, 33–37). On the other hand, when labor missed the next social movement wave in the 1960s, unions lost the opportunity for revitalization and, under the weight of an escalating employer offensive, fell into long-term decline and decay. A companion effect has been growing economic and social polarization in American society. Today's revitalization efforts are bred of both desperation

and the examples of a few organizing unions that did ride the 1960s wave. Just as the popular upsurge of the 1930s helped to build and then breathe life into new workers' rights and institutions of industrial relations, so the organizing activists of today aim to build the collective power necessary to reform, rebuild, and revitalize labor's institutional supports for the challenges of the global economy.

The story of labor's social movement and institutional success in the 1930s is well known. Led by rank-and-file activists and union leaders in mass production industries who had been excluded from membership in the old AFL, American workers across the country demanded union membership and recognition. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA or the Wagner Act), passed by Congress in 1935 and upheld by the courts in 1937, gave union recognition and collective bargaining rights to any workers who could gain majority workforce support. Organizers from CIO and AFL unions alike fanned out across the country to take advantage of popular sentiment and readiness to mobilize. In a few years, union membership more than doubled. Rising working-class protest demanded and gave political backing to Senator Wagner's promotion of the new labor laws, and these same movements of protests then gave substance to the laws and made the institutions work. Beyond a doubt, social movements in this case shaped institutions (Gross 1974; Green 1980).<sup>1</sup>

Wartime solidarity incorporated the newly strengthened unions into the political economy through the War Labor Board, informal access to President Roosevelt, new influence in Congress, and in other ways. Union leaders assumed that this implied "social contract" would carry over into the postwar era—and it did, but in a more limited way. Labor's influence was restricted through Taft-Hartley legislation and in compromise strike settlements in which labor's power was confined to collective bargaining and shopfloor enforcement at the expense of

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<sup>1</sup>The relationship, to be sure, was interactive: Once growing protest gave leverage to political forces to pass the new legislation in 1935, the NLRA (especially after clearing the Supreme Court in 1937) opened the door for more union organizing. Thus, beneath the causal relationship social movements > institutions lies a more complex picture: mass protest > new legislation > more mass protest and organizing, which in turn helped to consolidate the new institutional framework (see, for example, Gross 1974, 33–37; Hurd 1974; Green 1980; Lichtenstein 1995).

greater voice or codetermination in company decision making (Brody 1980; Gross 1995). In the context of the new cold war, many labor leaders consolidated control of their own organizations through a purge of the left (communists and noncommunists alike) that eliminated internal opponents at the cost of stripping the labor movement of many activist-minded local, regional, and even national leaders.

For the most part, the capacity to promote renewed social movement unionism disappeared, replaced by what came to be known as business unionism: collective bargaining, enforcement of the contract, and representational and other group services (health plans, insurance, group legal services) for the union member. Although the new rights and services were important and valuable to the members, the life went out of the unions. People began to see them as service agencies and stopped going to meetings or otherwise participating except for occasional activism at contract time (which did show mobilization potential for those who might want to tap into it). Although union membership density was near its peak (around 34 percent) by the time the AFL and CIO merged in 1955, the stage had already been set for the long-term dominance and eventual decay of a nonparticipatory business unionism.<sup>2</sup> While economic restructuring and labor market changes, which accelerated by the 1970s, made it essential that unions organize new industries and groups of workers, a consolidated contract-oriented unionism had little capacity to organize and entrenched leaders had little interest in organizing the new sectors of the economy.

What could have revitalized such unions for the increasingly difficult challenges of the 1970s and beyond? Perhaps the civil rights movement, antiwar movement, women's movement, or even the environmental movement (see, for example, Isaac et al. 1998). Institutions can be reinvigorated by social movements; in the politics of conflict, however, it is also possible for entrenched interests to beat back social movement influence—almost always to the detriment of the institutions.

Why did American labor miss the boat—the same boat that revitalized the German, British, and Italian labor movements in the 1960s and 1970s? To a large extent, it was the conservatism bred by business unionism in which many labor leaders presided over increasingly nar-

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<sup>2</sup>Maurice Neufeld warned of precisely this as early as 1950 (Neufeld 1951).



row member-oriented organizations that had lost a broader vision and passion for social justice. This combined with ideologically intense cold war anticommunism made many labor leaders (led by George Meany of the AFL-CIO) suspicious and at times quite hostile to new political stirrings on the left, whether it was civil rights, antiwar protests, or the women's movement.

