

UNION ORGANIZING ACTIVITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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UHBS 2008:4

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January, 2008 Draft

Working Paper -- Please do not cite without permission

*Court Gifford of the Bureau of National Affairs and various staff members at the U.S. Department of Labor and the National Labor Relations Board provided assistance in obtaining data. Vickie Coleman Gallagher and M. Todd Royle provided research assistance.

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Union organizing via National Labor Relations Board certification elections dropped sharply in 2006 to 1,648 elections, down from 2,142 in 2005 (Bureau of National Affairs 2007). This is one of the steepest drops in a decline dating to the early 1980s, when unions participated in over 6,000 elections annually (Chaison & Dhavale 1990). The drop for 2006 may reflect unique circumstances, including an election year in which unions devoted substantial efforts to wresting control of Congress from Republicans, coupled with union efforts to pass the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). Nevertheless, it underscores the long-term downtrend in organizing.

When Congress created the NLRB in 1935, elections were intended to be the primary means by which private sector workers could decide on union representation. The rules changed in 1947 with the Taft-Hartley amendments, and to lesser degrees with other legislation and case law rulings. The social and economic environment certainly changed since 1935, and the parties themselves evolved. “Things are different now” is, however, not a satisfactory explanation for dramatic changes in election activity over the past 30 years that are underscored in the 2005-06 decline. Explanations are especially needed in that union leaders, notably AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, have publicly championed intentions to boost organizing for more than 10 years.

In 1995 John Sweeney rose to power in a virtually unprecedented coup. A key plank in Sweeney’s platform was radically increased union organizing. Despite efforts to realize that goal and considerable rhetoric, many palace guards began grumbling in the early 2000s. Union decline in absolute terms, and certainly relative to job growth, continued. The Carpenters left the federation, followed by a broader revolt in 2005-06 wherein several major affiliates broke away to join the Carpenters in a new “Change to Win” federation.

Assessments of Sweeney’s record and the subsequent federation break-up stress the limited power of the AFL-CIO vis-à-vis national union affiliates. Decision-making authority and resources remain largely in the realm of national union autonomy (Chaison 2007; Fiorito & Jarley 2003; Hurd 2007). Sweeney’s efforts to boost affiliates’ organizing efforts have been likened to “herding cats.” Although various factors including personality clashes and priorities on politics and organizing played a role in the federation’s rebellion, fundamentally the rebels’ frustrations centered on the inability of the federation to foster change in affiliates.

Bronfenbrenner (2001) argued that union leaders know what must be done to boost membership growth, but lack the determination or ability to do it (also see Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004). Even within the new federation, national union autonomy remains jealously guarded, a factor, among others, leading to questions on whether the split really matters (e.g., Chaison 2007).

Simplistic assessments and the popular media tend to focus on personality clashes, the irony of mentor-protégé friction, and the potential drama of dueling federations. Fuller understanding also requires attention to the role of national unions, their decision processes, structures, environments, and other less dramatic elements. Some assessments have recognized this (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 2001, Chaison 2007, Hurd 2007), but analyses still rely heavily on impressionistic, indirect, and anecdotal evidence. More systematic analysis of national union organizing records may shed light on the nature and causes of continuing union decline.

Unfortunately, there is no reliable official census of union membership *by union*. Official figures make clear that aggregate U.S. membership has steadily fallen, or at best stagnated for brief periods while employment has grown (U.S. Department of Labor 2007). Private sector unionization fell below 8% in 2005, and further in 2006. Even with relatively stable public

sector unionization at about 36%, overall density fell to 12% in 2006, roughly one-third of its peak level circa 1955.

Beyond a bleak aggregate picture, however, it is hard to know the reasons behind what has happened. Unions' own reports on their respective membership levels are often suspiciously inconsistent across sources and time, negotiated for some purposes (per capita tax payments to the federation), may or may not include certain categories of members such as retirees and associate members, and may or may not count members gained through mergers as new members. Related data on union organizing activity are scattered across at least three federal and numerous state agencies. These sources record votes, but not membership. It is unclear how much organizing unions are undertaking outside of "official channels" (e.g., NLRB). Self-reports from the federation's now-defunct *Work in Progress* publication reported only union gains, and did so inconsistently. They do suggest, however, that organizing via elections still represents a large share, roughly 85%, of total union organizing activity.

This paper systematically examines national union data from the last years of the "Kirkland Era" (1990-1995) and the first several years of the "Sweeney Era" (1999-2004) – allowing that an interim period, 1996-98, reflects a transition phase. After a data-driven review that establishes "the facts" as best we can, our attention turns to prior analyses that attempt to illuminate inter-union differences. A concluding section draws tentative inferences on prospects for union revitalization and union policies, and suggests lines of further research.

A Partial Organizing Record for National Unions

Table 1 shows indicators of membership, membership growth, NLRB organizing win rates, NLRB jurisdiction elections and relative organizing effort, and leader views on organizing effectiveness, commitment, and expenditures during 1990-2004 for national unions with 50,000 or more members as of 2004. Other than the NLRB-based data, these measures are based on self-reports. Self-reports may be self-serving, as suggested by an average assessment of organizing effectiveness of 3.6 on a 5-point scale for 1990 and 2.5 on a 4-point scale for 1997 for all national unions (see Table 2 below) and somewhat higher respective values (3.8 and 2.9) for the large unions shown in Table 1. Self-reports may also have some advantages over objective data in netting out environmental influences such as employer resistance and employment changes underlying more objective data. Prior studies found that self-reports on organizing effectiveness correlated with more objective indicators in ways supporting their validity (e.g., Fiorito, Jarley, & Delaney 1995).

