VARIETIES OF SOCIAL UNIONISM:
TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR COMPARISON[1]

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ABSTRACT

In academic and activist debates about union renewal, the replacement of business unionism with social unionism is seen as central to the labour movement's short- and long-term survival. Social unionism, generally understood to involve both engagement with social justice struggles beyond the workplace and methods of union activity beyond the collective bargaining process, is claimed to increase the labour movement's organizing capacity, bargaining power, and social and political weight. However, despite its increased importance, social unionism's various meanings, strategies, and implications remain relatively unexamined, and very different approaches are often lumped together. Using concepts from social movement theory, this paper proposes an analytical framework for systematically comparing different concrete manifestations of social unionism. In particular, social unionist initiatives vary according to 1) the ethos or *collective action frame* used to rationalize union activity; 2) the *repertoire* or strategic means used to act on that ethos; and 3) the *internal organizational practices* and power relations which shape who is involved in defining and carrying out union goals and initiatives. I argue that whether social unionist projects are able to reach immediate instrumental goals as well as generate renewed working class / movement capacity is shaped by both the mix of frame, repertoire and organizational practice as well as the relationship between these three. The paper therefore asserts that the category "social unionism" must be more nuanced, and calls for a more explicitly comparative and multi-methodological approach to reveal such complexity.

Nowadays, it seems no self-respecting labour activist wants to be seen as a 'business unionist'. The 'sins' of this approach are well-documented in the union renewal literature. Traditional, bureaucratic and top-down, the "business" or "service model" of unionism emphasized the role of 'expert', full-time, elected or appointed leaders, acting on behalf of and in the place of members (Schenk 2003; Moody 1988; Ross and Jenson 1986). Exclusive and conservative, business unionists accepted the terrain of capitalism and worked to improve the material lot of a particular

section of the working class within that political-economic framework by engaging with workplace-level bargaining and legalistic industrial relations processes. The dominance of business unionism has been made responsible (in part) for declines in union density, the atrophy of working class capacities, and the inability of unions to develop effective strategies for countering neoliberal globalization.

In this context, social unionism is the unquestioned winner, widely held to be both more effective than the service model and the only kind of unionism capable of countering the effects of neoliberal globalization on workers and their communities (Robinson 1993; Moody 1997; Nissen 2003). The Canadian labour movement's greater capacity to keep social unionism alive alongside more bureaucratic forms of action has been credited with helping to prevent the kind of precipitous decline in membership, union density and political influence experienced by US unions since the early 1980s (Robinson 1993). Moreover, social unionism is itself seen as an important part of union renewal and an indicator of union innovation (Kumar and Murray 2006, 2002a, 2002b). For many, the emulation and diffusion of social unionism is the prescription for what ails the contemporary labour movement.

Despite its increased importance, social unionism's precise meaning and implications remain vague for both unionists and academics, and there are a number of barriers to developing a more nuanced analysis. First, social unionism's consistently positive comparison with "stale" business unionism rests on an idealization of the former, and an overly stark and not-quite accurate dichotomization of the two approaches. This has resulted in an underdevelopment of frameworks for critically assessing social unionism's strengths and weaknesses. Second, the proliferation and interchangeable use of multiple terms in the union renewal literature – "social movement unionism, union-community coalitions, social unionism, community unionism, social justice unionism or citizenship movement unionism" (Tattersall, 2006: 99) – complicates our understanding of social unionism's specificity. Although there is a growing recognition of this problem (Briskin 2003), terminological confusion still makes it quite difficult to pin down what social unionism is as a specific union orientation and set of practices.   The union renewal literature has "lumped" social unionism together with other distinct forms of union action, and there remains a great deal of slippage *between* categories (Tarrow 2002). Finally, "social unionism" itself is a "lumpy" term that overgeneralizes and assumes away important differences *within* that category of union practice.   Some researchers recognize that a wide variety of operationalizations are encompassed by this philosophical commitment (Voss and Sherman 2000). However, while both national-level surveys and micro-level case studies have made important contributions documenting the presence of social unionism in the Canadian labour movement, there has been little work developing ways to compare and

assess the relative effectiveness of the different forms it takes in practice. As Amanda Tattersall points out with respect to union-community coalitions, "despite the growing number of labels to describe [them] ... there is still significant ambiguity about what makes a coalition effective or powerful for unions" (2006: 99).

