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ILR Impact Brief - Labor Branches Out:
Resurgence in the Urban Core

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IMPACT BRIEF

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Labor Branches Out: Resurgence in the Urban Core

Research question: Why are urban labor movements relatively strong and successful in some American and European cities but not in others?

Conclusion: Agency (the choices made and strategies pursued by leaders and organizations) and opportunity structure (the presence or absence of institutional, political, and/or social barriers)—are the two factors that seem to account for the revitalization of city-based labor movements in several locales, such as Seattle, Buffalo, Los Angeles, and San Jose; European unions have not progressed quite as far in this regard. Rather than focus exclusively on traditional workplace issues, unions active in contemporary urban labor movements are forging coalitions with other actors in civil society and mobilizing grassroots participation in union campaigns as well as in the democratic process.

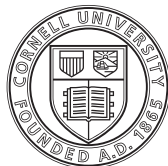
Policy implications: Within the context of deindustrialization, a growing service sector, and increasing immigration, some urban-based union locals are reinvigorating their capabilities and shifting their efforts toward the transformation of social institutions and local politics. This new type of social unionism has as a goal, among others, the creation of a social justice infrastructure; i.e., one that mitigates inequality by changing the political and economic dynamics within a community.

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Abstract: A revitalized labor movement is one critical means of combating widening income inequality in both the United States and Europe. Labor activists committed to union renewal and likewise concerned about the earnings gap are concentrating their efforts on urban-based union campaigns, particularly in cities with large ethnic and growing immigrant populations. They are focusing on a range of issues, from union organizing to living wage campaigns to economic development.

Researchers regard the shift in orientation toward the larger political and economic context as the emergence of social unionism. In this paradigm, unions seek to expand their local and regional influence by taking on a variety of non-workplace issues, building broad coalitions of like-minded community actors, helping to facilitate public engagement in the political process, and promoting initiatives designed to reduce inequality. Case studies of urban labor movements, which generated these findings, indicate that the necessary ingredients for renewal are the choices leaders and organizations make (i.e., agency) to exploit institutional openings (i.e., opportunity structure) made possible by fragmentation, rigidity, loss of legitimacy, and conflicts with power brokers; a social context that includes a growing immigrant workforce also enhances the opportunity structure.

Two analytic categories were investigated: established union towns with entrenched labor movements and “frontier” cities with weaker or newer labor movements. Within each group the researchers targeted cities experiencing labor resurgence and others where labor efforts



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are either weak or traditional in orientation. The researchers were particularly interested in union efforts to build coalitions and the ensuing development of social justice infrastructures and pro-labor progressive politics. In the end, they found that innovative strategies (a component of actor choice, or agency) could propel movement toward union renewal even when the opportunity structure seemed less favorable.

Among the union cities, significant union-led innovations were noted in Seattle and Buffalo; among the frontier cities, gains were most striking in Los Angeles and San Jose. Labor's influence expanded in each case largely due to inventive coalition building with groups committed to progressive causes and was further facilitated by a context that provided an opening wedge. In Los Angeles, for example, extensive networks within the growing low-wage Latino workforce were readily mobilized by newly activist unions operating in an environment lacking entrenched economic and political power held by labor. And in Buffalo, manufacturing unions struggling with industrial retrenchment formed labor-management partnerships that reached out to local government and other community actors in joint efforts to promote economic development.

Cities where labor revitalization is progressing more slowly include New York and Boston (entrenched union towns) and Miami and Nashville (frontier towns). Progress has been hampered in New York and Boston by strong locals keen on protecting their own turf and often divided among themselves. The labor movements in Miami and Nashville, until recently, have not aggressively sought out coalition partners, while the absence of cohesive immigrant groups limits the opportunity

structure and right-to-work laws in Florida and Tennessee constrain union prospects.

The European cases don't fit neatly into the model developed for American cities. Nonetheless, the data suggest that the situation in Frankfurt is similar to that of New York and Boston. On the other hand, a set of coalition-based campaigns has brought a social movement dimension to the labor movement in Hamburg. And in London, unions still pay more attention to national strategies than to local initiatives.

The researchers also considered, but ruled out on the basis of comparative analysis, other factors that might explain the relative success of urban union revitalization. Discarded reasons include economic restructuring and the impact of globalization (with the exception of immigration), local political structures, government attitudes toward unions, and employer opposition to unions.

Methodology: Twenty researchers undertook qualitative case studies of labor union initiatives in American and European cities. A summary introduction to the collection of essays that resulted is the basis of this *Impact Brief*.

Source publication: "Introduction: An Urban Resurgence of Social Unionism" appeared in Turner, Lowell and Daniel B. Cornfield (Eds.), *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*; 2007; ILR Press (a Cornell University Press imprint): Ithaca and London.

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