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In Defense of Public Service: Union Strategy in Transition

Abstract

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In the 1980s private sector unions were sent reeling by the combined forces of globalization, deregulation and increased management hostility. Today their public sector associates face the parallel threats of massive budget deficits, privatization and the expanded power of the Republican right. When unions addressed their conundrum in the private economy two decades ago, inertia and strategic rigidity forestalled an effective response (Hurd 1998). Today public sector unions are determined to avoid similar mistakes and intend to confront systematically the challenges that they face.

Keywords

labor movement, organizing, union, worker rights, unionization, public sector

Comments

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In Defense of Public Service:
Union Strategy in Transition

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Public sector unions have displayed healthy durability for the past twenty years, apparently immune to the economic and political forces that have buffeted the broader labor movement. While unions in the private economy have lost power and seen density decline by more than half, unions of government workers have retained influence and market share. Early in the twenty first century there are signs that this era of relative comfort may be coming to an end.

In the 1980s private sector unions were sent reeling by the combined forces of globalization, deregulation and increased management hostility. Today their public sector associates face the parallel threats of massive budget deficits, privatization and the expanded power of the Republican right. When unions addressed their conundrum in the private economy two decades ago, inertia and strategic rigidity forestalled an effective response (Hurd 1998). Today public sector unions are determined to avoid similar mistakes and intend to confront systematically the challenges that they face.

The Aura of Institutional Stability

In 1986 Freeman offered a comprehensive review of two decades of public sector union expansion followed by stability, heralding the rise of the “new unionism.” He described a spurt of growth in union membership during the 1960s and ‘70s tied to the political process and the passage of collective bargaining laws at the federal and state levels. He concluded that the strategies of public sector unions are aimed at expanding public budgets and the level of employment (Freeman 1986). Two years later in an IRRA volume on public sector bargaining, Stern accepted Freeman’s explanation of the rise of government unions and treated them as secure institutions. In looking to the future, he forecast continued maturation of both unions and the bargaining process, with gradual expansion of membership proportional to growth in

employment. He specifically pointed to the AFL-CIO Public Employees Department (PED) as a potential base for increased political clout (Stern 1988).

In 1994 Troy published a contemptuous interpretation of the mainstream analysis. While adopting Freeman's "new unionism" label, Troy portrayed public sector unions as creatures of public policy. He argued that management welcomes these unions and cooperates with them in the bargaining process and politically. In this context, the primary goal is "to redistribute income from the private to the public economy" (Troy 1994: 23). Like Stern before him, Troy depicted the PED as a potential center of power in the labor movement. Begrudgingly, he too predicted long term security: "The future of the New Unionism seems assured. Its record ... since the 1960s has been an almost uninterrupted one of expansion." (Troy 1994: 158).

The IRRA published another volume on the public sector in 1996, this time focusing on changes in the employment relationship. Freeman contributed a report on survey results, concluding that government workers support unionization to gain political power, and that this option is attractive because management is relatively constrained in opposing organization (Freeman 1996). The volume's editors argued that unions face a key strategic choice between traditional adversarial distributive bargaining and a cooperative approach to redesign the delivery of government services (Belman, et al, 1996:6).

Weighing in on the side of increased collaboration, the 1996 report of the Secretary of Labor's Task Force concluded that "traditional approaches to collective bargaining will not be sufficient." The task force praised unions "that support workplace innovation and service improvement," and concluded that "the possibilities appear to be greater than recognized for labor-management cooperation." (Florio and Abramson 1996: 3,6). This attitude mirrored the

rationale for the creation of the National Partnership Council (NPC) in the federal sector by President Clinton in 1993 as part of his campaign to improve efficiency and quality.

Dynamics of Union Membership

The picture of smoothly evolving union strategy in the context of institutional stability overlooks important details in the dynamic environment. With public sector union density firmly rooted a few points below 40% for the past twenty years, there is a natural sense of immutability. This appearance, however, masks important shifts in economic activity. In 1991 the public sector accounted for 17.51% of total employment, but by 2001 this share had dropped by almost one-tenth to 15.85% (Hirsch and Macpherson, 2002: 11, 16). In effect there has been a form of creeping de-unionization under the guise of privatization.