One could conclude from this all this confusion that the term 'social unionism' should be jettisoned altogether. However, social unionism remains a central part of labour movement discourses about itself and therefore holds real, if hazy, meanings for union leaders, activists and members.[2] This paper therefore attempts to develop a theoretical framework for systematically analysing the varieties of social unionism and their relative impact as approaches to union renewal. Using concepts from the social movement literature, I argue that social unionism takes many different concrete forms, due to variation on three major axes. First, social unionism exists as an ethos or *collective action frame* that provides a legitimating rationale for the pursuit of particular objectives, in which workers' interests and identities are defined. Second, social unionism is associated with a particular *repertoire*, a series of means or strategies for acting on its ethical claims. Finally, social unionist frames and strategic repertoires are shaped by and implemented via a variety of *internal organizational practices* and power relations within union structures. I argue that the ability of social unionist projects to reach immediate instrumental goals, as well as generate renewed working class/movement capacity, is shaped by both the mix of frame, repertoire and organizational practice, as well as the relationship between these three.

SOCIAL UNIONISM AS FRAME

At the most general level, social unionism operates as a way to express the meaning and rationale of concrete union actions. In his 1993 study comparing the Canadian and US labour movements, Ian Robinson characterized social unionism as an "organizational-maintenance strategy" based on a particular "moral economy" of union action. Rather than relying exclusively on selective incentives – better wages and working conditions made available to an exclusive, unionized section of the working class – social unionism works to "attract, retain and mobilize members" by invoking "the importance of moral commitments of labour-movement members, leaders, and supporters". For Robinson, the "scope of its ambitions and sense of obligation" go beyond that of the narrow, instrumental economism and sectionalism of "business unionism". Social unionism's goal is "to change the entire society and to advance the interests of many who are not union members" on the basis of a "moral critique of the existing order" (Robinson, 1993: 21). While not rejecting the appeal to 'rational' self-interest, this is contextualized as part of a broader struggle for working class

advance in political and social, as well as economic, terms. Using E.P. Thompson's language of moral economy, then, social unionism contains a "legitimizing notion", grounded in "definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal" as well as of the proper social norms, mutual obligations, roles of and relationships between various members of the community (Thompson, 1993: 188).

To achieve "organizational maintenance", the moral economy embedded in social unionism works as a *collective action frame*, a term originally developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and now widely used in the social movement literature since David Snow and Robert Benford (1988) adapted it to examine social movements' internal meaning-making processes. In general, frames refer to those constructions or interpretations of reality which "render events or occurrences meaningful ... organize experience and guide action" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614). Social movements develop more specific collective action frames, which aim "to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). As such, these frames provide a "set of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614). In that sense, framing discourses reflect a particular construction of not only "who [labour movement] actors are and ... their relationships with each other, but also ... what they should and can do," which is fundamental to the work of strategizing (Barker and Lavallette, 2002: 141-2; see also Frege and Kelly, 2003: 14-5). Framing also has serious social justice implications. As Nancy Fraser argues, framing "is among the most consequential of political decisions" since it not only "constitutes members and non-members" of a particular community, but also defines who is entitled to consideration, to solidarity, to rights (Fraser, 2005: 77).

Using Benford and Snow's categories, social movement researchers have identified an ever-proliferating number of frame types developed and used by social movements. However, for the present analysis of social unionism, three are most relevant. First, movements develop a *diagnosis* of the problems which require collective intervention and transformation. This diagnostic frame includes an analysis of the sources and effects of injustice, the boundaries between the 'right' and 'wrong' sides of the issue, as well as the identities of both protagonists and antagonists in the conflict (Benford and Snow 2000). Diagnostic framing also involves processes of identity formation in which a "we", a community which has shared interests, mutual obligations and bonds of affection, is defined. This identity work is particularly important in building and sustaining an oppositional culture which contests the "hegemonic constructions" of subordinate groups like workers (Carroll and Ratner 2001). Second, in order to guide action, movements develop *prognoses*, in which claims are made for particular solutions or strategic responses to identified problems. Prognostic

frames translate into strategic repertoires, those concrete means of engaging in action, on which more will be said later. Finally, claims about "what is to be done" are accompanied by *motivations*, frames that provide the rationale for why individuals should participate in collective action (Benford and Snow 2000). In his discussion of the importance to the US labour movement of a clear collective action frame, Paul Johnson nicely sums up its main elements: "an orienting, motivating and unifying idea; a story we tell about ourselves that identifies who we are, what we are doing, the challenges we face, and the way in which we respond to those challenges" (Johnson, 2001: 27).

