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Cultures of Creativity: Politics, Leadership and Organizational Change in the U.S.
Labor Movement

By

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Abstract

Cultures of Creativity: Politics, Leadership and Organizational Change in the U.S. Labor Movement

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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This dissertation uses case studies of four service-industry labor unions to explore the causes of union revitalization in the United States labor movement. While the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) were able to undergo processes of internal transformation by the late 1990s, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) were not.

This project illustrates how successfully revitalized unions were able to foster "cultures of creativity," which inspired new organizing strategies and new understandings about what a union should be. Two factors were particularly important to the generation of these cultures. First, cohorts of social movement outsiders brought new ideas to these unions. Second, revitalized unions had organizational structures that were decentralized enough for experimentation, but centralized enough for coordination, meaning that outsiders had the space to experiment and unions had the infrastructure to learn from, and scale up, those experiments that were successful.

Chapter One: Explaining Change in the American Labor Movement

In the mid-1990s, labor unions in the United States looked as if they might come back to life. Janitors in Los Angeles, Denver and Washington DC made national news as they clamored into downtown luxury office buildings, blocked traffic on major thoroughfares and won union contracts that brought their wages up to the highest in the nation. Around the same time, casino workers at a major hotel on the Las Vegas strip walked off the job in protest of wage reductions and cuts in health and pension benefits, beginning a six-year strike that was the longest in U.S. history. Not long afterwards, 74,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles County were brought under a union contract in what was labor's single largest success since the massive organizing campaigns in industrial workplaces in the 1930's.

Most union successes in the past decade have been among those workers most people would not have associated with unions. Instead of victories among autoworkers or steelworkers, the most noteworthy campaigns have been undertaken by service-sector unions with large numbers of immigrants, people of color and women – all workers unions at one time labeled “unorganizable.” As Jo-Ann Mort aptly put it in the title to her 1998 book, what we were seeing was “Not Your Father's Labor Movement.”

These developments have caught the attention of activists and academics, many of whom have spoken of a “new” or “revitalized” labor movement (For example, Milkman 2006; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Nissen 2003; Fletcher and Hurd 2001; Voss and Sherman 2000). This attention to revitalization is partly right: more unions have abandoned a model that focused on resolving individual worker grievances and maintaining member services for a model that emphasizes strategic and tactical creativity, worker mobilization, community coalitions and the organization of workers long considered outside the exclusionary bounds of the post-war labor movement. *How* unions organize has also changed, as more unions experiment with a broad range of confrontational tactics reminiscent of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. On the political front, unions have mobilized larger numbers of members and supporters in electoral campaigns, in some regions defeating well-financed anti-union candidates and ballot measures. Compared with even a decade ago, the labor movement has dramatically expanded its scope of interest and mobilizing capacities.

Yet this focus on the “new” glosses over that which remains the same. It has been over a decade since janitors captured the imagination of people hoping for a sea change in a movement that had long ago lost its vitality. From today's vantage point it is safe to say that isolated victories failed to produce a domino effect among U.S. unions. Some unions have undergone major internal reorganization and have adopted new practices, but most continue to do what they have done for decades. This does not make headlines: most of the growth and strategic innovation is happening in only a small handful of unions. In 2000, ten of the AFL-CIO's 66 affiliate unions brought in eighty percent of labor's new members, while three of them brought in a full fifty percent, debunking the

illusion of widespread union revitalization (Hurd, Milkman, and Turner 2003).¹ Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, in their research on union elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, show that despite the fact that unions are more successful when they use innovative and diverse tactics—and this is true even in mobile, global industries—most unions continue to rely on outdated and largely unsuccessful practices (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004).² Earlier research has thus shown that American unions are either consistently failing to use strategies that might lead to growth, or else are failing despite this. Given both the emergent creativity and enduring stagnation in American unions, we can say that a “new,” more dynamic model of unionism is at best uneven and underdeveloped.

My dissertation explores this heterogeneity in the contemporary American labor movement. Why have changes occurred in some unions but not in others? What leads certain unions aggressively to pursue internal organizational change and innovative practices while others remain committed to an older model of unionism? And among the unions that have changed, *how* have they managed to do this? Specifically, how are agendas for change developed and legitimized within organizations with longstanding, bureaucratic structures? Finally, among “transformed” unions, what does change look like on the ground, and what are the tensions embedded within different models for change?

In order to answer these questions, I compare four national unions: The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE)³, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). For obvious reasons, I privilege SEIU and HERE, given their successful transformations. AFSCME and UFCW, however, provide important foils for my two cases of transformation.

These cases will make sense to scholars familiar with American Unions. My two positive cases, The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and The Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union (HERE), were responsible for all the examples I gave of innovative campaigns at the beginning of this chapter. More than any other union today, SEIU is the poster child of the new labor movement. Although their massive reorganization is not without its problems and critics, there is no denying that this organization has embarked on an internal change project unparalleled among

¹ The three were the SEIU, UFCW and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). For reasons I go into at greater length later on, however, membership statistics alone are not a sufficient measure for union revitalization.

² Bronfenbrenner (1998) and then Bronfenbrenner and Hickey (2004) study union elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board. They find that unions win more elections when they run what are referred to in labor circles as “comprehensive campaigns,” which are campaigns that use a wide range of tactics to put pressure on multiple areas where employers are vulnerable. They also find that unions win more elections when they actively involve rank-and-file workers.

³ For the most part, my research is on the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union prior to its 2004 merger with the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). The newly merged union goes by the acronym “UNITEHERE!” Given my focus on the union pre-merger, however, as well as the current controversies between the two branches of UNITEHERE! that threaten the merger’s survival, I have chosen to call the union HERE throughout the dissertation.

contemporary unions. HERE is much smaller and less visible than SEIU but they have also made major strides in remaking their organization and becoming more effective vis-à-vis employers. While there is diversity within each of these national unions by local, region and industry, SEIU and HERE have undergone the most significant internal changes in the labor movement today. These internal changes have enabled them to practice a form of unionism unique in the labor movement.

More than anything else, these unions are committed to *strategic organizing*. This means that leaders at the highest level of the organization create effective, relevant and innovative strategies for a variety of contexts. Rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach, leaders recognize that strategy must be tailored to fit specific regions and occupational contexts, and they encourage a spirit of experimentation and creativity. SEIU and HERE have made the internal changes necessary to carry out this new form of unionism on a national level and, increasingly, on the local level. They have also centralized authority at the level of the international, exerting more control over local unions and regions in attempts to consolidate power in the hands of reformers and coordinate bargaining across industry and employer. Although it may be imprecise to refer to SEIU and HERE as practicing what Steve Lopez and others have optimistically termed “social movement unionism,” the term is useful in capturing the effort behind *internal* changes that reformers in these two unions embraced, as it took sustained and organized effort to reorient these unions.⁴ Moreover, at times the strategies of both unions *have* resembled social movements to the extent that they have trained workers to become leaders and connected the labor struggle to broader social and political issues.

While AFSCME and the UFCW have adopted some of the practices of SEIU and HERE, neither have pursued aggressive internal reform projects, nor have they significantly changed how their organizations function on a daily basis. While SEIU and HERE have evolved into organizations that look dramatically different than they did ten or fifteen years ago, AFSCME and the UFCW have remained more internally consistent in their goals and strategies. Even noteworthy changes within the UFCW and AFSCME remain limited in comparison. Piecemeal attempts to change an established organization are extremely difficult without major overhauls and steady cultural change.

Yet while AFSCME and the UFCW are similar in their relative stagnation, they are in many ways have *opposite* organizational structures. The UFCW is a highly centralized union, meaning that any internal challenge to the status quo was quickly subdued by the international office. AFSCME, on the other hand, is an extremely decentralized union, in which challengers to the status quo were isolated from one another and unable to organize for the union’s transformation.

These differences between organizations are puzzling, particularly given that these unions represent, in some cases, the same types of workers. Why such difference? The short answer is that SEIU and HERE had the *people* with the vision, skills and political capital to change their organization and the *organizational structures* that were porous to their change efforts. Two factors thus worked in combination to contribute to organizational change in SEIU and HERE: 1) a structure of authority that allowed for experimentation but was vulnerable to centralization—what I call a “porous” organization; and 2) cohorts of outsiders who, as a group, formulated effective strategies

⁴ See for example Steve Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement*, University of California Press, 2004.

that led to key successes and built the political legitimacy needed for making changes in their organization. These factors helped facilitate a culture of creativity within some unions that encouraged and rewarded the strategic innovation necessary for union transformation.

But the factors that made transformation possible are analytically distinct from the processes by which change occurred—a process of *strategic centralization*. Each organization's porous structure opened up the space for experimentation and innovation among outsiders, while a process of *centralization* around best practices allowed the most successful innovations to percolate across the organization. In the context of my four cases, we see organizational change when the union was initially decentralized enough to allow innovation, but later moved to centralize authority in order to diffuse innovations and reforms throughout the organization.

In the next section I flesh out how the structures of and people within SEIU and HERE were able to create the cultures of creativity that led to union transformation.

Structure, Agency, and Culture

Union authority structure refers to how decision-making power is distributed in the organization, primarily between the national body and numerous local ones but sometimes also including an intermediate level. Authority structure also encompasses how power is organized within each of these levels. Strauss (1993) refers to these two vertical and horizontal levels of power as “centralization” and “dispersion.” Some unions concentrate power at the national level, while in other unions locals are imbued with significant power that the national union lacks. When a union has an intermediate level of authority this usually manifests itself in a regional structure that works under the national union and coordinates activity among locals.

The collective bargaining context of different unions shapes what kind of structure a union first chooses—an initial structure that typically has strong inertial power (Stinchcombe 1968). Typically, the more local and decentralized the employer, the more local the contracts and the greater the chance power in the union will be concentrated at the local level. In industries that bargain, or used to bargain, regional or national union contracts, power is usually concentrated in a way giving the national union more power—for example, the power to force a local union to accept or reject a contract with an employer. Although structures can evolve over time in response to environmental and internal organizational change—for example, a union with historically decentralized power can later centralize, as is the case with SEIU—a union's initial structure affects how much actors can try new things within their organizations. Even the most entrepreneurial actors will fail in structures that do not allow them room to experiment.

My four cases demonstrate successful reform projects emerged out of porous, decentralized organizations. This is somewhat paradoxical, since there are good arguments for why a union might desire strong, centralized authority. Yet HERE and SEIU each were formed in a craft tradition that privileged local autonomy. Actors in these decentralized unions had the room—through a combination of design and neglect—to experiment free from the kind of micromanaging that hinders innovation. In each case, the actors working to change their unions—the people I call reformers—were paid staff organizers whose job it was to bring new workers into the union. These organizers experimented with innovative strategies and tactics, which helped them figure out what

worked in their particular contexts. Not only did their organizing successes build their legitimacy among other union leaders, but these successes also brought new workers into the union who were naturally sympathetic to the reformers themselves.

The analysis is complicated, however, by the fact that while decentralization allows for innovation it cannot *produce* it. People make change, and in the absence of certain kinds of people – institutional entrepreneurs – decentralization leads only to powerlessness. The case of AFSME illustrates this. In AFSCME, a larger-than-life president exerted considerable national influence even in an organization that placed a high premium on local autonomy. Jerry Wurf, president of the union from 1961-1981, shut out from the union the type reformers who were in HERE and SEIU. The union was decentralized, with a national office that had limited formal authority. However, certain locals and “councils” (AFSCME’s intermediate body) – including the council that produced Wurf, as well as the locals and councils of his allies – were imbued with a power that effectively shut down the possibility of the kinds of innovations that were happening in HERE and SEIU.

What, then, is the structure most favorable to reform? SEIU, HERE and AFSCME were all, to varying degrees, decentralized organizations in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, while the UFCW, a much younger national union, was highly centralized. Ultimately, SEIU and HERE increasingly centralized power by giving the national president and the national executive board increased power to make decisions for both the national and local union, by shoring up intermediate levels of authority and through the winning of higher per capita dues – the money locals pay to their national union per union member.

But decentralization does not itself lead to success. Rather, decentralization was merely the condition under which reformers were allowed the autonomy necessary to develop new ideas without threatening the power bases of the old guard. This leads to the second explanation for the differences between my two sets of cases: the presence of outsiders with new skills sets and commitments. These outsiders were not encumbered by notions of what was “appropriate” union work (Voss and Sherman 2001), and had come into the union motivated less by ties to a particular union than by social reform ideals that made them eager to experiment with strategies and tactics from other spheres. These leaders were distinct from the staff members at many unions who had come to the union by working in a job that the union represented.

Finally, as a result of these structural and individual factors, there arose in SEIU and HERE what I call “cultures of creativity.” A culture of creativity is an organizational culture that values and rewards new and imaginative ideas for solving organizational dilemmas. It might be understood as an interaction-effect between a porous organization and the presence of reformers—in other words, while made possible by these other factors, it cannot be reduced to them. Cultures of creativity encourage innovation and often rely on the experiences of people with relevant experience from outside the union. Cultures of creativity emerged at the level of the local union, most strongly in these locals’ organizing departments.

Before the resurgence of organizing in unions, the job of organizer was notoriously marginalized. Organizing was an entry-level position, a supposedly unskilled job held by newcomers or relatives of union officials in need of work. Some unions isolated their organizers into a separate department, departments whose very marginalization, ironically, led to a unique degree of autonomy and solidarity. Cultures of

creativity emerged as a result of both the decentralization that gave local unions plenty of room to act independently of the national body, and through the historical devaluing of organizing that led—paradoxically—to even more autonomy among the organizers. Cultures of creativity also emerged among organizers who, for various reasons including their own social movement- backgrounds, did not feel tied to the old ways of doing things.

Some labor unions were able to transform themselves because they had structures susceptible to change and the people who could push for reform. But if these transformations were unprecedented within the modern labor movement, surely *some* organizations have experienced such transformations. Thus, in the following section, I ask how the existing literature can help us understand heterogeneity in the American labor movement? I review two opposing literatures for hints about how to think about this variation: the organizations literature, which helps us think about stability more thoroughly than it helps us think about change, and so can help us understand the relative stagnation of the UFCW and AFSCME; and the social movements literature, which in turn focuses more on change than stability, and so can help us make sense of SEIU and HERE. Finally, I review the small but important literature on the question of union revitalization itself.

Organizational Theory Meets the Labor Movement: Understanding Stability

Two sides of the same question animate my dissertation: First, why and how do some U.S. unions change? And second, why do the majority of unions remain stable even while other unions are undergoing successful change? Organizational theory can help us begin to make sense of the different paths taken by these different unions, and is especially helpful in understanding those unions that have not changed.

Starting in the late 1970s, U.S. unions began to face industrial and economic circumstances different than they had faced in the decades in which they first formed. Structures and practices that had been successful in the 1940's made little sense in this new context. Yet very few unions changed what they were doing, begging questions with which organizational scholars have long grappled: How are organizations capable of responding to changes in their environments? And if they are capable of adapting, how do they manage this?

Much debate in the organizations' literature focuses on the first question. Population ecology theory (Hannan and Freeman 1977), for example, reasons that organizations themselves cannot change but rather are selected for survival or extinction out of a larger population of organizations based on how well suited they are to their environments, much like evolution functions in the natural world. Populations of organizations, not individual organizations, are the units of analyses. Change occurs because new organizations emerge that are better suited to their environments, while those that are less suited die out. From this perspective, organizations are impervious to change. Yet ironically if they are able to change, their malleability in the face of changing circumstances makes them inherently unstable (Hannan and Freeman 1984). This perspective provides a simple explanation for why most unions have not adapted: they simply cannot. This perspective minimizes strategic activity within organizations, treating it as random. Organizations may attribute their success to strategy the same way

that someone doing a rain dance before a downpour might give him or herself credit for the rain when the real cause for success lies with the environment.

On the other side of the theoretical spectrum, scholars argue that organizations change because people within the organization (usually managers at the top of the authority hierarchy) are capable of responding to their environments and “choosing” forms or practices that best “adapt” their organization to changing environments (March and Cyert 1963; March and Simon 1958). While population ecology makes actors irrelevant to the question of survival, this literature on strategic adaptation views organizations as susceptible to the efforts of individuals within them. Leaders make strategic choices. Yet the organizations literature has little to say about *how* leaders make the right decisions.

An extension of the strategic adaptation perspective is the resource dependence model (Pfeffer and Salancik 1988). In this model, organizations are most concerned with reducing the uncertainty in their environments. Those actors in positions on which the most uncertainty hinges are able to have the most influence within the organization. For example, Pfeffer (1981) found that organizations function not based on actors’ “correct” interpretation of their environments, but rather on the interpretation of their environments made by those actors in these particular positions within their organizations.

Cyert and March brought formal political conflict into organizational theory with their 1963 book *The Behavioral Theory of the Firm*. In their account, all organizations are made up of coalitions, and coalitions by definition pursue different goals. The dominant coalition ultimately sets the goal or strategy of an organization. In fact, any organizational outcome is the result of coalition activity. Cyert and March’s conception of power is ultimately a pluralistic one; multiple coalitions function as multiple centers of power, and politics occur in the ensuing bargaining between these different groups. Although the dominant coalition sets the overall strategy of the organization, it ultimately succeeds through a decentralized structure that allows other groups in the organization some degree of power and decision-making.

Resource-dependence theory emphasizes the role of internal politics. With elected leadership at many levels of authority within a labor union, they are inherently political organizations. Change within unions results from political contest. Conceptualizing organizations as sites of agency or “purposeful action” is also important.

Nonetheless, even in literature that grants bounded rationality to actors within organizations, the literature assumes that organizations will continue to reproduce past practice until forced to adapt to changing environments under extreme circumstances (For case studies in varying contexts, see Barnett and Coleman 2005; Carpenter 2004; Zegart 2005; Katz 2001; Salka 2004; Wills and Peterson 1992). In this model, external change triggers organizational actors to make strategic changes in order to hold onto something necessary for organizational survival, for example outside resources, legitimacy, or autonomy.

New institutional theory offers yet another perspective on the relationship between the organization and its environment, arguing that the very “environment” to which organizations adapt or are selected is itself made up of other organizations. Not only should organizations be analyzed in relation to the environment but also as part of their environments, and to some extent capable of influencing that environment. Furthermore, organizations are conceptualized not simply as production units but as

“social and cultural systems” onto themselves (Scott 2001). This means that for new institutionalists, organizations generate and operate either through norms, myths ceremonies and other cultural-cognitive constructs.

If organizations themselves contribute to *creating* their environments, and if legitimacy [*is this the first mention of legitimacy?*] is as important to survival as any kind of “efficiency of fit,” then we might understand organizations to be concerned primarily with creating stable worlds (Fligstein 1996). The central tenet of new institutionalism, particularly in its sociological form, is that organizations and institutions are quite stable and unchanging (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). This is consistent with sociology’s premise that institutions shape individuals within them through complex social processes that reproduce dominant ways of thinking and acting. After all, as Richard Scott (2001) asks, “If the nature of actors and their modes of acting are constituted and constrained by institutions, how can these actors change the very institutions in which they are embedded?” (p.181) New institutionalists explain how it is that organizations are so resistant to change and come to resemble one another. They highlight the way norms, rules and taken-for-granted scripts limit the ability to envision alternatives.

Given this emphasis on social reproduction, new institutionalists were unconcerned initially with accounting for change. Over time and faced with plenty empirical examples of change, new institutionalists have become more interested in the issue, though their studies remain situated within a theoretical framework that sees change as the exception rather than the rule. New institutionalism helps conceptualize the obstacles to change but provides limited tools for understanding the *internal* dynamics of individual organizations—in part because if organizations reproduce themselves through cognitive understandings, power within the organization becomes irrelevant.

Of course, organizations can tend toward stability but show vulnerability to the well-organized change efforts of the political actors within them. The key is figuring out the conditions under which stable organizations become susceptible to change, and the types of internal organizational conditions that are likely to favor movement over stability. Martin De Holan and Phillips (2002) argue for a form of institutional analysis that draws on insights from both old and new institutionalism. De Holan and Phillips maintain that how an individual organization responds to environmental pressures depends on the internal workings of the organization. Faced with similar circumstances, it would be possible that similar organizations – more specifically, the people within these organizations – could respond very differently. They argue that “institutional pressures” can work to stabilize or to transform, depending on the context:

This new form of institutionalism combines ideas of legitimation and isomorphism, and their limitations on behavior, with ideas of agency and institutional entrepreneurship that recognize the institutional processes as a legitimate area for purposeful action. The result is a more nuanced theory that argues that these are not opposing perspectives at all but rather describe different aspects of the same phenomenon that appear more or less clearly in particular cases depending on the nature of the processes at work. Sometimes institutional forces stabilize, sometimes they create strong pressures for change; sometimes institutional entrepreneurs act to create change, sometimes they act to buttress

existing arrangements. The challenge, then, is understanding when the dynamics of institutional processes will result in which sort of pressure. (70)

Ultimately, analyses of organizations can benefit from the insights of both institutional traditions – a point more and more scholars have made in recent years.

What the new institutional emphasis on “stable worlds” misses, however, are instances in which actors proactively change their organizations even in relatively stable environments. The very definition of strategic actors might be one who can anticipate the need for organizational transformations *well before* their organizations are faced with imminent demise and who can rally decision-makers within the organization if not to embrace change then at least not to fight it.

In the context of the organizations I examine, there was nothing unique or threatening about the years in which the first rumblings of change occurred. Labor unions were in crisis, for sure, but not significantly more so than they had been decade or so earlier or would be a decade later. Insulated to some extent from the market pressures that were transforming the surrounding industry, unions may have begun to lose members but did not see these losses as representing an existential threat. What changed was not the environment of the organization but the legitimacy and political will of an emerging set of reform-minded leaders who had enough clout to start taking on the entrenched culture of their stagnating organizations. What changed was internal, not external, to the organization.

Seeing organizations as either completely at the whim of their environments or as infinitely malleable from actors within cannot adequately account for variation in the capacity of organizations to change. Enough empirical work has been done to show that organizations can change. Yet if individuals can adapt their organizations to changing environments, why is change not the norm rather than the exception? We know little about why change happens in one organization and not another, particularly among organizations within the same environment. If we assume that organizations have the capacity to change given the right circumstances, then the question becomes under what conditions is change more or less likely to occur? What kind of variation, external or internal to an organization, should we look toward in order to explain change labor unions?

Any explanation must be able to answer two questions. One, if organizations reproduce themselves by creating people who do things similar to their predecessors, where does organizational change come from? And two, how do people with new ideas get traction in organizations that do not reward the type of innovative action that may create uncertainty rather than reduce it?

One way new ideas are introduced into organizations is through people who straddle multiple social contexts or who move from one arena to another. Research in this tradition stresses the centrality of actors and their competencies to the process of organizational change. Individuals “transpose” organizational or movement models from one institutional arena to another (Sewell 1992; Clemens 1993), drawing on a range of diverse experiences (Ganz 2000) or tactical repertoires (Voss and Sherman 2000). “Structural holes” (Burt 1992, 2004; Yang 2004) or areas of “confluence and overlap” (Scott 2001) between groups or organizations are particularly fruitful for developing new organizational forms.

I conceive of actors in these contexts not as rational actors who make ordered choices but as institutional actors who transform systems of shared meanings, collective identities and organizational goals. In this regard, Fligstein's (1997) notion of "social skill" is useful. Social skill explains how adept actors "skillfully balance competing constituencies to affect institutional arrangements" (Fligstein 1997). Rather than an actor-centered approach that sees individuals as carrying out their goals as individuals unaffected by organizational power arrangements, social skill by definition implies that efforts to induce change in organizations are, like every other aspect of organizational life, a social endeavor: "The idea of social skill is that actors have to motivate others to cooperate. The ability to engage others in collective action is a social skill that proves pivotal to the construction and reproduction of social orders" (Fligstein 1997, p. 3). Social skill includes, among other things, creating collective identities that resonate with people within an organization, balancing multiple, sometimes competing constituencies, and setting organizational agendas. The concept of social skill helps makes sense of transformations that are gradual and negotiated, where new leaders aim to incorporate (or at least appease) the old guard and their constituencies while at the same time building a new order.

Leadership in any context requires interpreting the world for a constituency. This interpretive work is particularly important in contexts of organizational transformation, where change agents must provide not only coherent rationales for new ways of doing things but also new cognitive frameworks allowing people to identify problems and craft solutions. The notion of "sensemaking" is a way to think about this process. Arising out of theories of cognitive psychology and social constructionism, sensemaking implies that people approach the world, and the world of choices, not through an evaluation of options but through on-going interpretations that are roadmaps for further action (Lant 2002; Laroche 1995; Weick 1993). Furthermore, sense-making happens on a collective rather than an individual level and bridges the organization to its environment. Organizations are affected by their environments but not in a way that leaves them completely at the whims of these environments. People within organizations interpret external changes in particular ways, and their interpretations will favor one type of action over another.

But given the presence of institutional entrepreneurs in some labor unions, why have new practices and understandings not diffused across the field of labor unions as a whole? Central to new institutionalism is the concept of isomorphism. Because organizations "extensively monitor one another" (Fligstein 1991: 316) they will discover and then mimic the organizational practices and forms that they have seen as leading to market success. Organizations are therefore seen as under isomorphic pressure to adopt new practices that other organizations have previously adopted. Over time, so the theory goes, all organizations in a particular field will come to resemble one another.

When applied to U.S. labor unions, the concept of isomorphism makes little sense. For one, it assumes a market environment where organizations face economic pressure to adopt the practices of their competitors or risk going out of business. With a steady dues paying structure, unions can (and do) survive for decades –albeit not very robustly – with no competition from other organizations. Another way of saying this is that unions usually have a monopoly on the workers they represent in a given workplace.

Second, unions in the U.S. are stunningly isolated from one another, and not only because they don't compete with each other for members (or, not usually). Unlike unions

in other OCED countries, American unions are not institutionalized under a formal structure on a national level. They are only nominally part of a national federation, and this national federation – the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations – has no substantive power over its affiliates. In fact, the federation does not even have the power to retain its affiliates, as the 2004 division of the AFL-CIO demonstrates. Furthermore, although most local unions in the U.S. are part of a national union, locals often hold more power than the national organization. Not bound to each other through a political party, and only rarely in meaningful coalition, many local unions operate as tiny fiefdoms.

Social Movement Theory

Where organizational studies focus largely on the reproduction of social orders, with change being the anomaly, social movement theory focuses on change. If organizational theory as a whole has focused less on the role of power and politics and more on rationality and formal authority, social movement theory *by definition* looks at power in social life and examines how power and politics work—both within an organization and in the relationship between an organization and its environment (Davis et. al 2005, p. 7).

Power is present in organizational theory, but the focus is power as organizational reproduction or organizational outcomes rather than power in the form of societal transformation, as is the concern of social movement scholars. To use the distinction Gerald Davis and his colleagues develop, organizational studies look at “prescribed politics,” while social movement theory favors “transgressive contention” (Davis et. al 2005, p. 11). In organizational studies, “naked power” (Davis et. al 2005, p. 11) is examined less than the role power plays in the workings of established routines and scripts.

Yet ordinarily change happens in a context of power and politics, and in this respect social movement theory can tease out some of the key dynamics of union revitalization. Social movement scholars pursue questions of how and why movements or movement organizations change over time. External factors like political opportunities and resources affect movement trajectories and outcomes, as do factors internal to a movement like leadership and the skill sets of individuals. Activists from earlier social movements can join new movements and introduce strategies and tactics into contexts in which these repertoires of action are foreign (Clemens 1993; Voss and Sherman 2000). In her study of the radical wing of the women’s movement from 1969-1992 in Columbus, Ohio, Nancy Whittier (1997) specifies one of the ways individuals entering a movement can have a transformative effect. She deploys what she calls a “generational approach,” arguing, in the tradition of Mannheim (1952), that the unique way a particular cohort of activists are recruited, and the identities they come to form as a group, shape how a movement looks over time. “Social movements change in part through the entry of new recruits,” she explains (p. 761). While long-term activists help ensure a movement’s continuity, new recruits are more likely to effect transformation in multiple spheres. “Cohort turnover,” she finds, “promoted innovation in feminist strategy, tactics, organizational structure and composition, and collective identity” (776).

A distinct cohort of activists form what Whittier calls a “political generation.” She defines a political generation as “comprised of individuals (of varying ages) who join a

social movement during a given wave of protest” (762). Many generations often exist within any particular social movement; the specific historical period in which a cohort enters a movement has meaningful consequences for how individuals come to understand their movement activity, and thus how they ultimately shape the movements and organizations to which they belong. Even a few years difference in time of entry can have significant effects. Whittier uses the concept of a “micro-cohort” to capture such differences. “Micro-cohorts are clusters of participants who enter a social movement within a year or two of each other and are shaped by distinct transformative experiences that differ because of subtle shifts in the political context” (762). Of notable importance is the context in which a cohort first commits to the movement. Initial, formative experiences shape the collective identity of micro-cohorts.

As I mentioned earlier, previous research on change in unions has highlighted the importance of outsiders, individuals coming from outside the labor movement, to tactical innovation and change in labor unions (Voss and Sherman 2001). Outsiders brought tactical experience from other social movements, like the anti-war and the student movements, into unions that had abandoned more confrontational tactics in favor of those emphasizing their reasonableness in relation to employers. As Voss and Sherman so nicely show in their comparison of local unions in the San Francisco Bay Area, those local unions that hired outsiders were the ones that fully revitalized.

I found not only were outsiders important *as individuals* in bringing in new tactical repertoires but also it was significant that individuals coming into unions were part of larger groups, or cohorts, the identities of which were shaped *as a group*—in relation to each other and to others in their organizations. In HERE, for example, the national union hired and trained a wave of young people in the mid-1980s, and this group of young organizers formed a distinct *organizer* cohort in the union. How people were recruited into union work and how they came to understand their places in the organization mattered in the life of their union. People who came into unions were previously shaped both by their existing social and political ties (especially those people who were previously part of cadre organizations) and by where, when, and how they were recruited into unions. People who came to be key reformers in both HERE and SEIU came into their organizations in waves and in groups.