In addition to the hidden erosion in market share, there is notable geographic variability. Table 1 divides the states into three equal groups based on 2001 public sector union density. The high density states have positive legal environments, while the low density states have right-to-work laws and limited bargaining legislation. The low density states have experienced declining fortunes, especially over the last ten years. It is relevant that private sector density in those states averages only 5.1%, well below the national standard. This suggests that the fortunes of public sector unions can be affected adversely by decline in the private sector, especially when density drops to very low levels. The combination of an unfavorable legal setting and weak private sector unions indicates that public sector unions are in decline in those states where they are least able to resist.

Table 1
Dynamics of Public Sector Unionization
By State, 1983-2001¹

	Low Density <u>States²</u>	Middle Density <u>States²</u>	High Density <u>States²</u>
Public Sector Density '01 Median	16.7%	28.9%	51.9%
Relative Change in Public Density '83-'01 Median	-25.4%	+9.0%	+7.8%
'91-'01 Median	-18.0%	+5.8%	+0.7%
Private Sector Density '01 Median	5.1%	7.3%	11.5%
Public Union Bargaining Rights '01 ³			
Yes	2	10	17
Limited	7	3	0
No	8	4	0
Right-to-work State '01 ³			
Yes	15	7	0
No	2	10	17

¹ Hirsch and Macpherson (2002, pp. 30-35); Hirsch and Macpherson (1994, pp. 30-34).

² With Washington, DC included, the states were divided into thirds based on 2001 public sector density.

³ Bureau of National Affairs, Labor and Employment Law Library, Collective Bargaining and Contracts Manual (cbnc:8:117), Public Sector Bargaining State Comparison Charts, available at BNA.com.

In addition to geographic variation, there are also divergent trends in membership among unions. Table 2 updates a table presented in Stern's 1988 overview, and compares membership in 1982 with that in 2000 for most unions that represent substantial numbers of government employees. Because the data are taken from a variety of sources, they should not be treated as precise measures but rather as reasonable approximations. To lend perspective, overall government employment increased by almost one-fourth over the time period covered.

Most of the unions that lost members are independent organizations; typically their losses involved entire locals or statewide organizations leaving to become associated with an AFL-CIO union (sometimes after reaching an affiliation agreement, other times after a raid resulted in decertification). It is also noteworthy that unions representing federal workers have not fared well. This can be traced in part to an unfavorable legal climate, with a limited scope of bargaining and an open shop environment. By contrast, unions representing public safety workers have experienced substantial growth, and the largest education unions have done almost as well. Again the legal situation is relevant, with public safety and education employees having more complete coverage under bargaining laws than other state and local employees. Similarly, the postal unions have done better than other federal unions which fits their expanded bargaining rights (postal unions can bargain over economic terms, other federal unions cannot).

Note that all of the units of the federal and postal unions operate under a single law, and their political activity is focused in the U.S. Congress. As a result, strategic decision making tends to be centralized. By contrast, the laws regulating collective bargaining at lower levels vary by state, and sometimes even by municipality. In this setting unions decentralize representational functions, political action, and strategic decision making. The national union sets broad direction, but resources and authority to implement decisions rest with the state and local affiliates. Since

Table 2
Membership in Public Sector Unions
1982¹ and 2000²
(membership in 1000s)

