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Awakening the Giant: The Revitalization of the American Labor Movement

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Awakening the Giant: The Revitalization of the American Labor Movement

Abstract
[Excerpt] The key to the contemporary revival of the American labor movement is precisely a renewed mobilization of the rank and file. Based on our combined research and work in labor education and representation, we believe that large numbers of American workers, blue and white-collar, skilled and unskilled, professional, service and manufacturing, union members and non-members, are open and in many cases ready for expanded workplace and union participation. To be sure, mobilization by itself is not enough: also necessary are national union support, innovative and flexible strategies, and coalition building, and we highlight these as well. But expanded rank-and-file participation draws on the central union comparative asset - the membership - and is essential to the success of most other strategies as well.

In this article, we present an overview of union revitalization strategies and three case studies of successful rank-and-file mobilization. Although not typical, these cases illustrate a variety of advanced union strategies in today's context, along with some of the barriers and resistance to be overcome.

Keywords
mobilization, labor unions, labor movement, United States, revitalization

Comments
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Awakening the Giant: The Revitalization of the American Labor Movement

Lee Adler and Lowell Turner

Introduction

Rick Hurd presents, in the previous article, a crisp analysis of the long decline and current resurgence of the American labor movement. Perhaps most tellingly, he argues: 'The national union evolved into a service organization ... [under which] active involvement of the members would not be necessary.' In fact, this 'business union' approach became so widespread that not only did members often feel alienated from their own unions, non-members increasingly questioned the value of union membership. External organizing effort and internal member participation dropped off together across the long declining decades (1950s—1990s) of business union or 'servicing model' dominance.

The key to the contemporary revival of the American labor movement is precisely a renewed mobilization of the rank and file. Based on our combined research and work in labor education and representation, we believe that large numbers of American workers, blue and white-collar, skilled and unskilled, professional, service and manufacturing, union members and non-members, are open and in many cases ready for expanded workplace and union participation. To be sure, mobilization by itself is not enough: also necessary are national union support, innovative and flexible strategies, and coalition building, and we highlight these as well. But expanded rank-and-file participation draws on the central union comparative asset - the membership - and is essential to the success of most other strategies as well.

In this article, we present an overview of union revitalization strategies and three case studies of successful rank-and-file mobilization. Although not typical, these cases illustrate a variety of advanced union strategies in today's context, along with some of the barriers and resistance to be overcome.

Making Amends: The World Needs a Strong American Labor Movement

In this increasingly global economy, the world needs a stronger American labor movement. Whether the United States is viewed as a benign hegemon for the new world order or as a dominating advocate for the interests of U.S.-based multinational corporations, the exportation of deregulation and other neoliberal policies is constrained only by opposition at home and abroad. Ronald Reagan's success in pushing toward a 'market fundamentalist' international order was possible in part because of weak opposition at home, as evidenced by the long decline in influence of the American labor movement.

The current revitalization is an effort to rectify this past failing, in the interests of American working families, but also in the interest of a new international solidarity. We Americans have a lot to answer for: while our hawkish labor cold-war warriors (in alliance with the State Department and sometimes the CIA) were fighting communism around the globe, not only did we often help to fragment foreign labor movements but our own base at home was

slipping away as well. When John Sweeney's slate was elected in 1995, one of the early moves was to clean house at the AFL-CIO's International Department, putting the cold-war warriors out to pasture and shifting focus under new leadership toward a genuine international solidarity. While specific solidarity efforts with foreign workers and unions, in developed and developing countries alike, are essential, we also believe that long-term 'progressive internationalism' requires the rebuilding of a powerful, influential American labor movement at home. That is precisely the goal of today's activist leadership at the AFL-CIO and several key member unions (including SEIU, UNITE, CWA, HERE, USW, AFSCME and others).

