

SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM AND PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC POLICY IN NEW YORK CITY¹

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Labour-community coalitions and shifts towards social movement unionism are part of a broad strategy for progressive public policy reform throughout the United States. Social movement unionism, at its most basic level, is the belief that in order to revitalize, the American labour movement will have to partner with other social movements – peace, feminists, immigrant rights, and environmentalists, among others – and look beyond its bread and butter issues of wages and working conditions. The notion is that global shifts in employment and changing national political ideology, as well as local challenges to organizing, have forced labour leaders (including the Sweeny administration inaugurated in 1995 to lead the American Federation of Labour – Congress of Industrial Relations (AFL-CIO), the US umbrella trade union organization) to re-envision and redefine labour’s role internally as well as in relation to other social movements, locally and globally, in order to achieve its organizing and broader public policy goals.

At times, academics and trade union officials have been quick to romanticize where we stand on the social movement unionism front: unions, this view espouses, are championing both the immediate and long-term interests of working people, both in the workplace and in society at large, and are partnering with other social movements on a broad platform of social and economic justice. Yet in reality, as this research shows, the situation on the ground is much more complex. Unions, at times, do partner with other social movements. But respondents overwhelmingly indicated that, at times, these relationships are more “strategic collaborations” for single-issue campaigns. Issues such as wages and working conditions remain labour’s core goals rather than goals integrated into a broader public policy strategy for progressive reform.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM IN NEW YORK CITY

Overall, there is clearly some movement towards social movement unionism in New York City but the movement is very slow and there are many obstacles preventing its further growth. Labour leaders agree that there are universal commonalities facing the entire labour movement: eroding wages, job security, and working conditions; decreased political power; and increasingly retaliatory federal legislation, and conservative local and state governments. They also realize, for the most part, that many local struggles resonate with the broader labour and social movement communities.

When asked to explain what a union should be, a number of interviewees responded that labour needs to find “the answer to the eight hour day” – a modern rallying cry for the movement that can unite all workers, both those that are unionized and those that are not. One labour leader asked:

I don't have the answer, I'm just posing the question to myself and to others: What is the equivalent of the eight hour-a-day fight? What is the great unifying standard that we can say to all workers that we should be fighting for?

Goals obviously vary between labour leaders and between unions, but the majority of those surveyed agree that labour needs to broaden its approach to organizing and increasing power – by engaging in labour-community coalitions and expanding its list of public policy priorities to a) level the legislative playing field in which to organize and b) give workers more of a reason to want to join a union. Indeed, a number of powerful New York City unions are beginning to adopt these strategies, while leaders from other unions are pushing for this approach from within.

Such movement is indeed significant but can not be over-romanticized. Aspects of social movement unionism such as coalition building have been noted to occur in very top-down, bureaucratic, narrow, trade-focused ways when seen as necessary to win. Likewise, unions adopting a social movement approach have successfully won organizing campaigns by pressuring large corporate employers to agree to neutrality agreements without the support of a coalition or broader public policy reforms. Furthermore, as a number of New York City labour leaders proclaimed “change is happening but change within labour is always a slow change.” Interviews showed that this slow movement is due to a number of reasons, including labour’s reluctance to broaden its tactics, labour’s hesitance to give up power (hence the frequent one-sidedness of coalition activity), the culture gap between labour and community, and the need for consensus within a highly diverse movement.

Indeed, movement towards social movement unionism in New York City and labour’s role in a progressive policy agenda – to both level the playing field

for organizing and to deepen labour's involvement in a quest for social, economic, and environmental justice – is slow and, at time, problematic.

Nonetheless, forward progress is focused on four broad areas, each with vast implications for the future of the city:

- Advocating for the rights of immigrant workers;
- Linking job creation and environmental sustainability;
- Increasing access to health care; and
- Increasing access to affordable housing and the construction jobs supporting this industry.

THE ROLE OF IMMIGRANT WORKERS

In moving forward, the role of immigrant workers in pursuing social movement unionism is likely to become increasingly important in New York City. It is extremely significant that while interviewees never were asked directly about the role of immigrant workers, the vast majority indicated the importance of meeting the needs of this constituency. One labour leader explained:

I think the future of the progressive movement in New York rests on immigrants. This is the youngest the city has been in terms of new arrivals since the turn of the century, and I think whoever gets to them first – and I hate to talk about them as a commodity – but whoever gets to them first, and addresses their issues first, that is where, at least for the next generation, their political allegiances will lie. So if you get them now – if labour unions get them now – start addressing their needs, both in terms of working conditions and also in terms of their community, then progressives win them, and they become progressives, and then we build New York. If we don't, then we lose them.