	<u>1982</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>82-00 change</u>
Education			
American Association of Classified School Employees	150	27	-82%
American Association of University Professors	63	45	-29%
American Federation of School Administrators*	10	12 ⁵	+20%
American Federation of Teachers* (AFT)	574	736	+28%
California School Employees Association*	76	129 ⁵	+70%
National Education Association (NEA)	1,641	2,530	+54%
Public Safety			
Fraternal Order of Police	160	280 ⁶	+75%
International Association of Fire Fighters* (IAFF)	163	227	+39%
International Union of Police Associations*	25	50	+100%
State and Local Government			
American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees* (AFSCME)	950	1,300	+37%
Assembly of Government Employees (AGE)	250	100 ⁷	-60%
Communications Workers of America* (CWA)	85 ³	160 ⁸	+88%
International Brotherhood of Teamsters*	150 ⁴	170 ⁹	+13%
Laborers International Union of North America*	125 ³	130 ⁸	+4%
Service Employees International Union* (SEIU)	560 ⁴	610 ⁹	+9%
United Automobile Workers*	25 ³	32 ⁸	+28%
Federal (non-postal)			
American Federation of Government Employees* (AFGE)	210	197	-6%
National Association of Government Employees*	50 ⁴	40	-20%
National Federation of Federal Employees* (NFFE)	52	10	-81%
National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU)	55	71	+29%
Postal			
American Postal Workers Union*(APWU)	248	313	+26%
National Association of Letter Carriers* (NALC)	230 ⁴	303	+32%
National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees	20	12	-40%
National Postal Mail Handlers*	40	50 ⁶	+25%
National Rural Letter Carriers Association	62	98	+58

¹ Gifford (1984, pp. 14-38), unless otherwise noted.

² Gifford (2002, pp. 41-66), unless otherwise noted.

³ Stern (1988, p. 54).

⁴ Freeman (1986, p. 46).

⁵ Gifford (2002, p. 238).

⁶ Union web site, 2002.

⁷ Estimate based on membership in affiliates which remained independent in 2000; AGE disbanded in 1985.

⁸ Interviews with union officials, April 2000.

⁹ Union web site, April 2000.

* Affiliated with the AFL-CIO

approximately 85% of public sector union members are employees of state or local government, the norm is a decentralized structure.

The Evolution of Union Strategy¹

After rapid expansion in the 1960s and 70s, public sector unions settled into a framework patterned on the private sector experience. They embraced the servicing model, with union officers and staff assuming responsibility for the technical aspects of negotiations and contract enforcement. Because government workplaces are managed under both the collective bargaining agreement and civil service regulations, expertise of a legalistic nature is especially important for those performing the representation function. Furthermore, all aspects of the labor-management relationship are influenced by the political process, requiring substantial resources and specialized skills. In this setting, union staff assume responsibility for the functioning of the union, while members are essentially passive consumers of union services.

Public sector unions operate in a less hostile environment than their private sector counterparts. They interact with elected officials whose political future might be enhanced by union support, and deal daily with administrators who are career bureaucrats often protected under the same civil service regulations as union members. Activism is often less important to the union's success than professional skill and long term relationships. Combined with legal restrictions on strikes, and the reality that organizing campaigns are seldom contested vigorously, the result is that the experience of public sector unions is seldom defined by struggle.

National leaders of public sector unions observed the 1980s devastation of labor in the private economy with detachment. Their unions were not affected by globalization, deregulation, corporate deunionization initiatives, or the conservative stance of the National Labor Relations Board. There was concern about budgetary pressures and new found interest in

privatization among elected public officials, but these were addressed in the context of the existing strategic model with minor modifications in political and bargaining functions.

Nonetheless, the larger public sector unions within the AFL-CIO joined the coordinated response to the labor movement's crisis. In addition to contributing to efforts to redefine the role of the federation, some of these unions reexamined their own goals and effectiveness.

Within the AFL-CIO the PED offered public sector affiliates an opportunity to coordinate on issues facing them during this period of turmoil elsewhere. Starting in the mid-1980s the PED emphasized labor-management cooperation. This was fitting in light of the distinction being drawn between "high road" and "low road" approaches to industrial relations. With characteristically less animosity than was typical in the private sector, the government workplace seemed to be an ideal laboratory to experiment with "high road" methods such as joint labor-management projects.

With the election of President Clinton in 1992 and his attention to "reinventing government," the PED interest in labor-management cooperation appeared to be appropriate preparation for the NPC and the Secretary of Labor's Task Force (of which the PED president was a member). During the 1990s public sector unions collectively embraced the concept of labor-management partnership. AFSCME's *Redesigning Government* offered advice to local unions on using partnerships to improve the delivery of public services and to strengthen security for workers and their unions. Similarly, three federal unions (AFGE, NTEU, NFFE) released *Total Quality Partnership – a Vision for the Future*, embracing the NPC concept and calling on the President to enhance union security and expand the scope of bargaining.

