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Introduction

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Introduction

The theme of the Spring 2001 United Association for Labor Education Conference in Boston was “Building Union Power in A Changing Economy.” All of the articles in this special issue of the Labor Studies Journal derive from papers presented at that conference and all grapple with the broad theme of how unions can build power in a context of sweeping economic change. Together they highlight some of the most critical changes facing workers and their unions: fragmentation between workers and work settings; globalization and the growing influence of multinational corporations; immigration and growing worker diversity; and privatization of government services. Some papers focus largely on organizing, others concentrate on contract negotiation or internal union practices. Yet, despite this variety, almost all of the papers offer a similar lesson: While economic change is typically national or global in scope, the source of union power is often local. It emanates from an active membership and must frequently reach out in coalition with other groups to be effective.

The first article, by Delp and Quan, is an excellent case in point. Their analysis of the campaign to organize home healthcare workers in California shows how a union struggled under seemingly impossible odds to produce the single biggest organizing win in the U.S. since the United Auto Workers’ victory at the Ford River Rouge Plant in 1941. Grassroots organizing and coalition building with consumers and patient rights advocates eventually led to a rationalization of the labor market through changes in public policy that created a defined employer and framework for improvements in both client services and working conditions.

The second article, by Worthen, Edwards, and Stokes, offers a similar lesson in social movement unionism. Examining the impact of welfare reform on social service workers and their clients, the authors discuss how a local union was able to link terms and conditions of employment with the quality of client services in ways that placed workers in coalition

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with the people they served. The authors go on to describe how the coalitions and institutions that developed out of this process were able to place public pressure on management to change operating procedures and save workers' jobs.

The third article, by Chang and Thompkins, details a move toward prison privatization and the use of prison labor to produce goods for sale in the open market. Seeing a direct threat to unionized protective service employees and an indirect threat to other unionized workers through unfair competition by low wage prison labor, they argue that coalition building has helped the labor movement slow expansion of prison privatization and prison industry. They further argue that long-term success will require adoption of a "decarceration" philosophy that helps take the profit out of private prisons by decriminalizing certain nonviolent behaviors and by supporting various social programs designed to eliminate poverty. Yet, Chang and Thompkins seem skeptical as to whether there is sufficient consensus within the labor movement to support such a strategy.

The fourth article, by Rob Hickey, shifts the focus to the private sector and explores the sources of union power in a sample of five first contract campaigns waged at different multinational corporations. He identifies four factors affecting campaign success: (1) organizational structure that either facilitates or dampens member activism; (2) external leverage or the lack of it, including high union density in the industry and the ability to generate community and government support; (3) employer resistance as evidenced by both union substitution and suppression strategies; and (4) the extent to which the union seeks recourse and gains bargaining leverage through the National Labor Relations Board.

He concludes that member activism alone is insufficient for securing a first contract and that external leverage, especially the union's strategic position in the industry is an important key to success. He further questions whether coalition building with community groups can serve as an effective substitute for high union density in the industry or firm. This observation raises the possibility that the social movement unionism strategy to politicize terms and conditions of employment through alliances with progressive community elements may be less effective in the private than public sector.

The fifth article, by Taylor and Mathers, examines the prospects for social partnership and social movement unionism in the context of European integration. Their analysis comes down decidedly on the side of social movement unionism and argues that union renewal in Europe re-

quires linking workplace mobilization and organization with other societal elements that are opposed to unbridled globalization and growing corporate power. They argue that there must be a strong political element to labor's strategy for renewal. They also note that lessons from Europe can inform debates in the U.S. concerning the relative efficacy of the service versus organizing model of trade unionism.

The final article, by Nissen, details the influx of immigrants into the South Florida labor market and describes how years of neglect and outright exclusion of the immigrant community by the Carpenters' Union eroded union power and market share. Crisis and leadership change brought efforts to reach out to the immigrant community. Customized labor education played an important role in changing the union's culture, internal practices, and approach to immigrant labor. This article not only demonstrates the important role labor education can play in supporting organizational change initiatives in unions; it underscores the need for unions to change to meet the changing needs of an ever changing workforce.

The dual themes of a changing economy and union power interact throughout the articles in this issue. No single response or pattern emerges for all sectors and contexts, because economic change varies by sectoral, national, or geographic context. Indeed, the articles in this issue underscore the complexity facing the U.S. and other labor movements in the modern era: No "one size fits all" strategy will work under all circumstances. Careful analysis, strategic thinking, and effective organizational capacity to move decisively are needed. Nevertheless, certain broad generalizations are possible. One of them seems to be that member activism, frequently in coalition with other groups, is a key source of union power that can influence the course of change in ways that produce more just outcomes for workers. Another is that clarity of vision and proactive organizational leadership is crucial to union empowerment, whatever the context. Developing union power in a fragmented and usually hostile environment requires these features more than has ever been the case in the past.

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