There are shortcomings in the ability of theories of organizations and social movements to account for my empirical cases. Perhaps most fundamentally, theories of organization still bear the imprint of their origins, which was an overriding concern for the efficiency and survival of the firm. While the firm-centeredness does not preclude applying it to more diverse forms of organization, it is worth pointing out both what the literature misses when it comes to the study of unions, *and* what my empirical study can add to the literature.

For one, the managerial bias in the organizations literature assumes a hierarchy in which top managers or administrators can issue blanket orders affecting their entire organizations. Managers or executive directors may not make the right decisions but they have the power to make binding, unilateral decisions. The fact that union leaders at the highest level of authority are elected rather than appointed matters to understanding how the organization functions on a day-to-day basis and how new ideas are formulated and moved through the organization. Although change in any organization is a political process to some extent, change in unions is political by definition. Insurgent leaders must

convince various constituencies of their legitimacy: union members who vote in elections and at conventions, other potentially threatened elected leaders who have the potential of circumscribing new ways of doing things and appointed staff who do the bulk of the daily work and have on-going contact with workers who are the voting members of their union. The union election process may be flawed, but a democratically elected leadership that is accountable to a large membership is both exceptionally empowered and constrained.

Second, much of the literature assumes that organizations share a common goal of maximizing profit and shareholder value.⁵ Actions of individuals within firms can be evaluated in terms of what furthers or hinders this overall mission, implying that there are more or less rational answers to dilemmas that organizations face (though even in this context, rationalities evolve. See Fligstein's (2001) work on the rise of shareholder value). But goals of unions are much more diverse, and in fact these goals are often what is at stake in struggles over strategy.

For example, one of the basic questions for a union is, "Who do we represent?" For many decades, the question of constituency was self-evident: unions represented their existing members. A union's resources went to bargaining and enforcing the contract in the workplace – filing and arbitrating employee grievances, maintaining relationships with employers and negotiating contracts. In the 1990s, however, union leaders in SEIU and HERE began to prioritize the organizing of new groups of workers over a focus on providing union representation for existing union members already covered by union contracts. In the organizing model, the union's constituency is not only the workers who are already covered under a union contract but also the entire workforce within the industry the union represents. Each model of unionism presumes a different constituency.

This difference in constituency has important implications for the ongoing work of a union. Let us say, for example, that a union representing nurses in California has contracts at three of the five major health care corporations in the state. If the union were following a representation model, a bulk of the union's work would be looking after members at the union hospitals. In an organizing model, emphasis would be on building support for the union in the non-union hospitals. Each model calls for distinct strategies and tactics, and requires a different set of skills and organizational competencies. A good decision according to one model would not necessarily make sense under the other.

Here my study starkly illustrates a critique of rationality in the organizations literature, since *there is no single rationality governing organizational behavior*. For example, recognizing a membership "crisis" is only possible if it is a crisis according to a model of unionism that requires new members to thrive. Getting workers to handcuff themselves to a bridge during rush hour might be a reasonable tactic if the goal is to show employers the depth of worker commitment or garner public support. But if union leaders were following the tradition of making nice with employers in order to maintain good bargaining relationships, then this tactic would seem outrageous. Conceptualizing unions as operating under various different logics lets us see how "problems" and "solutions" that are obvious in one context will not be obvious in another. This does not make sense

⁵ Organization theory also looks at government agencies and the non-profit sector. See for example Powell and Steinberg's (2006) *The Non-Profit Sector: A Research Handbook*. When looking at these sectors, secure resources are the organizational goal.

within a literature that reduces organizational success to organizational survival. Many unions have “survived”—albeit with dwindling numbers—for decades.

Research on Unions and Union Revitalization

In contrast to change in business organizations and social movements, only a handful of studies have looked at change in labor unions. Voss and Sherman (2000) studied union reform at the local union level in the San Francisco Bay Area. In their research three interrelated factors correlated with local union revitalization: internal political crises, outsider activist experience, and international union intervention. Typically a crisis within the local sparked a change in leadership, either through a contested election or trusteeship. Newly elected or appointed leaders interpreted the crisis situation as one that might be remedied through increased organizing. Assisted by their international union, leaders embarked upon a project of local transformation that included allocating increased resources and staff toward organizing. Staff from outside the labor movement – who are either newly hired or given new space to utilize their talents – brought in a new repertoire of tactics developed in earlier social movements, along with a willingness to experiment with these tactics in a new arena. The international union remained closely tied to the local, providing the new leaders with staff, financial resources, and a vision for continued change. Voss and Sherman examine the process through which local unions are likely to embark on a path of revitalization, and offer what may be the sole piece of comparative research explaining local heterogeneity. They also underscore some of the real obstacles reformers encounter, including staff and member resistance.

Voss and Sherman’s findings, however, beg questions that cannot be answered within the scope of their research. Why would international unions be concerned if their locals were not in crisis, or were not organizing? While a focus on the local union explains local variation within particular international unions – why some SEIU locals are fully revitalized while others are not, for example – it is less helpful in explaining differences between international unions. Given Voss and Sherman’s discussion of how international control facilitates the process of innovation, one might infer that international unions are uniformly oriented toward positive change, and that variation depends on the willingness of internationals to step into the jurisdiction of their locals. Indeed, how willing or able (constitutionally) national leaders are to interfere with the autonomy of their locals is likely to be an important factor in how successful an international will be in pushing a national program. But international intervention advances local revitalization only when the international has a strategic agenda for change. Why is it that some international unions have such an agenda, while others do not? This question remains unanswered. Furthermore, Voss and Sherman do not account for the processes through which reform minded leaders-in-waiting were ready and able to step up to the plate when a crisis ensued.

While there is no comparative research that explores the different structures and practices of international unions – of the type that might help explain, for example, the particular interventions in local unions that Voss and Sherman locate – Michael Piore’s (1994) analysis of the SEIU does point in directions helpful for this sort of inquiry. Piore, interested in how the “managerial practices” of locals enabled them to respond in better or worse ways to their environment, stumbled across the SEIU. He found that this union

instituted particular managerial reforms that “seemed to have addressed virtually all the major organizational problems that had undermined the renovative process elsewhere in the labor movement” (513). Specifically, SEIU locals were setting organizational goals and implementing strategic planning processes that allowed them to better understand and interpret the environments in which they operated.

Why does Piore claim the SEIU is different? More than anything, it is the “moral vision” and “common identity” of the organization’s members and staff that accounts for its dynamism. This vision is forged through an ideological alliance of members and staff. “Helping professions,” which include both staff and higher paid members, are predisposed toward supporting the struggles of lower paid workers, while low-income workers seek out alliances with the helping professionals because it gives their cause legitimacy and relieves the (so-called) shame they feel over their own low social position.

It is certainly plausible that unions able to forge a captivating moral vision are better equipped for making the types of wide-sweeping internal changes associated with revitalization. Social movements of all kinds rely precisely on such an animating vision and on leaders to make decisions in the name of that vision. Piore, however, does not elaborate on the process through which this “moral vision” is developed and passed on. A vision will resonate with people only if they see themselves contained somewhere in the vision. Any account of change must account for how the interests of particular groups of workers are constituted. Interests are socially constructed and constructed differently over time.

Although he does not examine the concrete processes through which important decisions were made, Piore does pick up on an important dimension of the SEIU: the existence of social movement activists in the union. Yet while Voss and Sherman link the presence of these outsiders to an actual mechanism of internal transformation (the introduction of new tactics), Piore simply suggests that shared political beliefs among the newly hired international staff created a new culture within the union.

Ruth Milkman (2006) has a much more in-depth analysis of SEIU in her recent book *L.A. Story*. Milkman believes it is significant that the revitalization of the Los Angeles union movement, of which SEIU played a key role, was spearheaded by AFL, rather than CIO, unions. Lore has long lauded the CIO as the bastion of progressive unionism, in contrast to the staid, provincial AFL unions with corrupt and exclusionary practices. “So why,” Milkman asks, “have these unions, and not those originating in the CIO, dominated recent efforts to rebuild organized labor?” Her answer is that AFL unions are experts at generating effective strategy in industrial contexts similar to those unions face today, contexts of “unregulated, highly competitive labor markets” and hostile legal environments.

These studies offer a good start for understanding changes that have taken place, particularly within the SEIU. Yet with the exception of Voss and Sherman’s work, these studies have been limited by a focus on the case study. While case studies add to our knowledge of *what* has changed, they tell us much less about why and how changed happened where it did. I designed my dissertation to answer this second question.

Methodology

I chose my four cases in order to explain variation in the American Labor Movement. In juxtaposing two unions that have changed with two that have not, my aim

is to illuminate the crucial differences that explain change in some instances and stasis in others. I choose to study service sector unions in order to hold the environment constant across cases, and avoid the inevitable messiness that would result by comparing unions facing very different economic circumstances, namely the threat of off-shoring. All four unions in my study operate in industries that cannot relocate to other parts of the globe. Many of the industries these unions represent vastly expanded over several decades, starting in the 1990s.

In this dissertation I elaborate both the content and process of organizational change. First, I examine what distinguishes those unions that have transformed from those that have not, defining more precisely what I mean by “union transformation.” I then turn to a historical analysis to understand the key moments, both structural and agentic, that sent these four unions on such different courses. When were the most important organizational decisions made? Which leaders played key roles and when?

In the next chapter I develop indicators for union transformation, and illustrate how my four cases fall along the spectrum. But for anyone familiar with the modern labor movement, the choices of SEIU and HERE are obvious. SEIU is the labor union that has served as the vanguard for union revitalization over the last decade, offering new strategies for organizing and new models for bargaining, and attracting both new and old social movement leaders to its ranks. HERE, while less prominent than SEIU, also has the reputation for engaging in strategic social movement campaigns. The leaders within HERE are regarded by many as embodying a vision for modern unionism even more radical than the leaders at SEIU.

I choose AFSCME to account for the fact that many of the same type of activists who came into SEIU arrived at AFSCME during the same time period. Piore argues that SEIU is unique because it became the union of choice for activists out of the New Left, and Voss and Sherman show how new left activists brought new tactics and strategies into bureaucratic organizations that were stymied by old ways of doing things. This is true – SEIU (and HERE) hired from outside labor’s ranks and was infused with new ideas. But this cannot be the only thing driving change, since AFSCME also hired activists from the New Left into their ranks and failed to make the kinds of changes we see in the SEIU and HERE.

Finally, the UFCW serves as a foil for my other four cases, and it is where I begin my analysis in the next chapter. UFCW is a union that is representative of the status quo in labor, one that had neither the structure nor the people necessary to change. While it represents the same kinds of workers as the other three unions, it shows no signs of transformation.

Research

I use many qualitative sources of data in my dissertation. I interviewed fifty-five officials from the four unions in my study: twenty-two from SEIU, fifteen from HERE, ten from AFSCME and eight from the UFCW. These interviews are supplemented by approximately another forty interviews that I either conducted, or had access to, as a member of two research teams.

Among the fifty-five interviews, I interviewed both elected union officials and appointed or hired staff members of unions. The elected officials I interviewed were mostly local union presidents, and the staff members mostly high-level directors. For

HERE and SEIU, I chose my interviewees after first identifying as many of the key reformers in each of the unions as I could. Reformers were people who practiced – and later preached – a form of unionism that was different from the form that was dominant in their organization. Most of the reformers in HERE and SEIU were organizers. In the union context, organizing entails many different activities but refers to the job of bringing in new, previously un-unionized groups of workers into the union (“external organizing”) or mobilizing existing groups of workers to be active in the union (“internal organizing”). Not all organizers were reformers, but all reformers were organizers. In HERE and SEIU, the story of how organizers moved into positions of increasing authority mirrored the story of organizing becoming important to the organization as a whole.

In HERE, identifying key reformers was relatively easy: organizers were a fairly small group of people within HERE in the 1970s and 1980s, and many of them are still with the union. Reformers were more numerous and dispersed in SEIU, and a greater percentage of them had moved on from union work, but identifying a core group of reformers was still a relatively easy task. Deciding whom to interview in AFSME and the UFCW was more tricky. In AFCME, I interviewed officials from some of the key locals – locals that had the reputation for being more oriented towards external organizing, and/or locals that had staff who were interested in doing things differently. I also interviewed staff people who had a national perspective on the union. For the UFCW, I interviewed only high-level staff from the international union.

My interviews ranged from ninety minutes to three hours in length. I asked my interviewees questions about their experiences in their union and about their union as an organization. I asked interviewees to describe the changes they had seen in their union, and to talk about how those changes came about. I also asked them to talk about how they learned how to do their work, and how they garnered power in their organization. Some of the people I interviewed still worked for the union; some had worked for the union during key periods of transition but had since moved on. I digitally recorded most of the interviews.

Besides interviewing, I attended national conventions of the UFCW, AFSCME and HERE, and two regional conventions of the SEIU. Union conventions, much like political party conventions, are events of political showmanship and rarely places of true political debate. However, for this reason, they are perfect places to see differences in the “messaging” that leaders within these unions project. Additionally, I gathered historical material from several sources including national union convention reports gathered at the Walter Reuther Archives at Wayne State University and through national union offices; union constitutions and by-laws, training, organizing, bargaining and research materials gathered both at the Reuther Archives and from the personal files of my interviewees; membership statistics from census reports and the Bureau of Labor Statistics; and union budget information gathered from reports that unions file with the Department of Labor. Reading bargaining and organizing training manuals were a particularly fruitful way of tracing organizational changes in SEIU, as the “how-to’s” of organizing changed so dramatically over the years.

My research on HERE was informed by nineteen months of ethnographic research with a local HERE union in the San Francisco Bay Area. While researching a local HERE union for my Masters degree, I worked inside a hotel that a HERE local was organizing. I observed in multiple contexts: besides working in the hotel’s restaurant, I

attended staff meetings at the local union; I joined the worker “organizing committee” and attended its weekly meetings; I talked to workers in their homes about the union; and I participated, with my co-workers, in many delegations to management. At all these research sites I was taught HERE’s steady and deliberate organizing model, a model that relies on intense, daily communication about the union campaign between workers and staff organizers and between co-workers. Although I had not yet started my dissertation research at this point, what I discovered in these nineteen months led me to the question that animates this dissertation. In HERE, I found a type of unionism that was far more robust than any I had seen before. Small, scrappy and tenacious, HERE had somehow transformed itself from an ineffectual (and in places corrupt) organization to one that cultivated deep ties between the workers and the union. I wanted to know how and why this union looked the way it did now – a question that could not be answered by looking only at HERE.

What is so unique about HERE is not always visible from the outside. In SEIU, the changes are palpable. New constitutions were written, departments were radically reorganized, leaders were ousted. In HERE, changes were more subtle, and so better suited to the ethnographic method. Much of what makes HERE a unique union in a U.S. context has to do with the type of relationships leaders cultivate with workers and the ways workers come to act and think differently in their workplaces. These distinctions are discussed at length in the conclusion of this dissertation.

In addition to using my own interviews, I draw extensively on interviews conducted by myself and others during the course of two research projects of which I was a part. In the first project, headed by Kim Voss and Marshall Ganz, we tracked down and interviewed a group of eighty former and current labor leaders who had been interviewed close to twenty years prior as part of a sample of up-and-coming California labor leaders. In these interviews we discovered, among other things, that social justice-minded unionists found homes for themselves in unions that were open to new strategies and tactics and that pushed for a more social-justice worldview. These social justice-type unionists, whom we refer to as “social reformers,” more often found themselves in SEIU and HERE. I re-interviewed a number of our respondents for my dissertation.

I also participated in a research project on change in SEIU that researchers at Rutgers developed with SEIU’s president Andy Stern. For this project, I was hired to do interviews in public sector SEIU locals on the west coast. While I was doing these interviews, SEIU was restructuring in California, Washington State and Oregon, merging smaller locals into larger locals and arranging west coast workers into locals that SEIU believed improved their chances of bargaining stronger contracts. For this project, I interviewed a range of elected officials and staff members from unions that were in the process of restructuring. Some of the people I interviewed had been with SEIU for decades and had played key roles in SEIU’s earlier transformations.

Finally, some of the data I draw on from SEIU – and to a more limited extent, the UFCW – I gathered while researching the Kaiser labor-management partnership with a group of researchers from MIT and Rutgers University. For this project, which was headed by Tom Kochan at MIT, I attended the national negotiations in the spring and summer of 2005 between Kaiser Permanente and a coalition of Kaiser unions. The union coalition included the SEIU and the UFCW, and was dominated by the SEIU. Watching the union’s strategy unfold during negotiations helped shape my understanding of how

leaders in SEIU (and to more limited degree the UFCW) understand their organization's strategy for securing contracts for their members.

Overview of the Dissertation

In order to understand why some unions have changed while most have stayed the same, I undertake a historical comparative analysis among four contemporary labor unions—two that have transformed, and two that have not. After elaborating in more detail what I mean by “change,” I examine the key moments in each union's history that made possible, or inhibited, transformation.

Chapter two examines in more detail what I mean by union transformation, and how I have gone about studying it. If porous structures and social movement outsiders helped generate cultures of creativity in my two “successful” stories of union transformation, what are the concrete ways we can distinguish between unions that have transformed and unions that have not? I lay out the factors that distinguish between success and failure, and justify the historical approach I use in later chapters. I argue that there were key moments in the 1970s and 1980s that set the stage for union success and union stagnation. As social movement activists looked to labor in the waning years of the Civil Rights Era, unions had the opportunity to change their course in the face of their own changing circumstances.

In order to capture the significance of the transformations of the SEIU and HERE, in this chapter I draw extensively on a case of a union whose goals and practices remained constant over the course of the period of study: the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). UFCW as a good example of an organization that failed to respond to the crises facing labor unions in the late 1970s. Like many other unions during this time, the UFCW failed to adapt to shifts in the economy and to the rising tide of political opposition to unionism. The UFCW was hindered by both a highly centralized structure that restricted innovation at the local level and by a leadership that insulated itself by adhering to a personnel policy that prohibited the hiring of staff that did not start out as a member of the UFCW rank and file. The UFCW is a case of passive organizational stability. Any efforts towards innovation within the organization were shut down by a national office bent on continuing down the path it had always traveled.

Chapter three moves to a discussion of organizational change by looking at the story of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union. Like the UFCW, HERE is a private sector union with a jurisdiction that covers both small establishments and large chains. Also similar to the UFCW, HERE faced major membership declines starting in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s. Coupled with this decline was a national organization with documented ties to organized crime. Yet within this enfeebled and (in places) corrupt organization arose a group of reformers that eventually made the union one of the most strategic unions in the labor movement, with a membership, in many places, that robustly participates in the life of the union.

Chapter four continues a discussion of change by looking at the most well-known case of union revitalization: the SEIU. More than any other union, SEIU has reorganized their structure to increase centralization and coordinate. Activists from outside the labor movement are key to this union's story, but they are not the entire story.

Chapter five strengthens my argument by showing how the presence of outsiders did not automatically lead to union transformation, as illustrated by the case of AFSCME.

I conclude in chapter six with an overview of the cases, and some thoughts about new directions for the labor movement. In this chapter, I show that union transformation itself can mean different things. While SEIU and HERE have both taken dramatic measures that distinguish them from the UFCW, there are important distinctions that can be made *within* my transformed unions as well—distinctions that have risen to prominence in the last two years, as fighting *between* SEIU and HERE has commanded more attention among labor scholars and activists than the chasm between these two unions and a broader labor movement that remains relatively stagnant.

Chapter Two: The UFCW

Understanding Union Transformation By Looking at Stagnation

In October of 2003, approximately 60,000 California grocery-store workers from Vons, Pavilions, Ralphs, and Albertsons walked off their jobs.⁶ Determined to put a stop to the “Walmartization” of the retail industry, organizers from the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) seemed finally to have breathed some fresh air into what had been a staid and conservative union. Over the next six months, the three chains (Safeway, which owns Vons and Pavilions; Kroger, which owns Ralphs; and Albertsons) reported large losses in sales, as shoppers took their business to other chains. Scholars observed a growing amount of public support for the union (Mitchell 2004; Gibson 2004; Bernstein 2005). One would expect that this leverage might have been used to win real gains for a newly courageous workforce.

Yet the resolution of the strike left workers with significantly less than they had before. While workers were mobilized by the promise of protecting wages, health benefits, pension funds, and hours, the settlement preserved only the right of UFCW directors “to collect dues from the members” (Gibson 2004). The union accepted a two-tier wage system, in which new employees would make forty-five percent less than their more senior counterparts, cuts in healthcare benefits and pensions, and less control over their work. Moreover, workers lost six months of pay over the duration of the strike.

What happened? Most narrowly, UFCW organizers had miscalculated. They were not prepared for a six-month strike, believing they could reach resolution in much less time. But having struck a deal with the Teamsters not to deliver groceries to the stores during the strike (which would have included the Thanksgiving holiday), the Teamsters quickly put pressure on the UFCW to change the terms of the deal (Bernstein 2005). By Thanksgiving, drivers were passing their keys off to store managers, who emptied the trucks themselves—honoring the picket line in name only. The UFCW had not built a strong coalition with other unions either, and so were left to face the well-organized employer opposition in relative isolation.

Tactics on the ground also seemed to sow confusion and decrease morale. Organizers began and ended pickets at different stores without explanation. Union leaders offered to enter into secret binding arbitration in the middle of the public campaign (Bernstein 2005). UFCW organizers refused to allow any signage other than those produced by the UFCW itself.

Meanwhile, the employer successfully undermined the arguments and appeal of the union. Arguing that they *had* to reduce wages in order to compete with chains like Wal-Mart, which had only recently entered the market, the employer pointed to wages of \$17.50 per hour that were far above industry standards in other parts of the country. Moreover, the ties between the membership and union leaders were also relatively weak. While a majority of grocery workers in the membership were Latinas and black women, there were no women (and few people of color) playing leadership roles during the strike (Gibson 2004). In early February of 2004, leaders from the AFL-CIO and the national UFCW wrested control of the strike from the local, and quickly conceded.

⁶ Initially, UFCW organizers had instructed only Vons employees to strike; but Albertsons and Kroger quickly moved to lock union workers out of their stores.

Yet the grocery strike is indicative of a deeper *consistency* within the goals and orienting vision of the UFCW—and much of the labor movement even today. The union did not use diverse strategy, focusing instead on a tactic (the strike) that could not move the employers by itself. A failure on the part of the union to research the industry, moreover, meant that it was unprepared for the strike's duration or the employers' concerted response. A weak coalition with the Teamsters, and limited coalitions with other unions, left the union isolated. While the rank-and-file was mobilized for this strike, there was no history of successful mobilization on which workers could draw, and limited feelings of commitment and solidarity between workers and union staff. And a failure to organize the broader industry (namely, Wal-Mart) meant that employers could rationally argue that they had to cut labor costs in order to compete. Moreover, the national UFCW did not coordinate with the local before taking control of the strike and making significant concessions.

Of course, UFCW is not alone in its failure. By any measure, unions have been in a steady decline since the late 1950s. Peaking at 35% in 1945, 1946 and again in 1954, union density levels were 31.4% in 1960, 30.8% in 1970, 25.2% in 1980, 16.1% in 1990 and 13.5% in 2000. Today it hovers around 12%⁷.

And union decline certainly cannot be blamed entirely on the behavior of unions. Structural explanations point to changes the loss of traditionally unionized manufacturing jobs and the rise of a service-oriented economy (Farber and Western 2000; Farber 1990; Dickens & Leonard 1985), the increase in the number of women and people of color (traditionally not members of unions) in the labor force, the movement of jobs from the rustbelt to the sunbelt, the rise of part-time employment and the *overall* growth of the number of people working, which makes labor's inability to bring in new members all the more numerically striking (Western 1997). Others point to the behavior of employers, who have become increasingly willing and able to bust unions through nefarious tactics (Freeman 1988), and who are aided by a political and legal environment that fails to protect workers in their organizing efforts (Levy 1985).

Typically, unions have responded to this decline in several relatively uninspired ways. One way is to submit to concessionary bargaining, in which the economic package of a contract is lower than an earlier one; or to agree to cuts in one area in exchange for at least minimal protection in another. Another strategy is for two or more unions to merge, joining forces to compensate for an environment of plummeting membership and diminishing dues-money-generated resources (Adams 1984). A third is to move away from declining industries and into expanding sectors of the economy, or at least into

⁷ Figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, January Issues, as well as from The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., Washington, DC, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book: Compilations from the Current Population Survey (2005 edition)*, (copyright by BNAPLUS); authored by Barry Hirsch of Trinity University, San Antonio, TX and David Macpherson of Florida State University. Internet sites: <http://www.bna.com/bnaplus/labor/laborrpts.html>. Density levels for the private sector are even lower. For example, the 2006 density level was 36.2% in the public sector but only 7.4% in the private sector.

sectors where employers are unable to relocate.⁸ This has meant that many unions (like the UFCW) have been able to “survive” without truly being able to succeed.

While the SEIU and HERE won major campaigns using strategies new to the labor movement, the UFCW has focused very little of its energies on organizing. When organizers were assuming leadership roles in SEIU and HERE, almost no skilled organizers could be found anywhere in the UFCW. In general, the union has remained wedded to a defensive strategy of tempering major cuts in wages and benefits without changing their overall vision of what a union should do or experimenting with any of the innovative strategies that were successful in SEIU and HERE.

The Content of Union Transformation

Throughout this dissertation I deal with both the content and process of organizational change. Content refers to what actually changes in an organization and includes organizational goals, strategies for undertaking these goals, and the reorganization of authority. Process is *how* change occurs: the timing of important events, how decisions were made and where and when there was support and resistance to change. This chapter deals with the content of change: how do we know that the “reformed” unions changed? What exactly changed? This chapter also justifies the approach I have taken to understanding the process by which change occurred, processes that I examine in the remainder of the dissertation.

What is most remarkable about “transformed” unions is that they prioritize organizing, and organize strategically and successfully. Much of organizational theory takes the firm as its unit of analysis. Success is understood in terms of the expansion of economic resources, and failure understood as extinction—or going out of business. Since survival is a primary indicator of success for the firm, studying the organizational field is pretty straightforward: those firms that are still present at a given point in time have succeeded; those that are not have failed.

The labor union’s success, however, cannot be measured in such straightforward terms—as explained in the previous chapter. While acknowledging that an organization’s goals are always multiple (Simon 1962), it seems safe to assume that a successful labor union enhances the power of the workers involved—whether in terms of the workers’ bargaining power vis-à-vis the employer; the workers’ daily experiences of respect and dignity on the job; or even workers’ leadership capacity outside the workplace in the political realm.

Since the economic changes of the 1970s and the declining rates of unionization that followed, those unions that have successfully won power for their constituents have done so through a commitment to organizing. Most simply, “organizing” entails a commitment to enlarging the number of members in the union so as to increase the union’s bargaining leverage vis-à-vis employers. But we can distinguish at least two components of a “commitment to organizing” shared by transformed unions. First, these

⁸ Although AFL-CIO rules forbid affiliated unions from organizing workers already covered under contract by another union, there are no institutional prohibitions against unions organizing non-union workers in whatever sector they wish. This explains, for example, why SEIU, AFSMCE, UFCW and the USWA have all organized nurses, sometimes in the same hospital or health care system, and why the United Auto Workers started organizing graduate student employees in the 1980s

unions think strategically about what industries and workplaces to organize. For example, certain businesses connect with others through interlocking directorates. Strategic unions, therefore, often seek to organize those businesses that serve as “nodes” of the broader network. These unions also think creatively about the different kinds of resources they might deploy in order to influence the employer—from political pressure, to religious and community support, to direct workplace action.

Second, “organizing” entails a commitment to leadership development and mobilization among workers themselves. This is often necessary in order to organize a workplace in the first place. Studies have shown that unions are much more likely to win union elections when an “organizing committee” made up of workers takes responsibility for advocating on behalf of the union with co-workers (Brofenbrenner 1998). But this sort of mobilization also helps to build a strong union in the long run, as workers learn to advocate on behalf of themselves as a collective—in the workplace and also in the communities of which they are a part. According to many organizers in transformed unions, legal recognition is only a part of what “makes” the union; more important is that a group of workers learn to act like a union.⁹ To the extent to which unions train workers as leaders, and engage in social issues beyond the workplace, transformed unions resemble social movement organizations.

While for the outside observer, a commitment to organizing might seem like an obvious response to membership decline, it was anything but obvious for labor unions as a whole—most of whom took their membership numbers for granted. Instead, most unions (like the UFCW) focused on “servicing” these members through arbitrating grievances, providing pensions and benefits, and bargaining new contracts.

Of course, as the success of transformed unions becomes more widely recognized across the labor movement, *all* unions have begun to pay lip service to the importance of organizing. This makes it all the more important to articulate as clearly as possible what indicators distinguish those transformed unions from the status quo.

Evidence of organizational change, I argue, can be observed in the ways that money is directed, in the types of formal reorganization that have taken place, in the changing characteristics of the organization’s leadership, in new practices in which the organization engages, and in changes to the public face of the organization. I choose indicators that show (1) the extent to which the union has prioritized organizing; (2) the extent to which this organizing demonstrates strategic focus; and (3) the extent to which this organizing illustrates “social movement” characteristics of leadership development among the rank and file and commitment to broader social change. I draw on organizational theory to justify the indicators I have chosen. And after reviewing the structural variables I use to distinguish successful cases of union transformation from failures, I compare my four case studies along the structural indicators identified.

I have defined a reformed union as one that: 1) has experienced a significant regime change at the highest levels of authority; 2) budgets for organizing at levels of at least 50% of their total budget; 3) has shifted and/or expanded organizational goals to prioritize strategic organizing; 4) utilizes a wide-range of strategies and tactics; 5) uses well-financed research departments in their campaigns; 6) actively involves rank and file members in internal and external organizing and contract campaigns; 7) builds coalitions

⁹ These two elements of organizing—a strategic focus, on the one hand; and a

with other organized groups. Table 2.1 shows indicate how the four unions in my dissertation fall on theses indicators of transformation.