Strategies for Revitalization

Six strategies stand at the center of current revitalization efforts by American unions[1]. The highest profile goes to *organizing the unorganized* (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, Turner, Katz and Hurd 2001). This is the central platform on which the Sweeney forces campaigned in 1995. Success in organizing marked off several unions in the 1980s and early 1990s from a generally declining labor movement. SEIU, AFSCME, HERE, ACTWU (predecessor to UNITE), USW, UAW and others formed the successful opposition coalition based on a commitment to shift resources on a large scale into organizing. The new guidelines call for an increase in organizing commitment from 1-2 percent (typical past levels) to at least 30 percent of local, regional and national union budgets[2]. Critical to these efforts is the emergence of a new activist rank-and-file to lead organizing efforts at the workplace. While there have been impressive breakthroughs in organizing success, there has not yet been a lasting turnaround in membership trends or a dramatic change in overall momentum. Facing relentless employer opposition, union organizing progress remains the critical measure by which contemporary union leadership will be judged.

Political action, expanded monetary and grassroots commitment, is another central effort (Dark 1999). Political campaigning effort, especially at the local level, has increased substantially by a variety of measures in every election since the dismal Newt Gingrich-led electoral rout of 1994. Labor continues to get a higher percentage of voters from union families to the polls, with higher percentages of those voting for labor-endorsed candidates. Unions, for example, are credited with pushing Gore to victory in pivotal states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Washington (and almost Florida). With continuing effort in building rank-and-file presence and political activity, labor looks set to continue its expanding role in local, state and national politics for the foreseeable future[3].

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[1] These categories are the product of an ongoing international research project on comparative labor movement revitalization in five countries (project coordinated by Lowell Turner at Cornell University, with research teams in the U.S., U.K., Germany, Italy and Spain). The burgeoning revitalization literature includes Bronfenbrenner etal. 1998, Fraser and Freeman 1997, Mantsios 1998,Nissen 1999, Sweeney 1996, and Turner et al. 2001.

[2] As with the German DGB or British TUC, for example, the AFL-CIO has no controlling authority over member unions. Thus, President Sweeney's guidelines for changing affiliate budgets reflect the urgent need to organize but are not directives for action.

[3] Although the labor movement generated a remarkable turnout in 2000 of union voters voting pro-union, AFL-CIO insiders concede that unless they are able to increase membership, they will not be able to improve upon election-year-2000 numbers.

Many successful political and organizing efforts are now based on *coalition building* (Moberg 1999, Rose 2000). In these efforts, unions are breaking out of a 'special interest group' stigma to build powerful alliances with environmental, campus, human rights, religious and other community groups. If rank-and-file mobilization is the key to organizing and political efforts, coalitions are the key to broadening labor's influence at local, national and now global levels. Path-breaking coalition efforts include Justice for Janitors, United Students Against Sweatshops, campaigns for a living wage and sustainable development, and the famous 'Battle of Seattle' in late 1999.

Labor-management partnerships, a more limited firm-level version of European social partnership, date from concession bargaining agreements in the 1980s (Kochan, Katz and McKersie 1986, Cooke 1990, Gray, Myers and Myers 1999; see also McKersie in this volume). While many of these are simply stabilization efforts on the part of troubled firms and weak unions, partnership remains a goal for many unions especially when they are able to forge such relationships on a basis of strength. A new type of partnership agreement, (for example found at Kaiser Permanente, Levi Strauss, and in principle but hardly in practice at Verizon) offers both expanded participation in company decision-making and company neutrality in union organizing drives.

Mergers and internal restructuring are important structural responses to new challenges (Chaison 2001, Fletcher and Hurd 2001). While we have found no compelling evidence linking union mergers with labor movement revitalization, it is clear that expanded organizing and rank-and-file mobilization require internal restructuring. Given the roles, skills and expectations of established local union office holders and members, restructuring can be deeply divisive - this is the rock upon which many revitalization efforts flounder.

Finally, the global strategies of multinational corporations increasingly demand new union strategies of *international solidarity* (Ramsay 1997, Gordon and Turner 2000). Still a drop in the bucket in relation to the need in today's global economy, the efforts of American unions to build new international solidarity with foreign unions - in specific organizing and bargaining campaigns – is growing.