By the end of the 1990s enthusiasm for cooperation was on the wane. Although there were successful partnerships in some agencies, unions were disappointed that the NPC had not

delivered expanded bargaining rights or union security. The AFGE staged a campaign against the Clinton administration under the acronym SWAMP, for “Stop Wasting America’s Money on Privatization.” The Secretary of Labor’s task force called for joint labor-management efforts to improve the quality of public services, but Robert Reich (who appointed the task force) left the administration and the recommendations were not vigorously pursued.

In 1998 the AFL-CIO closed the PED, symbolically ending labor-management cooperation as a strategic priority while also reducing the potential for government unions to address their mutual concerns. The demise of the PED reflected a conviction that the challenges facing unions were no longer clearly distinguishable by sector. As AFSCME organizing director Jim Schmitz explains, “Within the federation the public/private distinction is no longer meaningful; ... it is a better idea not to balkanize but to unite around a common struggle.” The attention of public sector unions shifted back to the political arena, with AFSCME president Gerald McEntee chairing the AFL-CIO Executive Council’s committee on political action.

A Threatening Environment

By the end of the Clinton administration it was clear that privatization was not an idle threat. The federal and postal workforces had shrunk by nearly twenty percent relative to total employment during the Clinton years. “Reinventing government” essentially translated into increased reliance on market forces, and the result was a transfer of jobs to the private sector. Support for this initiative under the guise of improving government service signaled a new bipartisan attraction to privatization with ominous implications for unions. Moderates like Clinton, whether Democrat or Republican, offer conditional support for privatization. The Republican right, however, supports the dismantling of large segments of the government bureaucracy so that privatization becomes the end rather than simply a method to improve effectiveness. This

philosophy was reflected in the title of a bill introduced in 1997 by Republicans, the Freedom From Government Competition Act.

A number of recent developments at the state level demonstrate the political right's animus towards public sector unions. Representation rights for state and local employees were terminated in New Mexico, the scope of bargaining for teachers' unions was reduced in Michigan, payroll deduction of union dues for state employees was circumscribed in Colorado, a right-to-work law was enacted in Oklahoma, and limits were placed on the use of union funds for political activity under the guise of "paycheck protection" in several states. All of these restrictions on unions were championed by conservative Republicans.

The intensity of the attack is increasing at all levels of government, with President Bush in the forefront in the wake of the Republican victory in the 2002 midterm elections. Early in his administration, Bush signaled his anti union leaning's with a series of appointments, executive orders and legislative proposals. Particularly relevant was his executive order terminating the NPC, which ended any hopes of labor-management cooperation in the federal sector. The Bush administration's hostility towards federal unions heightened after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. First an executive order ended union representation in five sections of the Justice Department. Then when the decision was reached to federalize airport security, the administration announced that union rights would be denied for airport screeners. When he proposed to create the Department of Homeland Security, the President insisted on the option to deny the department's employees coverage under civil service regulations and the Federal Labor Relations Act. When union allies in the U.S. Senate stalled passage of the homeland security bill, President Bush personally campaigned against several Democrats in tight senate races on this specific issue, in effect accusing them of being unpatriotic.

The President's effort paid off and the Republican party gained control of the Senate effective January 2003, while increasing its margin in the House to twenty four. This creates a clear threat to the future of public sector unions because Republican congressional leaders come from the party's conservative wing. To understand the depth of the challenge, it is instructive to compare the current situation to that twenty years earlier under Ronald Reagan. In 1983 the Senate was controlled by Republicans as it is in 2003; the majority leader was the moderate Howard Baker whose voting record on labor issues was 27% correct according to the AFL-CIO. The Speaker of the House was Democrat Tip O'Neil, a close ally of organized labor with an 87% rating (Ehrenhalt 1984). By contrast, in 2003 the Senate majority leader is Bill Frist, whose voting record is only 2% correct, and the Speaker of the House is Dennis Hastert who has achieved a 7% rating; the chair of the House Education and Workforce is Ohio's John Boehner who votes with labor only 3% of the time (congressional ratings available at aflcio.org).

