Globalization, Participation, and the Renewal of the Labor Movement

Lowell Turner
Cornell University, lrt4@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles
Part of the International and Comparative Labor Relations Commons, and the Unions Commons
Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.
Support this valuable resource today!
Globalization, Participation, and the Renewal of the Labor Movement

Abstract
In dangerous times, in a post-Cold War political landscape in which a settled "New World Order" has yet to emerge, continuing globalization brings enormous challenges. For labor unions, the pressures are intense and have been well documented and analyzed. Yet globalization also brings new opportunities for enhanced participation, alliance-building, and labor movement renewal. Viewing the global economy as an opportunity as well as a threat, some unions are crafting innovative strategies to ride the new currents toward modernization, mobilization, and expanded economic and political influence.

Keywords
labor movement, globalization, modernization, mobilization, labor unions, participation

Disciplines
International and Comparative Labor Relations | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments
Suggested Citation

Required Publisher's Statement
© Lyndon B. Johnson School for Public Affairs. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

This article is available at DigitalCommons@ILR: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/732
Chapter 5

Globalization, Participation, and the Renewal of the Labor Movement

by Lowell Turner

In dangerous times, in a post-Cold War political landscape in which a settled “New World Order” has yet to emerge, continuing globalization brings enormous challenges. For labor unions, the pressures are intense and have been well documented and analyzed. Yet globalization also brings new opportunities for enhanced participation, alliance-building, and labor movement renewal. Viewing the global economy as an opportunity as well as a threat, some unions are crafting innovative strategies to ride the new currents toward modernization, mobilization, and expanded economic and political influence.

The Argument: Globalization, Participation, and Labor Movement Renewal

Globalization is driving a logic of participation. This is true both for firms and unions and works best when all parties are on board—negotiating, debating, collaborating from positions of strength, and informed by a vision of the workplace of the future.

For labor unions, globalization thus brings not only pressures and great dangers but opportunities and positive challenges as well. The main challenge is to move beyond decline and the narrow perspectives of the past, to broaden the strategies and alliances, and to use new global forces to revitalize the labor movement. This means organizing, coalition-building, comprehensive campaigns—and it means innovative approaches to labor-management relations. All of these, to succeed, require increased member mobilization and participation.

Global economic pressures drive managers (in private and public sectors alike) to innovate across a range of possibilities, from outsourcing and union-busting to work reorganization and labor-management partnerships. Those same pressures, reflected largely through the strategic choices of firms and public agencies, also force unions
The Future of Labor Unions

to innovate—from concession bargaining and cooperation to coalition-building and international solidarity. In both management and union responses, there are new opportunities for employee and member engagement in both the work of the company and the life of the union. This is what is meant by the logic of participation.

For companies, there are profits to be made in both high road and low road choices. For unions, the range of options is smaller: resist the logic of participation and die out, or ride the new logic to a revitalized presence in the workplace and society. And to complete the circle, if unions do not mobilize for renewed influence in politics, society, and the workplace, there will be no countervailing force to insist that firms sustain the participatory workplace of the high road increasingly necessary in global markets.

To show the possibilities, selected case study evidence is presented here from a comprehensive research project on comparative labor movement revitalization.

Globalization: Pressures and Opportunities

The rapidly expanding global economy has several critical, adverse effects on unions. Since these are well known and widely recognized they need not be elaborated here. One effect is to undermine national and local policymaking, including protections of union and worker rights. The bargaining power and political influence of national and local interest groups, including labor, are also undercut. Another effect is intensified competition leading to economic pressure and restructuring. Firms are forced to reorganize production, putting pressure on established relations with labor. At the same time, public agencies come under new financial pressures associated with budget cutbacks, privatization, and restructuring—all intended at least in part to respond to demands for “leaner” government in a global economy. In the face of such pressures, employers (private and public) seek greater discretion to cut costs and reorganize, thereby—unless they are securely anchored in collective bargaining relationships—deepening their opposition to unions in a global economy. At the end of this causal chain, from globalization to economic pressures to new management strategies, unions thus face intensified and even life-threatening pressure from employers, government, and public agencies.

Initial union responses are typically defensive: hold the line, fight to protect what workers and unions have won in the past, or hang on through concession bargaining and trade barriers, fighting against deregulation and privatization. Defensive battles are important but can only slow rather than reverse decline, unless the opportunities offered by globalization are also seized. These opportunities fall into two categories.