Case studies presented below cross the boundaries of organizing, collective bargaining, rank-and-file mobilization, coalition building, politics and internal restructuring, and together offer insights into the opportunities and dangers facing the revitalization of the American labor movement.

Case Studies of Innovation

Bargaining to Organize at Verizon

Following the Teamsters model prior to the UPS strike of both visiting and educating every local union that had Verizon members, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) undertook the nearly impossible task of explaining that gains in their ability to organize Verizon's wireless workers were more important than traditional economic improvements. In the end they won both, causing the *Boston Globe* to crow in its September 3, 2000, edition, 'It's labor's day again'.

Tackling the newly created Verizon was no easy task. Infused with major capital contributions from the international conglomerate Vodafone and the former California telecommunications giant, largely non-union General Telephone and Telegraph (GT&E), Verizon stood tall as the June 2000 negotiations with CWA began. The company never took seriously the union's demand to organize Verizon's non-union wireless workers by card check[4], which would sidestep the cumbersome and adversarial union recognition/election process provided by U.S. labor laws.

Beforehand, however, the real work had been done. Armed with unwavering national union support and a strategy of empowering the rank and file, Verizon locals surveyed members while simultaneously educating them about where their work was going. They used train-the-trainer sessions and their internal mobilization structure, coupled with visits by CWA leaders, educators, and researchers to each local union, to ready members for the struggle ahead.

CWA researchers and educators prepared a persuasive manual for their 85 000 Verizon members in the Northeastern U.S. explaining why it was in each member's best interest to bargain for their future. The company's game plan was to build a wall between union and non-union sides of the company and shift a growing percentage of CWA work to the non-union side (fewer than 100 of the more than 30 000 wireless Verizon workers were unionized). For their part, CWA leaders viewed the essential response as member unity around the demand for card check recognition.

Mobilization of the rank and file was continuous. In December 1999, eight months before the contract expired, the mobilization process began with members wearing red and launching massive lunchtime picketing at every company office from Maine to Virginia. Later, in May 2000, the CWA demonstrated its resolve and remarkable solidarity by threatening a one-day strike against Verizon, urging its members to 'report to work' at a massive demonstration at the New York Stock Exchange. The job action was to be a response to the company's unlawful changes, mid-contract, to the union members' medical plan. As the day approached, and amidst threats of major lawsuits by the company, the union stood its ground until the company blinked, agreeing to correct the changes wrongfully made. The bargaining team and mobilization leaders read this outcome as very promising.

But a lot more needed to happen. Throughout June and July numerous rallies, public picketing, and work-related expressions of solidarity characterized union activities beyond the bargaining table. One local held a rally in Boston where hundreds of Verizon/CWA members wore black t-shirts with a menacing looking cobra snake on its back with the words, 'Will Strike If Provoked'. Other locals continued to educate the community, and a number visited their non-union Verizon Wireless counterparts, explaining that the union was fighting for their right to have a collective voice at work.

Still the company would not budge, and the strike began in early August. Just before Verizon caved in on card check, 8 000 striking workers rallied in front of the corporation's New York headquarters with a 29-year-old striker stating, as many others had said before him: 'It's

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[4] The term 'card check', in this context, meant that Verizon agreed to recognize CWA as bargaining agent for its wireless employees once 55% of the workers in a particular unit had signed cards indicating their preference for CWA.

our future; wireless is a growth industry. We built this company and we should get a chance to grow with it.' *{New York Times,* August 11, 2001)

Along with significant wage increases and pension advances, the Verizon strike victory had several other key components. In addition to gaining employer neutrality as CWA seeks to have 55% of Verizon Wireless workers sign union cards at each site, the union also severely restricted the company's prerogatives on forced overtime, created unusual stress 'time-outs' for its customer service representatives, and substantially limited management's ability to move jobs to other work sites not covered by the agreement. The company was also forced to end its practice of subcontracting substantial parts of the ordering and installation of DSL and other high-speed internet technology. Thus, card check recognition was bolstered by these other contract gains, creating a strong likelihood that CWA members would indeed have the opportunity to 'grow with the company'.