There were important exceptions, and these show the lost potential. Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis in 1968 while supporting the union recognition strike of a thousand black sanitation workers against a white racist city council. The movie *At the River I Stand* beautifully demonstrates how the power of this labor protest was magnified by the power of the civil rights movement and vice versa. The national union involved—the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—used the strike victory in Memphis as a springboard for organizing other municipal employees across the South; and a cohort of AFSCME activists, empowered and radicalized by this experience and the power they saw and felt in the convergence of these two popular movements, would go on to lead many successful public sector organizing drives in the 1970s and 1980s.

The labor movement supported the passage of civil rights legislation, and particular unions such as AFSCME and UAW participated actively in the civil rights movement. But the exclusion of black and Hispanic workers from skilled jobs in construction and other industries continued, as did the segmentation of jobs in the public sector and elsewhere—often with the collusion of unions whose first loyalty was to their existing (mostly white) members. Most labor leaders, in other words, gave their primary loyalty to the status quo; at a moment in history when a powerful movement was transforming society and could well have transformed and reinvigorated labor as well (Isaac et al. 1998).

The story is similar for the women's movement, itself to some extent a product of the civil rights and antiwar movements (led in its early years, in many cases, by women who had been active in those earlier movements). Outside the public sector, most unions had little interest in organizing female occupational categories such as clerical workers and nurses. Again, there were exceptions, as reflected in the public sector, the growing interest of SEIU and other unions in orga-

nizing the healthcare industry, CWA's commitment to organizing telephone operators and new telecommunications occupations, and the growth of AFT and NEA organizing in the public schools. But the larger picture was the same: conservative male labor leaders, threatened by the rising new women's liberation movement (as it was then called), showed little interest in bringing this potentially revitalizing force within the apparently stable house of labor.

For the anti-Vietnam War movement, the problems were political and generational. With a few exceptions (Walter Reuther of the UAW after 1968, for example; Lichtenstein 1995, 420–38), top labor leaders were so deeply anticommunist they could not link up with this truly (and unruly) mass American movement. With its foreign policy funded by the State Department (part of the cold war Red purge deal), the AFL-CIO supported the war in Vietnam well after most Americans had come to realize it was a mistake. Media images of New York City construction workers beating up antiwar demonstrators reflected a broader feeling among labor leaders that the protesters were privileged, un-American college kids, anathema to labor's interests.

While labor leaders resisted, a vast swath of an entire generation was swept up in the antiwar movement—and many of these bright, young activists came to see unions not as allies but as barriers to change. Far from discovering a source of reinvigoration in the swelling activism of American youth, labor leaders lost credibility with much of that energetic, activist-minded, up-and-coming generation.

From this cross-movement hotbed of activism in the 1960s and 1970s, a new and reinforced environmental movement also emerged. Here too the reaction of labor leaders was broadly negative. Far from working with environmental groups to find common interests (to develop, for example, a social-ecological reform strategy for the future of industry on a small planet as German unions have done), labor leaders reacted to demands for environmental preservation in many cases solely as attacks on union jobs. Bumper stickers on the pickup trucks of construction workers chiding "Sierra Club take a hike!" reflected the lack of vision in a politics of reaction. Once again, unions alienated a good part of an activist generation.

Social movements can revitalize institutions, and one way they do this is by sweeping away entrenched officeholders. But such revital-

ization is a political process and can also be blocked by defensive, threatened leaders—in this case aided by the fact that the new social movements were not for the most part targeted at the workplace, employers, or unions, but at government policy. This allowed existing union leadership, from George Meany on down, to cordon off their organizations from the radical currents of change.