The leaders of Congress, then, share the president's skeptical views of unions. Bush did not wait for the new Congress to take the offensive. After the November 2002 election he pushed his version of the homeland security legislation through the lame duck session of Congress, reduced the pay raise due federal employees by one fourth, issued an executive order that subjects nearly half of the federal government's civilian jobs to privatization (in effect implementing the unsuccessful Freedom From Government Competition Act), and formed a commission to review the viability of the postal service (Stevenson 2002; Aversa 2002).

The altered political climate at the federal level is mirrored in many state governments. Democrats lost seven state legislatures in the 2002 election, leaving Republicans in control of twenty one states compared to seventeen for the Democrats. This is the strongest position for Republicans at the state level in fifty years (Casse 2003). The implications for unions in the

states under Republican control are as ominous as at the federal level. In a foreshadow of what is to come, the President's brother Governor Jeb Bush of Florida has privatized 10,000 state jobs and is attacking unions that represent state employees. At his 2003 inauguration the governor renewed his call to "make government less necessary," painting a picture of state office buildings "empty of workers – silent monuments to a time when government played a larger role than it deserved..." (Kennedy 2003).

Exacerbating the dismal political prospects is the spectre of massive state budget deficits. The sluggish economy and a steep drop in revenues are projected to create deficits for fiscal year 2003 averaging about 15% (Feldman 2002). Even without an anti-union political tide, the deficit would translate into fewer jobs for public sector union members. Bipartisan efforts to control spending and improve government efficiency will intensify, while an attack on the very legitimacy of government employment and public sector unions could gain momentum under the increasing influence and political power of the Republican right.

Contemporary Union Strategy²

There is nearly universal agreement among national leaders of public sector unions that the threats they face are real, and not transitory aberrations. The political environment has heightened the level of urgency and forced unions to reorder strategic priorities. Enthusiasm for employee involvement, partnerships and mutual gains, so widespread in the mid 1990s, has diminished markedly. Attention has shifted to organizing and the fight against privatization. The new orientation is evident in the pronouncements of national leaders of public sector unions, and increasingly in practice at all levels.

Several unions have codified their priorities in formal strategic plans. For example the AFGE executive council adopted "Getting to 2006: A Survival Kit for AFGE", the AFT released

its “Futures II” report in 2000 ten years after its first national strategic plan and the SEIU Public Services Division developed its own vision statement and goals as part of the union’s “New Strength Unity Plan”. Other union’s also have gone through formal self evaluation and several now have standing committees that address strategic issues. Even those public sector unions that have not engaged in a formal planning process have shifted emphasis and are re-evaluating methods, options and internal structure.

Though the response to external threats has not been coordinated formally across public sector unions, there is a notable convergence at least at the national level. In some unions the change in practice is limited to escalated awareness and intensified zeal in selected programs. In several unions, though, there is a fundamental effort to redefine the organization. Unlike some private sector unions that have sought transformation through dramatic top down restructuring or a massive shift of resources to organizing, the norm in the public sector is an attempt to orchestrate a smooth metamorphosis by systematically reordering priorities, with the ultimate goal of advancing to a higher level of effectiveness. In this context, several unions have designed internal campaigns to mobilize members in support of new priorities, while others are complementing the metamorphosis in strategy with education programs to promote leadership development. There are five common elements in the programs for strategic change; the degree of emphasis varies across unions and by state depending on the political environment, with the consensus including the following initiatives in approximate order of importance:

- Intensify political action;
- Fight privatization;
- Expand organizing activities;
- Pursue partnerships where possible;

- Support labor movement revitalization.

Conspicuous in its absence from this list is collective bargaining. The commitment of public sector unions to bargaining effectiveness will continue. Some unions even list it prominently when they enumerate goals. Most are very concerned about balancing traditional representational services in the workplace with other activities such as political action and organizing. However, the consensus view is that in the current environment it is unrealistic to promote change through the bargaining process alone. Because other areas of union practice are more central to the transformation process, they dominate strategic discussions.