Table 2.1. Indicators of Transformation

	HERE	SEIU	AFSCME	UFCW
(1) <i>Regime Change</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No
(2) <i>Organizing at 50%</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No
(3) <i>Strategic Organizing</i>	Yes	Yes	Partially	No
(4) <i>Diverse Strategy</i>	Yes	Yes	Partially	No
(5) <i>Research Department</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
(6) <i>Involves Rank and File</i>	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially
(7) <i>Works in Coalition</i>	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially

Making Organizing a Priority

How can we tell that these unions prioritize organizing? For one, we can look at changes in the leadership of the union. As the organizations scholarship suggests, leaders tend to be chosen in order to solve what the organization considers the arena of greatest uncertainty (see Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, who describe changes in the qualifications of corporate CEOs). Therefore, a *regime change*, in which organizers come to *lead* the union, is a good indicator of a shift in organizational priorities that *precedes* whatever the leader is able to accomplish (see Indicator 1).

A priority on organizing can also be seen in union budgets. I have chosen as an indicator whether or not the union devotes at least fifty percent of its budget to organizing. This number is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but is a number used by unions themselves to distinguish those committed to reform from the status quo. Transformed unions can legitimately argue that they spend “most” of their dues money on winning organizing campaigns (see Indicator 2).

Each of these changes suggests that organizing becomes—for these unions—the area of most organizational concern or uncertainty, that the “problem” for a union becomes one that can be solved by organizing. This is in stark contrast to a model in which the “problem” is being the best union at servicing members, or being the union with the best negotiators, or being the union with the best ties to political elites, etc.

Strategic Capacity

Transformed unions are adaptive, and engage in strategic organizing. This complicates the notion—widespread in organizational theory—that organizations *in general* are either selected (Hannan and Freeman 1976) or able to adapt to their environments (Simon 1962). In other words, where one might argue that unions *did* fit the population ecology model at some point in time, some unions seem to have made investments that make them more able to engage with and negotiate their environments.

Transformed unions are resourceful even if they lack resources (Ganz 2000), thinking creatively about what sorts of leverage they might be able to put on employers. These unions leverage political and community power alongside traditional economic tactics, and think carefully about which campaigns to launch and when to launch them (see Indicator 3). Moreover, these unions are willing to experiment with innovative

techniques in order to figure out what works (see Indicator 4). In order to help them decide on their targets, and think creatively about their tactics, these unions establish extensive research departments (see Indicator 5).

Social Movement Unionism

But a priority on organizing is also the *result* of a more fundamental shift in the way that leaders in these unions think about what they are doing, or the schemata or rules or myths that frame how they think about what a union is (Meyer and Rowan 1977). This more fundamental shift is from thinking about unions as servicing-organizations to thinking about them as social movement organizations. Workers are reconstituted as a result. Instead of being the union's "clients," workers become "citizens" within the union, actively committed to furthering its goals. To this end, the union involves its membership both in new organizing drives and in ongoing workplace actions (see Indicator 6).

But transformed unions also help workers see themselves as citizens outside the workplace. These unions build linkages between the workplace and the communities from which workers come, working in coalitions with church groups, immigrant rights groups, and other social movement organizations (see Indicator 7).

Comparing Cases Along the Indicators of Change

Below, I describe the ways in which the UFCW *fails* to be strategic, and then compare this union with the three other unions that make up the rest of the dissertation.

UFCW

Where my questions to leaders in SEIU and HERE about organizing and strategy yielded long and complicated answers about union "density" and "market share," – revealing a strategic orientation that had firmly taken root at all levels of the union's leadership – "strategy" for UFCW officials was described along the lines of "we organize who ever calls us up and tells us they want a union." "We'll never turn anyone away," one national leader proudly told me when I asked about how they made decisions about whom to organize. Interestingly, all of the UFCW leaders I interviewed had been hired internally, a hiring practice that is written into union regulations.

From one perspective, this approach to organizing is the most democratic one. One UFCW leader discussed how his local's reputation was, "If nobody else will organize you, where you go is down to [us]!" When I pressed him on how he felt about this reputation, he responded,

Well, it's OK. I mean there are people out there that need to be organized, that need some sort of help, whether it's dealing with their employers or dealing with the city or getting benefits or whatever. So we can try to help them.... I mean we believe everybody has got a right to at least try to organize to make things better. When this leader compared the UFCW's approach to other unions, he continued, A lot of unions, and I guess there's some merit to the argument that if they can't go after a big unit and organize it on some kind of scale, then it's not worth your time. There is some merit to that argument. It's just not the way we do business here.

This type of organizing—known among labor activists as "hot shop organizing"—is antithetical to a strategic orientation. What was especially interesting was this leader's

own implicit *recognition* of the strategy's failure. Later in the interview he discussed the importance of waging "corporate campaigns" against some of the big employers in the retail industry, yet said, "We just don't have the resources and time. We barely have time to do organizing much less run some type of corporate campaign." Resources in the union are not deployed in a way that maximizes the union's leverage against its (quite well organized) opposition.

Many UFCW leaders also recognize the extent to which the union remains a "business-model" as opposed to an "organizing model." Union-hired business agents often do the work of workplace stewards, preventing leadership development among the rank-and-file. Moreover, these business agents are often responsible for organizing new workplaces as well. One UFCW leader recalls,

Business agents hate being organizers. When you put them in... I have a rule of thumb and I say this openly. When I have business agents working on an organizing campaign, and we get ready to do home [visits], I never put phone numbers on the home [visit] sheets because they will call them rather than go to the homes.

But this lack of focus on organizing means that the organizing which does take place is often less strategic than it might be. During one interview, when asked how the union might reinvigorate its organizing efforts, I was surprised by a leader's response:

Get more money, more people out there. (laughing) I mean you know... Some of these unions I've heard great ads on television and radio about why it pays to be union. Vote for a union label. And they need to do more of that to make our young people especially aware of what the labor movement has done and what it's accomplished.

The leader's ideas about turning the union around seemed to consist of little more than an ad campaign. Moreover, she concedes, she has never had to think too deeply about making organizing new members a priority, since "as long as we maintained our membership, you have a good idea of what your income is going to be."

SEIU

In 1980, UFCW was the largest union in the country, largely the result of mergers. With 1.8 million members, SEIU is now the largest union in the country, but its size is a result of successful organizing efforts as well as consolidation. SEIU represents a broad range of service workers in both the private and the public sector, including hospital, nursing home and home health care workers, janitors, security guards, child care workers, state and local government workers and assorted workers in the non-profit sector. Unlike other unions representing the private sector workforce, SEIU has been growing steadily since the late 1970s. Table 2.2 illustrates membership growth in this union from 1975-2005.¹⁰

In scale and scope, the SEIU has gone through the most dramatic internal reorganization of any union in the labor movement. While the capacity for major internal change was built over the period of several decades, the national union under Andy Stern, who was elected president in 1996, implemented the most far-reaching changes. 1996, then, is the date at which I label the union "changed." Starting in 1996, the union centralized power at the national level in order to better coordinate organizing and

¹⁰ The figures are taken from convention reports from the years reported. They are

bargaining and to exert more influence over what locals were doing. National staff began intervening into the affairs of locals that were not adequately in tune with the national plan, putting many local unions in receivership and appointing national staff as directors when locally elected leaders were pushed out. Per capita dues were raised in order to generate more funds for organizing,¹¹ locals were merged to form bigger locals, corrupt local leaders were kicked out or offered incentives to resign and locals were required to comply with a set of organizational goals that went beyond the local. All this was done with an eye towards coordinating organizing and bargaining on a more national level. As Andy Stern said, “We needed to be one national union before we could have a national relationship with employers.”¹²

Strategically oriented unions recognize that strategies and tactics are context-specific. Organizing construction workers in rural California is different from organizing janitors in New York, and strategies and tactics that worked for a union in an earlier period won’t necessarily continue to work. Rather than relying on a single tactic (strikes being the most obvious example), strategic unions will figure out where they have the most leverage and attempt to pressure the employer on multiple fronts. SEIU uses a broad range of strategies in different industries and with different employers.

SEIU’s leadership has also changed, with reformers coming into the union at all the major levels of leadership. The majority of the union’s top leadership, which includes the national president, the national secretary-treasurer, the division (sector) directors and the presidents of the major local unions, came to SEIU as college-educated, activist “social reformers” committed to broad ideals of social justice.¹³ Many were “outsiders” to the union, with little or no experience in the industry or with unions in general. These outsiders were hired by insiders who saw the potential value of tapping into the energy and skills of young social movement activists.

Today, these organizers run the union and, not surprisingly, organizing is the union’s highest priority. The national union has a budget of about \$135 million, and \$84 million, or 64%, is budgeted for organizing.¹⁴ The union’s constitution requires that local unions spend no less than 20% of their local budgets on organizing.¹⁵ While changes have been particularly noteworthy since Andy Stern was elected president in 1996, the union’s capacity for change was built over a much longer period. Leadership was built in organizing campaigns, political power was generated through organizing successes, and the resources needed for further organizing was garnered through membership growth. This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four. For now, it should be clear that SEIU meets all of the factors for union transformation elaborated above.

¹¹ Per capita are dues money every member is required to pay to the union; the local union in turn pays dues to the international union based on their membership. Today, per capita to the national union is \$7.50 per member per month, not including extra fees that locals pay to an organizing fund.

¹² AR interview with SR and AE

¹³ For a discussion of the role of social reformers in the labor movement, see Ganz, Voss, Strauss, Sharpe and Somers, “Against the Tide: Projects and Pathways of a New Generation of Union Leaders, 1984-2001” in Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (eds.) *Reorganizing Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, Cornell Press, 2004.

¹⁴ Interview with Kirk Adams (date?)

¹⁵ 2004 Constitution and By-Laws

HERE

Like SEIU, HERE has undergone a major internal transformation. HERE has an organizing budget that is 60% of its overall national budget, the national union has reorganized staff and resources in order to prioritize strategic organizing, and much of the top national leadership and local leadership is now made up individuals who came into the union as young organizers, often from a social movement context. But HERE is a much different union than the large, fast-growing and resource-rich SEIU. HERE represents hotel, casino, restaurant and food service workers almost entirely in the private sector; the bulk of their membership are the housekeepers, cooks, kitchen aids, servers, banquet workers, maintenance workers and janitors who work in large hotels, casinos, airports and food service corporations. While SEIU represents some classifications of higher paid service workers, HERE represents some of the lowest paid workers in the U.S. economy. Because the bulk of a union's financial resources come from membership dues, HERE is one of the poorer unions in the labor movement (or at least it was prior to the merger with UNITE).

Furthermore, membership had been declining for several decades prior to the reform period in the 1990s. For reformers in the union, amassing the political capital necessary for major internal change was a gradual process, as it was in SEIU. Yet HERE has a much clearer "moment" of change than SEIU. In 1998, a criminally indicted president stepped down and the union's executive board appointed a reformer who had built his career on major organizing victories. This event, although the culmination of many years of internal politics, clearly demarcated the old union from the new. The old leadership let the union fall into disrepair not just through benign neglect but also through legendary corruption.

Of course, not all locals were corrupt, and as much as there was corruption there was concerted opposition to it, particularly—in the early years—from communists in the organization advocating for a more transparent and inclusive union. Many of the locals that weren't corrupt were simply mismanaged by leaders who weren't up to the task of growing their locals or engaging the rank and file. Still, in many places the union existed in name only, and from its inception at the end of the 19th century through to the mid-1980s, there were periods when it looked as if this very small union might wither away altogether. Although there were pockets of robust unionism and worker involvement, mainly in California, it is fair to characterize HERE as a union that did not seem, at least from the outside, on its way towards national revitalization.

Yet, overlapping with some of the bleaker years of the union, HERE started making it into the news for some of the most interesting and innovative organizing campaigns the American labor movement had seen in a long time. Starting in the mid-1980s, smack in the middle of the Regan years and following the infamous breaking of the Air Traffic Controllers union in 1981, HERE union began winning fights with employers using strategies and tactics new to contemporary labor movement. With an organizing subsidy from the international union, an HERE local of clerical and technical workers at Yale university won a contract after organizers waged a high-profile campaign eschewing conventional tactics for rank-and-file committees, one-on-one organizing, discourses of gender equality and community pressure against a very visible employer. After this, the international sent staff and resources to Las Vegas to begin a struggle for

high member density in the town's hotels and casinos. Although the union first organized workers in Las Vegas starting in the 1950s, the local languished and by the 1970s hotel and casino owners were slashing wages and benefits or reneging completely on their contracts. In the late 1980s, the union began organizing in the city; eventually, they organized almost every hotel on the Vegas' main strip, and almost 90% of all the jobs in the city's major hotels. Today, Las Vegas' local 226 has over 50,000 members and is the largest and most vibrant HERE local in the nation. In fact, HERE has turned Las Vegas into a staunch union town where service workers have joined the middle class.

Furthermore, workers from this union are heavily involved in the leadership and life of their union. Although Las Vegas is unique in its level of union density, locals in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Orlando have likewise followed a strategy of building towards city-wide density.

HERE and UFCW are a good comparison in terms of their response to their core industry going global. Neither of their core industries – grocery stores for the UFCW and hotels for HERE – are mobile industries, but they are increasingly dominated by global firms. Both unions faced significant change starting in the early 1980s. When these unions first formed, of course, grocery stores, department stores, hotels and casinos were run by local employers. Over time, individual establishments merged into chains; eventually most of these stores became owned by national or transnational corporations.

Initially, both unions failed to keep pace with these changing conditions. Eventually, HERE developed novel strategies to organize within this new context. A union “fact sheet” about hotel consolidation, put out by the union's research department, emphasizes the need for a strategy that takes into consideration how employers are organized:

As these transnational corporations have consolidated their power, hotel workers have responded by seeking a national dialogue with their employers about national issues, such as immigration laws and health care reform. In the days when management decisions were made by local families, workers could successfully negotiate on a local basis. But in an era when corporations plan globally – making decisions from as far afield as Atlanta, London, Honolulu, and Hong Kong – hotel workers [...] have come under attack.

Like SEIU, national leaders in HERE have centralized power in order to facilitate regionally coordinated campaigns. When local autonomy was the norm, local leaders could run their unions completely independent of other locals, even if the local represented workers at the same hotel chain one town over. Locals still have significant power to set their own agendas, but as more reformers were elected to key local presidencies, the more locals began formulating local strategy in concert with the national union.

Finally, one of the most noteworthy changes in HERE has been the incorporation of worker involvement and leadership development into the regular workings of the union. In the years that the union languished, members had very little to do with their union; in some places, particularly places where the union was actually corrupt, members actively distrusted their union leaders. In both cases, union leaders and union members did not have a whole lot to do with one another.

In HERE's new model, intense worker involvement and leadership development are seen as key to both successful campaigns and to social movement unionism.

AFSCME

Compared to the UFCW, which clearly stayed at a standstill up through the 1990s, AFSCME is a more complicated case. Representing workers in the public sector where employer opposition is much more muted and organizing is therefore much easier, AFSCME has had a fairly steady membership since public sector bargaining laws first were enacted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, AFSCME brought huge numbers of public sector workers in their ranks and, in the context of politics of the 1960s and 1970s, perfected a political strategy that enabled them to successfully organize and bargain contracts.

AFSCME represents workers in the public sector who work for the local, state and federal government. While density in the private sector is at 7%, density levels in the public sector are at 36.5% for local government employees, 31.3 % for state workers and 27.8% for federal workers. AFSCME was thus able to remain insulated from the full-blown membership crisis in the labor movement that began in the late 1970s.

AFSCME's goals and strategy stayed constant over time, much like the UFCW. Yet this is a somewhat more complicated case, given that AFSCME's membership has increased over the interval of study; and given that social movement activists came to AFSCME during the same decades they joined SEIU and HERE. In Chapter Five, I explore how AFSCME's commitment to a particular conception of "union democracy" has, paradoxically, inhibited the transformation seen in my two cases of success.

The Process of Change

Throughout the following chapters, I draw on union histories to explain their quite different trajectories. In these chapters I show how a combination of porous organizations and social-movement outsiders allowed SEIU and HERE to foster cultures of creativity that, in turn, led to union transformation. Leveraging the case of AFSCME, I show how decentralization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for union transformation, as it became a liability under the leadership of Jerry Wurf.

In elaborating this historical argument, I focus on the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. To some scholars of the labor movement, a focus on this early history may seem somewhat bizarre. After all, union transformation was not recognized in labor or academic circles until the early 1990s at least. But my argument is that the way that unions responded to a changing environment in the 1970s has structured their divergent paths ever since. I believe that the decisions made during these decades were essential preconditions for the changes that have occurred (or not occurred) in these unions since.

This focus on early or intermediate events is characteristic of path dependence theory. At first glance, path dependence analysis is deceptively simple; as James Mahoney (2001) puts it, "quite often, path dependence is defined as little more than the vague notion that 'history matters' or that 'the past influences the future'" (507). Yet path dependence is not synonymous with historical analysis, or even with the notion that events in a particular sequence lead to one another.

Mahoney and others use Polya's Urn experiment to help explain path dependence. In the experiment, the object is to fill an urn with balls of one color. To start with, the urn

has only four balls of four different colors in it—one each of red, yellow, white and black. A ball is drawn, and after this the ball is returned to the urn along with two more balls of the same color. For example, if a red ball is drawn, that ball along with two other red balls are added to the urn, or three red balls in total. Going into the second draw, then, there will be six balls: three red ones, and one yellow, one white and one black. There is a 50% chance of drawing a red ball the next time—a much higher probability than in the first draw. If a red ball is drawn the second time, the probability of drawing a red ball in the third round is even higher. The drawing and filling of the urn continues until the urn is full.

Path dependence has three qualities that distinguish it from the tautological notion that “history matters.” We can use the urn example to make better sense of these qualities. First, early events in an historical sequence matter much more than later events. Using the urn example, the first few draws of the balls are much more important to the final color of the balls in the urn than the later draws.

Second, early events are not explained by initial conditions. In the case of the urn, early draws of a ball are unrelated to the initial state of the four balls of different colors in the urn. What color we end up with does not begin to be determined until the first ball is drawn. Lastly, sequences are marked by inertia. This means either that events in a sequence will reproduce themselves (economists refer to this in terms of “increasing returns”) or that a sequence will come to have a certain logic to it that is very difficult to veer away from.

For a sequence to be path dependent, there needs to be a point at which any number of outcomes might occur. Certain events then happen that “lock-in” a particular outcome, but those events themselves are contingent, meaning that the events did not have to happen the way they did. Goldstone describes path dependence as a “property of a system such that the outcome over a period of time is not determined by any particular set of initial conditions. Rather, a system that exhibits path dependency is one in which outcomes are related stochastically to initial conditions, and the particular outcome that obtains in any given ‘run’ of the system depends on the choices or outcomes of intermediate events between initial conditions and the outcome” (Goldstone 1998, 834).

Ruth and David Collier call these “intermediate” events “critical junctures” (Collier and Collier 2002. Andrew Abbot 1997 calls them “turning points.”) In their ambitious book *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*, Collier and Collier explain regime outcomes and the relationship between the state and labor in eight Latin American countries. They argue that there were four different paths that countries took, leading to different types of regimes, and that which path a country embarked on depended on how the working class was initially incorporated into the state after periods of major repression when the control of labor moved from the army to the state. How states incorporated labor (specifically, whether the state brought in labor to control it or political parties incorporated labor to mobilize working class support) led to a certain constellation of parties and conflict that in turn produced different “political legacies.” The type of working class incorporation that elites chose – and it’s important here that the type of incorporation was a choice, rather than inevitable – was the critical juncture in shaping the resulting political arena. The choices that elites made then got “hardened” into political institutions that assumed a life of their own. As Mahoney says of critical junctures in general, “these junctures are

‘critical’ because once a particular option is selected it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available” (513).

For example, neoclassical economic theory predicts that the most efficient technology prevails, whereas economic historians have uncovered how the opposite comes to be the case. Brian Arthur (1987), for example, talks about how VHS technology beat out Betamax technology despite the fact that experts insist on Beta technology’s superiority. Early on, VHS had a small market lead in market share that alerted consumers to choose VHS over Beta; this initial lead – partially due to luck – was reinforced until a tipping point was reached and Beta was no longer a viable option.

Contingent events thus lock in outcomes that become cemented into self-reinforcing sequences. Self-reinforcing sequences are those where “initial steps in a particular direction induce further movement in the same direction such that over time it becomes difficult or impossible to reverse direction” (Mahoney, 512). Self-reinforcing sequences reinforce and reproduce early events. Historical economists in particular have studied self-reinforcing sequencing as they account for why certain inefficient or sub-par technologies come to dominate over better alternatives.

Historical sociologists deal with reactive sequences, telling a story of casually related events in narrative form in a way that emphasizes the necessary and sufficient conditions in a historical series. *How A causes B* is key to the analysis and is the place where different theoretical perspectives come into play. But, as I said earlier, causal sequencing is not in itself a path dependent analysis. Path dependence must emphasize early contingent events, though where, exactly, to start – what to consider “initial conditions”—is always difficult to discern. Finally, path dependence rejects broad generalizations across cases in favor of historically and geographically grounded explanations that pay close attention to detail.

In my study I focus on the ways that different unions responded to the changing economic environment of the 1970s and 1980s, a time of key economic change. The different steps that unions took (or did not take) framed their possibilities for transformation down the road.

There was nothing inevitable about the stagnation of the UFCW. The UFCW is a fairly new union, formed in 1979 out of the merger of the Retail Clerks Union and the Meatcutters Union—at the time, the biggest merger in the history of the American labor movement. The United Food and Commercial Workers brought together 740,000 members from the Retail Clerks union, 525,000 members from the Meat cutters Union and “assorted other retail workers” from both into a new national union that with 1.3 million members instantly became the largest union in the AFL-CIO.¹⁶ Three more mergers happened in fairly rapid succession and further increased the union’s membership: in 1980 the UFCW brought in the Barbers, Beauticians and Allied Industries International Association, and the following year they acquired 22,000 new workers from the United Retail Workers. Finally, in 1983 the Insurance Workers International Union was subsumed under the UFCW, bringing in 15,000 more members. Since then, membership levels have stayed fairly constant. Most of the membership gains in the union since the original merger have been the result of the UFCW merging with smaller retail unions. In the last several years, the UFCW has also made limited

¹⁶ The Washington Post, June 7, 1979, Helen Dewer, pg. A3.

steps to break into the healthcare sector. *Almost no new members have been added through organizing.*

Somewhat surprisingly, the Meatcutters' union (one of the two unions that merged to form the UFCW) had an impressive and militant history of organizing. The Meatcutters' union was itself the product of a 1968 merger between the AFL-charted Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen and the United Packinghouse Workers of America, whose origins were in the CIO. Both unions organized beyond the "butcher aristocracy" to the legions of unskilled stockyard and packinghouse workers, and both unions had a radical history that includes several long strikes. The two unions merged after plant closings in the late 1950s and 1960s weakened both. The Meatcutters union was strong through the early 1980s, with a master agreement in the packing-houses of \$10.69 hour. By the mid-1980s, however, plant closures and concession bargaining was in full swing. Wages in some places went down to \$6.50 an hour.

The Retail Clerks union received its AFL charter in 1880 when it had just one local covering one store in Muskegon, Michigan: the Clothing and Gents Furnishings and Shoe Store. Over the next couple of years the union expanded into more parts of the Midwest, and by 1904 the union had close to 50,000 members. Membership dropped during the depression and by 1933 membership was at about 5,000 (Zundel 1954). In 1974 the union started a professional employees division, mainly the result of the union's forays into health care. In 1977 the Retail Clerks, which had a footwear division, merged with the Boot and Shoe Workers.

When the Meatcutters and Retail Clerks merged to form the UFCW in 1979, the leadership brought two distinct union cultures into the same highly centralized organization. As one commentator remarked at the time, "The marriage of the two unions is odd" (Dewer 1979, pg. A3), given their divergent histories and forms of struggle. Several union leaders discussed the clash of cultures that followed the merger. One leader in particular summarized the difference:

Because with retail clerk, a lot of members are in there working their way through college, doing a part-time job. It's not an industry where the majority of people work as a career. It's kind of a stepping stone. With the butchers, that's a trade and once you're a butcher, you are a butcher for the rest of your life. It's a trade. You have to know what you're doing. And so therefore, the operation of the union is much more political than it was in the retail clerks. The butchers were very involved in how their union ran, who was doing what, how the money was spent. The retail clerks could care less as long as they got a raise periodically and got their health and welfare and their pension, nobody seemed to bother about it. Money was more important than pensions.

These differences contributed to differences in the ways that leaders from different unions understood how to go about union business:

When I worked at the clerks, you follow the rules. You follow the rules on reporting. You follow the rules if you wanted to go on strike, you notified the proper state and federal agencies and you played by the rules. It was very interesting. The first labor negotiations that we were in with the Butchers I said to the representative who was handling the negotiations that we had to file with the state to tell them that we are in negotiations and that there may be a strike and this

is our date and so on. “Oh, we don't do that.” I say, “Well, you really can't get strike sanction unless you do that.” “Oh pshhh, we don't bother with that!... [Their philosophy was,] ‘Do what you want to do, we're the butchers. We control it. We pull the butchers, stores slow down because nobody can get meat, we're out of here.’ Like the Teamsters... That was their attitude.”

But despite the different cultures of the two merging unions, new president Bill Wynn (who had been president of the Retail Clerks prior to the merger) was optimistic that the union would “make organizing one of its top priorities” (Dewer 1979, pg. A3). Perhaps because of the challenge of bringing together these odd bedfellows, and perhaps because of Wynn's own prior experience in a CIO, industrial union, Wynn and other UFCW leaders implemented a highly centralized organizational structure. Local unions pay high per capita dues to support an international union, which bargains most of its local contracts, holds the power to authorize strikes and administers all strike funds.

By 1980, then, UFCW had a highly centralized structure and a very limited number of social movement outsiders within the union. Those few times when local leaders showed signs of creativity and innovation were quickly subdued.

In perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of its national power, in 1986 the UFCW national union placed its Hormel plant local in Austin, Minnesota in receivership after a bitter struggle with a local leadership that had voted down the proposed contract and refused to go back to work. Starting in the early 1980s, meatpacking plants began pleading poverty and demanding concessions in an industry that had been almost entirely organized, and for which there had been a strong master contract. In 1984 the UFCW's Packinghouse Division Director announced that the union would take a position of no further concessions. Yet despite this commitment, the union agreed to reopen contracts in its Iowa plant, accepted concessions there that workers voted down, and then advised the leadership at the local to accept the same – which they agreed to do.

Workers resisted this and in the midst of the conflict voted in a new leadership. This new leadership, which took the workers out on strike in violation of the rule of the international, forged a wide and deep web of support, both within and outside the Hormel plant, at a time when the labor movement saw few such instances rank-and-file energy. Ultimately the national union took over the local in the most dramatic and un-politically savvy way possible: they seized the local offices, painted over the mural the workers and their families had painted, had local leaders who resisted the receivership arrested, and agreed to the concessions without talking to the membership. Whether or not the Hormel workers would have been successful if left to their own devices is an unanswerable question; the point here is that the national union took control of a situation over which they had lost control, despite the fact that their strategy of concessions had up to this point failed to prevent the plant-closings and layoffs that they were ostensibly trying to prevent.

The union has taken severe, high-profile losses in all its major industries in recent decades. After years of hemorrhaging members in department stores, they have almost completely written these stores out of their jurisdiction. In grocery stores, their core industry, they have accepted major cuts in health benefits and a two-tier wage system that brings in new hires at lower wage rate. In the 1980s, looking for ways to compensate for major losses, the union started to organize assorted health care workers.

But UFCW's failures help us identify the factors that have led SEIU and HERE to success. Where reform movements in SEIU and HERE eventually toppled the old model of union and replaced it with one geared towards strategic organizing, no such movement emerged in the UFCW. In the 1990s, when innovative organizing in SEIU and HERE burst on the scene, no such activity came from the UFCW. Leaders continued to pursue business-as-usual with very little notice of any of the changes going on around them in other reform-minded unions. When leaders did take notice, they interpreted the changes in other unions as not relevant to their own. In the next two chapters I turn to the successes of HERE and SEIU.

Conclusion

The UFCW had neither the decentralization needed for innovation *nor* the people who might have brought this change about. Since its founding moment the union has focused more attention on servicing its members than on organizing. Any challenge to this lackluster mission, no matter how small, has been met with failure.

In this chapter I have attempted to show both what union transformation has meant in SEIU and HERE, and suggested a way for studying the *process* by which we might examine how these changes occurred. I have drawn on the case of the UFCW as a foil. Certainly, UFCW is not alone in its relative failure. But it nicely illustrates the ways that most unions have failed to respond to a changing organizational environment. In the chapters that follow, I examine cases of successful transformation.

Chapter Three: HERE Worker-Centered Unionism

On a bright Monday afternoon, between the breakfast and lunch rushes, restaurant workers at the Bayview hotel stream into the hotel's kitchen. They are due, in a few minutes, at a mandatory department meeting on the second floor of the hotel, in a part of the sprawling, low-rise structure that restaurant workers rarely venture. Workers coming on or off shift wear the requisite black pants and a white, button down shirt fastened at the top with a faux bow tie. Those not scheduled for work today have come dressed in casual street clothes. Small groups of workers congregate in the kitchen, hugging or exchanging handshakes. Everyone notices who is wearing a bright yellow square button with the words "union" written in five different languages. "Organizing Committee" members have come prepared with extra buttons, and they pin them on co-workers too nervous to pin one on themselves. Soon, workers cram into the service elevator and head up to the meeting.

Management called this meeting after three union organizers walked into the hotel and delivered to the general manager a petition for union recognition signed by the twenty-eight members of the organizing committee and seventy-percent of Bayview's workers. With this gesture, HERE local B and Bayview's organizing committee went public with their campaign to unionize and win a contract for the hotel's two hundred workers. Four days later, notices of department meetings went up around the hotel. In a letter accompanying these notices, the general manager insisted that the meetings were to discuss the yearly employee surveys. "These meetings are important," the general manager wrote, "because we always try to resolve issues that are important to you."