The labour movement's statements (whether written or spoken) provide a sense of how Canadian unions explain to themselves, and the world, their own activity. These meanings cannot be induced from an inventory of tactics or techniques. Rather, we need a discursive reading of union self-characterizations, which are present in key documents like constitutions and policy papers but also in the discussion and debate within various union spaces. Although social unionist diagnoses and prognoses are most observable in specific conflicts and struggles, there are some common ways in which workers' problems are understood, the contours of community defined, the interests at stake articulated, and appropriate actions delineated.

First, social unionism tends towards an *anti-economistic*[3] analysis of workers' problems: it holds that because union members are more than merely wage-earners, but are also citizens with a wide range of other identities, they have experiences, problems, and therefore interests that extend beyond the workplace (Kumar and Murray 2006). The Canadian Labour Congress emphasizes the labour movement's "key role in ensuring that Canadians enjoy a quality of life that is the envy of the world" due to their involvement "in every aspect of the economic, social and political life of Canadians, from fair wages and safe working conditions to universal health care, equality rights, a sustainable environment, and much more" (Canadian Labour Congress, n.d., ¶ 2, 3). The Canadian Auto Workers explain the reasons behind their commitment to such struggles in their Statement of Principles, pointing out that "[i]n our society, private corporations control the workplace and set the framework for all employees. By way of this economic power, they influence the laws, policies, and ideas of society" (CAW, 2003: 1). The power of capital over more than just the workplace and workers' economic lives therefore requires broader forms of action:

> Our collective bargaining strength is based on our internal organization
> and mobilization, but it is also influenced by the more general climate
> around us: laws, policies, the economy, and social attitudes.
> Furthermore, our lives extend beyond collective bargaining and the
> workplace and we must concern ourselves with issues like housing,

> taxation, education, medical services, the environment, the international economy. Social unionism means unionism which is rooted in the workplace but understands the IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATING IN, AND INFLUENCING, THE GENERAL DIRECTION OF SOCIETY (CAW, 2003: 1-2; emphasis in original).

Many public sector unions also embrace anti-economism as the impact of legislative decisions on workplace-level collective bargaining becomes undeniably clear. This tendency to view public sector workers' interests in more than economic terms has been advanced by continued and escalating attacks on their wages and collective bargaining rights by neoliberal policymakers, resulting in a spreading politicization of public sector workers since the late 1970s. The Canadian Union of Public Employees' Ontario Division thus justifies the emphasis on political action in its 2007 Action Plan in this way: "Building political clout, and leveraging local bargaining and labour unrest into province-wide campaigns directed at the government, are the best ways for CUPE Ontario and its locals to change the political decision-making needed to support and adequately fund public services" (CUPE Ontario, 2007: 7).

Second, social unionists adopt an expansive, *anti-sectionalist[4]* definition of the community of 'workers'. Social unionism tends to frame issues in terms of general working class interests, and not merely of those segments of the working class that have been able to organize and deploy their strategic strength to protect and advance their lot.   For instance, alongside the CAW's history of militant collective bargaining for its own membership – which can be seen as very effective business unionism – has been the idea that "the gains we want for ourselves we want for all workers" (Robertson and Murninghan, 2006: 170). This phase is echoed by other unions who identify with social unionism (for instance, see OPSEU, n.d., ¶ 5).