Another leader seconded this sentiment:

As a city, we've also had over one million immigrants come in the last ten years. This is a city largely of an immigrant working class that we are not tied to in any meaningful way. The trade union movement, to grow and to have influence as we move forward, we have to think in terms of a broader movement.

The role of immigrant workers being the key to the progressive movement and the creation of social movement unionism is also well documented in the literature. But how to make this happen in a meaningful way remains an enigma, and is likely to continue to prevent social movement unionism from becoming mainstream.

Jennifer Gordan writes:

The U.S. labour movement's ability to reclaim its roots as a social movement depends in large part on its approach to immigrant workers. A few unions, particularly on the West Coast, have successfully recruited large numbers of immigrants as both members and leaders. SEIU and HERE are the obvious examples, with others scattered around the country. But for much of the labour movement, immigrant organizing remains a puzzle (Gordon, 2001).

This past fall, New York City's labour movement took a big jump in broadening its appeal to immigrant workers. The Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride (IWFR) – modeled after the Civil Rights Freedom Rides – seriously raised the profile of immigrant worker issues and brought local labour and the immigrant rights leaders together to plan the huge New York City finale to this national event. While disagreements still remain in developing a specific legislative agenda to promote legalization, and while clashes of cultures caused serious hard-feelings throughout the planning process and the event itself, the IWFR was a major step forward in bringing labour and community together to address public policy that can potentially increase union density and power – due to demographic and employment shifts, among other reasons – but can also provide the broader public with more of a reason to join a union. The IWFR itself, in my opinion, also served as a tremendous organizing tool for deepening and broadening the appeal of social movement unionism.

The IWFR created a model for which New York City's labour and immigrant rights communities could work together. Currently, a coalition is fighting an effort to revoke the drivers licenses of undocumented immigrants in New York State, regardless of their employment status, residency status, history of paying taxes, or their ability to drive. This mandate is being administered by the state Department of Motor Vehicles – an agency which has no ability to determine immigration status – due to pressure from the federal Department of Homeland Security, which wrongly claims that such a policy will make our nation safer (even though the rationale on which this theory is based – that only those with drivers licenses will board planes – is false). It is significant that unions and community groups are engaging in this campaign together. How they engage in the future will continue to shape the direction of social movement unionism. This progress has the potential to change the face and strengthen the power of labour, while also forging a public policy framework more supportive to the rights of immigrant workers (even amidst increasingly punitive federal legislation).

THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Since the tragedy of September 11th labour and the city's environmental justice community have become much closer, having realized that their visions

for job creation, economic development, and environmental health and prosperity are closely aligned. Blue-green alliances have also increased in prominence at the national level with the creation of the Apollo Alliance, an influential coalition of leading unions, environmentalists, civil rights leaders, and businesses advocating for a serious public sector investment in clean energy and good jobs. In our post September 11th world, this national security strategy for job creation in alternative energy markets has gained much political prominence and feasibility, if not with the Bush administration than with the one that will follow.

These two factors set the stage for the launch of an official blue-green coalition in New York City in 2004 – N.Y. Apollo, which is a regional node of the Apollo Alliance. Convened by Urban Agenda, a labour-based research and policy organization, linking labour and community around issues of public policy, N.Y. Apollo is connecting labour, environmental justice, environmentalists, business, educators, and others to implement its vision for a strong economy and healthy city. The group is already influencing how the city is powered by promoting a framework that supports energy efficiency, economic development, and environmental equity.

For instance, N.Y. Apollo has been successful in developing and pushing legislation to promote high performance, energy efficient buildings and in helping shape a city-sponsored environment jobs creation strategy that will train workers – and thus prime the pump for further investment – in three emerging markets: high performance building construction, retrofitting, and maintenance; a green manufacturing sector to produce the products to support the high performance building market; and alternative energy markets (wind, solar, geothermal) used to power these smart buildings. Because it is framed as a strategy for maintaining global pre-eminence, N.Y. Apollo has been especially successful at gaining the support of the business community.

In addition to joining forces around issues of public policy, NY Apollo – through its inclusive approach that advocates for the environmental justice perspective to be integrated into all coalition activities – has pushed labour a little bit towards social movement unionism. A powerful political voice by itself, the environmental justice movement has also been strengthened on the legislative radar screen because of its central role in N.Y. Apollo.