The main exception to this predominant pattern for the 1960s and 1970s lay in the public sector. Here, new enabling legislation (national, state, and local) combined with the contagious activism of the era (an activism that mobilized blacks, Hispanics, women, and youth) to produce something of a social movement unionism in many places (Johnston 1994; Isaacs et al. 1998). Here in a more benign environment, with less employer opposition, unions grew rapidly in the public sector throughout the 1970s, contrary to the opposite trend in the private sector. By the 1980s, union membership density in the public sector was more than double that in the private sector. In the public sector, the movements of the 1960s in many cases did revitalize unions and the institutions of industrial relations, showing the potential had this happened on an economy-wide scale.

In the long run, however, the activism of the 1960s may yet save the American labor movement. Many young rank and filers were strongly influenced by the social movements of their formative years and became a constituency inside their unions for change and for greater openness.<sup>3</sup> And many activists in the course of the 1970s did find unions in which they could work and even thrive. John Sweeney, one could argue, leads the AFL-CIO today precisely because he was not threatened by the activists of the 1960s, and in fact began to hire them in the 1970s, knowing that these were people committed to social justice who would work hard for the cause if allowed to do so. Such activists, at Sweeney's SEIU and at other unions such as AFSCME, ACTWU, and CWA, would in the 1980s and 1990s play major roles in the organizing drives that laid the groundwork for a broad "changing to organize" campaign by the mid-1990s.

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<sup>3</sup>See Heberle (1951, 118–127) on the concept of a "political generation," shaped by the experiences of its formative years (ages 20–30) and ready to rely on that learning when it becomes the "ruling generation" (circa ages 40–65).

It wasn't that business union leaders didn't try to reverse decline. By the 1980s, it was no longer possible to pretend that things were fine. An employer offensive against unions had gathered force; starting on a large scale in the 1970s, it received official blessing in President Reagan's firing of the PATCO workers in 1981 and contributed to the rapid decline in private-sector union membership in the 1980s and 1990s. In a context of globalization and economic restructuring, union decline was driven by employer opposition and backed by the state; but because labor in the private sector had missed the social movement boat, unions were more vulnerable to attack than they otherwise would have been. By the 1980s, they had neither strong supportive institutions, as employers and government had whittled away at labor laws and their enforcement and interpretations (Gross 1995), nor the force of widespread collective action.<sup>4</sup> Labor leaders responded to the crisis in the areas they knew best—through concession bargaining and expanded services to members—and they moved beyond such modifications to experiment with labor-management cooperation. In all of these areas, modest gains were made in some cases, but nothing came close to turning the tide. Decline persisted (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986).

Labor refocused its efforts on keeping Democratic Party friends in Congress (the last barrier, perhaps, against union extinction) and getting a Democratic president elected (Dark 1999). In 1978, with a Democratic Congress and president, they had come close to getting some relief in modest labor law reform, only to be thwarted by a Republican filibuster in the Senate. With Democrats forever (it seemed) in control of the House, even with Reagan in power, they had high hopes for a renewed push for labor law reform under the next Democratic presidency. They campaigned hard for Mondale in 1984, for Dukakis in 1988, and for Bill Clinton in 1992.

In the meantime, however, a push to organize the unorganized developed within the labor movement at the grassroots level, which was led in many cases by activists of the 1960s generation. Some unions

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<sup>4</sup>Note the parallel here to an earlier era. Kim Voss (1996) argues that the 19th-century Knights of Labor failed because of employer countermobilization and because the KOL as an organization was unable to develop and implement appropriate new strategies to counter the employer offensive.

began to shift resources toward organizing. For the most part, the unions that grew in the 1980s while others declined were the organizing unions. Within the councils of the AFL-CIO, facing failure in so many areas, the new voice began to be heard. In an effort to consolidate what had been learned and to train new organizers, the AFL-CIO founded an Organizing Institute in 1989 directed by Richard Bensinger (himself a veteran of the 1960s social movements). As graduates of the Institute proved their worth in organizing drives, demand for their services rose and the Institute expanded. A new beachhead for organizing was carved out, and the dialogue and mutual learning grew among the Institute, the organizing unions (such as SEIU, AFSCME, CWA, ACTWU, HERE, UAW), and other unions that wanted to organize (Hurd 1998).