These contractual gains evidence critical and innovative strategic changes in the US labor movement's thinking. Just as the Teamsters in 1997 focused on non-economic demands to convert part-timers into full-time UPS employees, and successfully struck the company over that issue, CWA battled one of the world's largest corporations in large part over the right to follow and organize the work, now and in the future.

The only way to succeed in this effort, according to CWA International Executive Vice President
Larry Cohen was to launch an

> '... incredible education and mobilization campaign waged by our local unions and the mobilization activists in every District. That education and mobilization united our members behind a visionary set of organizing and job security demands, and gave us a rank and file hammer to prevail on these issues at the bargaining table. Without that effort, the outcome would not have been the same.'[5]

Many academics and pundits have praised the CWA effort and suggested that the Verizon results will significantly help to revitalize the US labor movement. This has not occurred, at least not yet, but the elements stressed by Cohen as the reasons for the bargaining table accomplishments are certainly a key part of the formula for future labor movement success.

In particular, the Verizon strike victory illustrates the importance of *national union leadership,* for education, strategy and other kinds of support; *intensive local involvement and mobilization* by an empowered rank-and-file willing to participate actively in ongoing campaigns; and a range of *innovative demands and tactics,* from the focus on card-check recognition to a planned mass convergence on the stock market.

Organizing 'permatemps' at Washtech

By the mid-1990's, even the conservative statistics of the US Department of Labor indicated that the number of leased or contingent workers exceeded 3 million full-time workers. Workers rights advocates often placed the actual number at triple that figure.

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[5] Communications Workers of America, 'Bell Atlantic/Verizon Strike Bulletin', settlement issue, fall 2000. p. 6.

Whatever the true number was, the US labor movement rarely involved itself in attempting to organize these workers, who were and are often low paid, women, and disproportionately people of color.

A parallel trend of employers hiring skilled and professional employees as contractors and not as employees occurred during the same time. Rapid changes in the professional workplace have, for example, led the cautious American Medical Association to advocate a union type 'association' for its members, while thousands of independent psychologists have sought affiliation with NYSUT (New York State Union of Teachers), the largest union in New York State.

It was becoming more and more clear to groups of professional and other workers that the nastiness of the global marketplace and the constant political pressures to shrink government employment were causing employing entities to have fewer real employees[6]. Employment was and is becoming more fragile, and even professional workers' rights continue to erode.

In the high-tech industry, these new workplace relationships, e.g., being a contractor and not a real employee, are best studied at the software giant, Microsoft. Following an investigation in the late 1980' s by the US tax-collecting agency, the Internal Revenue Service, Microsoft acknowledged that their contractors and certain other non-standard workers were improperly classified that way and were in fact employees. The government's determination caused Microsoft to pay a considerable amount of money to the US treasury in unpaid taxes and penalties.

Microsoft re-classified a few of these contractors as employees, but required most of the former contractors to seek 'employment' from friendly temporary employment agencies who in turn 'assigned' the former contractors to Microsoft as 'temps', or 'leased employees'. Under traditional US labor and employment law, such workers are not real employees, and thus an employer was not historically required to offer them the same benefits. Several of these temps balked at their status and filed suit against Microsoft, arguing that they were just like real employees and should be entitled as a matter of law to the same stock options that regular employees received.

By the mid-1990s, Microsoft workers expressed their restlessness in other ways. The temporary placements were a charade, as the majority of Microsoft's temps stayed as leased employees for many years, giving rise to the new term 'permatemp'. Stirred in part by the stock options suit just mentioned, leased employees individually pressed for health coverage, sick and vacation pay, and other rudimentary benefits. Neither the employment agencies nor Microsoft responded favorably.

The well-paid, decentralized, and highly flexible nature of the hi-tech labor market in the Seattle area made traditional union organizing unlikely. Still, a number of the leased employees (there were approximately 6 000 of them by 1997) sought a voice at work. Their frustrations ranged from a lack of respect and disparate treatment accorded temps, to the mysteries that surrounded one's ability to be 'converted' into a real employee.