Intensify political action. Public sector union operatives know that success in both representation and organizing is directly related to political influence. It is natural, then, that they would respond to the challenging environment by increasing the intensity of their political activity. The new initiatives include efforts both to engage members and to more effectively deploy staff. The AFT's Futures II "call to action," for example, provides for increased outreach to members to recruit political activists and increase contributions to the union's political action fund, and also recommends greater contact with legislators and expanded coalitions to build political power.

The elevated attention to politics is especially noticeable at the federal level and in states where the balance of power has shifted to the right. The importance of an effective opposition was stated succinctly by IAFF President Schaitberger early in 2003: "With the Congress elected in this cycle, at best we have enough votes in the Senate to keep from getting murdered." But not all of the attention will be on defending the status quo. There is also great interest in strengthening union rights in states with a more favorable political climate, and at the local level where municipal ordinances can enhance union bargaining power and organizing potential.

Fight privatization. There are two general approaches associated with efforts to oppose privatization. The first is to craft a pragmatic response. This includes using bargaining and the political process to secure the right for government agencies (and their unionized employees) to compete with contractors, bidding for work based on costs and quality. The emphasis on quality has increased, with unions like SEIU specifically committed to “ensuring reliable public services” as a basis to keep work in house at government agencies. There is general agreement that the emphasis on quality is essential in order to win public support for government services. Unions also carefully monitor the performance of major contractors, seeking to expose abuses and cost overruns.

A second approach has gained in importance, focusing on political ideology. AFSCME openly ties efforts to fight privatization with opposition to “right wing political extremism”. Allyne Beach of the AFL-CIO Work in America Institute notes that because of the ideological battle, unions “must think more about our role in preserving our industry, the public sector.” Similarly, NALC president Vince Sombrotto says “There is no secret about priority number one – we have to help save the Postal Service”. The fight against privatization, then, is no longer viewed as a problem that is limited to services that are duplicated in the private sector and thus susceptible to competition, but rather as a struggle to defend the very legitimacy of government.

Expand organizing initiatives. Although public sector unions do not have an urgent need to add members, they have joined other unions in elevating the importance of organizing. Like AFSCME, most first emphasize a commitment to fight for current members through the traditional avenues of politics and bargaining, then couch increased attention to organizing in the context of building strength for the future. Public sector unionist genuinely believe that

aggressive organizing now is the best defense against potential decline. Many unions have added resources for organizing as a direct result of strategic planning.

There are four basic components of the composite organizing agenda. First, in those states and municipalities without bargaining laws organizing encompasses effort to secure representation rights, along with the formation of locals that assist workers in exercising voice without formal contracts. The number of these pre-union formations has increased in recent years, sponsored for example by the CWA in Mississippi, and the SEIU in Georgia. Second, in those jurisdictions with laws that include right-to-work provisions or other versions of the open shop much of the emphasis on organizing is internal – recruiting among non-members in existing units. Third is to identify unrepresented units in those areas and agencies where the union already has a bargaining presence. Several unions have conducted detailed “audits” of state and local governments in order to locate potential organizing targets. The final organizing approach is to follow the work into the private sector and organize government contractors. As APWU organizer Mark Diamondsen describes it, “[We] will not be able to stop contracting, so the best we can do is to organize the industry” (Samuel, 2000).

Pursue partnerships where possible. Although less prominent than in the mid-1990s, labor-management cooperation still receives attention and support from public sector unions, and often is used to promote quality and the value of public service. In the federal government partnership arrangements have diminished markedly, but at the state and local level there are numerous examples of collaborative relations, especially where union density is high. The greatest interest in partnership is evident in units of professionals, especially in the field education. The NEA’s entire strategic approach focuses on excellence in public education and labor-management cooperation is viewed as essential in the campaign to improve quality. NEA

President Bob Chase explains the connection: “From a unionist’s perspective, better educational quality means more secure jobs for our members. For better quality we need collaborative relations with management where possible... We are also moving towards more interest based rather than confrontational bargaining.”