Even though I had been working at the hotel for only a few months, I knew that management usually ignored the results of these yearly surveys. While filling out the survey some months earlier, one worker had explained to me why she marks the lowest rating for every question. "I just go down and mark everything five. I used to write all this stuff down, but I said the same thing every year...now I don't even bother." This attitude of resignation was pervasive. "I just put a big X through it, seal it up and give it to Human Resources," someone else told me.

Having made it up the service elevator and into the meeting room, workers find their managers dressed in suits and standing single-file against the wall. The restaurant and human resources managers, the general manager, and two unfamiliar men whom I later learn are the management company's vice president of human resources and a hired union-busting "consultant" are all in attendance. After we all sit down, Betty—the human resources manager—thanks us for coming and explains the purpose of the meeting: to address the results of the survey. She tells us that managers want to find out why employees are unhappy and "how we can make things better." Betty introduces the two "special guests" who are there to help management "make changes." The management company vice-president of human resources, Gary Guarante, opens by telling the group why he is there. "I have read your surveys and talked to some of you," he told us, "and I have to tell you honestly that I am *shocked* about some of the things that are happening in this hotel... It's unacceptable. It's time to make a change, and that is one of the reasons I am here today."

After Gary finishes his speech, George, one of the more popular restaurant managers, walks to the front of the room and solicits thoughts on questions from the employee survey. For the next twenty minutes, George reads through questions and asks workers why they rated particular categories low. Workers voice pointed complaints when discussing the first few questions, and the meeting seems rather business-as-usual – the sort of ridiculousness anyone who has ever sat through a human resources-led exercise would recognize. But things soon turn more vociferous. When George asks why workers had felt they lacked the “adequate avenues to express grievances,” two organizing committee members seated next to one another rise from their chairs. Walking to the center aisle, Kristi and Luis unroll a scroll of butcher paper on which was copied the petition for union recognition and the signatures of most of their co-workers. Blown up, the petition is impressive. Her voice shaking a little, Kristi begins.

Kristi: We feel that there aren’t adequate avenues for grievances, and we’ve formed a union. We have a petition here signed by workers...

Betty: This isn’t the appropriate time...

Kristi: This petition is signed by almost all the workers. We’ve decided that we want a union, we’ve signed union cards, and we want you to count the cards.

This was the cue for the remaining committee members in the room to stand up. Two more workers stand up and ask Betty to “count the cards.” At this point Gary stands up.

Gary: I am not going to accept the petition.

Kristi: We’ll just leave it here for you.

Gary: You’ve made your point, now please sit down...

Mehrdad: Not until you agree to count the cards.

Gary: If the time comes, we’ll have an election where everyone can vote...

Tammy: We’ve already voted with the union cards. Count the cards.

Luis: We voted, that’s our election, count the cards.

For the next ten minutes, committee members and Gary go back and forth, with committee members refusing to sit down and Gary refusing to accept the petition or “count the cards.” The General Manager, sitting in the very back of the room, remains uncharacteristically silent. Finally, Gary remarks that “this has definitely been a very informative meeting” and officially ends the meeting. As workers stand to leave, someone starts to clap, and soon all the committee members and many of the other workers, emboldened by the interchange, are clapping – the clap that starts off slow and builds to a crescendo. The clap made famous by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Workers effectively ended an anti-union department meeting before it could begin.

Although Bayview management had learned of HERE’s campaign less than a week earlier, HERE local B had been meeting secretly with workers for six months. By the time Kristi and Mehrdad unfurled the petition and defied the managers who asked them to sit down, they and twenty-five other members of the organizing committee had been working closely with HERE staff organizers, practicing how to talk to their co-workers about the union and learning what to expect from management – learning to

anticipate, for example, that events like department meetings were likely to become a display of anti-unionism. The Bayview organizing committee had been painstakingly assembled over many months. With the help of a few key workers who initially guided staff towards workers sympathetic to a union, staff targeted key workers in the hotel – workers considered leaders in their departments, who held the most sway over their co-workers – and visited them at home again and again to win their support and then their commitment. Once these workers showed interest in a union, organizers tested their commitment through a series of small tasks, gathering the addresses of a few of their co-workers, for example, or copying down the weekly work schedule in their department. These workers were asked to talk to other key workers and the committee snowballed, eventually reaching twenty-five members and representing all departments in the hotel.

A few days before the restaurant department meeting, the organizing committee met for its regular weekly meeting and workers spent two hours rehearsing what staff organizers called a “take over” of the meeting. The plan was to use the department meetings as a place for the union’s first public confrontation. Committee members in each of the department meetings were to present the union petition. The goal was both a symbolic show of force and a way to shut-down an anti-union forum for management. Employers regularly use mandatory meetings during union campaigns and union staff believed that workers should set a precedent early on as to how they would respond to management’s attempts to scare or placate workers.

At the committee meeting, workers and union staff carefully rehearsed a confrontation. Organizers played the role of managers and one by one workers practiced “standing up” to them and verbalizing the reasons why they supported the union. After the role-play finished, organizers went around the room and asked for a commitment from each person to speak up in the real meetings. Committee members were used to these types of meetings. Each week, after organizers updated workers on the state of the campaign and revved up the room with a review of “recent victories,” committee members were asked to practice a skill or role-play an interaction or a confrontation with a co-worker or a manager. Committee members were learning how to be organizers, and learning how to stand up to their managers.

The organizing committee is the hallmark of HERE’s brand of unionism. Much more than a figurehead in their union campaigns, the organizing committee is at the heart of both the effort to secure union contracts and the goal of creating a semi-institutionalized mechanism for employees to contest power at their workplaces. While organizing committees exist in other unions, it is the systematic recruitment and training of committee members that makes HERE’s organizing model unique.

Unexpected Revitalization

The intensity of the involvement and the quality of skills of organizing committee members in HERE is unique in the labor movement. Yet a quick look at HERE’s history shows that the union has undergone a remarkable transformation. When mobster and former boss of the Gambino family testified in the 1985 federal hearings on the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union that “[s]omeone else owns the International,” he was referring to the union’s long-standing connections to a powerful crime family. His statement captured not just a moment, but how estranged the rank and file were from their union. In the New York, Chicago and Philadelphia locals, as well as

in parts of the national union, there is good evidence of shady dealings between union leaders and regional organized crime dating back from the very beginnings of the union. When a local officer from New York named Harry Koenig was murdered during the 1936 convention by a mobster worried that Koenig was planning on talking to federal agents, it might have been a *particularly* surprising moment in the day's proceedings, but it wasn't enough to derail the convention from its regular business.

Of course, not all locals were corrupt, but even the leaders of locals not explicitly corrupt were not up to the task of growing their locals or engaging the membership. In many places the union existed in name only, and from its inception at the end of the 19th century through to the mid-1980s, there were periods when it looked as if this very small union might wither away altogether. Although there were pockets of robust unionism and worker involvement, mainly in California, it is fair to characterize HERE as a union that did not seem, at least from the outside, on its way towards national revitalization.

Yet, overlapping with some of the bleaker years of the union, HERE started making it into the news for some of the most interesting and innovative organizing campaigns the American labor movement had seen in a long time. Starting in the mid-1980s, smack in the middle of the Reagan years and following the infamous breaking of the Air Traffic Controllers union in 1981, the union began winning fights with employers using strategies and tactics new to the contemporary labor movement. With an organizing subsidy from the international union, an HERE local of clerical and technical workers at Yale university won a contract after organizers waged a high-profile campaign, eschewing conventional tactics for rank-and-file committees, one-on-one organizing, discourses of gender equality and community pressure against a very visible employer. After this, the international sent staff and resources to Las Vegas to begin a struggle for high member density in the town's hotels and casinos. Today, Las Vegas' local 226 is the largest HERE local in the nation, and workers from this union are heavily involved in the leadership and life of their union.

Change in HERE occurred in the context of membership decline and contracting resources. If we assume, as much of the management literatures does, that contracting organizations with dwindling financial resources tend not to be breeding grounds for innovation (see for example Woodman et al 1993, 313), then HERE seems a particularly unlikely candidate for union revitalization. Successful innovations emerged within HERE during a period of membership decline and the atrophying of collective action among the remaining members. Fortunately, other factors present in the union counteracted the lack of financial resources this union faced, as well as their history of member demobilization. The decentralized structure of this AFL-founded union meant that contradictory organizational conditions could exist within the same national organization. The union could be losing members in some work places while gaining in others; some locals could be in disrepair, or even corrupt, while others thrived; and leaders from different departments or geographical regions could work entirely independent of one another. During years when much of the union functioned as a fairly traditional trade union organization with a demobilized membership and a leadership unconcerned with bringing in new workers or mobilizing the ones they already represented, a small but committed group of reformers found a foothold in parts of the union. These reformers, many of them young activists influenced by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, practiced a new kind unionism: what I refer to as "worker-centered unionism."

Through training, worker committees, one-on-one organizing, support for workplace actions and on-going leadership development, leaders and staff within HERE engender a form of participatory democracy where workers are intensely involved in the daily life of their union *and* where workers are challenged to think about their union and the larger labor movement more broadly – that is, as situated in a larger struggle for justice. This democracy, evidenced in the daily practices of the union, is rich in content, powerful vis-à-vis employers, and organizationally sustainable.

These democratic practices, which are distinct from what came before, were introduced into the organization largely by a staff recruited from *outside* the rank and file. That is, the development of democratic practices within the union has been a top-down project. It is in the context of a severely demobilized workforce that staff-driven democratic projects arise. Workers inexperienced or disconnected from unions—or other democratic, participatory structures—are unlikely to “rise up” spontaneously in the absence of concrete organization and a vision for how their work life, or their union culture, could be different. I argue that in any discussions of union democracy, we should pay careful attention to what is possible in different contexts and time periods.

Worker-centered unionism was successful insofar as it brought new groups of workers into the union, created locals with an unusually engaged membership and gave organizers the political cache to move into more locals and, eventually, into positions of national leadership. The move to worker-centered unionism was a reform movement within the union that ultimately spread to other parts of the organization. Ultimately, reform in HERE consisted of measured efforts of a fairly small group of leaders with an ideological commitment to worker-centered unionism. It resulted in the remaking of a scrappy, sometimes-corrupt organization into one of the most interesting and innovative unions around. The process by which reformers were able to remake this union is the subject of this chapter.

As in SEIU, change was possible in HERE at least in part because of a decentralized structure. In SEIU, this structure allowed for experimentation around the agreed-upon goal of expanding the union’s membership. Also like SEIU, change was made possible by organizers who brought new members into the union, and who had different ideas about how a union should be run. But unlike organizers in the SEIU, organizers in HERE were a smaller and more ideologically homogeneous group, trained rigorously in a model of worker-centered unionism. Organizers in HERE were committed not only to the ends of union expansion, but to a particular way of organizing. The success of this model in bringing new workers to the union helped this cohort of organizers win legitimacy within the international, meaning they were able to fill a vacuum of political leadership when the opportunity arose.

Early Precedents

The first iteration of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union formed in 1866 as the Bartenders and Waiters Union, Local 57, in Chicago. While the union eventually came to organize unskilled workers, indeed to refashion itself as a social-justice organization that represents some of the lowest paid workers in the U.S. economy, its craft beginnings and the focus on what was then considered “skilled” labor structured what happened and what was possible in the following decades. The union’s craft structure provided locals with enough autonomy for the eventual emergence of a

radical vanguard, which built power within the union beneath the radar of national officials.

As was true of craft locals of at the time, this union evolved out of ethnic-based “labor clubs,” in this case clubs made of German and French immigrants who worked in the burgeoning industry of late-nineteenth century food service. Although bartenders were included in the membership of Local 57, waiters—who considered themselves skilled workers, as opposed to unskilled bartenders—dominated the organization in its early years. Other local unions sprung up around the country over the next two decades, the largest and most important of which were based in New York, Boston, Chicago and St. Louis. Following a brief flirtation with district 7475 of the Knights of Labor, in 1891 the Chicago local joined thirteen others in affiliating with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The loose grouping of foodservice locals merged into a single organization of the “Waiters and Bartenders National Union.” Under AFL jurisdictional rules, any existing local of waiters, bartenders or cooks that had an existing AFL charter had to affiliate with the new national union. W.C. Pomeroy, head of the Chicago local, was elected secretary-treasurer—the top post in the union.

While elections for top officer spots were contested in the early years of the national union, reflecting some real authority in that position, locals remained highly autonomous and developed into what we recognize as the distinct structure of craft unionism: locals managed themselves according to “home rule” and connected with the national union only during conventions or during periods of extreme crisis.

The early history of the union is also revealing in that the same explosive combination of corruption and political radicalism that existed at the time of its transformation were present at its beginning. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, a power struggle ensued between the Chicago faction of the union, headed by Pomeroy, and Jere Sullivan, a waiter out of the Salt Lake City local. While both men believed the union should stick to organizing skilled workers, Pomeroy put very little effort into expanding the union’s membership with any new workers; smaller locals languished without any support from the national union, and many locals abandoned their links to the national union, to little notice. When Sullivan was finally elected president in 1899, after formally accusing Pomeroy of embezzlement at the national convention, national membership had shrunk to 990.

Although Sullivan wasn’t the most active of leaders, rarely leaving his office in Cinnicinati except to attend conventions, he did run a clean organization and his regime brought in new members. The Chicago local, still under Pomeroy’s corrupt control, disaffiliated with the national union. In reaction to this, Sullivan attempted to take control of the Chicago local by organizing bartenders into the union.

More generally, after assuming the top post in the union in 1900, Sullivan undertook a project of rebuilding membership, yet did so within the nativist traditions of the national union. During this time hotels, and particularly luxury hotels, were booming, with a burgeoning back-of-the-house workforce of immigrants who worked as housekeepers and restaurant workers in the hotels. Sullivan did not capitalize on these new workers, however, focusing instead on bartenders. He was actively opposed to organizing non-English speaking immigrants and the expanding group of unskilled service workers whose occupations potentially fell under the jurisdiction of the union. Bartenders were mainly Irish and English. The other two groups of workers on the radar

screen of the union at this time were cooks and waiters. Organizing cooks was difficult. Employers used ethnic self-segregation to keep cooks divided, and cooks in general were more likely to think of themselves as skilled craftspeople who didn't fancy sharing an organization with other food service workers. Although waiters were more likely to be pro-union than either the bartenders or the cooks, and indeed were the initial founders of the union, very few were brought into the union during Sullivan's regime.

Instead, bartenders became the public face of the union during Sullivan's reign: he hired bartenders as organizers, sent them around the country to recruit, and ran a bartender on his slate for national office. Sullivan's efforts paid off: large numbers of bartenders poured into the union between 1900-1904, and for the next ten years they made up the majority of the union. While their numbers built up an organization that was in grave danger of disintegrating before it got that far off the ground, politically they were a conservative force in the union. Indeed, organizers would often approach tavern owners before the bartenders themselves, as they were likely to be more amenable to the union.¹⁷

The Seeds of Radical Dissent

Although Sullivan's conservative vision of unionism was winning out during this time period, there nevertheless existed within the union (and the larger labor movement of the time) competing ideas of what a union should be and who should be organized. In particular, the socialists in the union were opposed to the craft unionism of the AFL and of the Waiters and Bartenders union. The local in New York represented, in general, a more radical wing of the union. In New York City, a few hundred socialists had formed the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.

In 1928, Sullivan died in the middle of a term in office. The executive board of the national union, empowered with appointing a new leader to fill vacancies between conventions, selected Ed Flore, a bartender from Buffalo with a more expansive view of the union than his predecessor. Flore instituted both structural and philosophical changes in the national union. He moved to consolidate national power in order to deal with what was becoming wide-spread corruption in the union, a decision that had long-range consequences for the life of the union. Soon after he took over, he began intervening in the affairs of corrupt local unions. But he was limited in what he could do by a constitution that granted locals a great deal of autonomy. Under the constitution as it was written at the time, local leaders resisting Flore's intrusions could challenge the national union in court and come away with injunctions against Flore.

This began to change at the 1929 convention. First, Flore had the "Law Committee" present overwhelming evidence of corruption and misuse of funds. On the basis of this report, delegates passed an (albeit vague) amendment that said the General President "shall have authority to enforce discipline upon Local Unions and members thereof." In the words of one of the delegates to the convention, "What he desired of the convention delegates was that they invest him with greater authority than before to intervene in the affairs of local unions, adjust disputes, or to discipline officers and members guilty of dishonest practices or of 'disturbances'" (Rubin and Obermeier 1943). Second, with the backing of San Francisco local president Hugo Ernst and the radical wing of the San Francisco local, Flore made other moves to increase the power of

¹⁷ This was because tavern owners, under the specter of prohibition, saw the union as their ally in the temperance fight.

the national union and increase the possibility for a more progressive unionism. At the same convention, delegates passed an amendment to the constitution that made the honoring of picket lines of other locals mandatory and affiliation with local Joint Executive Boards a priority (Cobble 1991, 87-88). In other words, he advocated for more national coordination across autonomous locals. Indeed, from 1929 to 1934, the union was restructured along semi-industrial lines.

Besides instituting constitutional and structural changes, Flore prioritized organizing to an extent unprecedented in the union. Far from the craft unionism of his predecessors, his vision of the organization was of an industrial-based union representing all culinary workers. This was in large part the result of the time in which Flore was in office; he led the union during the years when labor more generally experienced a surge in organizing activity after the passage of the 7-A clause of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which gave workers the right to organize free of employer obstruction. He pushed the international to funnel 40% of its resources into organizing,¹⁸ founded drives known as “organizing springs” each year, and worked to build consensus for organizing among local unions (Josephson 1956). In the an issue of the *Catering Industry Employee*, Flore reflected the time when he noted that “The strength of a union is measured by the percentage of workers that are organized.”¹⁹

Flore died unexpectedly in 1945. The national union’s radicalism, however, continued relatively unabated after Flore’s death. The executive board, in a closely divided vote, chose Hugo Ernst as president – who was then secretary-treasurer of the union and had been a bartender from the San Francisco local. Ernst, known as “that dapper little dandy of a labor leader” (O’Connor 1957) was born in Croatia, and had run unsuccessfully for congress on the socialist ticket in the 1920s. He championed racial and ethnic integration within locals (for which he was staunchly criticized) and as early as 1923 was pushing an unpopular proposal for equal pay between waiters and waitresses (Cobble 1991).²⁰ As such, he was a controversial, if also popular, figure in the union.

Despite his less-than-overwhelming mandate (he won by one vote, which also happened to be his own), Ernst quickly moved to make some important decisions. Most importantly in terms of the future of the union was his commitment to new organizing. He appointed Jack Weinberger – a “lifelong student of the labor movement and his own industry” – to be organizing director. Weinberger and his rejuvenated department were flooded with new staffers. Weinberger hired seven “national organizers” to head up organizing drives in the different key regions of the country, and within these regions the union hired thirteen state organizers and eleven roving organizers to take part in a slew of new organizing drives.

In many ways Ernst seemed a foreshadow of today’s progressive labor leaders. He began the national’s Research and Education department in 1947, located in

¹⁸ When Ernst became president, he appointed a black organizer, the first black international organizer in the union. He also had organizational ties to the NAACP. In a 1952 article in *The Nation*, Ernst calls on the democrats to address the “murderous assaults” by the Klu Klux Klan. *The Nation*, May 10, 1952.

²⁰ Still, in 1938, when arguing for the elimination of a vice presidential slot reserved for a woman, Ernst remarked that “I believe you good sisters are clannish, when you insist that there should be more representation, proportionately speaking, than the number would warrant” (185).

Cincinnati, and began to set up regional “institutes” that were related to the education department and trained rank-and-file members in leadership skills. He was also a founder of Labor’s League for Political Education, an AFL program to elect progressive candidates.

1947 was a banner year in terms of growth. The union grew by one hundred thousand members, peaking in 1947 at 402,000. The national union spent twice as much money funding organizing as they did under Flore, and they ran organizing campaigns in six cities: Chicago, Pittsburg, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis and Los Angeles. In these mostly successful campaigns, the new members were workers who had not yet been organized systematically into the union: waitresses, cooks, kitchen assistants, and hotel service workers. In areas where the union was the strongest, they came to effectively control, for a while, the labor pool in several key cities (in the north). Furthermore, the union participated not only in their own campaigns, but also in an AFL campaign to organize in the south. They gave \$100,000 to this effort, sending organizing “youngsters” like Charles Paulsen and Bert Ross to the area.

During this time, the national union also continued its piecemeal process of centralization. Yet where Flore had wanted the authority to trustee locals in order to weed out mob corruption, the focus of the Executive Board was now on a different threat: communists. Resolutions passed at the 1947 convention barred any member of the KKK, the Communist Party, or the Columbians (fascists) from being part of the union. The president was given the power to remove people belonging to these groups.

More significantly in terms of the union’s later history, in the late 1940s the Executive Board asked Ernst to trustee those New York locals suspected of being led by communists (Locals 1, 6, and 89). Before Ernst could act, however, New York’s Joint Board president from Local 1, Sam Spitzer, got a court order that the local not be put under trusteeship. Realizing that the constitutional changes made under Flore were too weak to hold up properly in court, the Executive Board introduced new changes to the constitution in 1949, which permitted the president to declare a “state of emergency” within a local. In the name of anti-communism, the national union would gain important new authority that would help it in future decades. In the next few years, international organizer Bert Ross successfully trustee Local 6 under the new Article XI, section 18 of the national’s constitution. What was the extent of communism in the union? During the 1930s, communists had begun entering the union, especially in New York and Chicago. Yet from the perspective of the international at the time, the communists were an important opposition to the racketeers. It was only in the climate of the late 1940s and 1950s that these radicals became a problem with which the international union had to deal.

The emergent anti-communism in the union was only one sign of the union’s gradual retrenchment into conservatism and corruption. In 1947, the Taft-Hartley Amendment to the Wagner Act passed, which was extended to the hotel and restaurant industries in 1955. Organizing stagnated under the presidency of Ed Miller, who was elected after Ernst’s death. By the 1970s barely one-tenth of the culinary work force was covered by a collective bargaining agreement, and the total number of unionized waitresses was less than it had been in the 1950s (*Waitresses and Their Unions*, p. 193).

Yet while the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s would bring stagnation and decline, the actual organization of the union was different than it had been in its early phase of

disarray. In the 1950s the international union had a larger treasury and more authority than it had before, and was more likely to step into a local that was having problems. That being said, the union was still far too decentralized for the national union to have any real impact on national strategy. And even when the national union was doing well, local autocracy bred a type of corruption that was hard to combat, even with increased authority.

Keeping it in the Family: HERE's Paradoxical Renewal

The roots of HERE's unlikely revitalization were in decisions made under the presidency of Edward Hanley. Hanley first joined the union in Chicago where he worked as a bartender and where he was eventually elected as a business agent. Hanley came of age in the labor movement during a time when back-room deals with employers and political machines were considered politics as usual, particularly in cities like Chicago, and Hanley consolidated his power within this labor-management context.

Throughout his tenure, the international union was under the scrutiny of the federal government. Hanley was accused of having close ties to the mafia, and of "reward[ing] family and friends, especially from the Chicago, IL, area with positions... without evaluating the needs of the union" (Mullenberg in Jacobs 2006, 214). In 1984, a Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations observed that Hanley had "used mergers of locals, international trusteeships of locals, and personnel transfers to solidify the international union's control over local union officers and treasuries" (Ibid). Hanley was also thought to have appointed mobsters to head Local 54 in Atlantic City and to have presided over mob rule of Local 100 in New York. A 1990 civil RICO suit against Local 54 charged its leaders with threatening to kill union members who opposed or ran against mob-backed candidates. Finally, in September of 1995, the Department of Justice filed a civil RICO complaint against the entire International Union, alleging a pattern of corruption and embezzlement stretching back to the 1970s (Jacobs 2006, 215-217).

Given these allegations, it is not entirely surprising that union membership stagnated under Hanley's presidency. When he was first elected president in 1973, his union had 450,000 members. Like many labor leaders throughout the country, he and his leadership team were unprepared for the employer onslaught and industry reorganization that began in the late 1970s and continued full steam during the Reagan administration. The union lost most of its membership in smaller restaurants; meanwhile, hotels consolidated and fought the union in clever new ways, and employers were no longer willing to accept renewal of contracts, and Hanley did little to combat these changes.

But the same kind of informality and familiarity that allowed for corruption in the union also made space for a different kind of "family" to emerge: a vanguard of committed organizers who would establish and promote a worker-centered model of unionism that would spread throughout the international and locals. Hanley helped this process along by bringing a "maverick" into the union whose lasting effects on the culture of the organization cannot be overstated. Vincent Sirabella – known in the union as "Vinnie the red" or "Vinnie the Bolshoi" – was a rank-and-file activist from the Rhode Island local who volunteered for the union for 20 years before Hanley appointed him to his first full-time position in the union as the trustee for a local in New Haven. Eventually rising to the top elected position in this union, Sirabella later went on to be the business manager of local 35 at Yale. He would go on to serve as the trustee of seven

other locals as he was sent in by the international to clean up and reorganize key locals in the union (“The Organization Man,” *The Nation* 2001). In 1980, Hanley appointed Sirabella to be Western Regional Director, and the next year he was elected as an international vice-president. In 1983 Hanley appointed him organizing director, and was after this that Sirabella—with financial support and political protection from Hanley—started building an organizing team in the union that would ultimately rise to power.

John Wilhelm, president of HERE since 1998 and the Director of Hospitality in the merged UNITE HERE, has argued that Hanley served as a bridge between two eras in the union. “I don’t want to argue that Hanley was perfect,” Wilhelm said, “but he was a transition figure...[and] I wouldn’t be president—or someone like me—without him” (Ibid). The story, now infamous in labor circles, is that Sirabella—after being given funding by Hanley—recruited Wilhelm with an advertisement in a New Haven newspaper that reads “Wanted: labor leader trainee, long hours, low pay, must be single...” (Ibid). This same idea emerges from an interview with one of Sirabella’s first hires in New Haven:

Vinny was always kind of a progressive guy and had a real sense of class struggle. He came from a working class background. His father was a cook. His mother was a chambermaid in Providence, RI. And I think was seen as a bit an outsider by most of the powers that were in HERE way back.

As a “bit of an outsider,” Sirabella seemed open to tactics and strategies that were foreign to most of the labor leaders of the time. Yet at the same time he would come to have the legitimacy (and resources) within the union to promote these new practices in a way that would ultimately transform the organization.

Most significantly, Sirabella promoted the hiring of staff from outside the union. Specifically, he wanted to tap into the idealism and energy of young college students animated by the social movements of the time, as well as community organizers who were ready to try something new. One long-time organizer with the union describes his vision (and the wanted ad) this way:

Vinny sat back and saw that during the whole upheaval of the first civil rights movement and then the anti-war movement, that all these college type kids were coming out and wanting to do something to change the world...And he thought “This is nuts that the labor movement is not tapping into this.” And that was always his kind of dream. So when he finally got some money to hire...I mean he put an ad in the New Haven Register and said “Wanted: Future Labor Leader. Long Hours, low pay” and a number.

In the context of labor politics of the 1970s and 1980s, the hiring of outsiders into a union was remarkable for a couple of reasons. First, traditionally unions have been loathe to staff their organizations with people who do not have experience in the industry the union represents, and in fact the constitutions of many unions expressly forbid it.²¹ Second, even if unions were open to bringing in people who did not come up through the ranks,

²¹ The UAW and CWA often level critiques against SEIU and HERE for being staff-dominated, citing their own organizations as inherently more democratic for promoting only from the rank and file. We should note, however, that there are internal hiring preferences in these unions that favor more educated and “intellectual” workers. For example, the UAW has hired a fair number of graduate students onto their staff.

labor unions were not automatically the top choice of employment for young activists looking for work. This meant that it mattered not just that the organizations to which these activists were coming to work were labor unions, but that they were *particular* unions whose work and vision resonated with a sense of who young activists saw themselves to be. In this case, it was the charismatic and highly skilled Sirabella who provided them with a vision of what their work meant within a larger political context, as well as a concrete sense of what union work entailed.

Sirabella is a legendary figure in the union among organizers who were recruited or trained by him. In his Eulogy in the 1995 Labor Almanac, Wilhelm put it this way:

Vinnie had an intense commitment to the idea of justice for working people. In particular, he looked out for those with the least prestige in our society and our industry: maids, dishwashers, porters, and others who are often overlooked. He had a fierce belief in equality of class, race, and sex. Along with that, he had an intense faith in the members. He believed that if you stood strongly for workers' rights-and if you told them the truth- they would do heroic things. And for him, they did do heroic things, because he inspired that in them (Ibid).

Another organizer who was recruited with Wilhelm describes him similarly:

He had this idea that it's all about the workers. He came out of the rank and file, but it was more than this. He understood the importance of bringing workers in and up in a way not many of us did back then. I mean, he really *felt* this.

Sirabella's organizational philosophy – that “it's all about the workers” – resonated with one organizer who had spent 6 years working in the United Farm Workers. He describes his time with the farm workers as “the best thing that ever happened in my life,” then goes on to compare Sirabella's model of unionism with that of the farm workers:

Well it's get close to the workers, that's the first thing. Get in there and spend time with them. Whether it's house visits or at the work site. Spend time with the workers. Identify the potential leaders in there and then challenge, recruit, cajole, get those leaders to start working with us and then back them up when the fight starts. So it's very simple and straight forward. It starts with being close in with the workers. Just spend time in there with them and things start to suggest themselves. Which is the message from the farm workers all the time.

There was, then, a favorable convergence between the kind of unionism Sirabella was advocating and the previous organizing experience of activists who had come to the organization; for most of them, Sirabella's model was simply what it meant to do union work. One longtime organizer with HERE sees the connections to his UFW work even more explicitly:

People see us as being a legit union for overwhelmingly the working poor. I mean the face of our union is a 5'1", 97 pound room cleaners And they are the salt of the earth. I mean [] used to talk about how he thought it was a logical transition from working for the UFW to working for HERE because these were sort of the urban farm workers.

Not only were the practices Sirabella promoted recognizable to farmworker organizers, but the workers for which HERE was responsible were analogous as well.