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[6] The significance here is that only by being an employee in the US can a worker be legally protected from racial and sexual discrimination, uncompensated overtime, or receiving disparate pension benefits.

By late 1997, two Microsoft contractors, Mike Blain and Marcus Courtney, formalized their various discussions and sought organizing help from the Seattle-based King County Central Labor Council. While these discussions progressed, and at the prompting of corporations such as Microsoft, the state of Washington sought to change the provisions of its overtime law which would result in no overtime payments (only straight time) to computer professionals (programmers, writers, editors) who earned over $27.63 per hour.

The overtime issue cut through several factors impeding unionization of high-tech workers, and it motivated many to use their voice (750 mostly e-mailed letters of protest) in opposition. Reviewing these letters convinced Blain, Courtney, and the labor council that there was a need for a high-tech workers' organization. Authors of the 'best' letters began bi-weekly meetings to discuss core issues of interest, and in March 1998 they adopted the name Washtech, an acronym for the Washington Alliance of Technical Workers. A few months later, in part fueled by Microsoft's institution of a harsh break in service policy directed at its temps, the Alliance' became a union affiliated with CWA.

CWA knew that 'union-building' at Washtech would go slowly, and that the high-tech workforce, let alone the industry, was virgin territory for the US labor movement. Still, the union had to learn how to navigate and be relevant here. The CWA's Director of Organizing, Larry Cohen, explained that a substantial portion of traditional telecommunications work is heading to workplaces which have structures, demographics, and a non-standard workforce similar to that at Microsoft. He believes it is critical to understand and then unionize these industries, which means representing their workers on 'issues meaningful to them', even if the ability to obtain a collective bargaining agreement is not yet possible. That is precisely what Washtech has done[7].

This innovative thinking, coupled with considerable financial support from the national union, has made Washtech relevant. Washtech leaders realized that the breadth of their activities must include representational, political, and organizing efforts. The high-tech industries of greater Seattle, as well as the rest of the world through the Internet, became their battlefield. Temps, independent vendors who service the high-tech industry, and even a few 'regular' employees are a part of the 1500-person listserv and 225-person membership.

Washtech activists built the organization through highly reliable internet reporting, by skillful 'networking' characteristic of the new economy, and by launching campaigns supportive of the needs of temporary employees in various workplaces. In December 1998, they assisted 500 temps facing lay-off and a meager severance package by successfully fighting the company before the NLRB. Although the company was able ultimately to halt the workers' organizing drive, they were forced to sweeten the severance package. A number of temps and the Washtech organizers left this struggle believing that a union presence might indeed be possible in this industry.

In the spring of 1999, a Microsoft work group of professionals designing a software product competitive with the highly successful Turbotax contacted Washtech/CWA for organizing help. These workers, all permatemps, sought better working conditions and a job upgrade. Initially, Microsoft refused, but then the workers, in consultation with Washtech, declared themselves a 'bargaining unit' and demanded that Microsoft and the workers'

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[7] Author interview with Larry Cohen, October 1999.

temporary employment agencies meet their demands through negotiating with their representatives, Washtech/CWA.

U.S. labor law neither required Microsoft to acknowledge the workers' demands nor to meet or even talk to their self-appointed representatives. Publicly, Microsoft denied any recognition, but Washtech/CWA and the workers' bravado became a front page story in Seattle and were carried in a surprising number of media across the country. Microsoft's real response to the union declaration and demands for economic change was to make significant alterations in key areas of pay-equity concern and to upgrade certain of the job classifications. These workplace changes buoyed the workers despite the continuing refusal by Microsoft and temp agencies to formally negotiate.