Anti-sectionalist commitments are also an important part of most public sector unions' identification with social unionism, as their particular collective bargaining interests are inherently tied to debates over public policy and how the state should serve the public interest (Johnson 1994). Given that context, public sector workers tend to frame their political mobilization and coalition-building as serving 'the public' and not merely their own members' interests. CUPE's anti-privatization campaigns are a good example. Here, the union emphasizes the importance of defending public services not merely as a source of good jobs but also because "[t]hey enhance the quality of life of all Canadians. They are particularly essential to the health and welfare of those with medium and low incomes ... They are even more important now with the decline in real incomes for many years" (CUPE, 1999: 6). More generally, CUPE emphasizes its status as "Canada's community union"; because CUPE members "aren't just public workers" but are also "neighbours and friends", the union places "[c]ommunity

engagement and connection ... at the heart of everything our members do. That's why CUPE gives special attention to projects and initiatives that benefit the community at large" (CUPE, 2007: 5). This anti-sectionalist vision also underpins The Canadian Union of Postal Workers' involvement with the Winnipeg Workers' Organizing Resource Centre, which supports, advocates for and organizes non-union and unemployed workers. WORC is part of CUPW's conviction that "[t]he union movement must again become the moral, strategic and political center to build a movement dedicated to fighting for the rights of all workers, defending workers' democracy and improving the lives of the ever increasing numbers of people forced to live in poverty" (Bickerton and Stearns, 2002: 50). Unionism is therefore the base from which broader social change is made in the interests of the working-class majority (Schenk and Bernard 1992). The 'we' to whom allegiance is owed is not simply one's immediate workmates, but rather, depending upon the phrasing, working people, community, civil society, or the working class.

While it is important to take seriously these self-characterizations, we can't assume that frames determine practice in a straightforward or unilinear way. As well, in the concrete world of union orientations, there is no guarantee that the anti-economistic and anti-sectionalist aspects of social unionism will come together, will be found in the same measure in each organization, or will remain the same within an organization over time. Moreover, social unionist discourses can and do co-exist alongside business unionist ones, producing complicated hybrids. In other words, there is significant variation in how social unionism gets talked about and taken up by different unions. For instance, an anti-economistic emphasis might include the necessity of seeing members' interests as fundamentally shaped by public policy decisions as well as the actions of the employer; however, the union may remain fundamentally focussed on the pursuit of its own members' interests. Alternatively, an emphasis on the anti-sectionalist face of social unionism can mean using the union's resources in order to make broader social change and engage in activism on a host of issues which union members do not obviously have a direct or immediate material stake – and in which they do not necessarily participate.

Another source of variation lies in the extent to which social unionist discourses frame different aspects of union activity. In some organizations, social unionist commitments may pervade all of the union's efforts, and the linkage between economic and non-economic interests, sectional and general interests, is repeatedly emphasized.[5] In others, however, social unionism is what happens "outside of bargaining" and is counterposed to – or at least separate from – what remains the core of union activity: collective bargaining and the labour-management relationship. Indeed, as Kumar and Murray (2006) point out, this co-existence of business and social unionism is a long-standing and dominant pattern in the Canadian labour movement and is visible in the division

of labour between unions and social democratic parties.

Finally, as implied above, the definition of who 'we' are, of the community of interest that social unionism seeks to serve, is a major source of variability (and indeed contestation). While social unionist frames often reach beyond the union membership, various unions invoke different ideas of who in the 'community' is encompassed by labour's embrace, as well as the nature of relationship between the union and community. For instance, in the CAW's recent mobilization around the loss of manufacturing jobs in Windsor, the 'community' included members of the local business and political elites as well as those marginalized in the local economy and invoked particular notions of 'domestic' versus 'foreign' manufacturing (personal notes, March 22, 2007). This is quite different from the 'we' in an alliance of services providers and recipients fighting the privatization efforts of organized corporate interests like the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships (CUPE, 2000: 2-6). Perhaps most important, we need to probe how class, gender, racialized and national identities are embedded in social unionist frames in varying ways, and assess the implications for who is mobilized and how.

These variations raise questions about the link, causal or otherwise, between framing and repertoire: do the philosophical commitments associated with social unionism lead to a particular strategic repertoire? What role does ethos play in shaping an organization's actions? Benford and Snow (2000: 616) argue that there tends to be a link between diagnostic and prognostic framing, where "the identification of specific problems and causes tends to constrain the range of possible 'reasonable' solutions and strategies advocated". However, they also admit the possibility of disjuncture between what is said and what is done (620). This cautions us against automatically deducing particular practices from broad statements of purpose. Instead, it is important to examine the way that the various meanings of social unionism inform and guide not only strategic choices but also the implementation of those choices.