Support labor movement revitalization. Public sector unions cannot act in isolation. A stronger labor movement increases the ability to influence policy and budgetary decisions at all levels of government. As AFT organizing director Phil Kugler assess the situation, “Teachers got collective bargaining because of strong private sector unions; with those unions weakened it affects ... the legislative framework.” Stronger unions in the private economy also have a direct impact on labor markets. As one union official observes, “You can’t maintain standards in the public sector if the private sector is unorganized and low wage.” This combination of economic and political factors has persuaded union leaders that they should look beyond their own organizations and do what they can to influence and support movement wide revitalization. However, approximately 40% of public sector union members do not belong to AFL-CIO affiliates. Although leaders of the independent unions recognize the value of stronger unions generally, they are removed from formal coordinated revitalization efforts.

From Conception to Execution

There is a broad agreement on the strategic priorities for public sector unions. The reality is, though, that the national unions operate independently with limited formal coordination. Although their courses of action may be parallel, each union operates in it’s own best interest and within the confines of its particular culture and internal political considerations. Clearly there will continue to be cases where unions compete vigorously with each other, especially in the

organizing arena. Even in the political realm it will not always be easy to reach consensus on legislative priorities, budgetary proposals and electoral endorsements.

The norm of autonomous union action constrains potential, as was demonstrated in 2001 when an opportunity for a major political victory was missed. An historic bill that would have extended bargaining rights to all of the nation's public safety workers came before the Senate in early November, just eight weeks after the terrorist attacks. It had already been approved in the more conservative House and seemed assured of passage in light of the elevated status of police and firefighters nationally. A last minute rally by conservative Republicans succeeded in draining support and a motion to end debate failed by four votes (i.e., the Senate favored the proposal 56-44). A high ranking officer of a union with an active state employees division attributed the failure to labor's lack of political cohesion: "It is interesting that the AFL-CIO did not rally behind the national public safety bargaining bill, which had a real chance to move post September 11 – firefighters did a great job of pushing this but the rest of us did not help enough." The lesson is that although public sector unions share strategic commitment this does not necessarily translate into aggressive mutual support.

Even within national unions it will not be easy to achieve strategic objectives. Most public sector unions are decentralized with the locus of control over resources and programs residing at the state or metropolitan level. As a result, even when a national union is committed to a clearly articulated agenda, this does not necessarily translate into consistent practice in the field. The commitment to representation and the servicing model has a firm hold on affiliates at the local level, blocking transformation efforts. As Jim Schmitz of AFSCME summarizes his union's experience, "We have a long way to go with organizational change; ... we bump up against huge contradictions." In states with high union density there is little interest in dramatic

reorientation, and virtually no incentive to devote attention or resources to organizing and political action in other states. The defensive environment surrounding budget deficits and the expanding influence of the Republican right increases concern for self interest and further reduces the potential for cohesive action nationwide.

The internal structural impediments and the threats posed by the external environment will limit progress on plans for a smooth metamorphosis in union strategy and practice. These cautions notwithstanding, because they are starting from a position of relative strength and have adopted a strategic perspective that makes sense in the context of the challenges that they face, major public sector unions are well positioned to weather the difficulties. It does seem likely that both union density and the government share of total employment will erode slowly, with absolute loss of union jobs in those states where the Republican right holds sway, and in the civilian federal service. However, with the decentralized legal framework and the matching union structure, there are significant pockets of health that promise to be quite durable. In addition to maintaining overall strength in high density states, it seems apparent that public safety and education unions should fare well. With a firm foundation and national commitment to organizing and intensified political action, public sector unions are positioned to persevere until the political tide shifts and the attack on bargaining rights and the legitimacy of government comes to an end.

Endnotes

¹ In this and following sections all unions will be referred to by standard acronyms. The acronyms are defined in Table 2.

² This section is based on internal union documents and interviews with national officers and high level members of staff. Selected quotes from the interviews and excerpts from the documents are included in the text. Contact the author for a copy of the interview schedule, a list of interviewees with dates, and a compendium of union documents.

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