Interestingly, N.Y. Apollo has attracted the attention of some of the city's more conservative unions. The building trades are interested in capturing the solar photovoltaic market while the utility workers see N.Y. Apollo as a strategy for strengthening the city's energy infrastructure. How and if these unions are interested in anything beyond their narrow self-interests is yet to be seen. The future of social movement unionism and labour-community coalitions as well as progressive public policy around environmental issues will be shaped by this question.

THE ROLE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The notion that housing can build more than homes – that it can build communities – has helped reengage labour in one of the city’s most pressing issues. For too long, labour has ignored the housing crisis, mostly because affordable housing units tend to be built by non-union contractors. However, demographic shifts within unions’ rank-and-file and the realization that a new construction market could potentially be captured and increase labour’s power have led to unions engaging in labour-community coalitions to create more affordable housing, and ensure that community residents get the construction jobs and are paid a living wage.

For instance, TRADES is a coalition of 25 public housing resident associations, labour unions (including the notoriously traditional Painters, Labourers, and Carpenters), and advocacy groups working together to expand employment and training opportunities in the construction trades for N.Y.C. public housing residents. The group is also seeking to a) increase the presence of union construction workers on local housing authority jobs, thus improving the enforcement of prevailing wage laws; and b) to repeal the federal community service mandate that requires public housing residents to provide 96 hours of unpaid labour each year, or else face eviction of their entire household.

According to TRADES representatives, the campaign grew out of recognition that creating jobs for residents on local housing authority construction projects is not just good policy but that it is also the law. A federal mandate requires that when federal funds are spent to renovate or build public housing, housing authorities and contractors must, to the greatest extent possible, hire and train residents to fill the jobs generated. But in N.Y.C. less than 1% of these jobs go to residents, and those few individuals who do get these jobs often receive short-term positions at wages less than the legally mandated prevailing wage.

For this reason, the group developed an agreement with the local housing authority around three main objectives:

- to co-operate with the trade unions to ensure that over the next ten years thousands of residents are provided pre-apprenticeship training and admittance to union apprenticeship programs;
- to comply with the federal legislation requiring that contractors fill all their apprenticeship positions on local housing authority projects with local housing authority residents; and
- to ensure that unionized firms have fair access to these jobs by requiring that contractors have state-certified apprenticeship programs and that they comply with prevailing wage laws.

This agreement not only set a precedent for how affordable housing will be built in New York City, but also for how labour will engage in this vital arena. Two additional labour-community coalitions are now working to address the city's affordable housing marketplace. One campaign is advocating that inclusionary zoning mandates affordable housing units for all new construction projects, rather than leaving private developers to choose whether to build affordable housing. Another campaign is demonstrating that affordable housing is literally built on the backs of an exploited low-wage workforce, and is advocating that the municipal government ends this exploitative and illegal practice.

These campaigns both address critical public policy issues – affordable housing and access to, and provision of, living wage jobs – and demonstrate that labour has a vested interest in engaging in labour-community coalitions to both level the playing field for organizing (by ending discriminatory and illegal wage and safety practices of employers) and demonstrating to the broader community that labour is trying to address the needs of all workers. How these coalitions and legislative campaigns play out in the future will seriously shape both social movement unionism and progressive public policy reform in New York City.

THE ROLE OF AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE

Finally, a number of labour and community organizations – spearheaded by Jobs with Justice – have launched a health care campaign to level the playing field for responsible employers who provide health benefits. The newly introduced (in City Council) Health Care Security Act would require employers who do not provide health care benefits to pay into a fund that would cover uninsured workers. This legislation has been widely backed by employers, unions, and community groups. If this legislation passes, labour will gain more strength, as responsible employers will be better able to compete with those employers who take the “low-road” and do not offer benefits – and will thus be more amenable to workers forming a union. Labour will also gain more power as the broader community realizes that unions care about more than their own seemingly narrow self-interests.

THREE STRIKES AGAINST SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM (SMU)

With all this wonderful work happening on the ground, there are three reasons that the pace of social movement unionism in New York City, while moving, is unlikely to proceed rapidly:

- The social, political, and economic context – regardless of it being in some ways a unifying force – is still an obstacle;

- The younger generation is not unanimously championing social justice unionism; and
- Union democracy issues threaten to alienate the most progressive side of the movement.