SOCIAL UNIONIST REPERTOIRES

In the academic literature on union renewal, a more typical way to define and chart social unionism is to look for a specific range of concrete practices rather than rely on union statements of purpose. This method is in part rooted in an recognition that saying and doing are not necessarily the same thing. Academic treatments of social unionism therefore tend to examine the presence and use of what Charles Tilly has called a *repertoire*, which translates diagnostic and prognostic frames into action. For Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, repertoires refer to "a historically specific constellation of power strategies" (2000: 414). Both they and Sidney Tarrow refer to Charles Tilly's development of the term, by which he means the "inventory of available means" of collective

action, or, more specifically, "the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests" (Piven and Cloward, 2000: 414; Tarrow, 1998: 30). This research approach has specifically emphasized the repertoires of contention, or, in other words, how people make claims in ways that challenge the interests of other social forces.

There is a repertoire of contention associated with social unionism, both historically and presently. Because its vision expands beyond the workplace and the union, social unionists have adopted multiple methods of union activity beyond the collective bargaining process. For some, electoral political activity is the strategic exemplar: Christopher Schenk and Elaine Bernard (1992) have argued that organized labour's connection to social democracy has both been the main expression of Canadian unions' social unionist desires for egalitarian political reform and fostered a further broadening of union perspectives and aims. Non-partisan lobbying, coalition building, "community unionism" and extra-parliamentary mobilization in general have also been central to the social unionist repertoire. Although not a novel approach, a recent proliferation of union-community coalitions, such as the Action Canada Network, Operation Solidarity in British Columbia, the Ontario Days of Action, the Ontario Health Coalition, and mobilization around the Quebec City Summit of the Americas, not to mention the hundreds of local coalitions that rarely come to national attention, suggests that the community unionist strategy has become at least as important as electoral politics in the Canadian social unionist repertoire. However, collective bargaining, when framed by social unionist concerns, can also leverage gains outside of the immediate workplace for union members (e.g.: employer-paid tuition in the CAW's Big Three agreements) and non-members (e.g.: the growing number of social justice funds to which the employer contributes and the union controls and distributes). Finally, charity work and volunteerism is a growing – and under-examined – part of the social unionist repertoire, articulated as part of the labour movement's moral obligation to marginalized segments of the community (Manchee, 2006).

Examples of research that uses repertoire to define social unionism include the work of Pradeep Kumar and Gregor Murray in Canada, and Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman in the United States. Kumar and Murray's two national surveys of union innovation (1997; 2000-2001) document the extent to which the Canadian labour movement has taken up elements of the social unionist repertoire. Although their definition of social unionism has evolved over time,[6] methodologically they focus primarily on strategies. Their data identify "a fairly coherent set of social union practices" that tend to come together in 41% of their respondents: "working in coalition with women or community groups; engaging in political action to change public policy or effect social economic change; prioritizing an involvement in the community; taking specific action to promote gender or racial equality; and promoting membership

understanding of their union" (Kumar and Murray, 2006: 97).   From these patterns of practices, Kumar and Murray make the generalization that "social unionism [is] ... an important motivating philosophy for unions in Canada" (2002a: 6).   Similarly, in their examination of the conditions which supported revitalization in several California-based union locals, Voss and Sherman use "the degree to which locals used labour's new social movement repertoire" as a measure.   These tactics include "non-NLRB recognition, ... strategic targeting, corporate and community campaigns, mobilization of workers being organized, disruptive direct action, and community alliances" (Voss and Sherman, 2003: 58). Although Voss and Sherman use the term 'social movement unionism' (on which more later), the tactics they identify overlap with those identified by Kumar and Murray as 'social unionist' in the Canadian context and they share the same methodological approach.

However, this way of 'measuring' social unionism also raises questions about the relationship between repertoires and the frame in which they are embedded.   Just as the presence of a particular ethos in union statements does not guarantee its emergence in practice (whether in general or in particular ways), neither does the use of particular strategies necessarily indicate the presence of a broader philosophical approach to unionism.   In that sense, the distinction between social unionist goals and their operationalization, between frames and repertoires, is elided: methodologically, the latter is made to stand in for the former.   According to Mark Steinberg, this is a common problem in social movement framing literature more generally, where, in the absence of "empirical examples of frames" themselves, "frames are read off of and extracted from tactics and strategies" (Steinberg, 1998: 848).