Against this backdrop, when Bill Clinton and a Democratic House and Senate took office in early 1993, traditional labor leaders were elated. They had contributed to the Democratic victory and expected it to pay off (Friedman et al. 1994). Although they had no coherent strategy of their own for labor law reform, many had hopes for the Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations (the Dunlop Commission), appointed by Clinton to study and propose win-win reforms for labor-management relations and workplace regulation (Kochan 1995). The commission heard thousands of hours of testimony and studied long and hard, finally coming up with a consensual but rather watered down package—too watered down for labor but not watered down enough to please employers. In any event, the ink was barely dry on the commission's report when the Gingrich revolution swept into Congress, immediately foreclosing the possibility of any union-friendly legislative reform.

What was missing in 1994 was the same as in 1978: strong, popular pressure in favor of reforms aimed at reducing the barriers to union organizing success. The AFL-CIO and some member unions organized letter-writing campaigns but showed no inclination either to consult the members on this issue or to mobilize vast support, the support that a social movement unionism might have achieved. In any case, after decades of business unionism, it is unlikely that rank-and-file support would have been there to mobilize.

Union organizing activists, meanwhile, carried on with their work. They had looked skeptically at the Dunlop Commission from the start,

and now, bolstered by successes in the field and by the failure of just about every other approach, they began to talk more openly about in-house revolution and a massive shift of resources from servicing to organizing. When Newt knocked the final props out from under the aging “our Democratic friends will take care of us” crowd—the labor equivalent in the political arena to business unionism in the economic arena—John Sweeney in 1995 announced his candidacy for president of the AFL-CIO.

In his winning campaign, Sweeney and his slate partners, Linda Chavez-Thompson and Rich Trumka, rode the crest of a growing internal reform movement. Upon taking office, the new leaders swept house at the Federation, brought in younger activists and staff members (most AFL-CIO departments are now headed by former social movement activists), cleared the red-baiting, movement-debilitating cold warriors out of the International Affairs Department, and announced a massive \$20 million shift of resources into organizing.<sup>5</sup> Since 1995, expanded training programs and hiring incentives for organizers, new union education programs, central labor council reforms and mobilizations, countless organizing drives, and grassroots political campaigns have taken shape across the country. High-profile organizing, strike, and political victories have raised labor’s visibility and strengthened its role as a newly fortified actor in the political economy.<sup>6</sup>

This is a heartening story as far as it goes, and clearly offers the best—and perhaps last—hope for the revival of the American labor movement. Activists and leaders, however, have much more in mind than a simple turnaround in declining union membership. What many

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<sup>5</sup>Thus, veterans of earlier social movements help to promote new social movements (or in this case awaken a slumbering labor movement to its social movement potential), a pattern well known to social movement theorists (McAdam 1988; Voss and Sherman 1998).

<sup>6</sup>Watershed victories, none of which would have been possible in the 1980s, include the union representation election victory in early 1999 for 74,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles, the result of a long but relentless SEIU organizing drive; a major strike victory at UPS in 1997 as the Teamsters campaigned around the broad issue of part-time work with widespread public support; and the fast-track victory in Congress, also in 1997, led by the AFL-CIO in alliance with environmental groups, placing an important obstacle in the way of free-trade agreements lacking labor and environmental protections.

of them seek is nothing less than a widespread, full-fledged social movement unionism, one that can translate at the appropriate time into an even wider social movement coalition—with environmental, religious, human rights, consumer, women’s groups, and others—fueled by two decades of growing inequality. New labor progressives believe conditions are right for such a social movement, and that indeed it will take the power of such a movement to transform the institutions, to reestablish the right to organize, and to overcome the “representation gap” and the general powerlessness so widespread in the economy and society (Sweeney 1996, 154–57; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998). They also believe that in so doing, they will not only reduce America’s extraordinary inequality but will push firms toward the high road, adding important social value at and beyond the workplace, compatible with strong economic performance (Wever 1998).

### **Causal Forces: Social Movements and Institutional Change**

To summarize, social movements have shaped democratic institutions of workplace representation; in the absence of renewed social movement energy, these institutions in the postwar era have stagnated and decayed. The current hope and strategic orientation of many American labor leaders and activists is for the organizing energy of a new social movement unionism to build the broad power necessary for institutional reform and even transformation, to revitalize the labor movement, and to combat economic and social inequality.