In the early winter of 2000-2001, Washtech/CWA's efforts to organize the key Amazon.com warehouse in Seattle were about to bear fruit. This effort attracted considerable local and Seattle press, as the hypocrisy of the use of 1930's-style union-busting techniques by Amazon's new age, new economy CEO became well documented. Claiming a downturn in the economy, Amazon closed its distribution center in Seattle and moved the work elsewhere. Washtech/CWA assisted the laid-off workers in obtaining a better severance package by leading the fight against company efforts to limit severance pay unless workers signed an agreement stating that they would *never* say anything bad about the company.

Representational efforts combined with reliable information about the high-tech industry, coalition building around legislative efforts, and development of new training opportunities have together allowed Washtech/CWA to maintain a visible, union-based platform. Continual surveying of listserv associates informs the organization on issues 'meaningful' to members and future members. A traditional collective bargaining agreement in this sector of the economy is still likely years away, but at least the beginnings have occurred, and there is hope in Seattle and elsewhere that Washtech/CWA's efforts will result in a union workplace representation in the new economy.

To the extent that CWA, against all odds, has established a stable vanguard presence among professional permatemps in the anti-union high-tech sector, critical components of this effort include: *strong national union support* and strategic guidance; *activist rank-and-file members* willing to take risks and to participate in on-line as well as in-person activities; *innovative tactics,* electronic and otherwise; and *coalition building,* especially in the Seattle area, with enthusiastic support from other unions as well as a variety of community groups.

New Labor Coalitions with Justice for Janitors

The building of newly active coalitions - most of them at the local level, organized around a wide variety of issues - has been a central component of the revitalization of the American labor movement. The Seattle Coalition, which brought together 30 000 demonstrators organized by labor with 20 000 from environmental and other groups to protest World Trade Organization policies in late 1999, was only the most dramatic manifestation of the growing coalition phenomenon (Hawken 2000). Since the 1980s, and accelerating since the mid-1990s, key unions have moved beyond traditional bases, in some cases to build enduring

alliances with human rights, environmental, religious, student, feminist, immigrant and other community groups.

Justice for Janitors provides an example of a labor-initiated, enduring coalition now firmly established in many places - with strong national union support and widespread rank-and-file mobilization, including both union members and supporters from local churches, political and community organizations. In successive campaigns over the past decade, JfJ in Los Angeles, for example (as in several other cities), led by SEIU, has successfully mobilized thousands of janitors as well as community and political supporters in organizing and collective bargaining breakthrough campaigns (Erickson *et al.* 2001, Milkman and Wong 2001).

Building service workers including janitors were organized in the union upsurge of the 1930s and 1940s, especially in Chicago, New York and San Francisco, by the BSEIU (a precursor of today's SEIU). Unionization reached janitors in Los Angeles in the late 1940s and 1950s, improving wages and working conditions until the 1980s, when Reagan-era de-unionization sent membership levels plunging. Janitorial membership in L.A.'s SEIU 399 dropped from 5 000 in 1978 to 1 800 in 1985 (Erickson etal. 2001:3).

In 1988, Justice for Janitors brought full-scale unionism back to LA., as a national SEIU strategy developed in other cities. By 1990, a combination of new tactics and mobilization resulted in an improved contract and a renewed union upswing for janitors in L.A. Successful negotiations in 1995 were followed by a successful three-week strike in 2000, with strong rank-and-file participation as well as widespread public and political support.

In order to accomplish the turnaround in 1988-90, the SEIU sent in key organizers, veterans of successful JfJ efforts elsewhere in the country, who led strategy development. When the local union split into factions after the 1990 contract victory, the national office put the local in trusteeship, restructured, and worked with new local leadership to re-unite the union. The national union continued to play a strong supporting role in the 1995 and 2000 bargaining campaigns, building on local conditions.

By the late 1980s, office-building janitors in Los Angeles were largely Latinos, men and women, many of them immigrants from Mexico and Central America. This rank and file produced its own local labor leaders, built on existing immigrant and Hispanic networks, and gave rise to a sea of red-t-shirt-wearing activists for demonstrations, meetings and picket lines. Union tactics ranged far and wide, well beyond the confines of traditional business unionism. The new tactics included massive demonstrations and marches, which contemplated civil disobedience and mass arrests, intense pressure on building owners (in addition to the cleaning services), political pressure on elected city officials, and outspoken support from key community leaders such as ministers, priests and rabbis.

