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Amanda Tattersall

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change.* By Amanda Tattersall. Ithaca and London: ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2010. 224 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4899-7, \$62.95 (Cloth); ISBN 978-0-8014-7606-8, \$21.95 (Paperback).

“Social movement unionism,” particularly in the form of coalitions between unions and community groups, has been the subject of increased scholarly attention in recent years and has raised fresh hopes for labor movement practitioners at a time of renewed anti-union pressures. This interest represents a reaction against the staid “business unionism” of the second half of the twentieth century, with its focus on contract negotiations, grievance arbitration, and political connections that, reformers such as Fantasia and Voss argue, came at the expense of organizing new members (*Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement*, 2004). Interest is also inspired, however, by positive examples, such as the successful L.A. Model of coordination between unions and immigrant workers’ centers (Milkman, Introduction to *Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy*, 2010) and the innovative campaigns involving environmental activists, urban reinvestment groups, revitalized central labor councils, and others from Seattle to Miami, highlighted in Turner and Cornfield’s 2007 edited volume, *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*.

In *Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change*, Amanda Tattersall engages this growing discussion, seeking to draw lessons from both the successes and the failures of union–community alliances. She argues that unions must build “positive-sum” coalitions, in which they and their allies alike gain from campaigns, rather than “transactional coalitions,” in which community groups are merely dispatched as foot soldiers for union priorities. Positive-sum coalitions require three elements to be effective: *common concerns* (i.e., concerns that are bigger than those of any given union’s membership), strong *organizational relationships*, and *scale* (meaning geographic depth, such as activism taking place at both the municipal and the street level).

Tattersall uses three case studies to illustrate this thesis. The first is a public education coalition involving the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) in Sydney; the second, a living wage campaign driven by Chicago’s Grassroots Collaborative, including the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); and the third, the efforts of the Ontario Health Coalition (including the Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE]) to resist public–private hospital partnerships. These case studies are chosen for their similarities. All three countries are “liberal market economies” and have experienced severe attacks on their unions; all three cities have similar populations, are “centers of key regional economies,” and can be considered “global cities” (p. 15). One wonders whether three cases from the same country might serve to focus comparisons even further, but the book’s geographic breadth does make a strong argument for the application of certain activist tactics across varied national contexts.

Each of Tattersall’s case studies highlights a different combination of movement strengths and weaknesses. In the first case, the NSWTF builds a powerful coalition of teachers, parents, and even school principals who are in favor of reduced class sizes, launching an inquiry into educational quality and winning public support. The unity of the coalition breaks down, though, when the narrower issue of teacher salaries comes to the fore. In Tattersall’s analysis, this case illustrates the power of a compelling common concern (class sizes) and the danger for campaigners of weak organizational relationships. The second case study, Chicago’s Grassroots Collaborative, covers an ill-fated “No Wal-Mart” campaign and a promising attempt at instituting a living wage. It reveals strong organizational relationships (especially between UFCW, SEIU, and the Association for Community Organizations for Reform Now [ACORN]) grounded on realistic assessments of groups’ abilities, but it shows weak scale, with insider political influence overemphasized by campaigners. Finally, the third case study, the Ontario Health Coalition, shows the power of a multiscaled initiative (driven in part by

the peculiarities of the Canadian health care system) and the problem of a lack of common concern, with groups having difficulty agreeing on a shared health vision.

In contrast to much of the broader (not labor-specific) social movements literature on which she consciously builds, Tattersall is refreshingly focused on the *results* of her three coalitions' campaigns, in addition to their structural starting points, their organizations, and their participants' self-perceptions and messaging (sometimes broken down as "political opportunities," "mobilizing structures," and "collective action frames," as in Tarrow's *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (1998, 2nd ed.)). Constructing measures of success and failure that are tight, true to a given campaign's own goals, and that nonetheless travel across cases is a challenge—and one that Tattersall does not always fully meet (her definition of a "successful" movement sometimes seems a little too broad, as it includes, for example, a living wage campaign whose hard-fought ordinance is ultimately knocked down)—but it is a challenge that more researchers ought to take up. The pragmatic orientation in the book may be the result of Tattersall's own personal experiences in activism, from antiwar campaigns to the labor movement, experiences she explicitly draws on at points. Although academics may balk at passing judgment on a movement's outcomes, activists are, in the reviewer's experience, eager for concrete lessons, as long as such lessons are well-informed.

Tattersall provides rich, natural descriptions of her cases. Readers receive both a clear chronological tour through each campaign and a simultaneous disaggregation of the varying, sometimes conflicting, factors at work in any moment. The broader political and economic environments of Australia, the United States, and Canada, as well as the specific cities under study, are deftly sketched. Individuals, furthermore, stand out and are given real agency. Over the course of the book, readers settle into Sydney, Chicago, and Toronto, and have enough information to draw their own conclusions and to compare theirs against Tattersall's. Article-length qualitative studies rarely allow for this.

This level of detail can also be a burden, though. The book suffers from the demands it places on its small number of cases. With three main variables (common concern, organizational relationships, and scale) and several subsidiary variables (e.g., the presence of a full-time coordinator to mediate between coalition groups and negative versus positive messaging), along with the historical, political, and economic features of the three countries in question, there is simply too much variation. Tattersall mitigates this "degrees of freedom" problem by essentially expanding her three cases into six, highlighting two distinct phases in each city's campaign and contrasting the strengths and weaknesses of each phase. Interestingly, the within-city contrasts are ultimately more revealing than the contrasts between the three cities. Nonetheless, it is difficult for Tattersall to make hard and fast causal claims.

The lines between the variables are, moreover, somewhat fuzzy. To use the Sydney example again, was the issue that divided the teachers' coalition one of poor organizational relationships or a lack of common concern after the class size campaign wrapped up? Was scale really the most serious problem with the Chicago anti-Big Box coalition? The coalition certainly did not rely on its rank-and-file members as much as it might have, but one might equally reasonably argue that common concern was a challenge for the campaign (with racial issues pitting those in favor of jobs of any sort in minority neighborhoods against advocates of decent jobs). Toronto health care campaigners certainly had scale down pat, but organizational relationships seem at least as much of a problem in this case as common concern (some coalition partners resented CUPE's outsized influence). The author's demarcation among different issues is important to the causal claims in the book, but that demarcation is not always intuitive.

Nonetheless, *Power in Coalition's* findings ring true. Tattersall's interest in going beyond bemoaning unions' decline, on the one hand, and celebrating extraordinary success stories, on the other, ought to spur further comparative analysis on the same themes. In particular, it should spark useful discussions among union activists at a time when the public is increasingly unfamiliar with the labor movement's historic role and demands more inclusive goals from the movement—and when unions are in sore need of allies.

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