In our effort to draw on and synthesize theoretical perspectives from several disciplines, we find insights from industrial relations, political science, and sociology all useful in making sense of the above story, including contemporary attempts at labor movement revival. From industrial relations we draw on the framework known as “strategic choice,” which emphasizes the critical decisions made by key actors such as business, labor, and government (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986). Thus, employer opposition played a major role in driving down union influence and numbers from the 1970s to the 1990s. This was not the only available option for American business and not the

choice that all firms made, yet the institutional framework—weak labor laws, business unionism—made anti-unionism a viable option. Employer opposition was successful in part because the union response was so weak. Mired in bargaining concerns and day-to-day contract enforcement, unions responded to the new employer challenge defensively without well-articulated, proactive union strategies to counter the threat. The choices of employers and unions, in other words, help explain the decline of the labor movement and collective bargaining coverage in the 1970s and 1980s.

From political science (comparative political economy) and industrial relations, we draw on the important recent literature of the “new institutionalists” (such as Hall 1986; March and Olsen 1989; Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992). Building in part on older industrial relations traditions (Perlman 1928; Commons 1934), these contemporary theorists emphasize the importance of institutions in accounting for economic, political, and social outcomes. The central argument is that institutions shape behavior. From this perspective, an institutional framework was consolidated in the 1940s and 1950s in the wake of the social movement upsurge of the 1930s, one that shaped the behavior and decisions of industrial relations actors throughout the postwar period. Collective bargaining, the NLRA and NLRB, industrial unions in mass production industries dominated by large firms all combined to shape the choices and decisions of unions and employers in relation to one another. Unions were lulled into a businesslike relationship with companies, helping to regulate the workplace through contract negotiation and enforcement. Employers accepted such arrangements until it became clear beginning in the 1970s that NLRA interpretation, NLRB enforcement, and business unionism together meant that other options were viable. Firms learned, for example, that they could open new facilities and keep them union-free, challenge union certification, defeat union-organizing drives, and press existing unions for major concessions. In this view, the industrial relations framework encouraged employer opposition to unions, which further weakened both the unions and the framework itself.

A shortcoming of the institutional literature is that it doesn't tell us how institutions come to be or how they change. Here we need to



study social movements and draw on insights from sociology and social history (Johnston 1994; Kelly 1998; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996; Tarrow 1994) because social movements are one important source of institutional change: social movements shape institutions. While social movement theorists primarily debate the origins and characteristics of social movements, our concern is also with the effects. The labor upsurge of the 1930s played a major role in shaping the institutions of industrial relations that would in turn shape labor-management relations throughout the postwar period. When labor to a large extent missed the social movement wave of the 1960s, unions lost the opportunity for an organizational revitalization that could have provided stronger mobilization against mounting employer opposition. By the 1990s, institutional atrophy and chronic union decline led a new generation of trade unionists to push for renewed social movement unionism, aimed at mobilizing the rank and file to combat employer opposition and fight for institutional reform. The renewed movement was especially aimed at strengthening the right to organize.

To sum up the current situation using all three theoretical perspectives, unions are now shifting their strategic orientation and promoting a new social movement unionism. This is aimed at organizing the unorganized and taking political action to strengthen union influence. The ultimate objective is to reform labor laws with new protections for workers and unions and to reform the institutions of industrial relations.

Social movement unionism is not the same thing as a social movement, to be sure. The former is a type of unionism that mobilizes the rank and file for specific actions and gains; the latter is a broad, often uncontrollable social phenomenon that comes along at particular periods of history. While social movement unionism can make specific gains in organizing or politics, a widespread social movement is a force that can reform or transform institutions. Labor activists in the United States promote social movement unionism in the absence of a broader social movement—but with the explicit goal of instigating that wider movement to provide the power necessary for institutional change.

## Assessing the Prospects

We have laid out an optimistic scenario, arguing that a return to social movement unionism has the potential of saving and revitalizing the American labor movement. But what are the realistic prospects? Can the change in attitude and perspective at the AFL-CIO serve as a coalescing force? Can institutional inertia and conservative tendencies be overcome? Can the internal culture of unions adapt to a more freewheeling participatory style that welcomes activists and militants? Can women, people of color, and immigrant workers find a home in unions and achieve more prominent leadership roles? The transformation of unions from insurance agencies to centers of working-class activism has proven complicated. There are notable examples of unions that have shaken off institutional rigidity and redefined themselves, but at least as common are those that have clung to traditions while changing only at the margins.