The latter was possible because of intense coalition-building, always an essential ingredient for JfJ success, in cities across the country. In Los Angeles, this included a major effort from the beginning (1988) to win the active support of religious, civil rights, political and other community groups. In so doing, the issues highlighted went beyond the specifics of an SEIU contract, to address inequality, social justice, immigrant rights, civil rights and more. Successful coalition building brought a social movement dimension along with extensive public and political support (even the Republican mayor backed the janitors in the end) to an otherwise narrow, local union campaign.

The remarkable turnaround for union janitors in Los Angeles in the 1990s served as a pattern for other areas. Janitors in once conservative Orange County (the home of Disneyland) successfully unionized and won a similar contract later in 2000, while JfJ campaigns in cities across the country followed similar tactics and reached parallel successes.

Beyond improved wages and working conditions for janitors in Los Angeles, Orange County and elsewhere, JfJ has actively participated over the past decade in the transformation of formerly conservative L.A. into an increasingly strong union town. The president of the Los Angeles County Labor Federation, Miguel Contreras, has built on SEIU and other union organizing and bargaining victories to expand coalition efforts and political influence. Quite surprisingly, Los Angeles now offers not only a mecca for European tourists but a model of union revitalization in one important American city in the early 21st century.

Key elements of JfJ strategy and union revitalization success for janitors in Los Angeles and elsewhere include the following: *national union leadership,* to support strategic development: *rank-and-file mobilization,* from high-profile marches across the city to picket-line duty to phone banks; an array of *innovative, diversified tactics;* and, finally, a persistent decade-long effort at *coalition building,* aimed at community and religious groups as well as political officials.

Successes and Pitfalls for the New American Labor Activism

Although each of these cases offers grounds for considerable hope for the US labor movement, a more complete understanding of their context reveals how much more needs to be done. The Los Angeles janitors' success has been maintained, as SEIU's ability to maintain market share and keep their members mobilized continues to yield positive results for other municipal and building services workers there who are largely recent immigrants. The tremendous growth in the Los Angeles area labor movement was unable, however, to achieve its main political goal this year of electing a labor-movement-backed candidate as mayor for Los Angeles (although labor's candidate Antonio Villaraigosa did receive 46 percent of the vote, against James Hahn, the elected mayor who is also a Democrat).

CWA efforts at both Washtech and Verizon, despite compelling accomplishments, face immediate and enormous obstacles. Washtech successes demonstrate high-tech workers' need for a voice at work and reliable information about what is happening to them. Yet, after several years of organizing work, Washtech has a listserv (of approximately 1500 persons) and a dues-paying membership (225-250 persons) that is barely growing. When they were on the verge of successfully organizing the Amazon.com book warehouse in Seattle, the company not only thwarted the drive by closing the facility, but the union found little interest amongst the workers to pursue subsequent legal or organizing strategies. There has been a disappointing response by high-tech workers to Washtech's offering of discounted skills training[8] classes to programmers to enhance their skills and marketability. In short, activists have not yet

[8] Several commentators have suggested that unions organizing in high-tech industries may attract worker interest by offering skills-building opportunities (e.g., DuRivage 2000, Heckscher 2001).

developed an effective 'hook' to capture significant numbers of high-tech workers, let alone mobilize them to accomplish union objectives.

At Verizon, before the ink was dry on the world-class contract described earlier, more than 30 workers were fired for 'strike-related misconduct', and war has been brewing between the parties ever since. Most of the disciplinary cases are flimsy, but the company has used the firings as an opening to step away from nearly all of the contractual commitments that the CWA wrested from them during last year's inspirational strike. Organizing opportunities with the wireless side of Verizon have been hindered by differing 'interpretations' of both the neutrality and card check provisos that the Verizon workers had fought for and won. Formerly cooperative relationships have disintegrated, and the union has been running a major public campaign pointing to instances of company fraud and violations of utility regulations, which have naturally sharpened the dispute. Not a single unit of Verizon wireless workers has been *successfully* organized, as the company has blocked the most successful campaign with a mean-spirited and questionable federal law suit. Meantime, fight after fight occurs between the parties about this legal matter or that, and the business of organizing the workers where traditional CWA work 'has gone' is stalled.