The first is the fact that employers, in private and public sectors alike, need the collaboration and participation of their employees more than ever. Given growing pressures of competition, deregulation, and restructuring, employers need worker input and they need engaged participation—from work teams to reorganization, from highly vulnerable just-in-time delivery systems to expanded training and retraining. Enhanced needs for participation in turn give unions—but only where representation is already established—
fresh opportunities to engage, to negotiate the terms of change, and even to influence the shape of new organization and workplace relationships.

The second set of opportunities comes from the growing need of unions, given the new pressures, for both external allies and the internal mobilization of their memberships. The days are gone when unions could operate as special interest groups, focusing on their own member interests without the real participation of those members and without regard for other social groups. Today union leaders have to mobilize members and allies or the game is up. Taking advantage of these pressures and opportunities, the ringleaders of labor movement revitalization in America today, at local, regional, and national levels, have turned with a passion to new strategies, including organizing the unorganized; rank-and-file mobilization in bargaining, organizing, and politics; multi-union solidarity efforts (from the new AFL-CIO executive committee to the area federation and central labor council to specific local and national campaigns); coalition-building with a growing range of other groups (from environmental and campus to religious and antiwar, from comprehensive campaigns to economic development); and international solidarity in both targeted campaigns and broader global justice efforts.

All of this adds up to a new logic of participation in the global economy, for workers and unions as well as for firms and public agencies.

**Logic of Participation**

This logic, driven to a large extent by globalization, can be twisted and distorted—through empty management promises of participation in return for concessions, through union-management “sweetheart deals” that offer perks for some officials and little else for the rank and file. What I am suggesting, however, is that at its best the logic of participation is also a logic of mobilization. Paradoxically, both contemporary battles for union recognition against hostile employers and innovative labor-management partnerships are a product of the same logic. The “Battle of Seattle,” the Kaiser Permanente partnership coalition, and union-led teacher training reflect different manifestations of the same underlying forces at work. In the global economy, participation can be partnership-oriented or militant, with dimensions of each often side by side.

The key to success in this view is engagement by revitalized unions, capable of mobilizing and sustaining participation, capable of building and sustaining broad coalitions, informed by a vision of the workplace and global economy of the future. This is an actor-centered approach, one in which union strategies matter decisively. This approach—and much of the rich contemporary labor movement revitalization literature—both builds on and breaks with the dominant currents of received wisdom.

Traditional industrial relations literature, for example, talks about system stability, contracts and laws, and regularized bargaining relationships, but tells us little about what to do when the system approaches collapse. The transformation literature of the 1980s and 1990s makes a valuable contribution in analyzing collapse and identifying employer opposition as the driving causal force. The currently hot “Varieties of
Capitalism” literature builds both on earlier institutional approaches and more recent transformation literature to show the very limited possibilities for union influence in “liberal market economies” (LMEs) such as the United States, in contrast to stronger union roles in “coordinated market economies” (CMEs) such as Germany.2

The trouble with all of these views is that they assign union strategy a secondary place. Union strategies may matter, but they are either derivative of institutional frameworks or they are overwhelmed by opposing forces. Unions can adapt—to the institutions, to the transformation, to collaborate with management largely on management’s terms—but they cannot pursue innovative strategies to promote a worker-friendly transformation of their own. This is true to a large extent in the Varieties literature even for CMEs; for LMEs there is little prospect for meaningful, independent union influence.3

Yet renewed transformation is precisely what the most innovative contemporary American unions seek. The logic of participation can be ridden in a passive way—toward limited incorporation in a continuing context of broad decline—or in a proactive way. For unions pursuing meaningful influence, at work and in the broader society, proactive union strategies matter a great deal. Today’s revitalization literature aims precisely to understand (and promote) the new proactive strategies, for which the received literature tell us all too little.4 Still in its early days, theoretically underdeveloped and incorporating conflicting currents, this recent work on union strategies offers rich promise for the theoretical breakthroughs and policy prescriptions of the future—focused on understanding how unions can best ride and shape the logic of participation.

This is a synthetic view, in contrast to zero-sum debates between cooperationists and militants, between activism and participation. Whether union strategies aim at promoting participation in the high-end production of goods and services or basic dignity for low-end service workers, successful outcomes depend on union strength, on renewed organizing and mobilization capacity. And the institutional reform necessary to stabilize worker dignity and participation at the high and low ends and everywhere in between—from labor law reform to corporate accountability and expanded social policy—is inconceivable in the absence of sustained popular pressure. For long-term participation to succeed, unions need to mobilize protest for institutional reform. Revitalization and participation are two sides of the same coin.

The basic causal lines can be traced in the figure that appears on the following pages.