Yet while some of the outsiders who came into the union had been involved with the UFW – the farmworkers union made a practice out of pulling students out of college and onto the national boycott campaign – many had no previous experience in unions. In 1985 Sirabella got money from the international union to hire a slew of new organizers, and another cohort of staff enter the union. In the summer of that same year, Sirabella and Wilhelm took a group of thirty-five organizers—recruited from locals as well as from the international staff—to a retreat center for three weeks of intensive training. This training was tied to organizing efforts that were to take place in five regions: Chicago, Washington, DC, Boston, and Southern California.

This three-week intensive training would be remarkable in the labor movement today, where despite all the organizing rhetoric, very little time is devoted to training novices. But this was in 1985, no less, when organizing was considered simple, entry-level work that anyone could do. For Sirabella, on the other hand, organizing was a craft, and training was a regular component of bringing organizers into the union. Attesting to the impact these training sessions had on organizers, those who took part in them still remember some of the specifics:

From the very beginning, the first couple weeks that the 4 of us were hired, John and Vinny kind of laid out this training thing for us. And in fact there was a woman who had been hired from the, at the time Hartford local. This is New Haven. And also as I recall there was a guy from New York who came. We went to a motel in Stratford, CT, a union motel and literally for 5 days or 6 days, whatever it was the first week, we had classes. I mean they gave us a bunch of stuff to read, including the book that was history of our union...and a couple of other histories. Some books on arbitration and just lots of general background stuff and then did classes.

Another HERE leader puts it this way:

The training we got at...it was rare at this time for organizers to get anything except a vague assignment and maybe a little money. But he [Vincent] took us through communicating with workers, moving them past fear and then recruiting them for committees. We didn't know what we were doing, nothing too much about strategy yet, but this felt like the right thing to be doing. And it was more training than most organizers ever get in their whole career!

The organizers who were recruited in the years between 1983-85 had a profound effect on the organization as a whole. Sirabella recruited them, trained them, and sent them out as “missionaries” of sorts to build a new culture in the organization. These missionaries retained the philosophy in which they were trained and went on to mentor others in the same way. Of the twenty-five organizers recruited for that one training, thirteen are in current leadership positions in the union. They all use the same kind of language to describe the work they do and their commitment to their organization – some variation of “it’s all about the workers.”

Part of what is remarkable about these organizers’ experiences with HERE is the degree to which they were able to develop and experiment with worker-centered unionism without much guidance from or interference by the international union. One leader remembers that he and a friend were responsible for a thirty-five hospital strike in

1980 that would involve over 5,000 people, and neither of them felt like they knew exactly what they were doing. “I remember it was like whatever happens, act like you know what you’re doing. That was the slogan we adopted!” Another leader remembers the improvisational context within which he helped to develop the idea of “organizing committees,” or groups of workers that would lead organizing campaigns:

Well, I mean, yeah, [Sirabella] believed in rank and file negotiating committees, and workers having a voice and really representing themselves. Now, how it was actually going to play out in detail, right—there wasn’t really a tremendous structure.... As the dust settled after we did the shop stewards and stuff, then it was like “now what?”

While Sirabella promoted particular values among his cadre of organizers, the process by which these values were interpreted into practice was informal and experimental.

Organizers’ autonomy to practice worker-centered unionism was at least in part a result of a *lack* of organizational structure. During Muellenberg’s investigation of the international union in the mid-1990s he found that it “suffered from a management deficit and did not subscribe to generally accepted business practices,” and remarked that there was “no budget, no organizational chart, no job descriptions for employees, and no manual” (Muellenberg, in Jacobs 2006, 218). This vacuum, which was the result of corruption throughout the union, also permitted Sirabella and an emerging cohort of young organizers to develop their model without inhibition.

The end result, then, was a kind of “family” of organizers with incredibly high levels of commitment to the union. One organizer remembers how working for HERE “wasn’t a job” but rather “was a lifestyle... a religion, a philosophy. I mean all of us took cuts in pay to take the job.” Sirabella was clear with organizers that this calling should come before one’s own family, that organizers “shouldn’t even be married... or have kids or anything.” She goes on, “I found... I had bought into that. I mean to this day I don’t have kids. So that says something for Vincent’s influence.” This is consistent with another leader who thinks of organizing as “like building the church without the crutch of religion.”

Organizing to Organize, Local by Local

The relatively small number of organizers who came into HERE during the late 1970s and early 1980s, in turn, became a tightly-knit and politically savvy group of organizers and leaders. Their experiences of campaign success, of constantly defending the very existence of an organizing department in their locals, and of slowly moving a program of change through a union still headed up by a member of an old guard all forged a deep commitment to their work in the union. The success of these organizers-cum-leaders, including their campaigns and political maneuverings, ultimately led to their model of unionism before dominant in the organization, the culmination of which was the election of a major reformer.

Interviews with HERE leaders reveal certain patterns in the ways in which organizers worked to establish organizing as a priority within local unions. During Hanley’s reign, trusteeships became more and more common, for two related reasons. Hanley himself was accused of using trusteeships for his own corrupt purposes, to consolidate power and finances. Second, in *response* to corruption allegations against

HERE locals, the federal government imposed monitorships and trusteeships on several locals as well.

The openness of the international union to trusteeships (both voluntarily and with the encouragement of the federal government) helped organizers move their agenda in stagnating (and, in the case of government-mandated trusteeships, corrupt) locals. One leader in Southern California remembers how she was initially “pissed off” about the imposition of trusteeship on her local, yet came around to it when she realized that the trustees—trainees of Sirabella—would actually help her advance a progressive agenda:

So eventually I realized that... we're not going to give up something and be on the outside when we can be on the inside. This is what we wanted all along. And we should be a part of it. We earned it. And we should be a part of making the change. So why should we be on the outside?

After the trusteeship, the local was much more closely in contact with Wilhelm and other international organizers who were steeped in the model of worker-centered unionism, and promoted the importance of organizing within the local:

Wilhelm really impressed upon us when he got us through the '92 hotel negotiations, every opportunity at the committee level, with me at the staff level, that we had to organize. And unless we organized, we were gonna find ourselves shrinking and facing negotiations. Negotiations were going to be much tougher because if we didn't grow, if we didn't organize the rest of the industry, without a doubt, we were just gonna lose members. And so for reasons of gaining the power needed to further improve and to keep improving our contracts, he really continuously talked about that. And I knew it theoretically, but when you have to face the day-to-day things that happen in running a local, it could get away from me.

Trusteeships helped weed out incompetent leadership. Yet even when Sirabella's organizers were given formal authority over locals, the process by which they transformed the culture of the local was often arduous. One leader in Southern California remembers struggling with how to make organizing a priority in the local after assuming power with a trusteeship. She and others “came up with this notion that we ought to completely mix the non-union organizing with the internal organizing,” meaning that “everyone on staff” had to both work with existing members and work helping to organize new members:

And the idea was that we were going to involve our internal union leaders with organizing and mesh, bring the two together as resources to complement each other. The non-union workers would get a chance to see how the unionized workers, what they had to say about why it was important to be unionized. And the unionized workers had a chance to see "Oh my god, this is what's non-union." Compare and contrast the two. And the same thing for the staff because as long as the staff didn't feel the urgency of non-union organizing, would they mobilize their internal leaders?

Through changing staff assignments, forcing *everyone* to be involved in new worker organizing, organizers in this trustee local attempted a kind of reeducation among those for whom new organizing had never been a priority.

The challenge was even greater in other locals, like Local 100 in New York, in which members had become disillusioned after decades of corruption and apathy among union leadership. After a government-mandated trusteeship, organizers trained by Sirabella came into the local and tried to inspire members to take ownership of the organization. One leader remembers this process in detail:

Our message had to be to them, "Listen we're gonna tell you that we're gonna run the union the way a union is supposed to be run. It sounds like what you're saying is you have a vision of a union that's different from the one in the past. We're saying that we share that vision. But we're not asking you to trust us. It's way past that in this local. We're saying 'Hear what we say. Watch what we do.' But you're going to have to come on and help because we're not gonna be able to do it. That's not part of our vision."

This leader was concerned about how long it would take members to become reengaged, and was surprised at how easy it was to convince workers to rebuild the union. This helped solidify his commitment to a worker-centered model of unionism:

And we were wondering "Is it gonna take 3 months to get that? Is it gonna take 6 months? Is it gonna take 2 years to get them to work with us?" In most cases it took like 45 minutes. I mean when we just came in and said "OK, you're right. It's bad. The more angry you are about it, the more we're in agreement." "Well why should we believe you? The international..." "No, no. We're saying we're gonna run it this way and watch it." And literally what happened in these meetings, I'd never met these people. They'd come up afterwards and go "You know in the beginning when I was cursing and screaming at you? Don't mind me. I'm just like that. Let's do this." They were like in the first meeting, in the earliest meetings... [P]eople want a union. They need a union and they're willing to give the union a shot if the union sounds like it's for real.

Over the course of a few years, given leaders' success at rebuilding the local on clean foundations, the government allowed the organization to have elections, during which time Sirabella's organizers had "pulled in more people and recruited people" and had "replaced the old staff..." As a result, the elections in 1994 brought in team who was close with Sirabella and Wilhelm. Slowly, Sirabella's organizers helped to shift people's thinking from being merely a "good union," returning people's phone calls and negotiating contracts on time, to "organizing the unorganized. So we had to organize the staff."

Trusteeships were not the only way organizers worked to legitimate organizing within locals. One leader in Northern California remembers the process by which he helped reorganize the local so that it could focus on organizing. This began by organizing a campaign around a new leader who could replace the ineffectual president of the local. When people asked him what the difference was between the old president and the candidate he was supporting, he said that "one way to think about it is that myself

and other people who support [the new candidate] are the only people with enough integrity so that if we don't win we will quit. Because I won't work for these other people and I don't think they'd want me." His vocational commitment to a particular idea of unionism, then, became part of his argument about why people should support him and the new leadership. Yet even after his candidate won, the priorities of the union could not shift immediately. The leader remembers that he wasn't able to focus on "organizing organizing," but rather had to focus on "reorganizing the union." As it was, organizing victories would be "turned over to the representational part of the union and... fall[] apart. There was no organization." So this leader had to spend a lot of energy building committees throughout the union's existing membership. Another leader involved in this effort remembers the process similarly:

Well, you know how if you have something you want to do and you just start doing it and gradually the structure follows you?.... So that we started doing it and then it was given to us.

As a team within the local, these organizers were able gradually to shift the organization's orientation.

Scaling Up While Staying Worker Centered

Organizational change in HERE is the story of the spread of a particular conception of unionism, a model I call worker-centered unionism. Vincent Sirabella and John Wilhelm developed worker-centered unionism within a context of union decline, when HERE was losing members and the members that remained had little connection to their locals beyond paying their monthly dues. Worker-centered unionism demanded that staff and elected leaders put workers at the center of managing a local (or running an organizing campaign). Within locals in disrepair, staff first sought to gain the trust of union members – a process that union staff members found to be much easier than they expected. As one local president said, "Once we started returning workers' phone calls, they could see we were different than the old leadership!" This process of rebuilding trust may or may not have been as easy as leaders insisted, but the story of the ease of building (or rebuilding) trust itself became part of the narrative of worker-centered unionism: workers, proponents of worker-centered unionism asserted, *want* to be active union members.

Among the practitioners of worker-centered unionism, any obstacle to worker involvement, any criticism of the union or hesitancy to join or be active in the union, could be explained with one simple word: fear. Workers who will not sign a union membership card or who refuse to come to a meeting or walk a picket line do so because they are scared. The main job of union organizers? To get workers to "overcome" their fears. Organizers in other unions use the concept of fear in their organizing, but in no other union have I seen it used as systematically – in trainings, in staff meetings, in leaders explaining their daily work – as in HERE.

This model emerged most clearly in the campaign to organize the clerical and technical unit at Yale University in the mid-1980s. John Wilhelm, under the national direction of Vincent Sirabella, successfully organized a clerical and technical unit after other unions failed. HERE's strategy was radically different than the strategy other unions deployed – unions like the United Auto Workers or the Organization of

Professional and Technical Employees. Rather than asking interested workers to quickly sign union authorization cards, and then watching as employers discredit the union and decimate support among the workers, Wilhelm and his staff (armed with a hefty organizing subsidy from the national union) organized workers a full year before asking them to sign union cards. The idea was that workers needed to learn to trust the organizers and needed to learn how to be union members before the campaign went into full-on fight mode with Yale. Key to this was recruiting key workers onto an “organizing committee” and teaching them how to mobilize their co-workers and – of course – addressing the “fears” workers have when confronting their employers. This all happened face-to-face; unlike other unions that relied heavily on detailed literature to teach workers about the union, Wilhelm insisted that fliers wouldn’t help workers “overcome their fears.”²² This strategy of building a strong worker organization before taking on Yale paid off: HERE won the unit after a strike in which two-thirds of the workers (1700 people) participated. While there were other important aspects of the campaign that contributed to its success – including framing the campaign as a comparable worth issue and creatively mobilizing public support within New Haven, which were also new tactics in the labor movement of the time – the Yale campaign is significant in the history of HERE because success at Yale showed that this new worker-centered model could actually be successful in growing the union.

This model would be applied in local unions nationwide over the next two decades. In 1987, Sirabella assigned Wilhelm to be HERE’s Western Regional Director, and Wilhelm’s main assignment became working with a newly elected leadership in Las Vegas’s culinary union, Local 226. The local had recently suffered a crushing blow and something of a wake up call when, in 1984, a citywide strike resulted in the union losing six casinos and a huge number of its members. Wilhelm worked with Local 226’s new leadership developing a core of worker-leaders who could take on the expanding hotel industry in the city. Building a strong membership base went hand-in-hand with deploying new organizing tactics in the city. When Las Vegas’s first mega-resort opened in 1989, Local 226 was able to negotiate card-check neutrality with the hotel, followed soon by a first contract. This victory set a precedent, as the union would go on to win neutrality agreements with Caesars Palace, Bally’s, Circus Circus and other casinos soon after (Greenhouse, 2004). Card-check agreements and a reinvigorated base of worker-leaders meant that the union was able to organize over 22,000 into the union over the next fifteen years, more than doubling its size and giving it the distinction of being the fastest growing private sector union in the country.

At the same time the local’s membership expanded, Wilhelm trained staff to in turn train workers to engage in prolonged collective action, demonstrated most powerfully by a strike at the Frontier Hotel that lasted more than six years (1991-1998). Once again with an organizing committee at the center of the campaign’s leadership, five hundred and fifty workers from the hotel staffed a picket line that ran twenty-four hours a day for the duration of the strike. Moreover, the strike generated extensive solidarity from other social justice organizations from around the city and country.

Wilhelm and a core of leaders, all trained in the precepts of worker-centered unionism, were thus able to transform Local 226 from an ineffectual (sometimes corrupt) union into one of the most vibrant in the modern labor movement. Today, the level of

worker involvement and leadership continues to be an exemplar of a strong rank-and-file organization. The pattern in Las Vegas was replicated elsewhere. By spending time at other locals and bringing in staff from other locals to spend time at Local 226 – locals that the union had put under trusteeship in a lot of places – leaders from Las Vegas local exported this model to other places, including locals in Orlando, New York, Oakland, Los Angeles and Chicago. I saw this process clearly during my research at Local 2850 in Oakland. The lead organizer had cut her teeth in Local 226 and was now working at 2850, and the local president in turn was spending most of his time working with staff in Chicago.

When Wilhelm assumed the presidency in 1998, he began assigning elected leaders from transformed locals to help other locals undertake similar transformative processes. For example, as I just mentioned, Jim Dupont, the past president of Oakland's Local 2850, traveled to Chicago to train members of Local 1. Whereas SEIU under Andy Stern perfected the top-down trusteeship, HERE's methods were sometimes less heavy-handed in that Wilhelm targeted locals with leadership turnover and less often imposed trusteeships. Rather than forcibly removing leaders, leaders in HERE would revitalize locals from the inside out—running campaigns to increase the local's membership, while in the process encouraging the old guard to step aside.

The HERE model for revitalization, of course, has come with a price. Its commitment to the slow work of leadership development means that its growth has never matched the growth of SEIU, so that while it has developed a large number of well-trained leaders, it has never been able to match the resources of SEIU or other well-endowed unions. As a result, in 2004, HERE merged with the Union of Needletrades and Industrial Technical Employees (UNITE), a union with extensive financial resources but whose membership had been displaced as textile work moved overseas. Yet while the merger made sense from the standpoint of the two locals' respective resources, the cultures of the two unions varied tremendously, and in recent months it has appeared to fray.

Chapter Four: The SEIU Cultures of Creativity

In recent years, no other union in the U.S. has attracted as much attention as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). SEIU's campaigns to organize janitors in Los Angeles, Denver and Washington DC enchanted labor scholars interested in tactical innovation, immigrant organizing and the revitalization of the labor movement. In numerous case studies of the Justice for Janitors campaigns, the union receives high praise for creativity and a willingness to pair raucous tactics with clever corporate research and strategic employer targeting. Some labor scholars have noted the ability of the union to make important organizational changes, mainly at the local level, that remain elusive to other unions and inhibit the ability of most unions to respond to changing economic and political circumstances. In 1994, for example, Michael Piore boldly asserted that within the SEIU "managerial reforms seemed to have addressed virtually all of the major organizational problems that had undermined the renovative process elsewhere in the labor movement" (513). Researchers have also found an unusual (for the labor movement) level of social movement-oriented staff members in the SEIU – a relatively new phenomenon in the post-WWII labor movement known for years as a bastion of conservatism. Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman, in a study of local unions in the San Francisco Bay Area, find that SEIU (and HERE) locals are much more likely to have "revitalized" than other service unions, in large part because of activists who worked in the locals and a national union oriented towards promoting local regime change. In a study of union leadership of which I was a part, Ganz et al find that "social reformers" – or people committed broadly to ideas of social justice – were much more likely to find satisfying and movement-building work in SEIU and HERE. Finally, in her book on the explosion of unionization in Los Angeles, Ruth Milkman writes in *LA Story* of the important role of SEIU in leading a progressive movement in the city. Beyond the academic universe, SEIU and its leaders – most notably, president Andy Stern – have garnered an unusual number of reports in the press lauding their new tactics, including a front page *New York Times* magazine profile of Stern in 2003.

Of course, not everyone following the SEIU has interpreted its upsurge in a positive light. Criticisms of the SEIU run the gamut, but much of the recent criticism concerns the practice of merging together local unions in the same industry and geographic region into so-called mega-locals, often under the objections of local union leadership (though it is important to note that some leaders and members of local unions see their union as benefiting from mergers into bigger organizations, because it means increased resources and support for bargaining). Critics of mega-locals see the dissolution or restructuring of local leadership as synonymous with the destruction of a more "democratic" form of unionism. Other criticisms of the SEIU center around the kinds of bargaining relationships the SEIU has pursued, such as labor-management partnerships (with the HMO giant Kaiser, for example), and agreements to curtail union-led objections to working conditions in exchange for employer neutrality in unionization drives (with nursing homes in the west and northwest).²³ Regardless of how one understands the

²³ It is worth noting that these debates over SEIU practice exist almost entirely at the level of elected leadership --including rank-and-file leadership-- and staff. I found that most union

current debates within the union, the transformation of the SEIU into the largest and most extensively restructured union in today's labor movement is an interesting phenomenon given that most unions have made few fundamental changes in their structures and practices. How did this formerly decentralized AFL union representing low-paid janitors ultimately morph into the largest union in the AFL-CIO – a union now criticized for its massive centralization and dominance in the labor movement? Who and what was responsible for the shift?

With 2.2 million members, SEIU is now the largest union in the country. SEIU represents a broad range of service workers in both the private and the public sector, including hospital, nursing home and home health care workers, janitors, security guards, child care workers, state and local government workers and assorted workers in the non-profit sector. Unlike other unions representing the private sector workforce, SEIU has been growing steadily since the late 1970s. Table 4.1 illustrates membership growth from 1975-2005.²⁴

In scale and scope, the SEIU has undertaken the most dramatic internal reorganization of any union in the union movement. I date 1996 as the year the union “transformed,” since this was the year Andy Stern was elected president and began implementing the most far-reaching structural changes in the organization. Beginning in 1996, the union centralized power at the national level in order to better coordinate organizing and bargaining and to exert more influence over what locals were doing. National staff began intervening into the affairs of locals that were not adequately in tune with the national plan, putting many local unions in receivership and appointing national staff as directors when locally elected leaders were pushed out. Per capita dues were raised in order to generate more funds for organizing,²⁵ locals were merged to form bigger locals, corrupt local leaders were kicked out or offered incentives to resign and locals were required to comply with a set of organizational goals that went beyond the locals' immediate concerns. All this was done with an eye towards coordinating organizing and bargaining on a more national level. As Andy Stern said, “We needed to be one national union before we could have a national relationship with employers.”

Strategically oriented unions, like SEIU, recognize that strategies and tactics are context-specific. Organizing construction workers in rural California is different from organizing janitors in New York, and strategies and tactics that worked for a union in an earlier period won't necessarily continue to work. Rather than relying on a single tactic (strikes being the most obvious example), strategic unions will figure out where they have the most leverage and attempt to pressure the employer on multiple fronts. SEIU uses a broad range of strategies and tactics in different industries and with different employers.

SEIU's leadership has also changed, with reformers coming into the union at all the major levels of authority. The majority of the union's top leadership, which includes

members, unless they have been mobilized by leaders and staff in support of a particular position, are largely unaware of these kinds of debates or even of major restructurings within their union.

²⁴ The figures are taken from SEIU international convention reports from the years listed.

²⁵ Per capita are dues money every member is required to pay to the union; the local union in turn pays dues to the international union based on their membership. Today, per capita to the national union is \$7.50 per member per month, not including extra fees that locals pay to an organizing fund.

the national president, the national secretary-treasurer, the division (sector) directors and the presidents of the major local unions, came to SEIU as college-educated, activist “social reformers” committed to broad ideals of social justice.²⁶ Many were “outsiders” to the union, with little or no experience in the industry or with unions in general. These outsiders were hired by insiders who saw the potential value of tapping into the energy and skills of young social movement activists, or by insiders who were in need of staff in an organization that was growing exponentially.

Today, these organizers run the union and, not surprisingly, organizing is the union’s highest priority. The national union has a budget of about \$135 million, and \$84 million, or 64%, is budgeted for organizing.²⁷ The union’s constitution requires that local unions spend no less than 20% of their local budgets on organizing.²⁸

What Made Change Possible in SEIU?

While changes have been particularly noteworthy since Andy Stern was elected president in 1996, the union’s capacity for change was built in the decades prior to Stern. Leadership was built in organizing campaigns, the political power of reformers was generated through organizing successes, and the resources needed for further organizing was garnered through membership growth. This chapter traces the history of SEIU in an effort to explain the conditions under which Andy Stern was able to rise to power and implement the structural changes enumerated above.

How was change in the SEIU similar to or different than the process of change in HERE? In this chapter, I show that the process by which change occurred in SEIU was as different from HERE as their respective conceptions of what transformation meant. As we have seen, change in HERE occurred in the context of membership decline and contracting resources. Fortunately, other factors present in the union counteracted the lack of financial resources and history of worker demobilization this union faced. The decentralized structure of HERE, another AFL-founded union, meant that contradictory organizational conditions could exist within the same national organization. The union could be losing members in some work places while gaining in others; some locals could be in disrepair, or even corrupt, while others thrived; and leaders from different departments or geographical regions could work entirely independent of one another. During years when much of the union functioned as a fairly traditional trade union organization with a demobilized membership and a leadership largely unconcerned with bringing in new workers or mobilizing the ones they already represented, a small but committed group of reformers found a foothold in parts of the union. These reformers, many of them young activists influenced by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, practiced a new kind unionism – what I refer to as worker-centered unionism. Worker-centered unionism was successful insofar as it brought new groups of workers into the union, created locals with an unusually engaged membership and gave organizers the political cache to move into more locals and, eventually, into positions of national

²⁶ For a discussion of the role of social reformers in the labor movement, see Ganz, Voss, Strauss, Sharpe and Somers, “Against the Tide: Projects and Pathways of a New Generation of Union Leaders, 1984-2001” in Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (eds.) *Reorganizing Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, Cornell Press, 2004.

²⁸ 2004 Constitution and By-Laws

leadership. The move to worker-centered unionism was a reform movement within the union that ultimately spread to other parts of the organization. Ultimately, reform in HERE consisted of measured efforts of a fairly small group of leaders with an ideological commitment to worker-centered unionism and resulted in the remaking of a scrappy, sometimes-corrupt organization into one of the most interesting and innovative unions around.

In the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), organizational change meant restructuring all parts of the union in order to prioritize membership growth and bargaining power. This transformation was of a different quality than that of HERE, where transformation meant a commitment to a particular kind of social practice, worker-centered unionism, consistent with organizational growth but not necessarily reducible to it. SEIU reformers, in general, were more committed to expanding membership and bargaining power than to a particular method of interacting with workers and developing leadership. As a result, organizers in SEIU experimented at the local (union) level with a host of different strategies for winning organizing campaigns. At the level of the international, these same organizers understood change as finding ways to exert more central control over diverse and numerous locals around the country to increase their bargaining leverage with national employers.

Like in HERE, union organizers spearheaded SEIU's reform, leaders who had spent many years organizing new groups of workers and for whom union organizing was how they identified themselves as part of the union. Yet the process by which organizing became the priority – and what organizing even meant -- was a much looser, less-directed and more experimental affair than it was in HERE. This is somewhat paradoxical given the SEIU's more recent centralization. Organizing did not become the union's priority in one clearly demarcated moment, as it did in HERE. Rather, organizational changes occurred in a piecemeal fashion, with each generation of leadership expanding on the reforms of the last.

Significantly, reform in SEIU occurred within a context of growth rather than decline. In this way the union more closely follows what scholars of innovation predict. While HERE was on a downward membership trajectory when reformers started experimenting with new tactics and strategies, SEIU was gaining members at a rate incomparable to any other union in the U.S. in the 1980s or 1990s. In fact, SEIU had been gaining members at a phenomenal rate for a couple of decades. From the late 1960's on, SEIU membership was increasing, mainly in the burgeoning public and health care sectors, and this growth flooded the union with new groups of workers, more union dues and new staff members who were hired to meet the growing needs of the organization. Expansion fueled revitalization in several important ways. First, the union had ample financial resources, which meant that money was more freely allocated to organizing campaigns without jeopardizing the functions (and the turf) of other departments in the union, at least initially. Secondly, growth gave reform-minded organizers political legitimacy within the union, and these organizers used this legitimacy to move into new locals and new positions of leadership, either as staff or elected leaders. New members organized into the union were loyal to the union organizers who first brought them in.

But where membership growth made possible the SEIU's transformation, growth in itself is not the same as transformation, nor does it automatically lead to changes in practices. After all, without a new vision for the union, increased amounts of money and

resources are utilized just as the old ones were. SEIU's size is not what makes them unique; what is distinctive about SEIU is its successes with novel approaches to growth made possible by a substantial set of organizational changes – changes that are a marker of SEIU exceptionalism. Growth in SEIU enabled reformers in the union by lending legitimacy to new strategies, but is only one factor among many in explaining the process of reform. Furthermore, growth had to be *interpreted* in a particular way – in this case, as evidence that new strategies and tactics were key to growth and success as a union, and that supporting new leaders was the path to further success.

This is illustrated best by comparing SEIU with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). AFSCME grew at a similar rate as SEIU for several decades but did not alter its vision or practices. AFSCME's leadership remained constant, as did their strategies for organizing and bargaining. In AFSCME, growth was not a stepping-stone to innovation, as it was in SEIU. As a public sector union with political influence and a union that was sheltered to a certain degree from employer opposition, AFSCME never experienced the membership crisis facing many other American Unions starting in the late 1970s.

What factors allowed SEIU to change? I argue that seven factors made possible organizational change in the SEIU: 1) a decentralized structure; 2) a history of organizing; 3) on-going membership growth; 4) a culture of creativity; 5) hiring and promotion practices, including hiring staff from outside the union and allowing staff members to run for elected office; 6) a gradual centralization of power; and 7) successful internal political campaigning and messaging.

Before explaining these seven factors, let me first say more about *what* exactly I am trying to explain. In this chapter, I am explaining why and how the structures and practices of SEIU changed over time, as well as what those changes consisted of. In contrast to AFSCME and the UFCW, the SEIU – like HERE – pioneered strategies and tactics new to the contemporary labor movement. This happened in SEIU as a result of a set of changes in the union that empowered and promoted reformers. But it wasn't sudden change that catapulted the union to where it is today; it was a gradual movement forward – a willingness of leaders to experiment, to embrace the craziness and creativity of a younger generation of activists who gravitated towards SEIU as young people and stayed on in the union. SEIU's structure and history made the union particularly porous to the change efforts of this group of people.

We might understand Andy Stern's regime, then, as the culmination of a gradual organizational transformation—one made possible by certain structural features in the organization from the beginning, and made increasingly likely by the piecemeal steps made by several generations of reformers before Stern came to power. Although Sweeney is a transitional figure in SEIU – the bridge between the old and the new guards – Sweeney's predecessor George Hardy had a substantial impact on the union. The antecedents of the SEIU's transformation can be seen in the values and hiring practices of Hardy, the international's president from 1971 to 1980 – specifically, his focus on organizing and his hiring of staff from outside the union. These values and practices, combined with early efforts at structural change by John Sweeney, the union's president from 1980-1995, helped inspire a “culture of creativity” out of which Andy Stern and other reformers would learn their craft—both in terms of their vision for what a union should be, and in terms of their techniques for bringing this vision to fruition in

organizational practice. Understanding what happened in the union between 1971 and 1996, then, is key to understanding SEIU's transformation. It was these years in particular that paved the way for Andy Stern's rise to power and the further consolidation of authority at the level of the national union. I now turn to a discussion of the seven factors

Decentralized Beginnings

For most of its history, the SEIU was a union highly decentralized union where power rested in the hands of locally elected leaders. How power gets distributed in a union varies according to union structure. Some unions concentrate power at the national level, while in other unions locals are imbued with the most authority. Highly centralized unions are more likely to have an empowered intermediate level of authority – usually a regional structure that coordinates bargaining and legislative activities among a group of locals.