The Bush administration has been a tragedy for the American labour movement. Organizing has been made more difficult (through a number of punitive National Labour Review Board (NLRB) decisions including making card-check more difficult), rights we won decades ago are being turned back (the Bush administration has eliminated time and a half pay for up to 6 million workers), and the right of public sector workers to form a union has been discarded in the name of security (as is the case with the decision to not allow 200,000 Department of Homeland Security workers to organize). Because labour is increasingly under attack, unions are forced to dedicate significant resources towards maintaining the status-quo and, not surprisingly, towards defeating President Bush. The fact that the economy is in serious despair has added to this already difficult situation, as have increasingly conservative local and state administrations seeking to increase productivity without increasing pay and benefits for public sector workers.

The second strike against SMU in New York City is the fact that the younger generation of labour leaders is not unanimously broadening its definition of labour, or strategies for achieving power, than leaders of previous generations. The literature is quick to point out that younger leadership translates into a more social justice orientation for labour. For instance, Sherrod Brown writes,

The labour movement has evolved into a proactive force on issues that resonate with young activists. The labour movement is immensely more attractive to college students, environmental groups and human rights activists today. The issues that young people care about - human rights, fair labour standards, the environment - are at the heart of the free-trade debate, and they understand that unions are on their side in that debate (Brown, 2001).

To some extent this is the case in New York City. To some extent some younger labour leaders are attracted to the movement because of this perceived shift to a more social justice oriented unionism. And they feel they can further push the unions in this direction. As one younger political staffer explains:

I have to believe there is something to do with younger people now. People are more interested in organizing. In the last ten years people have switched from a servicing model to an organizing model and I think that's had a lot to do with it.

A more seasoned labour leader agrees:

I think so because there are more people in the unions now who are younger or more flexible, and have worked, may have come from backgrounds where they have worked in these social movements and visa versa.

However, I am not convinced that this generational shift is most pronounced in New York City. The research revealed that some of the city's most progressive labour leaders are of the older generation, former sixties and seventies radicals who have committed their life to the cause, while some of the most admittedly conservative labour leaders are younger, and increasingly non-white and female. It is important to note that within this spectrum of diversity the leaders of community-labour coalitions are overwhelmingly in their twenties and thirties. This may highlight the fact that coalition activity is more important to the younger generation, or it might just suggest that leading a coalition is a career step leading to more senior level positions within the movement, a trend which is becoming increasingly common.

In addition, interviewees cited union democracy issues – most noticeably the fact that leadership and membership do not reflect one another – as a formidable obstacle to the creation of social movement unionism. One coalition leader replied:

Our frustration with the New York labour movement is that the white males who run the labour unions are not going to give up that power so easily even though their membership is growing and growing and growing to be more people of colour membership.

Kate Bronfenbrenner's research supports these findings:

Exacerbating the situation is the persistent racial and gender gap separating union leaders and organizers from the workers being organized. It's true that significant progress has recently been made in recruiting more women and people of colour as organizers, but given the demographics of current and future union membership, the representation of women and people of colour among union organizers, and especially among union leaders, remains woefully low (Bronfenbrenner, 2001).

Another coalition leader went further, in arguing that trade unions will become extinct at both a national and local level if they don't address these issues:

Unless unions become truly democratic and reflect these interests, issues, and colours of the rank and file, they will not exist in twenty years.

Furthermore, a large fragment of New York City's trade unions oppose coalition activity. They see it as a source of distraction, leading to skewed priorities and declining membership. They also question why labour should always be the one helping the community groups – why labour needs to be the one leading the larger social movement.

One younger, senior political staff member at a private sector union explained:

If we had the market share we could focus on the larger issues. It is short-sighted of us to get involved in everything. We have an obligation to the workforce. From a labour perspective, it is just not useful to partner with the community-based organizations.

Another senior political staffer at another private sector union echoed these sentiments:

The question is 'when did it become labour's job to be heading the social movement? Isn't that supposed to be the democratic party?' At some point in the past, it somehow became labour's job to do this stuff and I think that is part of the problem with labour, we're distracted now away from the real bread and butter issues, getting involved in all sorts of social issues.

This tension between public policy priorities underscores vast differences in organizational culture between those two disparate sides of NYC's dual labour movements. One self-described traditional unionist remarked:

Lefties want to address community issues but won't show up for strikes!