The Evidence: Partnership

Thus we have two contrasting but overlapping aspects of the same logic—the logic of participation expressed in both partnership and mobilization. To begin with the first, American labor-management partnerships of the past two decades have been widely studied, producing a rich new literature on the subject. The growth of labor-management partnerships reflects the logic of participation: the need of firms for enhanced employee and union collaboration in global markets, the need of public agencies for
the same under intensified cost-cutting pressures, and the need for unions to engage cooperatively to keep firms afloat and preserve jobs. The shortcomings of most of the literature include: (1) a focus on cases and collections of cases that do not say much about the broad effects for overall job preservation and job creation in the American economy; (2) a failure to show what kinds of union strategies enhance the usefulness of partnerships for retraining, attracting, and improving jobs; and (3) a broader failure to link partnerships to union revitalization.

Paul Osterman, a proponent of the "mutual gains enterprise" found in later research that the gains from partnerships had not been shared because unions had not been able to exert enough countervailing power. American research on labor-management partnerships has thus left important open questions, including whether such arrangements provide only narrow gains for particular workers and firms, whether any gains for workers can be sustained, and whether union participation in such arrangements can contribute in a significant way either to upgrading the American economy or to revitalizing the labor movement.

In any case, the logic of participation is quite clearly reflected in various types of

![Figure 5.1
The Logic of Participation Causal Sequence](image)
American labor-management partnerships. While none of these have the depth or breadth of European social partnership arrangements, they are nonetheless innovative and significant in the American context. The major partnership types include (1) single firm-single union (e.g., much of the auto industry), (2) firm-union consortium (e.g., Kaiser Permanente), and (3) regional/sectoral partnerships.

Most of the literature and case studies have focused on the first type. While many such partnerships come about with unions on the defensive or in decline, the capacities of local unions have a major bearing on the success and durability of the partner-
ship. Especially salient for union revitalization is the ability to use such partnerships to gain management neutrality in union organizing drives (at Johnson Controls, Verizon, and AT&T, for example).

Kaiser Permanente is a prime example of the second type, single firm-union consortium. A strong union base in California and management neutrality have allowed unions to organize in Georgia and other non-union locations. While problematic in some ways (e.g., union support for Kaiser’s opposition to a patients’ bill of rights in California), partnership at Kaiser has brought unions into management decision-making processes in new and significant ways.

One prominent AFL-CIO response to the limitations of single firm deals has been to promote local-sectoral partnerships. These have been most prominent in the rapidly unionizing health care, hospitality, and construction industries, and usually focus on workforce development, regulatory intervention, and providing business services. Instead of organizing a firm, regional/sectoral consortia organize a local labor market, working with government authorities, community organizations, employer groups, and other unions to build programs to train, offer support services, and find jobs for new employees. While providing resources to employers and unions to upgrade workplaces, such partnerships can reduce low-wage competition, coordinate union strategies, provide training and job opportunities for traditionally excluded labor market outsiders, and link partnership with other elements of union strategy such as coalition-building and political action.

While the three types of labor-management partnership offer unions new opportunities, and particular cases are quite promising (especially regional/sectoral possibilities), it is simply not enough to examine the details of partnership cases, either for analytical purposes or to transfer the lessons. It is also necessary to examine the connections between partnership and broader economic, social, and political outcomes, including effects on the overall economy, effects on union revitalization, and by extension the broad contribution (if there is one) to American economic and political democracy.

**The Evidence: Mobilization**

Partnership in its fullest sense involves the mobilization of participation. For unions, however, doing this on a firm-by-firm basis shows little promise of revitalizing the labor movement. Nor can such partnerships offer unions the renewed societywide influence necessary for institutional reform and sustained participation from a position of strength. For partnership relationships to be stabilized in the long run, unions require the second form of participation: the mobilization of members, potential members, and organized allies.

This is the contribution that contemporary labor movement renewal can make, and at its core such revitalization, like partnership, is driven by globalization. The “Battle of Seattle” in 1999 was a watershed in this development, bringing 30,000 union demonstrators into the streets to join 20,000 from other groups (environmental-
tal, student, human rights, consumer, religious, and community). With the World Trade Organization as target, these dramatic demonstrations at century’s end announced new union breakthroughs in rank-and-file mobilization, coalition-building, and international solidarity around issues of global justice. The protests built upon local developments of the 1990s in mobilization and alliance-building (see below), and the momentum of Seattle in turn inspired local union activists and coalition-builders across the country to press their campaigns forward.