Over-reliance on repertoire to define social unionism can cause us to categorize certain union actions as social unionist in ethos when they may not actually be.   For instance, the Amalgamated Transit Union understands that both the public and bus drivers' interests rest with the implementation of the Kyoto Accord to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.   They argue: "[m]any of the fuels burned that create GHG's also create the air pollution that makes our kids sick. Fossil fuels are not a renewable source of energy. In Canada we could see the depletion of some of these fuels in our children's lifetime. Taking action now to reduce GHG's will save our non-renewable resources for future generations and lead to improved public health" (ATU, 2003: 1).   However, a primary justification for taking a position on this particular issue is related to how it will enhance job security and employment growth in their sector, public transit (ATU, 2003: 2, 13).   Also notable is the absence of policy papers on other environmental issues in which their members do not necessarily have an immediate economic stake.   Though an excellent policy paper, ATU's narrow focus demonstrates how "engagement in legislative or political action" can in fact be business unionism by other means, namely legislative activism designed primarily to benefit one's

own membership and to support one's own collective bargaining activity. As Robert Hoxie argued long ago, despite a tendency to avoid political action in general, business unions adopt methods which will "sustain ... and increase ... bargaining power" and will therefore engage in "politics when such action seems best calculated to support its bargaining efforts and increase its bargaining power" (1914: 213). In other words, 'social unionist' tactics can be articulated with a business unionist frame. Key to recognizing and understanding social unionism is therefore not the use of a particular tactic but rather the *relationship* between that tactic and the underlying goal it is meant to serve.

'Measuring' social unionism with a set of strategic indicators also masks the relative implications and effectiveness of different elements in the social unionist repertoire. By lumping together rather than distinguishing and comparing, there is little capacity to analyse whether and how different ways of operationalizing social unionist commitments produce varying outcomes in terms of identity formation, mobilizational capacity and activism, or union power and influence more generally. Here, a comparison between coalition work and charity work is pertinent, as each implies an entirely different relationship between the union and the community to which it feels an obligation. In much coalition work, there is at least the pretense of an equal relationship between partners coming together over a mutual interest. While the research on community unionism shows that the negotiation of such partnerships is always fraught, there is a much clearer expectation that coalitions are meant to benefit both partners (even if they don't always do so).[7] In contrast, charity work often adopts a discourse of helping 'the less fortunate' from a position of relative privilege; an obligation to 'give back', while laudable, is often expressed as a paternalistic 'noblesse oblige'. Union members' feelings of pride and powerfulness are predicated upon an inegalitarian relationship in which the unemployed, ill, abused, or poor are grateful for help. The charity relationship can substitute for a politicized one in which the marginalized define their own needs, challenge the structural sources of inequalities which make charity necessary, and raise questions about the neoliberal state's downloading of responsibility for social welfare onto the community or voluntary sector. Moreover, charitable giving can also constitute an instrumental investment in the loyalty and gratitude of the community that can be cashed in when the union requires broad political support and therefore imposes certain responsibilities on the part of the recipients. An example of this was evident at a CAW town hall meeting in October 2006, called to discuss the potential closure of Ford's engine assembly plant in Windsor, Ontario. With much pride, it was repeatedly emphasized that the Ford workers' Local 200 had again donated the most per capita to the United Way of any group in the city, and that a plant closure raised serious questions about the viability of community services. Moreover, Local 200's fundraising record implied that "we've earned consideration" from the

community (personal notes, October 1st, 2006). In that sense, it matters whether social unionism is operationalized through a political alliance with anti-poverty organizations or through fundraising for social supports.

In sum, while repertoires are an important component of social unionism, description of tactics is insufficient to conclude a commitment to the social unionist ethos. As well, there is a range of ways to operationalize the social unionist commitment, each of which reflect and act on the social unionist moral economy in distinct ways and also generate different outcomes. Finally, the way in which union activity is framed and implemented is also crucial, and is a question of internal organizational politics.

SOCIAL UNIONISM AND INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Another layer of variation in social unionism concerns the internal organizational practices through which the meanings of union activity and strategic repertoire choices are defined, negotiated and made. Organizational structures and relationships involve the roles, relative importance of and division of labour between elected leaders, appointed staff, and member activists and general membership in both decision-making and implementation. In that sense, both frames and repertoires are produced via multiple ways of organizing who decides what and who does what, and in spaces that necessarily involve different patterns of power relations. Moreover, the particular connection between framing, strategizing, deciding and implementing can have important implications for the extent to which social unionist practices are transformative or are building greater movement capacity.