She goes on to voice her frustration by rhetorically asking:

Why will the lefties campaign for Congressional Budget Office (CBO) issues but not show up for strikes?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

While increasing in momentum and power, social movement unionism is not yet a mainstream practice in New York City. There are a core group of passionate and progressive labour leaders championing community-labour coalitions, organizing campaigns, and rank-and-file activism with the goal of creating a broad workers' movement with serious social and economic justice goals. In addition, labour is increasingly paying attention to a number of traditionally progressive public policy issues, such as immigrant rights,

environmental sustainability, and access to adequate and affordable housing and health care.

It would be misleading, however, to base public policy campaigns in New York City on the assumption that labour and community are one unified voice (or even that labour is one unified voice) – they never have been and it does not look like they will be at any point soon. Nonetheless, the research presented herein has vast implications for the future of both the labour movement and the future of social policy in general in New York City.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Environmental justice advocates have been calling for sustainable development practices for years that seek to address the location of waste, illness, and nuclear power in the city's most economically disadvantaged communities. If N.Y. Apollo – and the alliance between labour and the environmental justice community – achieves its goals, major social, economic, and environmental progress can be made in New York City, and labour can increase its ability to hold elected officials accountable. The N.Y. Apollo approach – if embraced by labour and others – can change the face and fabric of the city for generations and can ensure that New York retains its status as the world class city. It would create good construction and manufacturing jobs for city residents, jumpstart new markets, and reduce the need for traditional sources of energy.

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS

The Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride has provided a framework in which to implement the AFL-CIO's new strategic goal of addressing immigrant worker issues, in a quest to increase union power. Because of shifting demographics, both within New York City and within the local labour movement, the future of social movement unionism is intricately linked to the way labour engages with immigrant rights organizations and the wider public policy community. Public policy reform – as illustrated by the campaign to preserve immigrant drivers licenses – is also closely linked to the future of this coalition.

WORKFORCE EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The TRADES campaign and N.Y. Apollo are excellent examples of what can happen when labour and community work together. TRADES can be used as a model for providing workforce education and training for New York City communities that lead to good jobs – those that pay family supporting wages

and offer further educational opportunities and room for growth – for New York City residents.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

New York City is beginning to link workforce and economic development using a sectoral strategy, as illustrated by government's interest in an environmental jobs initiative. The state of social movement unionism in New York City has broad and dramatic implications for how these connections play out on communities – whether they create co-operative economies where labour and management work together to increase both productivity and neighbourhood sustainability, or on the other hand, whether they create conflictual economies marked by lower wages and weaker communities. The more labour and community work together, the greater chance that a movement spearheading co-operative economies can be created.

HEALTH CARE

If the Health Care Security Act passes New Yorkers without benefits will have increased access to health care coverage. Such a win would also most likely push labour to engage more broadly with other unions, employers, and community groups in a quest for social and economic justice. At the very least, this health care campaign has pushed the boundaries of social movement unionism. At best, it will provide a new framework for healthy urban living and progressive public policy reform.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

New York City residents need affordable housing now more than ever. Too many individuals are homeless, under-housed, and/or paying too large a proportion of their incomes on housing. The situation is especially severe for the city's most marginalized communities. The power created by labour and community working side by side to secure affordable housing for their constituents far exceeds the policy advocacy efforts undertaken by each of the movements alone. It would also ensure that efforts are not in opposition to one another and assumed at the expense of each other's membership bases.

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

Alliances between labour and community have the potential to raise the profile of workplace health and safety issues so they become community issues as well. Increasing awareness of low-standards suffered most often by the city's

low-wage, part-time, and contingent workforces – and linking the concerns of labour and community groups in this regard – has the potential to transform the political landscape, as pressure placed on elected officials is raised.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

The creation of a state of social movement unionism can also pressure officials to increase investment in the city's under-funded public schools. To do so, labour unions would have to realize that their members' community concerns are their own concerns, as social movement theory subsumes. Better educational facilities and standards are a unanimously recognized need of the city and the nation, and thus one of the easier points to rally around.

CONCLUSION

In the long-term, addressing these social policy issues has the potential to also address larger interrelated social, economic, spatial, and political problems such as poverty, social exclusion, and crime. Indeed, creating a state of social movement unionism clearly has the capacity to place social and economic justice issues on the political pedestal. But as this research shows, we are just beginning to walk this path.

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NOTES

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- ¹ This paper is amended from an MSc dissertation completed in October 2003 at the London School of Economics.
- ² Urban Agenda, a joint effort of the NYC Central Labour Council and Queens College Labour Resource Center, is a research and policy organization seeking to build a fairer and stronger New York.