One example is the living wage movement, which journalist Robert Kuttner has described as “the most interesting (and underreported) grassroots enterprise to emerge since the civil rights movement.” In cities large and small across the country, coalitions of activists, often labor-led, campaign for an area minimum wage (at least for firms doing business with local government) considerably higher than the national minimum wage, with notable cases of success. Examples include the Community Labor Alliance in Connecticut (with living wage laws passed in New Haven in 1997 and Hartford in 1999), the Santa Clara County Central Labor Council in alliance with Working Partnerships USA and 60 groups (pushing the San Jose City Council to adopt living wage policies in 1998), and the Los Angeles Living Wage Coalition (with broad popular and deep political support resulting in victory in 2000).

In all of these cases, successful coalitions were led by local unions with active national union support, with networks of overlapping activists in long-term regularized relationships among a variety of community-based groups including social movements, churches, and political organizations. Broad success for the living wage movement is indicated in the spread of new legislation: over 70 American cities had passed living wage laws by early 2002.

Closely related to living wage campaigns are union-initiated coalitions originally conceived in support of labor campaigns that develop long-term strategic potential. One example is SEIU’s Justice for Janitors, essentially a national effort to reorganize urban building services after a period of de-unionization. Faced with the loss of members as building owners eliminated jobs and turned to janitorial service contractors in the 1980s, SEIU developed a combined organizing, bargaining, and civil rights strategy based on the corporate campaign model with special attention to building coalitions in specific communities. This has been a national effort based on the mobilization of local union activists in coalition with local churches, community organizations, and labor-friendly elected officials. While in some cities the coalitions have been temporary or sporadic, in other cities they have endured, spilling over into a variety of related issues and campaigns.

To move beyond specific coalition-building cases to the mobilization of participation in geographical regions, Los Angeles provides an example of a major city where expanded coalition-building and member activism have resulted in successful, extended campaigns both for living wage and Justice for Janitors and in broader labor movement revitalization as well. In the Justice for Janitors case, thousands of largely Hispanic janitors have been organized and won major contract improvements in a se-
ries of successive campaigns from the late 1980s through a dramatic strike victory in 2001, each campaign building a broader and deeper level of community support.\textsuperscript{15}

Los Angeles is also a “global city,” in which great concentrations of corporate wealth depend on new inflows of low-paid migrant and immigrant labor,\textsuperscript{16} providing to some extent a model for contemporary labor movement revitalization in America. The transformation is particularly striking for a native Angeleno returning to visit. The Los Angeles I grew up in (1950s and 1960s) was politically conservative and largely non-union (outside manufacturing bastions such as aerospace and automobiles), in contrast to that heralded union town to the north, San Francisco. In a dramatic reversal of labor movement fortunes, Los Angeles today has a plausible claim as one of the country's stronger union towns, with the latest mayoral runoff election (in 2001) between two pro-labor Democrats.\textsuperscript{17}

The transformation has been driven by the growth of the Hispanic community and its political and economic mobilization, along with the coalition-building of a revitalized local labor movement.\textsuperscript{18} And union success is not limited to low-end service jobs. Unions play an active role throughout public services, and a dynamic central labor council wields vast political influence. Hospital and home-care organizing has brought the health care industry in Los Angeles up close to the 50 percent union membership density threshold (beyond which much greater influence is possible)—building in part on earlier union strongholds such as Kaiser Permanente, now protected (as we have seen above) in an innovative labor-management partnership.

The examples above offer vivid proof that union strategies and the mobilization of participation matter. Living wage, Justice for Janitors, and the revitalization of the labor movement in Los Angeles have all occurred in spite of the factors that are generally cited as driving union decline in the United States, including vigorous employer opposition to unions; a declining national labor movement; the liberal market economy (with institutions that offer only very limited possibilities for unions); globalization and intensified competition; the anti-union policies of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush (1980-1992); September 11 and its aftermath; specifically for Los Angeles, the enormous power of global capital in Los Angeles (a focal point of the Pacific Rim economy); an anti-union Republican governor of California until 1998; an anti-living wage Republican mayor of Los Angeles until 2001; the collapse of unionized heavy industries in southern California (automobiles, aerospace); and Anglo-Black-Hispanic tensions, including native-immigrant conflicts and immigrant deportation fears.

None of the above, therefore, even in combination, can stand as credible full explanations for union decline in America, or at least as insurmountable barriers to a labor movement revitalization that builds in centers of global corporate strength such as Los Angeles, focuses on broad coalition-building and rank-and-file mobilization, and deepens local political influence—in short that develops innovative strategies that follow the logic of participation.