Social unionism is generally assumed to entail practices that place greater importance on active membership participation. However, this presumes that certain frame or repertoire produces a particular type of organizational politics. While certain repertoire choices may tend to promote particular types of internal organization, the combinations of frame, repertoire and organizational form – and their implications – are the historically contingent and hence variable products of struggles and practices over time. In that sense, projects with similar frames and strategies can vary according to the extent and nature of membership participation in and control over decision-making and implementation, as well as the relative importance of and division of labour between elected leaders, appointed staff, member activists, and the general membership.

With these points in mind, at least three types of social unionist organizational practice are in use: *leadership-focussed*; *membership-focussed / mobilizational*; and *membership focussed / democratizing*. Each of these involve differences in who does the framing, chooses the repertoire, and acts on these decisions and in what ways. In leadership-focussed social unionism, elected and appointed leaders frame the issues, decide on repertoires, and perhaps even

implement them (as, for instance, in a lobbying effort that sees union leaders make representations to parliament). While the substance of claims may be consistent with an expansive notion of both workers' interests and the community being served, the scope of who participates in defining, articulating and acting upon that ethos remains limited.

In membership-focussed social unionism, there is an recognition that union power is enhanced when the general membership participates actively in the implementation of strategies. A good example of this approach in the US context is the so-called "organizing model", which "involve[s] members in solutions" rather than "help[s] people by solving problems for them" (Diamond, 1988, cited in Fletcher and Hurd, 1998: 38). Union tactics are "rank-and-file intensive" (Bronfenbrenner 2003): members participate heavily in organizing, shop floor, and community campaigns as well as internal representation functions (Voss and Sherman 2000; Fletcher and Hurd 1998). Kumar and Murray's (2002a) conclusions also indicate that greater membership participation is an important feature of contemporary Canadian social unionism. However, 'participation' does not necessarily imply democratic control. While social unionist campaigns may mobilize members, they can do so in conditions largely defined by leaders. For instance, union leaders may prioritize "promoting membership understanding of union history, goals and activities" (Kumar and Murray, 2002a: 7); but this tells us little about the content of membership education, the means by which membership participation is encouraged, or the scope of that participation. Indeed, a focus on "promoting membership understanding" can be easily accommodated within and could even reinforce top-down practices, if, for instance, the goal of education is to encourage members to accept leaders' visions and initiatives.

Membership-focussed democratizing social unionism places priority on membership involvement not only in implementation, but in all aspects of the process of defining union goals, strategies and tactics. Gindin (1995), Moody (1997), Eisenscher (1999) and Schenk (2003) all make a distinction between mobilizational and democratizing approaches to union renewal, and in particular, how tactics are framed and utilized. They all suggest a variant of social unionism – most often referred to as *social movement unionism* – which combines an anti-economistic, anti-sectionalist, and transformative vision with mobilizing repertoires and organizational forms in which workers don't just 'participate': they "actively lead" and have democratic control over "the fight for everything that affects working people" in their union, their communities and their country. (Gindin 1995: 268). Although some commentators in the union renewal debates have begun to raise questions about the quality of membership control in revitalization strategies, very little of the research on social unionism has asked questions that would systematically reveal and assess differences in organizational approach.

CONCLUSION: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this paper is not to suggest there is one 'true' form of social unionism, nor that it is possible to replace business unionism with such a model in one fell swoop. Indeed, the lived practices of social unionism exist in complicated and contradictory relationship with the established habits and institutions of business unionism, which continue to be reinforced by labour law. However, it is to claim that social unionism is a much more complex, variable and contradictory form of union practice than has been suggested by either unions themselves or the scholars who study them. A fuller, more nuanced understanding of contemporary social unionism requires that we examine the contingent combinations of union ethos, strategy and organizational form, as well as the struggles within and between unions to define such an approach. To do so is to open up the possibility of assessing the implications of different ways of acting on similar values, or of the effects of different motivations on the outcomes of using the same tactics. In other words, breaking social unionism down into three distinct but interrelated facets will permit a more systematic and comparative approach to case study analysis of social unionist initiatives.