A brief review of developments over the past few years is sobering. The level of activity has certainly been raised in the effort to promote organizing at the AFL-CIO and in many national unions. In one promising sign, union membership grew by 265,000 in 1999, the largest increase in twenty years. Nonetheless, union density stayed at 13.9 percent overall and dropped to 9.5 percent in the private sector (Hirsch and Macpherson, 2000, 11–12), the lowest level since before the Great Depression. Although much has been made of the increase, we should point out that since 1980 this is the fifth time that membership has increased and the third time that density has failed to decline. It seems that the increase in organizing ability has not yet been sufficient to overcome the tremendous hurdles of employer opposition, an unfriendly labor law, and deunionization through downsizing, outsourcing, and privatization.

Along with efforts at organizing, there have been signs of success on the political front. Efforts by the Sweeney administration to centralize control of political strategy have been supported broadly. The most notable change has been a dramatic increase in funding for the AFL-CIO political operation. In 1996 affiliated unions agreed to a special assessment (above normal dues) totaling \$35 million to finance expanded electoral activities. The funding was renewed in comparable amounts for the 1998 and 2000 election cycles.

Major accomplishments of the heightened political involvement, however, have been largely defensive: defeat of “paycheck protection,” defeat of “fast track,” forestalling Republican attacks on unions (such as the Team Act). The major positive accomplishments have been on legislation only indirectly beneficial to unions, such as increases in the minimum wage. Nonetheless, the effort to build a lasting political presence continued with grassroots operations in one hundred districts in the year 2000. In an effort to boost political influence, the 1999 AFL-CIO convention took the unusual step of endorsing Al Gore for president prior to the primary season. This type of top-down political effort is quite distinct from rebuilding labor’s political strength at the grassroots. Whether the centralized approach represents a change in philosophy or a bow to pragmatism is perhaps unimportant. What is more significant is the need for labor to crack through the seemingly impenetrable wall of resistance to any effort to create a union-friendly legal environment. In the long term, labor’s ability to sustain its effort to build grassroots political operations may have more impact on laws and institutions than candidate endorsements. While the political strategy shows promise, its movement-building potential may be thwarted if grassroots components are delegated to the back burner.

In spite of mixed results, the very fact that unions are more active in organizing and politics, including new overtures to mobilize members in support of these efforts, offers an encouraging sign of movement-building potential. In late 1999 proponents of social movement unionism received a major boost in the “battle in Seattle.” In a truly impressive and high-profile campaign, American unions brought tens of thousands of demonstrators to Seattle for the World Trade Organization meetings held the week of November 29 to December 3. Remarkable was the wide range of participants active and present in this coalition effort, including environmental, student, consumer, human rights, and religious organizations, along with hundreds of trade unionists from other countries.

The Seattle events gathered so much attention precisely because this was the first large-scale popular protest on American soil focused on the issue of democracy in the global economy. The demonstration demanded a social dimension to expanding international trade and asked, “What kind of global society is being created?” A major new front has

opened in struggles for democratic and human rights, one that includes international labor solidarity as a central feature, and one that may be with us for years to come. American unions have arrived on this post-cold war international stage, showing a capacity to mobilize members and to build broad, influential coalitions addressing the very nature of the new global economy. Seattle may well turn out to be a key step forward for the revitalization of the American labor movement.

In the absence of convincing evidence that labor has, as a broad force, reinvented itself as a social movement, we can conclude only that the prospects are uncertain: much activity, many new initiatives, and mixed results. Examples of renewed activism are plentiful and exciting, yet in the absence of a broader social movement they are often limited in effect. The future depends on the decisions of leaders, the resolve of members, and the ultimate strategic direction adopted by unions. The barriers to internal reform, rank-and-file mobilization, broad coalition building, and international solidarity are high. As learning processes and activist experiences develop, however, there is reason for hope for the future of the American labor movement, far more reason than we have known in many years.