In each of our three cases we see innovative and at times visionary thinking coupled with strategic care in deployment and strong national union support. Unmistakable workplace success remains only with the janitors, and one wonders what it means for change in the US labor movement that these other campaigns are having such difficulty.

The janitors' continuing success is in part attributable to the service nature of the industry, e.g., the work must be done in those buildings, and the cost does not significantly impact the owners' ability to compete. The high-tech and wireless industries are considerably more risky for management and organized labor, as these intensely competitive industries are ideologically committed to cordon off their non-union workforce. Intensely capitalized and highly profitable corporations like Microsoft and Verizon recognize the weakness of U.S. labor laws, even with regard to collective bargaining obligations, and either completely ignore them or brush off any sanctions imposed as a tailor might deal with lint.

The race by these oligarchic corporations to deepen their worldwide presence and market share means that labor's response must be even quicker and more confrontational, if organizations like the CWA are to protect what their members have gained through strike activity. The challenge for unions like the CWA is to further mobilize their members about the strategies of mega-corporations like Verizon, and develop a counter strategy of *ongoing* militance that was unthinkable a year ago. If not, their hard-won gains might end up on the mythical side of labor history rather than be a part of the actual progress of the trade union movement in the U.S.

The Promise of Rank-and-File Mobilization

The problems and pitfalls are real. The American labor movement is recovering from a long illness, and such recovery takes time. Sometimes progress is 'two steps forward, one step back', and other times it is only 'one step forward and two steps back'. Most American employers continue to oppose union organizing efforts intensely and when necessary militantly

- efforts in which they are finding new support in current White House policy. Today's revitalization efforts are real, far more promising than what we witnessed in the 1980s and early 1990s, yet the road to full recovery remains long and hard.

The three cases presented above illustrate what we and other researchers have seen in many recent organizing and bargaining campaigns. There are four key elements to success: *national union support, rank-and-file mobilization, coalition building, and a range of innovative and flexible tactics* adapted to particular industry, labor market and workforce characteristics. We believe that where all four of these are present in full and active ways, the chances for union success rise dramatically (if not inevitably)[9].

To do all of the above, national and local unions in most cases must go through internal processes of restructuring and reform (Fletcher and Hurd 2001). JfJ offers a useful example of new union structures that stimulate internal union reform as well as external coalition building. Critical battles will be fought in both internal and external processes of alliance building and reform. Outcomes of the uncertain politics of internal union conflict and negotiation as well as external alliance building will be decisive in the success or failure of contemporary union revitalization efforts.

Are there lessons here for European unions? We believe there are. American unions declined in part because labor institutions were so weak. Unions in much of Europe (Germany, Scandinavia, Austria, Italy) stayed strong in the same period in part because of their strong institutional position (in politics, in collective bargaining, in the workplace through works councils). German unions, however, have now dropped to under 30 percent membership density, and unions in other (but not all) Europeans countries have declined in numbers as well. While American unions need revitalization in order to reach a point where institutional reform is possible (when they can then draw on lessons from Europe), many European unions need revitalized organizations in order to shore up and reform their existing institutions. As they do so, they may find useful strategic examples in American efforts to combine national union support, rank-and-file mobilization, coalition building and innovative tactics.

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[9] Note the parallels in our argument to those made by Voss and Sherman 2000 - who identify three key variables for local union revitalization: national union support, crisis, and local mobilization led by leadership with experience in other social movements - and also to the argument by Milkman and Wong 2001 emphasizing the need to coordinate both top-down strategic leadership and bottom-up mobilization.

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