Developing and applying such a comparative framework will be challenging, particularly in methodological terms,[8] but would make both theoretical and political contributions. Theoretically, we could begin to understand whether and how frames, repertoires and organizational forms become connected, are reproduced, and are altered. We could also better assess the relative effectiveness of particular combinations of these three elements, whether in terms of the goals set out by unions themselves, or in terms of fostering union revitalization and movement capacity more generally. In that sense, this approach could move us away from overgeneralizing about the way that social unionism *tout court* contributes to union renewal. Politically, this analysis could contribute to a deepening of the labour movement's thinking about what it will take to revitalize unions and to cope with the pressures of neoliberal globalization.   This is all the more crucial as the CAW, one of Canada's leading social unions, characterizes its "Framework of Fairness" agreement with Magna International – which includes no-strike pledges and an appointed internal representation system – as a form of 'union innovation', a way to combine "the best traditions of union protection and security, the best features of Magna's fair enterprise corporate culture" (Stronach and Hargrove, 2007). As more unions take up the process of union renewal and are confronted with complex choices about how to survive and thrive, the approach in this paper can help union leaders and activists examine the substantive meanings and practices behind their rhetorical commitment to social unionism and to critically assess whether union strategies and organizational practices actually represent and effectively achieve their goals and desires.

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NOTES

[1] The title's imputed reference to the "Varieties of Capitalism" debate (Hall and Soskice (eds.) 2001) is unintentional. However, it bears noting that union ideologies, structures and strategies do not emerge out of a vacuum but rather as an historical product of interactions between labour, capital and the state. The specific institutional arrangement of capitalist economies undoubtedly has a profound impact on class formation and its more specific expression in working class organizations (see, for instance, Therborn, 1983). While the question of how different expressions of social unionism might be related to the broader structures of capital and the state is beyond the scope of this paper, the larger comparative project called for here will hopefully engage such issues.

[2] Thanks to Dale Clark for the exchange that clarified this point for me.

[3] 'Economism' was a term used by Lenin to describe – and criticize – that tendency in the Russian social democratic movement to separate economic / workplace-based struggles from political ones, and to prioritize the trade union struggle on the assumption that workers' interests could be satisfied without engaging in class-conscious political action (Lenin 1902). This term also became associated with North American union leaders such as Samuel Gompers, who advocated the kind of "pure and simple unionism" that Lenin was arguing against (Gompers 1948). This is distinct from the way term is used in contemporary debates about Marxism, in which 'economism' has come to mean a tendency to explain all political, social, cultural or ideological phenomena with reference to capitalist economic structures and processes.

[4] Also a part of Lenin's critique of "pure and simple" trade unionism, sectionalism refers to the tendency for trade union structures – as well as workers' identities and consciousness – to reflect and internalize capitalist industrial and occupational divisions, and to prioritize making gains for particular groups of workers rather than promote the kind of class consciousness which is "trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse" (Lenin 1902; see also Hyman 1971).

[5] See, for instance, CUPE's anti-privatization literature.

[6] In 1997, they noted that "the building of coalitions with other unions and social groups, 'social unionism,'" had become "an organizational priority" (Kumar and Murray, 1997: iv). By 2002, the "social-unionism orientation ... entails emphasis on new organizing, greater rank-and-file activism, alternative agenda on work organization, internal structures that reflect new labor-market and social identities, extended research and education, coalition-building with social groups, and a range of other innovative practices" (Kumar and Murray, 2002b: 2). In their most recent work, they do discuss the broader philosophical underpinnings of social unionism as based on "broader definition of solidarity and job territory" and the articulation of workers' rights as citizenship rights (Kumar and Murray, 2006: 82). What is common throughout, however, is their emphasis on particular repertoires as indicators of social unionism.

[7] Tattersall (2005), Nissen (2004), and Frege, Heery and Turner (2004) all develop typologies of union-community coalitions which emphasize their variability according to, amongst other things, the extent to which the relationship between allies is (in)egalitarian.

[8] For instance, Benford and Snow point out that understanding not only frames themselves but also the

processes by which they are negotiated, taken up, contested, and transformed over time requires ethnographic research. This means not only looking at documents but also interactions that occur in meetings, gatherings, campaigns, etc. "The problem with such research is that it is highly labor intensive: requiring not only fieldwork over time but also access to and retrieval of the discourse that is part and parcel of the framing process" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 623-4).

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