The structure of a union largely depends on the dominant bargaining context that was present when the union formed²⁹. The more local and decentralized the employer – for instance, independently owned and operated restaurants – the more local the contracts and the greater the chance that power in the union will be concentrated at the local level. Unions that bargain with national-level employers and create national or regional contracts are more likely to develop structures that concentrate power at the national union. The United Auto Workers are a good example of a highly centralized union where bargaining is coordinated nationally. Structures can evolve over time in response to external and internal changes – for example, a union with historically decentralized power can later centralize, as was the case with SEIU.

Generally, industrial unions founded and affiliated under the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were highly centralized while AFL craft unions were decentralized. Unions like the UAW, The United Steelworkers of America and the United Mine Workers all had national leaders who were imbued with the most power within their unions; local leaders did not have the power to bargain with employers separate from national level bargaining. Local leaders in AFL unions, on the other hand, bargained their own contracts and had very little contact with the national leadership. In AFL unions, per capita dues – money locals must send to the national union for every local dues paying member – were usually fairly low, and national offices were small and ill-funded.

SEIU was no exception to this rule. When janitors affiliated with the American Federation of Labor in the early 1900s, it was codified in the national constitution for power to be centered at the local level, which was the norm for AFL-affiliated locals that worked in disparate workplaces in local labor markets. As a result, early organizing in SEIU was coordinated and financed entirely at the local level, with locals rarely lending resources to each other and frequently feuding with each other.

SEIU dates back to 1902, when the AFL granted the first janitor's local – a local made up of janitors who cleaned and cared for apartment buildings³⁰ -- an official charter.

²⁹ For a discussion of the importance of founding moments in organizational structures see Stinchcombe 1965.

³⁰ Apartment janitors, or “flat janitors” as they were called then, were men who worked as what today might be called a “super” of a building. They cleaned the common areas of the apartment

³¹ This AFL local was somewhat of an anomaly at the time, as most unions represented skilled crafts-workers or workers in large, centralized industries, and “flat janitors” fell into neither group. ³² One of SEIU’s early chroniclers explain the janitor’s affiliation with the AFL as one that was supported by AFL building trades unions out of their self-interest: “the building trades were tired of watching union-built apartments and offices maintained by non-union labor, and they saw the value of a strong building service international” (Ransom, 2). The plumbers union sponsored the janitor’s application to the AFL, which Samuel Gompers, president of the relatively young American Federation of Labor, quickly approved. William Quesse, the son of German immigrants who would later go on to head the national union, became the president of this first local (Beadling, 3). Membership was made up primarily of German, Swedish, Irish and Belgian immigrants, and African-Americans.

Later the same year, the AFL granted flat janitors in another part of Chicago a charter for a second local union, which was followed over the next two years by the chartering of three more Chicago locals made up of different building service workers, including office janitors, window washers and elevator operators, each in an autonomous local. Total membership of Chicago building service workers unions in 1904 was around 2500, and several of the locals had “working agreements” with real estate agents in Chicago (Beadling, 5). The national SEIU had its first iteration in 1905 when, at the behest of Quesse and a few others, the AFL chartered the “International Union of Building Employees.” Infighting among the Chicago locals over leadership of the new organization led to the dissolution of the national union soon after its launch, along with the collapse of Quesse’s original flat janitors union, which Quesse revamped in 1912 (Beadling, 6). In the earliest foreshadowing of SEIU’s move into the public sector and health care, in 1916 Chicago municipal janitors and janitors in the county hospital (all women, referred to at the time as “janitresses”) both received AFL charters.

Janitors in Chicago were the most organized in the country and had the most success in pressuring employers into agreement, but janitors were organizing themselves into unions in other large metropolitan areas as well, the most successful of which were the ones in New York City. Many of the locals, at least until the depression, had impressive agreements that set wage scales and maximum work hours and mandated closed shops. (Beadling, 10).

In 1921, seven local janitors unions in Chicago, Seattle, St. Louis, Boston and New York merged together into the Buildings Service Employees International Union (BSEIU), and the newly-formed executive board appointed the head of one of the largest Chicago locals, William Quesse, as their first national president. Chicago local 1 spearheaded the effort to form a national union, and Ray Van Heck, a vice-president of

building and did the daily upkeep and repairs in exchange for a room and a small salary. Although men were the only ones officially hired, building owners hired married men on the assumption that their wives would work beside them (Beadling, p. 4). A flat janitor from the Chicago local said that when a non-union flat janitor “applied for a job, he had to bring his wife along— [and] unless she was husky and able to do a lot of work, he couldn’t get the job” (Ransom p. 2)

³¹ Federal Labor Union No. 9947. Beadling, p. 3

³² In fact, The New York Times at the time described a janitor as “nothing more than a servant.” Beadling, p. 3

Quesse's local, explains the impetus behind a national organization this way: "Every time he [Quesse] negotiated a contract, they'd [the building owners] throw Detroit, New York, Philadelphia –the non-union towns—in his face" (Ransom, 2). Faced with a threat of well-organized building owners busting the few successful locals, local leaders saw a need for a national organization that could help expand the union into non-union. But they had no interest in a national union that would interfere in local union affairs. Locals were highly autonomous, with most of the power in the union centered in Chicago around local 1 (the largest local, with 1365 members) and to a lesser extent New York, in the second largest local (1122 members) – the elevator operators local that was later to become the powerful Local 32B. On the West Coast, powerful locals emerged in San Francisco and Seattle, and members won significant gains including the right to a six-hour week (Beadling, 12). Other locals struggled, however, and the structure that gave the national union very little power also provided them few resources to assist weaker locals with small memberships. Per capita dues to the national union were low, and what little dues there were the one national staff person had a hard time collecting. Members from the fledgling locals often complained about a lack of support from the national union. A member of the Belleville, Illinois local, for example, complained that they were "standing alone...with no international back of it" (Beadling, 14). The national union could not afford to pay for organizers when locals asked for help organizing, nor were any of the national offices and positions, except secretary-treasurer, paid. Beadling notes that "The lack of contact between the locals, particularly those farthest from Chicago, contributed to the sprawling, uncoordinated nature of BSEIU during these years" (14).

The Chicago locals might have had more success than many of the others, but they weren't without their own difficulties. In 1921, the Illinois state legislature indicted Quesse and nine other men from local 1 for conspiracy – an indictment which likely reflects both the power of real estate interests and employers in city politics of the time *and* the shady tactics of Chicago's union leaders. Although Quesse eventually pressured the governor at the time to pardon all ten defendants, many years of lawsuits took its toll on the local (Beadling, 14). Quesse died at age 48, and at the national union's fifth convention in 1928 delegates vote that the next national president should (again) also be the president of Chicago's flagship local 1, and Jerry Horan was elected president. When he took office, BSEIU had about 7,000 members and 60 locals (Beadling, 17).

Horan was president during the Depression, when the BSEIU took major hits in their agreements and contracts with employers. Still, despite this and the major infighting between locals over jurisdictional questions, membership reached 10,000 in 1932. By 1937, in the wake of Roosevelt's election and the passage of section 7(a) of the national recovery act, membership was at 40,000. Much of the growth in the union happened at the two coasts. While Chicago remained at the center of the union for another decade or so, organizing in New York and California expanded both the overall membership of the national organization and the power of the coasts within the union.

Organizing in New York centered around local 32B, which was founded and chartered in 1934 by a small group of elevator operators. In 1934, conditions were much worse for janitors in New York City than they were for janitors in Chicago. Wages were lower, and workers had no vacation days or days off, which were gains Chicago janitors had won 20 years earlier (Beadling, 22). Red-baiting and general power mongering in the New York locals had led to the folding and de-chartering of several small locals in the

early 1930s. In 1933, after one local union president fled a membership meeting with the local charter tucked under his arm, a small group of members who worked as elevator operators broke away and formed an independent union. The following year, one of the operators in this independent union was fired, twenty-five other building employees went out on strike in protest, and an organizer from the Typographical Union, who worked nearby, intervened to help settle the strike. The next month, this organizer got a charter from BSEIU, and Local 32B was formed (Local 32, also a local of elevator operators, had by this time shrunk down to about 300 dues-paying members). Six months after this short strike, the union approached the New York Real Estate Board with demands for wages scales and improved working conditions. The board refused to negotiate with the local and the union leadership decided to strike the city's garment district. Although the local had only 500 members in the district, other unions in the city came to their assistance. Teamsters and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union both helped shut down the buildings, and their members joined the janitors on their picket lines. Local 32B formed "flying squads," or small groups of union workers to go persuade elevator operator and porters (sometimes forcibly) to leave the building. In three days, the local added 6,000 members and Mayor LaGuardia agreed both to a closed shop and to further negotiation (Beadling, 23). After further threats to strike other areas of the city, the mayor consented to a major wage hike and a 48-hour work-week. By 1936, the local had over 25,000 members, and they had moved on to organizing other janitors in the city.

Significant union activity was happening on the other coast, as well, much of it in San Francisco's Local 9 and Seattle's Local 6, both janitor's locals. Local 9 was formed in 1902 and chartered in 1921, but by 1931 – a decade later -- the union only had a paltry 418 members. In the wake of San Francisco's 1934 general strike, organizing in Local 9 picked up steam. Charles Hardy, president of Local 9, had a son who had grown up around the union. George Hardy, along with a long-time group of friends he came to call the Hayes Valley Gang, worked at various buildings around town and eventually got himself and his friends hired as building janitors at places represented by Local 9. In those years, George Hardy becomes committed to organizing non-union workplaces. He remembers that "all the guys were gradually working toward the day when we would decide we were going to organize the office buildings," and their combined experience at so many work sites over the years meant that they had met many of the non-union janitors. [need citation] As more members came into Local 9, building owners moved to hiring women and undocumented immigrants (mainly Italians) in order to avoid hiring members of the union.

Local 9 pursued a strategy of creating a prevailing wage in San Francisco, starting with the produce markets, then the bakeries, and finally office buildings in an effort to prevent individual employers from going out of business (Ransom, 7). George Hardy remembered that "you had to be damn sure that you got the rest of the industry organized and paying scale, so that people wouldn't lose their jobs" (Ransom, 7). Workers went out on strike and were arrested; Hardy recalled that "the cops would come down and load us all in cars and take us to the police station. Then we'd get bailed out and go back to the picket line and get arrested again. We kept doing that, I think some members got arrested five time in one day" (Ransom, 7).

How is decentralization and decentralized local organizing significant for later organizational transformation? There are at least two answers to this question. First, a

decentralized union structure made possible local experiments and innovations. This starts early in the organization but will become clearer during the years when John Sweeney is president. When a national union has little or no power over its local unions, local leaders are free to sculpt a form of unionism independent of national intervention, and in this context local innovations can arise. In unions with weak national bodies, corruption is also more likely; as scholars who study union structure have noted, experimentation and corruption both arise out of similar structural contexts (Piore 1994; Ullman 1955; Perlman 1928).

Of course, as explored below, decentralized unions need some mechanism for innovations to spread. In radically decentralized unions, innovations that occur at the local level will stay at the local level. Applying lessons learned in one local or region to other parts of the union couldn't be done until the national union was imbued with a greater degree of power. This began to happen under John Sweeney's leadership.

Second, the legacy of decentralization would later help the union move into representing larger groups of public sector workers. In many places, public sector workers in the 1960s and 1970s were organized into unaffiliated employee associations, and after public sector bargaining were passed in the late 1960s and early 1970s legalizing public sector unionization and later public sector bargaining, unions like the SEIU and AFSCME scrambled to bring these now-eligible workers into their ranks. With employee associations the potential for growth was huge. California's state employees association numbered close to 150,000 members at the time they affiliated with the SEIU. Leaders of these organizations were likely to be attracted to trade unions that allowed them to keep what they felt was their unique occupational identity. An early organizer of public sector workers in California who was later elected to the International Executive Board identifies local autonomy as the reason why employee associations preferred to associate with SEIU:

They fell in love with our autonomy...they chose SEIU, not because we made them the most lucrative offer—we didn't—but because they recognized that they could do their own thing and get great training in classes, in seminars, in workshops, that they could control their own destiny, they wouldn't be controlled by some centralized group in Washington (Beadling, 15).

Locals stayed independent under Hardy, even as he made moved to consolidate a little more power in the international.

Legacy of Organizing

This early history left more than a legacy of local autonomy, however. Local 9 is where George Hardy, who went on to lead efforts to organize in the national union, learned to organize. "These years were really the basis of my entire knowledge of what the labor movement is all about," Hardy has said. "It was just tremendous—the vitality, the mutual respect and aid unions gave to one another. Picket lines were the life-lines of labor. They were never broken. When you called on a union for support, they'd send their whole hiring hall down to join with you, and you'd do likewise" (Ransom, 7).

Hardy's rise to national leadership in the 1970s, and his focus on strategic organizing, had important ramifications for the SEIU. Prior to 1971, the union was growing tremendously – by about 200,000 in the previous decade – not according to any

coherent national plan but through numerous and uncoordinated local attempts to capitalize on the burgeoning service sector. As the president of the union David Sullivan said during the 1964 convention, “In general, the organizing efforts of the international union during these four years were not directed towards any particular group or type of employer. The international continued to expand in private industry, in government services, and among the employees of non-profit institutions – in fact, wherever the possibilities present themselves” (p. 15, 1964).

Growth in the 1960s primarily arose through affiliations with public employees associations and through organizing in health care. Public sector bargaining laws in the late 1960s and early 1970s gave bargaining rights to school, city and county workers, and in 1974 non-profit hospital workers won the right to unionize – a huge legislative victory for SEIU that establishes the union even more firmly in the health care industry. During these years, the union had the most members in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, the San Francisco bay area, and Detroit. By 1976, SEIU was the largest union in California.

Hardy’s rise to the presidency in 1971 marked the year when the international leadership began coordinating and systematizing the scattered efforts of local unions to a much greater degree. David Sullivan, who had been president of the union since 1960, retired. By that time, Hardy was the international vice-president from California, having built his power base through organizing in California. Elected president, Hardy immediately proclaimed organizing as his highest priority. In the 1972 presidential report for the convention, he writes: “While I found everything in fine shape, it must be understood that every new leader seeks to improve and to innovate in terms of his own special objectives and emphasis. My own primary objective is the organizing of at least one half million more members.” Under his leadership, the national union started an organizing training school, created an organizing manual, a stewards manual and a strike manual for local unions and instituted a national “research specialist” training program to help unions prepare for bargaining.³³ While Hardy employed an international general organizer, most of the support for organizing, aside from training programs and written materials, came in the form of organizing subsidies for local unions, totaling about \$2 million a year.³⁴ In contrast to later years when organizers joined the national staff, organizers who came into the union during this period were hired directly into locals.

One former organizer in a California public sector local remembers how different Hardy’s approach was from the rest of the international staff in his willingness to take risks on organizing drives. The organizer remembers how Hardy, then head of the west coast region, responded to a request for funding:

Everybody around him, his advisors, including his president in Washington, of SEIU, advised him against [it]... because we had no business. We’d never organized transit workers. We didn’t know shit about them. I told George, “You didn’t know anything about public employees or hospital workers, either. All you are is a janitor.... But let me have some money, because I don’t have any.” He gave me 20 grand. That’s what I got to organize BART... [H]e told me, “I don’t

³³ From the 1988 president’s report: “The SEIU support program dates from the 1970s, when the International initiated a program involving ‘research specialists’ who were assigned to help local unions prepare for contract negotiations” (2, 1988).

³⁴ According to their own reporting.

give a shit what they say. I don't know anything about transit workers, either. But, it's an opportunity, and you'd better jump on the train. Here's 20 grand." (PV)

Hiring of Outsiders

In both SEIU and HERE, cohorts of staff hired from outside the rank and file helped shift the organization's culture and transform the organization's priorities and practices. Most basically, for this to be possible, it must be permitted by the organization's constitution. Many American labor unions (like the United Auto Workers, for example) restrict staff hires to their membership, arguing both that this helps to hold the staff accountable to the membership, and (more philosophically) that the labor union is one of the few organizations within which the working class can rise to positions of authority.

Of course, the role of outsiders within a labor union depends in large part on *who* those outsiders are and the reasons for which they are hired. George Hardy was the first president of SEIU to programmatically hire outsiders into the union. In fact, one former organizer could not remember a single rank and file member Hardy hired on staff. And while Hardy's hiring practices would set an important precedent within the union, his intentions were not entirely pure. At the same time hiring outsiders helped him avoid internal "politicizing" and personnel "deadwood," it also helped him avoid internal challenges to his authority. Hardy "had an affection for young people who were bright," remembers the same organizer, likely not only because of their capability but also because of their dependence on him.

Whatever the reasoning behind his hiring practices, Hardy helped to transform the culture of the international—paradoxically, in many ways, transforming it *away* from people like himself. One woman who worked in the publications department of the international remembers how different she and her young colleagues were from the existing staff. Before, all of the departments were headed by white men, while all of the clerical positions were held by women. "And into this mix suddenly came maybe eight of us who were the young professional staff. One in organizing, three in research, two in the publications department... We had all been through the sixties."

This cohort of union staff challenged the existing union culture not only by injecting middle-class and young professional values into the union, but also by bringing the politics of the 1960s to the labor movement. Feeling frustrated by the "bad stuff going on in the labor movement" and the "right-wingers" who wielded inordinate power, some of the "60's people" who had "started drifting into the labor movement" began speaking to one another across organizational lines. In 1976, several of these progressives began the "Grays Mountain Lodge, New Leftover Union Guru Retreat," an annual gathering that would expand from twenty-five to seventy members over the late 1970s. While the formal structure of SEIU was largely unchanged during this time, this sort of informal organization was a first step in more concerted challenges to the orientation of the union. The roster of attendees—including Andy Stern and Fred Feinstein, a future head of the NLRB—reads like a "Who's Who" of contemporary labor leadership.

Throughout his time as president of the international, moreover, Hardy recruited organizers to work in locals who would both help to change the culture of these locals and—over time—rise in the ranks of international staff. These hiring practices set an

important precedent that continues to this day. A current leader of the international discusses the role that outside organizers have played in the union's more recent development:

We definitely recruited from the outside. If you look at executive board today, primarily people who were not members, didn't go up through chain of command, path to political power is through organizing, almost everyone an organizer, either in SEIU or somewhere else.

Hardy's willingness to hire and promote based on staff members' organizing talent was an important first step in bringing new voices into the union—voices that would soon grow in strength.

Early Steps Towards Centralization: Fostering a Culture of Creativity

Hardy shifted the focus of the union more than he changed its structure. He had reservations about exerting any control over locals, and seemed almost obsessive about the international's responsibility not to waste local members' money. One former SEIU staff remembers a meeting in Washington when Hardy had gathered some staff together from various locals:

And some of these folks came late to a meeting...and Hardy stood up there and said how he's been there and back, and he didn't give a goddamn if somebody went out and rolled in the gutter overnight, do whatever they want, but this was the members' money and they better get their asses in there on time. And he really believed that.

According to this organizer, Hardy "didn't have a problem being the head of a small organization" in which locals "kept their money and were strong."

This being said, Hardy did make some structural changes that preceded the more substantive changes of later presidents. For example, he began to coordinate local union activity more than had been standard in the past. In 1974, he coordinated the first "industry conferences" to bring together leaders from different locals and regions who organize similar workers; this later evolves into regional conferences. Finally, he expanded the executive board of the union to 33 members and nine executive vice-presidents (Hardy, 13).

Nevertheless, until 1980, when John Sweeney became president of the national union, the SEIU national staff was extremely small and underfunded, even for an AFL union. Sweeney continued hiring outsiders with organizing experience, in even greater numbers than Hardy had done. But perhaps more importantly, Sweeney began a conversation within the union about coordinating activity to a greater degree than had been done in the past. In addition to offering organizing subsidies to local unions, Sweeney hired organizers directly onto the national staff and developed a "field services" department to support research, bargaining and education, increasing the capacity of the national union to offer skilled support to local campaigns.³⁵ All of this demanded a new

³⁵ "In the past, the International's responsibility in organizing has rested primarily in providing technical assistance and funding for local union efforts. Because our membership continues to diversify, however, we must focus more of our efforts on new occupations and new geographical

level of support from locals, which Sweeney secured by increasing per-capita dues from locals. While an older staff remembers this step as beginning to “extract[] big bucks from locals,” the dues had previously been the lowest in the AFL-CIO.

Sweeney also reorganized the union into a division structure by industry. In July 1982, Sweeney recommended a “7 point plan to restructure the International” (13, 1984) that was approved by the International Executive Board. This included, among other things, creating “divisions” for the union’s main industries: health care, public sector, building services, clerical and jewelry, gas and industrial. The plan also created a commission to investigate the merging of smaller locals and “exploring” more coordinated bargaining across locals that share employer. Although there was not significant coordination among locals at this time, the political process of convincing people in the union of the need for coordination had begun.

One staff member remembers Sweeney’s steps towards centralization as a process of “promoting best practices.” Sweeney’s assumption was that if the international could spotlight the “good things going” in locals around the country, other locals would follow. Sweeney brought together those organizing similar groups of workers in different parts of the country to evaluate the work they had done and brainstorm new strategies to try in the future. One previous staff member remembers the union at this time being a “crazy space of creativity.”

This level of coordination allowed for some of the most innovative partnerships between the international and various locals ever to have taken place in the SEIU. In 1981, SEIU formed local 925 out of the organization Working Women, previously an advocacy organization for female clerical workers. At the same time, in a campaign with the UFCW and the AFL-CIO Allied Service Trades Department beginning in 1983, SEIU ran its first “corporate campaign” against Beverly Enterprises, a for-profit nursing home chain. This campaign “involved adverse publicity about the quality of patient care, coordinated shareholder actions, and involvement in industrial revenue bond hearings,” and was the first mention of corporate campaigns in convention materials. Sweeney called it a “new strategy” (23, 1984) and went on to say that “another major factor in our Beverly success is the fact that the campaign has been couched in terms not only of improving wages and working conditions for employees but also in improving the quality of patient care, and has conveyed a positive image of the union’s concerns about rising health care costs and our efforts to help bring about cost control” (23, 1984). The union found that emphasizing the relationship between the union’s success and patient care worked: “SEIU pioneered the use of the patient-care issue as a strategy, a tactic that provided an advantage in the public arena and, more important, rallied the workers in the homes” (2, 1998). In March 1984, Beverly and SEIU agreed to a labor-management commission to deal with disputes.

The success of the Beverly campaign proved the value of combining local and national resources in corporate campaigns. The 1984 Convention Report notes, “SEIU has developed effective organizing techniques to counter union busting campaigns, through careful analysis of which facilities are likely to be organized and whether a contract can be won, leadership development among employees at a particular worksite,

areas—particularly the Sun Belt. And the increasing presence of multi-national corporations with their seemingly limitless resources and professional union-busters as our opponents makes it clear that the *International* must take a new and vigorous role in organizing efforts” (p. 22, 1984).

low-key techniques for conveying the message to other employees, and effective education campaigns” (23, 1984). As importantly, the 1984 convention notes show a new commitment to innovative tactics to gain leverage against employers: “We have learned that such traditional tactics as strikes, pickets, and boycotts are often failing to provide sufficient leverage against employers. We have learned that it is necessary to understand the intricacies of corporate finance, government regulation, and business law. We have also learned new and more effective ways of taking our case to the public” (2 1988). This was tied to the need to coordinate local activity from the international union: “The demands of the corporate campaign have required increased efforts to coordinate services to local unions including field services, communications, legal assistance and research” (2, 1988).

These innovative successes set the stage for the Justice for Janitors campaign in the late 1980s, a time during which the union “synthesized the old with the new” (1, 198). While SEIU is today most known in the public imagination for their justice for janitors campaign, organizing in the building services was at a standstill until 1986. Just two years prior, in the 1984 president’s report, for example, organizing in the building services was discussed for under a page, and what was discussed was mainly obstacles – including the “centralization in building ownership and increasing use of contractors” (23), “double-breasting (23),” and “undocumented workers” who “come from cultures without a tradition of strong unionism” (23). By the 1988 president’s report, Justice for Janitors was mentioned on the very first page of the report as a campaign that “not only reversed the decline in our union’s historic jurisdiction, but has sparked a rebirth in militant labor organizing and captured the imagination of workers in every industry” (1, 1988)

This campaign provides perhaps the clearest evidence of the increasing influence of the international in local affairs during this time. During the early 1990s there was actually quite a lot of resistance within Local 399 to organizing janitors, at least among certain staff-members, given the uncertainty it would introduce into a “tightly controlled union where you could predict the outcome of every contract negotiation, the outcome of every organizing campaign, the outcome of the E Board elections.” Yet there were pockets of support for the Justice for Janitors campaign within the local as well. One former high-ranking staff within 399 remembers actually campaigning for the local to be trustee, since he “would rather lose control to the international” than lose control to the more conservative staff within the local. Once the local was trustee, and the Justice for Janitors campaign was able to proceed unhindered, this same staff member remembers the important innovations that the international staff like Steven Lerner and John Sweeney brought to the organizing drive—especially in their advocacy for circumventing the National Labor Relations Board and demanding recognition on card check instead, the strategy that ultimately proved so successful.

By 1988, then, the international union had begun to have unprecedented success, and was continuing to adjust its own structure in light of lessons learned. In 1986, media experts had begun to be deployed to local unions “to provide innovative new approach to communications at the local level” (5, 1988). In 1987, the international began regional training institutes for organizers. The international had also hired Abernathy and Mitchell, Inc., as public relations consultants, which had emphasized a “public relations approach... that always features SEIU members out front, telling their own story, in their

own words...It is an approach that has helped gain significant movement at the bargaining table and in elections (5, 1988). Finally, throughout this time Sweeney had been building the industry divisions within the international. By 1988 each division had an organizing director, organizers, researchers, and lobbyists employed by the international.

But where Sweeney's first steps towards centralization were able to spotlight innovations and move some locals towards the best practices exhibited by others, his abiding commitment to local autonomy also inhibited his capacity to take on those locals unwilling to jump on the bandwagon. As one senior SEIU staff person remembers, Sweeney's philosophy was, "If you build it they will come." She continues, "We built it. They didn't come." Instead, "You would move as fast as the slowest person would move." While the international was offering more resources and advice than it had ever done in the past, this in itself did not spur change in some of the larger and more conservative locals. "When a local was really a mess, and [there were] very clear recommendations [from the international, Sweeney found it] very hard to confront a local leader he had known a long time." Another international staff member reflects that Sweeney did not take out Gus Bevona, the corrupt head of 32BJ. He continues, "In the pre-96 period we trusted people [leaders] who were weak but not people who were strong." The partial centralization of the Sweeney era was good for fostering creativity and innovation, but it was limited to those parts of the union open to change.

Change and Growth Under Andy Stern

If John Sweeney pursued a politics of conciliation within his union, Andy Stern pursued one of confrontation. Sweeney nurtured an organizing spirit in the union and opened up a space for creativity and innovation, but he enabled change only to the extent that local leaders were interested in pursuing new ways of doing things. The union had plenty of organizers interested in experimenting with new strategies and tactics –and even some local leaders willing to change what they did – but much of the old-guard resisted change. It's easy to see why this would be the case: bringing in new members, restructuring local union jurisdictions or what members should belong to what unions, all threaten the power base of elected leaders. New members change the make up of the electorate that elects local union leaders, and changing how a region or state distributes members in locals can shift the power base of local leaders. And, most fundamentally, leaders skilled in one model of unionism are rarely skilled in another. In this case, leaders skilled at bargaining and servicing contracts aren't necessarily the best candidates for leading drives to organize new groups of workers – especially when those new groups look quite different than those organized in an earlier time period.

Chapter Five: AFSCME

Member-Driven Unionism and the Limits of Local Autonomy

It was hard not to be impressed as I walked into the convention hall on the next-to-the last day of the The American Federation of State, Country and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union's biennial convention. Overnight the hall had been utterly transformed. The long tables at which the delegates had spent most of their week were gone, as were the rows of bleachers at the back of the room for alternate guests. In their place were four hundred round tables where four-thousand local union delegates were to be seated for an eight-hour "Town Hall Meeting."

The day's events were run by AmericaSpeaks, best known for their town-hall meeting in New York where local participants rejected the redevelopment plan for the World Trade Center, sending public officials and architects back to the drawing board. Founded in 1995 with the mission of "promoting greater grassroots involvement in decision making," AmericaSpeaks orchestrates large-scale, face-to-face discussions that combine both intimate conversation and direct polling to produce reports on the attitudes and ideas of participants.

Today's town-hall meeting came on the heels of four days of proceedings marked by the typical convention fare: speeches from the union's president and vice-president, reports from various committees, votes and debate on a variety of proposals, and visits from prominent politicians – in this case, Senators Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama. The day before, delegates had passed "The 21st Century Initiative," a plan to increase the union's political power, better mobilize existing members and bring new workers into the union. The town-hall meeting was an attempt to build excitement for the types of changes that AFSCME local members would have to make in order to put the 21st Century Initiative into practice.

AFSCME staff had recruited four hundred volunteers, including me, to facilitate discussion at each of the tables. Each of us had attended a training session to prepare for the day's events, and the morning of the meeting facilitators met for a review of the agenda and a pep talk from a staff member from the national union. AFSCME staff gave us extra-large, bright orange t-shirts to wear over our clothes, a packet of written materials that we would use throughout the day in our discussion groups and the number of the table to which we were assigned. Members of the "technology team," responsible for managing the many technical aspects of the town meeting, were decked out in less conspicuous blue shirts and rock-star concert headsets that allowed them to communicate with other members of their team. An hour before the delegates were due to arrive, facilitators filed into the hall to organize their tables.