This argument is actor and strategy-based—union successes depend not only on
The Future of Labor Unions

...external factors but also on union reforms and strategies themselves, and in particular on the mobilization of participation. In this regard, new union strategies are part of another global phenomenon: the swelling of contemporary social movements, from union-led Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in 1999 to massive American and international antiwar mobilizations of 2003. The disenfranchised and their allies are driven to action—against sweatshops, for living wages, to defend deteriorating urban and rural environments, to promote sustainable development and world peace. Seeking to overcome collective powerlessness in the global economy, the newly mobilized band together in coalitions for local and global justice. This is true from New York to Los Angeles and from Sao Paulo to Seoul. And globalization ensures that current protest waves, current mobilizations of participation, are not only local and national or confined to rich countries or poor countries but are increasingly international in scale and scope.

A major focus of future research thus needs to be on the strategies, coalitions, and campaigns that make possible the renewal of labor movement influence via enhanced participation and mobilization. To sort out the causal factors, comparative analysis of case studies at home and abroad is essential—for labor-management partnership, for coalition-building, for rank-and-file mobilization, and for metropolitan labor movement revitalization.

Sustaining Participation: Indispensable Role of Revitalized Unions

When the global economy’s logic of participation builds on labor-management partnership, policymakers, opinion leaders, and corporate executives generally approve. When participation take shape as mass protest, however, these same actors, and some union leaders as well, are likely to disapprove. Thomas Friedman, for example, an influential journalist for the New York Times, called the Seattle demonstrators of 1999 a “Noah’s ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions and yuppies looking for their 1960s fix.”

Yet this was largely a union show, based on labor-led coalition-building and a vast mobilization by union members and environmental activists. Participating unions at Seattle, and in other coalition efforts from living wage through the antiwar movement, are avoiding the demoralizing error that many unions made in the 1960s—to stand aside or even oppose the rising social movement waves. By contrast, many of the unions driving contemporary labor movement renewal are consciously riding the waves of history, in globalization-driven currents of social protest across a range of progressive issues. Activist union leaders in the new millennium know how urgently they need the vitality of rank-and-file and social movement mobilization—to revitalize unions, to bring dignity to low-end workers, and to promote and sustain essential participation at the high and middle ends (from teachers to engineers to the new legions of high-tech workers).

For the logic of participation, union renewal through member and coalition activism is essential because of the indispensable role of strong, proactive unions.
in sustaining participation. The evidence shows that where unions are weak, lacking in both mobilization capacity and a proactive vision of their own, labor-management partnership as well as community and political coalitions are unlikely to endure. And revitalized unions are indispensable for the future promotion of organizational and institutional reforms necessary to underpin a more participatory and labor-friendly economy.

Policy implications center around the promotion of participation in partnerships, organizing, and coalition-building. It's not one or the other—all are required. And what they add up to is in fact a transformation of American unions, well beyond the 1980s transformation of industrial relations.\textsuperscript{22} This time, with the cliff's edge in sight, it can no longer be a question of adapting to decline. What is needed now—and what is possible given a globalization-driven logic of participation and a context of rising social protest—is precisely a broadening of union perspectives and influence, at and beyond the workplace.

In an earlier era, J. David Greenstone argued that American unions had reached a “partial equivalence” to labor's broad social-democratic place in western European societies.\textsuperscript{23} Since then, that influence, along with union membership, has seriously declined. But the opportunity for renewal is greater today than it has been for several decades, given global forces and the new activism of union leaders. The opportunity is there once again to transform labor from a narrow interest group to a broad partisan force. To be sure, the opposition is as massive as ever. But members and potential members are available and coalition partners are willing. What remains is for unions to ride the logic of participation more aggressively, joining forces with rising social protest, developing and promoting proactive visions of the workplace and society of the future.

Thanks to Ray Marshall for his thoughts on how to approach this paper, and especially for suggesting a concise idea paper rather than a longer academic piece. For research and other assistance in the development of these ideas, thanks to Ian Greer, Nathan Lillie, Julie Sadler, and Sarah Swider. For research funding, thanks to the Ford Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies, and the ILR School at Cornell University.

Notes


17. The suddenness of the transformation is clear from a reading of City of Quartz by Mike Davis (1990), a lucid historical account of social and labor history in Los Angeles that ends in 1990 and gives no inkling of the coming mobilization of the Hispanic community, Justice for Janitors, a revitalized central labor council led by Miguel Contreras, and the emergence of a strongly pro-labor city council.


22. Kochan et al., The Transformation of American Industrial Relations.


References