The logistics of the meeting were remarkable. At each table was a laptop computer and ten wireless touch-key pads. All of these devices were linked up to a hub of central computers that aggregated the inputs and, when the "Theme Team" desired, projected the data onto an enormous screen in the center of the hall. Each table was to discuss a range of issues throughout the day, enter the highlights on the laptop and vote on questions via the key pads. In between discussion periods, the head of AmericaSpeaks told jokes, brought AFSCME members up to the stage to tell stories about their local union, and led the group through stretches. There were no scheduled bathroom breaks; the only break in the day came when box lunches were delivered to our tables, and even

then we watched a compilation video featuring clips of famous movies related to workers or unions, to the tune of Dolly Parton's song "nine-to-five." By the end of the day, participants at my table were flagging.

Topics under discussion were diverse and related to the goals of the 21st century initiative. For example, a discussion about why non-activist AFSCME members might not be more involved in the union was intended to be a way to help local activists increase the number of volunteer organizers, and a brainstorming session on how to change the perception of public sector workers and public sector unions was related to the goal of organizing new workplaces. The delegates at my table were interested and engaged in almost all of the day's discussions, although they expressed frustration over how hard they worked and the modest gains their union was making.

Several aspects of the town-hall meeting struck me as illustrative of the organizational ethos of AFSCME. First, the emphasis on delegate input and the institutional requirement that members weigh in on a host of convention themes reflects a belief on the part of AFSCME's leadership that members can produce answers to the union's most pressing dilemmas. This belief did not just emerge at the convention; the importance of member deliberation, and the sincere belief that members could figure things out for themselves if given the space to do so, was a recurring theme in my interviews with AFSCME leaders. The very structure of AFSCME, a structure in which there are layers of elected rank-and-file positions that simply don't exist in many other unions (including SEIU and HERE), illustrates the value AFSCME places on rank-and-file involvement – at least measured in this particular way. The idea that "members are the highest authority in the union," which comes up repeatedly in union documents, is prized within AFSCME.

I found a second aspect of the town-hall meeting particularly telling, and this was the complete absence of an overall "message" for the day, apart from a message that discussion and dialogue is inherently useful. Union leaders spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the day's events but, remarkably, did not craft a political agenda to accompany "labor's first" town-hall meeting. There was, of course, the agenda that was the union's "21st Century Initiative," and delegates had voted earlier in the week to adopt this initiative. And, as I mentioned earlier, the town-hall meeting was geared towards making members more effective in meeting the goals of the new initiative. Still, I found the lack of a unified message striking, particularly after having attended conventions of both the SEIU and HERE where every aspect of the convention was carefully orchestrated to drive home a single message. If either the SEIU or HERE had held a town-hall meeting like this one, surely every vote and discussion would have been punctuated by a message that would be a mandate for some type of change.

These two observations from the town-hall meeting – that AFSCME leaders take the views of their members very seriously, and that leaders would pass up the opportunity to shape a dialogue of their members – help to illustrate differences between AFSCME and both the SEIU and HERE. Whereas leaders in the SEIU and HERE have worked to "move" their members from one set of beliefs to another through a process that includes framing the issue and the solution and then reinforcing the solution at every possible opportunity, AFSCME leaders historically have not engaged with their members in this way. In part this is because AFSCME's national and regional leadership did not see a need for a massive internal change, at least until 2004, when a small number of leaders

began to coordinate some initial efforts at change. But the lack of this certain kind of leadership in AFSCME isn't explained merely by the fact that the union wasn't embarking on major internal change in the way SEIU was. Even once the union *did* start attempting to make some internal changes, leaders did not follow the lead of a union like SEIU. Instead, a small group of leaders in AFSCME are attempting to change the practices of the union through a deliberative process in which people in AFSCME are to be convinced voluntarily to change.

Introduction

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is the final case of my dissertation. The majority of AFSCME members work for local, state and federal governments, and a small number of members come from the private and private non-profit sectors. Within those sectors, AFSCME represents workers in a wide-range of blue collar and professional jobs.

AFSCME's constitution, structure and political practices privilege local union autonomy to a greater extent than any of the other unions in my study. As I discussed in earlier chapters, both SEIU and HERE were founded in the tradition of local autonomy – and this autonomy helped to foster a creative spirit within some local unions. But decades after their founding, national leaders in SEIU and HERE restructured their unions to give the national officers more power, and in the process locals lost some of their independence. The pattern in SEIU and HERE was a movement from decentralization to centralization. The UFCW, formed from the merger of two differently structured unions, had a centralized structure from the very beginning.

AFSCME's trajectory illustrates yet another possibility. AFSCME's initial structure was a decentralized one, and today AFSCME remains highly decentralized. There remain three levels of authority in AFSCME. The first level is made up of the executive officers and the International Executive Board. There are two executive officers, the President (the CEO) and the Secretary-Treasurer, each of which is elected at-large by convention delegates. There are thirty-five international vice-presidents, and these positions are elected by convention delegates out of AFSCME's thirty-five legislative districts.³⁶ The International Executive Board, made up of the two executive officers plus the vice-presidents, meets by constitutional mandate at least four times a year.

The second level of authority is the District Council, which functions more like a local does in other unions. About half of these districts have elected presidents. In states with a longer history with AFSCME, like Minnesota and Wisconsin, elected presidents (who work full-time in a public sector job) work alongside appointed directors. These districts conduct a majority of bargaining, handle grievances, and manage the political action committees of the union. Districts also get the majority of dues money, with the rest going to the national and locals.

³⁶ This according to Article IV, Section 27 of the AFSCME constitution. International vice-presidents used to be elected at-large, but this changed when council directors from large district councils led the effort to change voting rules.

The third level of authority is the “local” union, which is usually confined to a particular workplace or even a department within a workplace. These locals elect officers and an executive board, and have their own constitutions. There are about 3,400 AFSCME locals in the forty-six states in which AFSCME exists.

These three levels have a rich array of conventions and meetings. The national convention takes place every two years (as opposed to every four in the SEIU), and districts and locals take part in their own conventions as well. To get a feel for the decentralized nature of the union, it is useful to look in more depth at a particular local. As one of the oldest and most established AFSCME locals in the country, District Council 24, The Wisconsin State Employees Union (WSEU), serves most of the represented employees working for the State of Wisconsin in six bargaining units: Blue Collar, Technical, Administrative Support, Professional Social Services, Security and Public Safety, and Law Enforcement. The council has a yearly convention. On the executive board sits a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer, all of whom are elected on an at-large basis. Twelve representatives also serve on the executive board, elected from the bargaining units. Within the district, however, exist fifty-eight locals, many of which have as many as seven elected leaders and another large number of stewards.

AFSCME’s decentralized structure plus AFSCME’s leadership’s commitment to this structure is tied to other significant characteristics of the union. For one, there is a privileging of individual AFSCME members. In interviews with SEIU leaders, the *individual* member is often absent in favor of a group of members or a group of workers – some of whom may be union members, some of whom are not. AFSCME leaders, on the other hand, elevate the views of local union members. Also, individual members, with their keypad, voted on dozens of things throughout the day, and their views were aggregated and reported in real time. Leaders did not filter member responses, nor did they even attempt to *interpret* them. Whereas leaders in SEIU and HERE carefully shape the outcome of any polling that happens in their unions, AFSCME leaders let the day’s discussion and polling unfold organically. The result was that nothing politically succinct came out of the meeting. Instead, participants learned about the major concerns of other members and also about some of their ideas for what could be done differently.

This leads to the second key difference between AFSCME and SEIU – and to a lesser extent between AFSCME and HERE. Whereas many of the leaders in SEIU and HERE – leaders ranging from the executive officers to local leaders to organizers – constantly shape the message that gets communicated to members, and use that message to build support for a political platform, there seems to be very little of that in AFSCME. And in fact AFSCME leaders seem a little mystified by the practices in SEIU and HERE.

And despite their nominal similarities, AFSCME’s focus on the individual member is also very different from HERE’s “worker-centered unionism.” Although AFSCME leaders and HERE leaders both forefront members when they discuss their work and their vision, and although workers are at the forefront in some way in both models, *how* they are at the forefront is different. HERE leaders work closely with rank-and-file members or non-union workers, more closely in fact than AFSCME leaders usually do, but HERE leaders are constantly *organizing* workers, inculcating in them a particular way of thinking about the union, and pushing them to partake in particular practices and actions that demonstrate worker “voice.” In other words, whereas

AFSCME seems to conceive of union democracy as emergent from the aggregation of members' individual beliefs and preferences, HERE seems to conceive of union democracy as a set of theories and behaviors that must be taught to members.

How is local autonomy and individual membership related to organizational change? The autonomy AFSCME grants its locals has made it more difficult for innovations to spread throughout the union and it has made AFSCME more impervious to the types of top-down changes that came about in the SEIU and HERE.

Elaborating the Comparative Case

The case of AFSCME, moreover, helps to elaborate and support the organizational argument I have made about SEIU above. Indeed, many of the previous arguments made for SEIU's exceptionalism list characteristics of the union that AFSCME shares. For example, while Brofenbrenner (1998; 2003) suggests that SEIU's transformation can be explained by its movement into the public sector and the healthcare industry, AFSCME is made up almost entirely of public sector (including healthcare) employees. Similarly, while Voss and Sherman (2000) argue that new left activists spurred SEIU's transformation by bringing new organizing frameworks to the union, these same sorts of activists joined AFSCME as well. And while several scholars have discussed SEIU's decentralized beginnings as being important to the union's innovative tactics (Piore 1994; Milkman 2006), AFSCME has always been at least as decentralized as SEIU. These similarities, therefore, push us to identify differences between the unions that explain SEIU's success and AFSCME's relative failure.

Both SEIU and AFSCME brought many new workers into their unions in the 1970s. Yet while this provided new resources and opportunities to both unions, only SEIU was able to make use of these opportunities. I argue that this was because the structure of SEIU allowed leaders gradually to consolidate organizational power at the center, diffusing best practices across the organization. AFSCME, however, was and remains a decentralized organization, which has undermined its capacity to transform itself.

This difference is related to the different organizational contexts in which the two unions were founded and the opportunities these founding structures provided for their evolution. While the public sector remains one division among many within the SEIU, and while organizing in the public sector has been key to the story of change within SEIU, the union is (and has always been) primarily a private sector union that operates according to a private sector logic; that is, a logic where the primary fight for the union takes place within the market, leveraging workers' capacity to affect labor supply. As a public sector union, AFSCME was founded and guided by a different logic. Because employers were local and state governments, winning contracts for workers was a political fight as much as it was a fight in the market.

There are differences between organizing and collective bargaining in the private and public sectors that had important impacts on the trajectories of these two unions. Indeed, differences between unionism in the two sectors account for the very different levels of union density in the two sectors. Today, about 8% of employees in the private sector are union members, while membership in the public sector is at about 37%.³⁷

³⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by occupation and industry, 2009 (figures from 2008).

Before the 1960s, density levels in the two sectors was almost the inverse. Private sector union density rose after the passage of the NLRA and the Wagner Act, peaked in the 1940s and 1950s, and then declined starting the late 1970s and 1980s. Public sector workers, on the other hand, did not have the legal right to unionize prior to the late 1960s. After this, density in the public sector rose in the 1970s and 1980s and even into the 1990s before leveling out in the late 1990s.

The first noteworthy difference between public and private sector unionism is that unions in the public sector are closely tied to the political process. This is because public sector workers elect their employers. Public employees, as *citizens*, elect the mayors, governors, school board members and department heads with whom they bargain as *workers*. Although the more strategically-savvy private sector unions (like the SEU and HERE) leverage political power in private sector union campaigns, public sector unionism is, by definition, tied to the electoral process. One consequence of the political nature of public sector unionism is that public sector employers are much less likely to oppose unionization than their private sector counterparts. This is largely because employers face a backlash at the ballot box. Hiring anti-union consultant agencies that specialize in helping employers remain “union-free,” for example, is as rare in the public sector as it is commonplace among private sector employers (Freeman 1988). The lack of aggressive opposition to unions in the public sector is one important reason why union density in the public sector is higher than in the private sector. In addition, unions and public sector employers are often able to forge collaborative as opposed to adversarial relationships in fighting for increases in state budgets, since both workers and their employers are equally invested in the status and funding of the agencies for which they work (see Johnson 1994, 12-13).

Relatedly, as Johnson (1994) observes, the strategies employed by public sector unions are often distinct from their private sector counterparts. Public sector unions are accustomed to using “political and organizational resources” in making claims, and to framing these claims as “public needs” (12). This is at odds with private-sector unions, who are more accustomed to thinking of strategy in terms of labor’s market power.

Another important difference between public and private sector unions is in their divergent organizational origins, and the cultural legacy left by these origins (Stinchcombe 1968). Many public sector locals evolved from “employee associations” that pre-dated public employees gaining the legal right to unionize. These associations essentially were employee advocacy organizations, and they varied by region and employer. Most of these organizations functioned as professional associations that furthered the professionalism of the occupation. Some associations were more militant in their demands than others, and in a small number of places these associations actually bargained with employers over wages and salaries, but in general these early worker organizations were more professional-association than union. This means that within public sector unions there is a legacy of professionalism with which to contend—workers are more reluctant to engage in the types of collective action that are more standard practice for industrial workers.

A final difference between the sectors is that workers in the two sectors gained the legal right to organize at different times and in different ways. While the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 established labor rights throughout the private sector, public sector unionization increased with piecemeal changes in state labor law over time

(Freeman 1988). This meant that while there was (and is) one uniform legal code governing private sector unionization and collective bargaining, there is no such uniformity among public sector workers. There is no national equivalent of the NLRA for public workers and their employers. Laws covering the public sector vary by state, with federal employees operating under yet another legal structure. In some states, workers legally can be union members but the union has no right to collective bargaining, or unions might be able to bargain collectively but not have the right to bargain over wages or have the right to strike. In twenty-two states, public workers do not have the right to collective bargaining, either because it is expressly forbidden or because they don't have the stated right to do so. In the public sector, what it means to be a union member varies by state. Freeman (1988) argues that labor laws changed at the state level but not at the national level because senators from anti-union states can block national legislation but not state legislation.

There are, of course, substantial numbers of public sector employees in the SEIU, and the story of how SEIU organized in the public sector, particularly in California, is an important part of SEIU's change process. As I discussed in Chapter 5, bringing public sector workers into the SEIU grew the union by leaps and bounds and flooded the union with resources that, at the time, other private sector service unions lacked. Indeed, SEIU's successful move into the public sector is one of the reasons why organizers within SEIU had the resources to experiment with new strategies in organizing private sector workers – including returning to their original base of janitors through the “Justice for Janitors” campaign. These “experiments” in rejuvenating private sector organizing led to the organizing successes that gave SEIU organizers the cache to introduce substantial reforms within the union. Organizing in the public sector also meant bringing in left-leaning county-employed social workers, many of whom came out of the National Welfare Rights movement. While the most famous social worker in SEIU is president Andy Stern, other significant leaders in SEIU came out of the ranks of social workers as well. So while SEIU's public sector organizing during the 1970s and 1980s was tactically unremarkable (it mainly consisted of affiliating public sector employee associations), public sector organizing gave the union the resources that enabled innovation in other parts of the union; and this organizing brought in social movement-oriented people into the union in the form of county-employed social workers.

Given the role that public sector organizing played in SEIU, we might expect similar outcomes in AFSCME. That is, we would expect AFSCME to grow during the same time SEIU grew, and we would expect to see left-leaning social workers come into the union when social workers and social worker employee associations started affiliating with unions. If SEIU was growing in the 1970s and 1980s in large part because of the growth of a public sector membership, we would expect AFSCME to have grown at a similar rate – perhaps even more so given that AFSCME is by definition an organization of public sector workers skilled in the practice of organizing and representing government workers. In terms of growth, AFSCME did in fact grow during the period when SEIU was expanding. As we can see in Chart 6.1, AFSCME grew in the 1960s through the 1990s. Like in SEIU, growth largely was the result of affiliating huge employee associations after laws passed legalizing collective bargaining.

As I documented in Chapter five, much of the growth of SEIU in the public sector was not due to organizing new groups of workers but the result of affiliating pre-existing

employee associations into the union. Growth in AFSCME also was the result of accreting large associations of public sector workers. But organizing in the public sector was a zero-sum game, and AFSCME and SEIU were frequently “at war” in different regions of the country, particularly in California. Somewhat paradoxically, SEIU often won this war where it competed because it promised public worker associations even more autonomy than AFSCME did, and offered protection from the raids of other unions. As a result, early growth in the public sector actually occurred *more rapidly* in SEIU than it did in AFSCME, especially in California, where social workers joined Local 535. AFSCME had slower but steady growth outside of California, especially in Washington state, Oregon, New York and the Midwest.

As explained in Chapter Five, public sector workers in SEIU were incorporated into broader organizational structure that itself was gradually consolidating. As SEIU established regional structures and division structures, the radical social workers from the public sector were able to have increasing levels of influence nationwide. AFSCME’s commitment to its tradition of local autonomy, however, prevented social workers from being able to have the same kind of influence in this union.

The remainder of this chapter explores the curious case of AFSCME: a union seemingly poised for the same kind of transformation as SEIU, but one without the organizational capacity to effect this change. It begins by reviewing the history of the union, highlighting key moments at which its path diverged from the path taken by SEIU; and it concludes with a snapshot of AFSCME at present, linking this present to its history.

Public Sector Organizing and AFSCME’s Early History

In the U.S., public sector unions developed differently than those in the private sector. Unlike in Western Europe where public and private sector unions grew together, U.S. public sector workers formed collective organizations, and then won the right to bargain collectively, later than private sector workers.

Public workers began forming collective organizations later than workers in the private sector, often in response to the organizing of their private sector counterparts. They began organizing for better working conditions only in the 1820s and 1830s after private sector workers had begun to win demands for a shorter workday.

Firefighters and police officers were among the first group of government workers to form collective associations. Like other government workers, both groups had taken pay cuts during the First World War and hoped to win higher wages, caps on working hours and safer working conditions. The fallout from the attempt of Boston police officers to unionize in 1919 was the most dramatic example of political censure of public employee unions, and it set the stage for ongoing political opposition to public workers unionizing. In August of 1919, Boston police officers got an AFL charter for a police union. The AFL had granted charters to other police officers’ unions around the country; by this time police had secured AFL charters in 37 cities around the nation. In Boston, however, the response from city officials was particularly severe. Although the mayor urged a committee to investigate the possibility of meeting the officers’ demands, Police commissioner Edwin Curtis, who supervised the police independent from the

mayor, suspended workers who had led and joined the unionization effort. The next month officers voted 1132 to 2 to strike the city.

Officers went out on strike on September 9, and there were riots in Boston that evening. With few officers left on duty, and replacement workers not due until the next day, groups of Bostonians took to the streets, looting stores and destroying property. Then-governor of Massachusetts Calvin Coolidge, sensing a political opportunity in the public's fear of chaos and in the exaggerated reports of violence in the press, declared the police strike "an intolerable crime against civilization" (Fogelson 1977) and declared that "'There is no right to strike against the public safety, anywhere, anytime.'" (Fuess 1976 [1940]), 226) The police commissioner fired 1100 of the officers. With the specter of chaos looming in the popular imagination, Coolidge framed the "right" of public employees to unionize in terms of public safety rather than the right of employees to protest their working conditions. This proved to be politically expedient for Coolidge, who himself later recalled, "No doubt it was the police strike in Boston that brought me into national prominence." (Foner, 101). Other politicians no doubt took notice of the political gain to be had from opposing public employee unionization. Over sixty years later, in fact, Ronald Reagan used Coolidge's precedent to justify firing striking PATCO workers.³⁸

[insert political cartoon here]

Political cartoon:

He Gives Aid and Comfort to the Enemies of Society

Literary Digest, 9/27/19.

Originally from the Chicago Tribune (McCutcheon).

political cartoon

<http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/DIGITAL/redscare/HTMLCODE/CHRON/RS059.HT>

AFSCME itself began in Wisconsin when a group of white-collar state workers, fed up with a system in which state employees were replaced every time a new governor was elected, formed an association calling for state employment to be linked to merit rather than political patronage. The new Wisconsin state workers' union, which later became the Wisconsin State Employees Union, had the unusual distinction of being chartered as a "federal local" directly under the AFL. For a brief period of time the AFL forced the Wisconsin union to merge with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). In 1936 they were given a separate AFL charter as The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. While they were a union under the AFL, workers in this union had no right to collective bargaining. This was to come decades later.

From the beginning, AFSCME leaders saw their sector of the labor market and their membership as unique, and one requiring uniquely autonomous locals. In the eyes of AFSCME leaders, local self-determination was important because state workers were capable of representing themselves. Arthur Zander, one of the founders of the Wisconsin union and the first president of the new national union, supported state workers unionizing because he thought merit-based hiring (instead of patronage hiring) increased the professionalism of state workers. Also, he saw AFSCME members as smarter than the average union member and, because of this, not needing much in the way of assistance from the national union (Goulden 1982). AFSCME members, he believed,

³⁸ See for example *Sleepwalking Through History*, by Haynes Bonner Johnson.

could represent themselves (Billings and Greenya 1974, p. 30). According to one published history of the union, this philosophy had “catastrophic effects on the structure of the union.” According to Ames, Zander felt the rank and file membership was capable of handling its own problems without professional assistance. “Consequently,” writes Ames, “he deliberately created a structure that was 1) severely underfinanced and 2) consisted mainly of small locals, each expected to manage its own problems” (30).

Part of AFSCME’s purported exceptionalism had to do with the kind of unionism AFSCME’s leaders – and by extension, AFSCME members – espoused. Some labor historians claim that AFSCME’s members possessed a different union spirit, and that this difference constrained AFSCME, in contrast to private sector workers (or, implicitly, workers who used their bodies in their job). According to Billings and Greenya, AFSCME’s state workers were “professionals not inclined towards militancy” (26). But this analysis is infused with Zander’s ideas of the inherent exceptionalism of state workers. It was true that state workers were not particularly militant – this is true of most workers in the U.S., for myriad reasons – but this lack of “militancy” had less to do with some inherent characteristic of state workers than with their leaders’ ideas of what constituted acceptable unionism.

Zander’s conception of state workers’ exceptionalism was manifested in a decentralized organizational structure, in which he and the national office—somewhat paradoxically—granted themselves very little power. The structure he created in the union assumed that locals could and should manage their own affairs. Districts (or locals) paid low membership dues, leaving the national union underfinanced and, in some years, operating in the red.³⁹ AFSCME’s constitution (modeled closely on the constitution of AFGE) was similarly written so as to circumscribe the national union’s capacity to affect local practices.

Although the AFSCME national union had limited power compared to industrial unions, the national union did obtain the authority to manage locals that asked them for help. This was not true during the first several decades of AFSCME, but at the 1950 national convention delegates passed an amendment to the constitution called the “Special Arrangements” provision. Under this provision, locals could get bargaining, legal or organizing assistance from the national union in the form of national staff people coming to the local. The national union put locals or districts that came under Special Arrangements in trusteeship, or under the authority of the national union. In trusteeship, the national union could hire and fire local staff, and the AFSCME national would take control of the local or district’s treasury. To pay for the national staff, the local union receiving assistance paid higher per capita dues. All this meant that the national AFSCME could take control of struggling locals and districts.

Some district leaders resisted the authority of the national union to appoint staff people to locals, even if the requests came from local leaders, because it left struggling locals or districts beholden to the national union. District leaders’ opposition to this practice seemed tied to their dislike of Arthur Zander and their desire to imbue authority to district councils rather than the national union. They believed that Special Arrangements gave Zander increased political power. Jerry Wurf, who (ironically) became national president after Zander, was one of the council leaders who opposed Special Arrangements and was a part of a growing dissident movement against Zander.

³⁹ From 1958 to 1962, the national union spent more money than it took in.

Although Wurf was loyal to Zander, and in fact reported back to Zander what the dissidents were planning, years later he described Special Arrangements this way:

A council in, say, Michigan, would go under special arrangement and expect help. What the hell does Zander do? He hires the full-time organizer and sends in some part time jerk who doesn't know diddle about Michigan labor, the local situation. He closes the damned office and installs one of those telephone answering machines – you ever try to carry on a conversation with one of those things? He shuts down the newspaper, so that members don't know what is happening. He gets all the money he can out of the council to pay or his guys who are running around three states distant, lining up votes for the great Arthur Zander.

A Key Juncture: Organizing for Local Authority

Despite AFSCME's decentralized structure, then, Zander did attempt limited steps towards centralizing authority in the union. In this way he resembles George Hardy in SEIU, who began taking steps towards centralizing authority in that union. But while George Hardy rose into national leadership on the basis of his organizing success, Zander's local opponents were the ones with organizing success and experience. They used their organizing talents to rebuff Zander's attempts at centralization, and instead maintain authority at the local level—a legacy that remains to this day. Their movement challenged the power of the president, and led to changes in the constitution that further drew power away from the national office and concentrated it in the hands of leaders of the big locals and councils.

For its first twenty-five years, state professionals made up the majority of AFSCME's membership. Most members and most of the leadership came from small locals in the Midwest, not far from where the union started in Wisconsin. Billings and Greenya write, "Look at the official photographs of those early conventions, 1948, '50, '52 and so on, and all you see is the same square-faced, crewcut, hayseed, blue-eyed Norwegian, state level white collar worker from Minnesota" (43).

During the 1950s, as the union grew, power continued to reside in the Midwestern and Midatlantic districts. According to AFSCME's constitution, the locals got one delegate to the convention for every 500 members, and each local could send up to five delegates. This meant that—proportionately—small city locals had significantly more representation than the large locals in urban areas, since each was limited to five delegates.

This became an issue as more and more municipal workers came into the union, shifting the balance of AFSCME members to more urban areas. In 1936, Zander appointed Jerry Wurf to be Executive Director of District Council 37, the district council of New York City—a move that would have important ramifications for the future of the union. With the hope of gaining collective bargaining for city workers, Wurf supported a pro-labor state legislator, Robert Wagner, who promised, if elected, to support dues check off and an executive order permitting collective bargaining. AFSCME campaigned hard for Wagner, and in 1938 – following Wagner's successful reelection – Wagner issued executive order 49 granting municipal employees the right to bargain collectively with the city. Wurf brought in five-thousand workers into the council and established a political base that would ultimately help him challenge the national leadership.

AFSCME's constitution mandated the regional election of vice-presidents, which—according to Masters—was important in facilitating organized opposition. These positions, moreover, were not considered full-time employees of the international, giving them an autonomy from the international leadership. Indeed, in the union's early history, only the president and secretary-treasurer of the union drew salaries from the international's treasury (Masters 8).

The opposition to Zander reached a head at the union's 1962 convention, as five dissident leaders made public their challenge to Zander and the international. The leaders of the organized opposition were all men and all appointed staff of the union: Al Bilik, Victor Gotbaum, Joseph Ames, Robert Hastings and Norm Schut. The five leaders of the opposition at first called themselves the Forces of Evil – a name they adopted after Zander called them this in the union's newspaper, *The Public Employee*. Realizing this name was a public relations nightmare, however, they renamed themselves the Committee on Union Responsibility (COUR).

The dissidents' complaints centered around two related issues: Zander's somewhat limited attempts to increase the power of the international, and the international's failure adequately to represent the large, urban districts of the union. In the lead up to the 1962 AFSCME national convention, COUR developed a platform of specific reforms they hoped to implement. Overall, they sought more decentralization of power in the union, for less staff control and for larger locals to have more votes. They wanted more power given to officers, and they pushed for vice-presidents to be elected by region rather than at-large. They also wanted the Executive Board to have more authority, and the president to have less. Zander had hoped to eliminate the secretary-treasurer position, and COUR opposed this. Finally, they wanted the national president to get out of the business of low-income housing, and to cut ties with the CIA.

Leo Kramer, Zander's Executive Assistant who later wrote a book about AFSCME describes the dissidents differently. From his perspective, the dissidents were interested more narrowly in furthering their own power:

Several staff members from locals and councils banded together to form a political caucus opposed to per capita increases. They personified a relatively new development in AFSCME, that of well-financed urban district councils which attract aggressive and better paid staff who tend to want to run their district councils like little internationals, and therefore must inevitably overlap some activities of the national union. (Kramer, 104).

Whether representing the interests of their members or seeking to further their own careers, these five leaders were a formidable force. What seems especially significant, compared to SEIU, is that strong local leaders did not see their fate as bound up with an effective international union. Rather, the international was seen as an obstacle to locals' organizing possibilities.

Zander had his own plan for the 1962 convention. He hoped to get a per capita increase passed. At the 1958 convention, convention delegates had rejected Zander's proposal for a substantial increase – an increase from sixty-cents to one dollar. From 1958 to 1962, the national office was in dire financial straits, and Zander planned to try to bring the per capita increase back to the floor for a vote at the 1962 convention. Knowing this increase was at the top of Zander's agenda, given the national union's financial

difficulties, COUR attempted to strike a deal with Zander. If Zander backed the move to elect vice-presidents through regional voting, COUR promised to campaign for the per capita increase at the convention. Zander at first agreed to the deal but then later backed out.

In response, COUR decided to run a candidate for president against Zander. They settled on Jerry Wurf, the executive director of New York City's DC 37 and a controversial figure, but the only potential candidate with a constituency that could ensure a large number of votes. Framing their program as one of union democracy, COUR announced at the convention that theirs was "a program to strengthen local autonomy and to bring back democracy in our union" (81). Zander defeated Wurf in the 1962 convention election, but COUR's slate won four of the eleven vice-presidencies. Although Zander tried to oust Wurf from the union for the next two years in retaliation for his attempted coup at the convention, at the 1964 convention Wurf won the presidency by twenty-one votes: 1450 to 1429. This was one of the few times in history that an incumbent president of an AFL-CIO has lost an election.⁴⁰

At the 1964 convention at which Wurf was elected president, delegates also passed significant changes to the union's constitution. The most important change was the creation of regional districts and a new regional system of voting. In the new system, a council got one delegate for every one hundred members, up to four delegates. After this, the council could send one delegate for every one thousand members. This also meant that there were five additional Executive Board members – some, among other things, actions of the president. This panel was made up of seven members who were elected by the Executive Board. Lastly, the convention approved changes in the constitution that limited the president's ability to trustee locals and councils, and called for a review of every trusteeship within thirty days.

What did this all mean for the future of AFSCME? I argue that there are two lasting legacies of this period. Both the end of Special Arrangements and changes in the ways that delegates elect international executive board members—from at-large to regionally—moved power away from smaller locals and stripped the national union of some of its power, a power that was weak to begin with. That is, an already heavily decentralized union became even more decentralized at the end of Zander's presidency, while the major councils became the powerhouses of the union. This meant that large councils, councils like New York City's District Council 37, became major strongholds of the union.

A Paradox of Powerlessness: Jerry Wurf and the New Leadership

By the early 1970s, AFSCME seemed poised to represent the future of the labor movement. Not only had the union's numbers swelled during the 1950s and 1960s, but the victory of COUR seemed to secure the union's reputation as a democratic union. A 1972 *Washington Post* article "singled out AFSCME for acclaim as a model of democracy" (Masters, 8). The article suggested that the union had "moved from the fringes to the center of the American Labor Movement, not in terms of its political ideology per se but in terms of its clout" (Masters, 10).

⁴⁰ Years later, Wurf described it this way: "Beating the incumbent president of an international union isn't all that big a deal. It's not any tougher than overthrowing the pope, say, or the king of England" (Wurf, 61).

AFSCME's internal turmoil in the 1960s not only secured the decentralized structure of the union, but also brought to power Jerry Wurf, who remained president of AFSCME until his death in 1981. Wurf is infamous in labor circles for his despotism. According to one leader, Wurf's inability to give his staff much independence had to do with his worry that his loyalists would eventually conspire against him, as had been the case with Zander.⁴¹

Wurf was credited by some with transforming AFSCME into a "fighting organization," working to redraw the union's jurisdictional lines and "facilitate broader organizing campaigns" (Billings and Greenya, 86)... Certainly Wurf did bring to the union a renewed commitment to organizing, at least theoretically. According to one AFSCME leader, public sector organizing at the time was "just a wild west show" in the 1970s given the opportunities offered by the passage of public sector unionization laws. This leader implied that it may, then, have worked to "have... a fast and loose and crazy system." Wurf himself

had no compunctions about saying, "Get on a plane and be in Louisiana tomorrow morning. Get going." And we [were] struggling with "What do we do when people have these deep roots in their community?" And Wurf frankly didn't care. It was "Get on the plane and go."

But if Wurf was perhaps *personally* committed to organizing new groups of workers, he failed to transform the structure of AFSCME into one that would facilitate organizing victories. Indeed, according to many AFSCME leaders, Wurf's personality was itself an obstacle to his organizational ambitions. One leader remembered, "And a lot of what Wirth liked to do is just fight with you. He'd like to tangle and see what you were made of. And sometimes that was amusing and entertaining and sometimes it was aggravating." According to a Business Week article in 1980, Wurf's personality "resulted in high staff turnover and created enemies among other elected AFSCME officials" (Business Week, 1980, 71, in Masters, 8). Indeed, Wurf's personal commitment to social justice unionism and his talent for alienating others seemed to go hand in hand—represented well by his public stance against the Vietnam War. One organizer remembers having trouble with the AFL under Wurf's leadership "because of the Vietnam thing and Jerry Wurf and some would say his personality. But we like to think there were more noble reasons than that."

Yet more critically important to the future of AFSCME was a failure on the part of Wurf and AFSCME's leadership to challenge the decentralized nature of the organization. One former organizer from the international recounts: "We would go in and organize a small local... and just walk away and expect that somehow something good was gonna happen. There would be no structure, no council." This was reinforced by the fact that some organizations sought to affiliate with AFSCME *because* they knew they would be left alone. Moreover, Wurf's own former allies in COUR prevented him from undertaking any major organizational changes. For example, when Wurf sought to create regional directors answerable to himself, others in the union successfully opposed the plan (Masters, 8).

The decentralized structure of AFSCME thus continued to reinforce itself, undermining the union's capacity for large-scale campaigns or strategy on the national level. This was proven again when Wurf died in 1981, and the union undertook an

election for a new president. The election was decided by the vote of the New York District Council, who selected Gerry McEntee over Bill Lucy. According to an AFSCME leader, the District Council was upset for Jerry Wurf for having opened an international office near the council headquarters, implicitly threatening the district's autonomy and that of its leader, a former COUR member Vic Gotbaum with whom Wurf had had a contentious relationship. Bill Lucy had suggested that the international had the authority to maintain offices wherever it chose, McEntee agreed to shut the office, thereby securing a winning margin. Gerry McEntee has remained president of AFSCME to this day, and the structure continues to afford large amounts of autonomy to small locals.

Chapter Six: The Challenge of Sustaining a Culture of Creativity

Over the course of this dissertation I have worked to make sense of variation within the modern labor movement. Why have some international unions been able to transform their practices and understandings, while other unions in the same industries—and facing the same sorts of constraints—have been unable to effect similar transformations? First, I worked to articulate exactly *what* transformation looks like, using the case of the UFCW as a foil. Transformed unions are those unions that have made a commitment to organizing new workers—a commitment that we can see in the resources they dedicate to organizing; in “regime changes” through which organizers became union leaders; and in the union’s commitment to industry research and to the use of innovative organizing strategies. Institutionally, these unions went from understanding themselves as service-organizations to seeing themselves as social-movement organizations.

Next, I worked to reveal the processes by which these transformations took place—processes that had both structural and agentic moments. Transformed unions had porous structures, meaning that there was enough decentralization for innovation to occur but enough centralization for innovations to diffuse across different parts of the organization. These unions also had social-movement outsiders who were able to capitalize on these structures, and were able to centralize authority around their own organizing successes. I focused specifically on the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, a time period that seemed especially significant in terms of these unions’ ultimate successes or failures.

But as interesting as the stories of success were the stories of failure. Indeed, given the objective crisis in the American labor movement, it is somewhat surprising that the lessons from unions like SEIU and HERE have diffused to unions like the UFCW and AFSCME. UFCW had neither the people nor the structure to transform itself. At those few moments in its history when a transformative faction began to organize itself, as it did during the Hormel strike in the 1980s, a powerful national office quickly subdued it. We see the lasting legacy of UFCW’s failure in its ongoing organizing failures, demonstrated perhaps most clearly in the recent grocery strike in California.

But if UFCW is a story about the dangers of centralization, the lesson of this dissertation is certainly *not* that decentralization and local autonomy in and of themselves make for union transformation, as some advocates for “union democracy” have suggested. AFSCME, the quintessentially democratic union, has always privileged members’ personal preferences over any sort of organized program. As a result, the union has never been able to engage in the kinds of concerted, strategic campaigns that we see in SEIU or HERE.

Remarkably, the story of AFSCME bears striking resemblance to that of the UFCW. But where a strong and centralized national office was able to hinder reform in the case of the UFCW, in the case of AFSCME the barrier to reform was the *weakness* of any potentially disruptive constituency. The decentralization—and, indeed, the “democracy”—within the union inhibited any group from directing the program of the union in a transformational direction.

Social Movement Unionisms

Up until this point in the dissertation, I have spoken of SEIU and HERE as similarly transformed. Both have prioritized organizing more than other unions in the labor movement, both have engaged in strategic organizing, and both have built social movement campaigns that engage their members as well as the broader public. In the last year, the similarities between SEIU and HERE have been overshadowed by conflict between them. Public and bitter fights over jurisdiction have driven a wedge into the “new” labor movement that threatens its very existence. From one perspective, the intensity of the disputes between these two “revitalized” unions suggests a disturbing reversion to a history in which fighting over already-organized members took precedence over organizing the vast sea of the unorganized; from the opposite perspective, this competition might be seen as an indicator of union vitality, which will ultimately serve the interests of all workers.

In chapter two, I argue that transformed unions engage both in creative strategy in a variety of arenas and in extensive leadership development among workers themselves. While these dual engagements are not necessarily contradictory, they do come into tension. If a union sees that political struggle may win more for workers than workers’ own engagement at the workplace, a commitment to leadership development among workers likely fades. If a union sees itself as a social movement, than innovative types of bargaining and partnering with employers may smack of selling out.

This conclusion suggests that the conflict between the two unions is, at least in part, indicative of variation in how these two “transformed” international unions understand their missions—specifically in terms of how leaders within these unions think about what it means to represent their members. The differences between SEIU and HERE are significant especially in light of SEIU’s modern critics, who see shadows of a new autocracy emerging in the union’s aggressive efforts at expansion. Even if these transformed unions have escaped Michels’s “iron law of oligarchy,” as previous scholarship has demonstrated (Voss and Sherman 2000), we should still think carefully about the promises and perils of their new models of representation.

Despite (and indeed in response to) the continued growth of the SEIU, critics from both the academy and the labor movement argue that SEIU’s leadership continues to subordinate its members’ interests to its own, and not only because leaders become invested in their own careers at the expense of their members, as Michels would have predicted (and as was arguably the case in the SEIU in an earlier era). According to these scholars and activists, unions like the SEIU and their leaders resemble their old-guard predecessors in some key ways, including centralizing authority away from local leaders and members, and being overly-friendly with employers – in its present form trading away workers’ bargaining rights, wages and benefits as part of compromises with employers that allow them to represent a larger percentage of the workforce. The result, so the argument goes, is that union leaders remain detached from and unaccountable to their membership. Those more sympathetic to SEIU either argue that a centralized approach is necessary to growth, and that this growth is necessary to win power for workers, or that centralization is not incompatible with member involvement. The debate between SEIU’s critics and its defenders has been framed as one of “top down” versus “bottom up” unionism.

A more illuminating framework for this ongoing debate focuses on different conceptions of political representation within these transformed unions. Leaders in SEIU consider politics an autonomous sphere in which they must work, as delegates, to win power for the working class; leaders in HERE see their role as more educative, teaching workers to win power for themselves.

SEIU and the Autonomous Political Field

Leaders in the Service Employees International Union understand the union's success to be the result of a process of centralization of authority and coordination among the union's various regions and industries. According to recently retired international president Andy Stern, "The world needs global unions" in order to engage with "new multinational corporate employers" (Stern 2006:111).

In the eyes of SEIU leaders, union centralization follows from the centralization of capital. An SEIU international staff member puts it this way: "Well, the theory is the bigger we are the more strength we have to exact public policy and hold accountable employers who have gotten bigger and more centralized, so that wealth and decision-making is more centralized, so that we have to get more centralized. So the employer picture is going to fashion the labor picture in response." This same staff member is quick to point out that while there are contradictions in centralizing power, labor has no choice but to do so: "I think what Mary Kay [current SEIU President] would tell me, and she is so knowledgeable. She would say, 'We don't have that luxury. We are dying, labor. We have to organize to scale in order to survive and recover and gain strength, but on our current trajectory we're gonna die.' And so it's not that bigger is better for bigger is better's sake, it's that when you do the power analysis, the way to preserve gain and to advance is, it requires exponential growth." This staff member goes on to say that "exponential growth" requires experimenting with a range of strategies – some of which are going to be unpopular. "The way you get exponential growth," she says, "is you look at all options, and that's what Andy [Andy Stern, SEIU president] was willing to do. And it's produced fruits, and it's also produced conflicts. Which is a natural outgrowth of any...it's gestation, there's blood."

This centralization has allowed for an autonomy from the everyday interests of members that leaders in SEIU see as essential to representing the real long-term interests of those members—as well as the interests of the "working class" more generally. Paradoxically, the further away workers themselves are from decision-making authority, the better the international feels able to represent the "working class." The union's autonomy from the everyday lives of its members is essential for it to win substantive victories in the political arena. According to an international staff member, the union's responsibility for its members *necessitated* "maximum flexibility and... realpolitik." A local union's narrow focus on its own membership—rather than on members across the country or on the *unorganized*—meant, according to the international, that a local would never voluntarily take the risks or make the compromises necessary on behalf of the working class as a whole. In order to mobilize for a national Justice for Janitors campaign, SEIU international staffer Stephen Lerner explained that local unions behaved as "powerful local fiefdoms that, in the name of local union autonomy, claimed it was their right not to change." As a result, he continues, "SEIU faced a choice and a

challenge: accepting the road block these local leaders represented or remaking the union so that workers could win and take on nonunion employers” (Lerner 2005).

When leaders in SEIU speak about their work, they focus almost exclusively on the goal of organizing X percent of an industry, as one leader put it, and the variety of means they have used in order to increase membership. Many of these mechanisms are outside traditional models of workplace action, and in fact make little use of workers at all.

In 2003, the international brokered a deal with a coalition of nursing homes called the California Nursing Home Alliance. Under the agreement, the union would help lobby the California legislature to increase reimbursement rates for nursing home care. In exchange, the nursing home alliance would select forty-two homes to be organized by the union under “template agreements,” which limited the extent to which workers would be able to bargain collectively, and put limitations on workplace grievances or public advocacy. Such strategies, existing within a kind of political game of which workers are not necessarily a part, sometimes bring the union into close alliance with employers. For Stern, these sorts of partnerships are what the modern labor movement must foster: “Employees and employers need organizations that solve problems, not create them.” One of the union’s functions, he writes, must be to “assist[] employers in overcoming unnecessary legislative and political obstacles to their success” (Stern 2006:105). But even for those within the union who were skeptical of partnership, there was a logic to such deals. A local SEIU organizer explained that while he and his colleagues were “not totally cool with” the nursing home deal, they also realized that “we haven’t been able to organize nursing homes in the way we know we need to to, so let’s give this a try.” He goes on to say that in many places the union was able to use the union’s contract template as a starting point for even better bargaining rights further down the road.

These strategies can sometimes take place without the involvement of workers, which one official recognizes directly when he espouses himself as a “primary advocate and practitioner of ‘you can win without workers.’” For him, worker action is only one of a variety of tactics that that *international* should be able to employ depending on the campaign.

These strategies, existing within a kind of political game of which workers are not a part, sometimes bring the union into close alliance with employers. One leader explains the philosophy of the union towards a particular employer in the building services industry as being, “We will not impose the contract until we take the whole market union, we will not disadvantage you.” Describing the union’s relationship with the health care sector, he says that the union “cannot be a force of dissent” but rather must “be a force of offense,” helping the industry to organize itself. Yet at the same time, this leader recognizes the tension in working alongside employers, something he and other leaders refer to as the “struggle versus snuggle” debate. He is worried about the “long term outcome” of being “totally willing to have cooperative relationships with the boss,” recognizing that without some degree of conflict “you lose something that is important to the wellbeing of workers.” Another leader says that “our employers are so disgusting nobody would admit to snuggling with them,” but goes on to say that some within the

international argue that “if employers felt more confident in the relationship they would be more willing to do things.”

Leaders in SEIU understand their constituency as being wider than the members from whom they collect dues, encompassing all members of the “working class” more generally.

In the process of representing workers, then, the international has helped to constitute a “working class” with shared interests. Stern has written that as the president of SEIU it was his job to “watch out for the threats that confront our members—and All American workers” (Stern 2006:15). In an exit interview as he was leaving the presidency, Andy Stern said, “[W]e also decided at our last convention that the union wasn’t going to be just about us, it was going to be about justice for all” (Klein 2010). In the process of representing particular, then, the international has helped to constitute a “working class” with shared interests. Still, the particularities of these interests are constructed by the staff of the international themselves, who see membership growth as necessary to the union’s success in the wider political arena. The largest internal challenge for leaders in the international over the past decade has been to increase the capacity of the international to act on behalf of local unions—to make the international, represented by Andy Stern, the unified voice of the union and of workers more generally. In fact national staff are sometimes worried that local leaders are *too* accountable to workers from one region to be able to represent workers generally, whereas the international, in contrast, is able to understand its constituency as broader than the union’s membership.

Leaders in SEIU appreciate the symbolic nature of political struggle, having invested large amounts of time and money into the international’s identity. In recent years the international has branded all locals with it now ubiquitous “sea of purple,” and required locals to include “SEIU” in their title. The international has also put forward Andy Stern as a new kind of spokesperson for the labor movement, with a public presence (for good and bad) somewhat autonomous from the organization he leads.

Worker-Centered Unionism and HERE

The most striking contrast between leaders in SEIU and leaders in HERE is the extent to which leaders in HERE emphasize leadership development and education among their membership. This is understood as a kind of vocational commitment. As one leader puts it, “Building the union is like building the church without the crutch of religion.”

Where leaders in SEIU tend to see membership growth as the most important indicator of their own success, because of its importance to bargaining power with employers on the national level, leaders in HERE tend to see workers’ leadership capacity as an end in itself. These leaders see their most important work as being educators and motivators of those with whom they work. One leader discusses that he has remained committed to the union because “this union is trying to develop leaders. That’s its mission and the people that are shaping the direction of this union, that’s what they think is the most important work.” For these leaders, what is significant about a union is that it “changes the relationship with the employer.” This leader goes on to say that while “wages and benefits fall out of [organizing],” the priority is on turning the employment relationship into “a respectful relationship.” Another leader in HERE

explicitly connects the importance of workplace leadership with establishing this kind of respectful relationship, arguing that an employer “will never truly respect his employees unless he sees his employees capable and willing...to talk to him, and explain [their] issues and fight for those issues. They will never earn that respect unless they do it themselves.” This leader feels that her biggest accomplishment within the union has been to “go from no rank and file leadership involvement” to building “a very strong group of seventy-five to a hundred rank and file leaders.” This requires on-going training since “some fall off” and “we’re always getting more people.” But it remains a priority because the union “want[s] [each rank and file leader] to be recognized and respected as a spokesperson for their co-workers.” Winning concessions from employers does not lose importance, but workers’ involvement in the process of victory is essential: “[W]e create opportunities for people to be leaders among their co-workers. I mean the exciting thing is how the union changes people’s lives. And the least of that is pay increases and better benefits.”

While leadership development is a kind of end in itself, leaders in HERE assume that education and leadership development among the membership is consistent with membership growth. One leader discusses her plan to involve all rank-and-file members in organizing non-union workers: “The non-union workers would get a chance to see how the unionized workers, what they had to say about why it was important to be unionized. And the unionized workers had a chance to see ‘Oh my god, this is what’s non-union.’” Another leader discusses how workers’ voluntary commitment to fighting is a particularly powerful resource when the employer realizes “‘all these people come and they’re not getting paid.’” He continues, “No, they’re just here because they like kicking the crap out of you and building the union.... It’s that effort that makes it all go.”

The idea that everyone should be involved in the union’s growth, and that the union’s power resides in members’ leadership capacity, contrasts sharply with those leaders in SEIU who assert that a professional staff can “win without workers.” A kind of anti-professionalism pervades interviews with HERE leaders. One leader recounts that they have been successful working through the National Labor Relations Board because they have refused to rely on lawyers, instead “treat[ing] the board like organizing” and pressuring them to rule in favor of the union. This same leader remembers when a group of workers were about to go on strike, and asked him “how does the union support us?” His answer was that “after you’ve been on strike two weeks you will get fifty dollars a week of strike benefits, and you get me. I work with you seven days a week twenty-four hours a day. That’s it.” The implication is that workers *are* the union, rather than the clients of the union. Paradoxically, past union successes can present a kind of problem for these leaders. As the union becomes capable of providing more financial and staff support for organizing campaigns, the need for worker leaders diminishes. This “presents a different organizing challenge.”

While those SEIU leaders interviewed discuss strategy largely in relationship to employers, HERE leaders spend significantly more time discussing their strategies for encouraging members to take steps towards becoming more powerful leaders themselves. One leader discusses his strategy for winning as “get[ting] close to the workers.” He continues,

Get in there and spend time with them. Whether it’s house visits or at the work site. Spend time with the workers. Identify the potential leaders in there and then

challenge, recruit, cajole, get those leaders to start working with us and then back them up when the fight starts.

In another indication of these leaders' proximity to workers, a leader mentions that his salary is tied to members' earnings.

This proximity, however, is not conflated with "union democracy," a point especially significant in light of recent debates. Organizers should listen to workers, according to these leaders, but must also shape and push workers' ideas about what needs to be done. One leader, discussing the lessons he learned when working for the United Farm Workers, remembers how Cesar Chavez would "solve" seemingly intractable problems by "listen[ing] and believ[ing] that the workers could come up with [an answer]. And he pushed them. It wasn't a mystical thing." As another leader puts it, "[members'] money gives us the luxury to sit around and think about this stuff all the time. And if we don't have an idea about how to do it, shame on us! And if our idea doesn't make sense, they'll tell us." This same leader discusses his objections with a conception of union democracy that involves "bring[ing] people to a meeting and let[ting] them choose," arguing that "that's a false choice" since people naturally want to "do the easy thing." The union leader's role is to educate its membership, to say "this is what we need to do, and this is going to be hard work, are we up to do the hard work? Yeah. And then let's go." In this leader's experience, "the more you ask people to do the more they do, [and] the more they're prepared to do."

Of course, sometimes opportunities for worker action arise unexpectedly. For Fantasia (1988), union bureaucracies inevitably stifle this kind of collective effervescence among workers. Yet leaders in HERE seem to welcome, and indeed work to foster, this kind of creativity. One leader discusses the biggest challenge the union leadership faces as being "how do we create more spontaneity by workers?" She continues,

I think you get to the point of you have trained enough leaders that then they, out there on their own, do things. Or you create enough confidence that even if people don't have the experience, they do things that challenge the employers, to challenge the workers in any particular workplace.

Far from the union leadership stifling displays of spontaneous workplace action, this union leader sees training as a necessary prerequisite for spontaneity.

Tensions in Transformation

It would be a mistake to overstate the differences between leaders in SEIU and HERE. Both unions see political work as integral to their organizing efforts, and both understand the importance of worker engagement and building power at the workplace. Moreover, the above analysis glosses over large differences between locals and industries in the same international unions. That being said, there are distinct differences in how leaders in these two unions talk about the work that they do. These differences can help us identify the (quite different) perils that each of these transformed unions faces in the upcoming months and years.

For SEIU, the dangers seem somewhat obvious. Since the 1980s, Sweeney and then Stern have worked to centralize authority in the union, ostensibly consolidating the union's commitment to innovative and strategic organizing. This has made sense

strategically, given the national (and international) scope of employers. Large mega-locals, many with over 100,000 members, are able to have a kind of bargaining leverage that smaller locals cannot. But this consolidation itself threatens the decentralized spaces within which organizing innovations were able to occur in the first place. Mega-locals can perhaps bargain effectively with employers, but also decrease the degree of autonomy that members and staff feel. Moreover, constitutional amendments within SEIU have given Stern the authority to appoint the president of newly-merged locals for three-year terms, further consolidating Stern's personal power.

When Stern uses his authority to remove corrupt union presidents and replace them with committed organizers, this contributes to union transformation, as Voss and Sherman (2000) correctly point out. But when Stern uses his authority to remove political dissent, as seems to be the case in SEIU's recent trusteeship of the large California healthcare workers' union United Healthcare Workers—West (UHW), one must wonder whether the union's very transformation is in jeopardy. Indeed, in a 2008 in the *New Republic*, Bradford Plumer writes of the ousted UHW leader Sal Rosselli, "it was stunning how much he sounded like the young stern—the Stern who had, many years ago, assailed Pennsylvania union leaders for ignoring the interests of their own workers." The important difference, however, was that Rosselli faced a centralized international union able to silence his dissent. Allegations of corruption, politically-motivated trusteeships, and an increasingly adversarial stance towards the rest of the labor movement are suggestive of the danger of SEIU's consolidation.

Similarly, partnerships with employers make sense in some contexts—as the widely lauded Kaiser-Permanente agreement suggests—while they smack of company-unionism in others—as the SEIU's questionable nursing home contracts illustrate. Yet as Ganz (2000) suggests, it seems that the capacity to distinguish between smart partnerships and sell-outs—the capacity to be *strategic* at all—depends on a chorus of dissonant voices from different backgrounds.

For HERE, the dangers are quite different, and best captured by a turn to my fieldwork with an HERE union. During the organizing campaign on which I worked, organizers continually alleged that workers decided campaign strategy. In some sense, this was true. Workers voted with their feet, participating in union actions that they approved and endorsed, and, as time went on, the organizing committee took an increasing responsibility for the campaign. So when organizers insisted that workers were the highest authority in the union, this was not just rhetoric.

Yet for the local staff (and for many organizers within HERE), a fierce commitment to winning a union contract could (and perhaps *should*) override concern with internal democracy. If committee dissent threatened to derail the process, organizers continued to invoke the language of democratic process even as they worked to eliminate all such dissent. Ironically, sometimes the language organizers used, ostensibly to generate discussion of the union plan, shut down any *possibility* of disagreement. This became transparent in one situation, as union staff unilaterally made a decision and tried to pass it off as committee-endorsed.

For weeks, union staff had been talking to the committee about a boycott picket in front of the hotel on the day of a large symphony orchestra dinner, *if* the orchestra refused to relocate to another hotel. The union had informed the orchestra of the boycott and requested that they move their fundraising event and pledge not to return to the hotel until

workers had a contract. An organizer and three hotel workers visited the orchestra to “inform” the musicians and administrators of the labor dispute at the hotel, and to warn them that they should expect a noisy picket line the afternoon of their fundraiser if they refused to move their event to another venue.

Two days before the weekly committee meeting, a union staff member met again with an orchestra administrator and was told that it was impossible to move the event at such late notice. As a compromise, the orchestra offered to print notice of the boycott on the front page of their fundraiser program notes, and agreed to let organizers speak at the event and distribute union flyers to the orchestra patrons. Without consulting the committee, the union agreed on this basis not to picket the day of the event.

How, then, to communicate this to the committee? One option was just to present the decision as a done deal. The committee was not likely to be overly concerned with this, since they trusted the judgment of staff organizers. Yet organizers approached it another way. A lead organizer brought up the orchestra situation during the section of the meeting devoted to recent victories. Framing it as a definitive victory, the organizer told the committee that the symphony agreed “not only to do one thing, but to do *six* things.” She only mentioned that the symphony did not meet the union’s most important demand—to pull their event from the boycotted hotel—when she told the committee that it was “too late to hold the fundraiser somewhere else.” The organizer explained that because the goal of the picket was to inform local residents coming to the event about the boycott, the action inside the hotel was even better than a rally outside. The organizer wanted the committee to confirm the decision.

But what do you guys think? We thought this was something great, but we always want to check in with you all. You call the shots. So you think even with all that the symphony is doing—letting us talk, putting us at the very front of their program, promising not to come back—that we should just keep going and have the rally? Or do you think, “Let’s play it smart and think about our strategy,” and cancel the rally?

Organizers knew that going ahead with the rally after they promised to cancel it would not be the most prudent course of action. The lead organizer described the two possibilities in order to shut down any questions committee members might have had about canceling the rally. If “playing it smart” meant calling off the rally, who was going to suggest otherwise? Organizers could present a façade of democratic procedure, “you call the shots”—while at the same time ensuring that the plan the committee supposedly developed was the one organizers had already decided.

On some occasions, organizers actually accidentally revealed a little more than they had meant to about behind-the-scenes planning. Once, in the middle of a meeting, an organizer flipped through the tablet of butcher paper looking for a blank sheet on which to develop the weekly plan with the committee, only to flip to a page of an already written-up weekly plan that organizers had made earlier that day. “Oops,” the organizer joked, “you weren’t supposed to see that.” And at the end of another meeting, after two hours of “developing the plan for the month of March,” an organizer pulled out a stack of flyers announcing the month’s actions. “And what would you have done if we hadn’t agreed to these actions?” one of the men from the banquet department asked. Laughing, the organizer assured him that “we knew you’d agree.”

Where the danger in SEIU seems to be that centralization will reduce the union's capacity to strategize effectively, the danger in HERE seems to be a danger of a more micro dogmatism. All along, HERE's transformation has been driven by an ideological commitment to "worker-centered unionism." Yet there is a difference—even if a subtle one—between listening to workers and generating strategy together, and formulating strategy knowing that workers will agree. Organizers' vanguardism might preclude a close ear to workers' needs or contributions.

This vanguardism has also been questioned as a "creepy, cultlike form of organizing" ("Some Organizers Protest Their Union's Tactics," *New York Times*, November 18, 2009) as details have been revealed about the ways in which personal information is used in organizing drives. Recounting a practice known as "pink-sheeting" within HERE, some former organizers have described being compelled to divulge painful details of their personal lives as a way for the union to ensure their lasting commitment; and being encouraged to elicit the same sorts of stories from workers they were organizing. This is the flip side of the type of vanguardist commitment many organizers feel towards the union.

But perhaps even more importantly, HERE's commitment to worker-centered unionism has *not* led to significant membership growth, meaning that the union's power must derive too extensively from workers' militancy at individual workplaces. A focus on worker-centered unionism, at the expense of direct political negotiation or employer partnership, may constrain the union's capacity to improve workers' lives.

Renewing Renewal

Of course, criticisms of both SEIU and HERE have become amplified as these unions combat one another for members. Their similarly strong commitments to organizing workers, and to knowing the *best* way to do it, has led to what seems from the outside to be a dangerous sort of internecine warfare. The conflict between these two unions, which have for so long been so closely aligned, threatens to undermine the very processes of renewal they both spearheaded. One of the most paradoxical elements of the conflict is that many of the next generation of social movement activists, who came to unions like SEIU *because* of their reputations as social movement unions, seem to be leaving these unions for safe havens like the UFCW.

What this dissertation suggests, to paraphrase the civil rights hymn and Kevin Anderson's academic adaptation (2004), is that union transformation is a constant struggle. The stories of SEIU and HERE bring to mind Weber's (1978) discussion of the give-and-take between bureaucracy and democracy, as democratic moments or "ruptures" (231) tend to be fleeting, returning to bureaucracy only slightly altered. To the extent that centralization silences these voices, even if this centralization is done in the *name of strategic capacity*, there seems to be a risk of losing strategic perspective altogether.

In the 1970s and 1980s, outsiders within both SEIU and HERE undertook internal political projects to make organizing each organization's first priority. In so doing, they necessarily centralized and consolidated each organization's structure. The question, then, seems to be whether centralization and innovation can actually coexist within a union, or whether we must look elsewhere for the next union revival.

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