-- Please see Table 1 --

Table 1's membership data reveal a wide range of union experience from 1990-2004. The figures show impressive growth for the SEIU, IAFF, IATSE, and PTE, and abysmal decline for the ANA, RWDSU, TCU, and AFM as well as for some better-known unions including the UMW and UAW. These "bottom line" figures reflect many influences, including mergers, absorptions, "automatic" growth and decline through union security clauses and bargaining unit expansions/contractions, as well as the effects of organizing and decertification. The USWA, for example, appears mildly successful in membership growth over this era (+17.7%), but this reflects mergers that brought workers from rubber manufacturing and other industries into the USWA while steel membership fell. Thus membership growth *can* reflect organizing success, but it is by no means a clear indicator. Varying growth rates between the Kirkland and Sweeney eras for specific unions may reflect timing of particular mergers, differing environmental conditions, or changes in organizing strategies, tactics, and results. Unions on average increased their membership by 3.1% over the 1990-2004 period as shown in Table 2, but declined during the Kirkland era by 5.3% and increased membership during the Sweeney era by 2.7%.

Consolidation, rather than organizing, however, is the principal explanation for this “growth” as overall union membership declined from 16.7 million in 1990 to 15.5 million in 2004 (Hirsch & Macpherson 2007), while average national union size increased from 142.6 thousand members to 172.9 thousand as shown in Table 2.

-- Please see Table 2--

The NLRB win rate figures in Table 1 are more precisely about organizing success, but are limited to NLRB jurisdiction elections actually held. They do not reflect non-NLRB jurisdiction organizing, card check “elections,” or possible differing propensities to pursue campaigns to elections depending on authorization card signings. Some unions may proceed to elections only when large proportions of workers have signed cards, and win a high proportion, and others may proceed to riskier elections and achieve lower win rates. Thus win rates may connote strategies as well as effectiveness.

Caveats noted, there are clearly NLRB win rate differences between unions and over time. The SEIU nears the top of the list in both eras and improved its win rate noticeably over time, from 64.6% to 72.4%. The IBT shows one of the lower win rates in both eras, and improved its rate less than most unions, from 43.3% to 45.2%. The average win rate across all unions for the Kirkland era was 51% as compared to 61% for the Sweeney era, as shown for unions with 10 or more NLRB elections in an era (see Table 2). Tradeoffs between NLRB organizing activity levels and win rates are apparent in the SEIU vs. IBT comparison, and for unions generally in the correlation between activity level indicators and win rates for the Kirkland era ($r = -0.43$, $p < .01$), but less clearly for the Sweeney era ($r = 0.06$, NS), as shown in Table 3.

--Please see Table 3--

Correlations among the various organizing success and activity indicators in Table 3 underscore that each type of measure conveys somewhat different information. In neither the Kirkland nor Sweeney era is there strong evidence of consistency between self-assessed organizing effectiveness and membership growth. The Kirkland era correlation is 0.08 (NS) and the Sweeney era correlation is .02 (NS). Similarly, NLRB win rates are at best marginally correlated with self-assessed organizing effectiveness in both periods (Kirkland era $r = .21$, $p < .10$ one-tailed, and Sweeney era $r = .13$, NS). Self-assessed organizing effectiveness does not correlate with NLRB organizing activity level in either era (NS correlations of -0.03 and -0.06 , respectively).

Although the NLRB win rate and membership growth rate improvements between the Kirkland and Sweeney eras shown in Table 2 might be cited in support of Sweeney’s success in refocusing unions on organizing, organizing *activity* is arguably more relevant, and for it the evidence is mixed. The number of NLRB certification elections rose briefly during Sweeney’s early years, then seemingly returned to a long-term downtrend. This is reflected in data for specific unions in Table 1, and in summary form by the drop in the average number of elections per union in Table 2, which shows that the mean dropped from about 260 elections in the Kirkland Era to about 139 elections in the Sweeney Era. These figures overstate the decline because the latter period includes data for more small unions that lower the average, but even a same-unions comparison shows that the average union participated in about 59 fewer elections in the latter period (see Table 4). Comparing numbers of elections across very different unions, however, is of limited value. Organizing requires resources and unions vary greatly in size and resources.

-- Please see Table 4 --

Consequently, emphasis here is on *relative* organizing activity, that is, numbers of workers “tried” (workers whose representation rights were sought) per thousand members for the

union seeking their representation rights via the NLRB. Relative organizing activity rose from an average of 62.4 eligible voters tried per thousand members to 73.4, but is virtually unchanged on a same-unions basis (see Table 4). For several seemingly “organizing-active” unions such as the IBT, UFCW, USWA, and LIUNA, relative organizing activity fell. Organizing budgets averaged only about 14.5% of total union spending (for a relatively small number of reporting unions, N=44) in contrast to Sweeney’s 30% goal, and showed a mild upward trend over three years, 1996-98 (Fiorito, Jarley, & Delaney 2007). Here too there is considerable variation across unions, consistent with distinctions drawn between “organizing,” “organizing-driven,” or “organizing-active” unions (or similar terms) and other unions (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Hickey 2004). As Table 2 shows, relative variability in organizing activity is far greater than that in win rates. The coefficient of variation (CV) for NLRB elections is in the 600-900% vicinity, and even after adjusting for union size and taking into account size of units targeted for organizing, relative organizing activity’s CV ranges from 85% (Kirkland Era) to 194% (Sweeney Era), but for win rates the CV range is only from 24% (Kirkland Era) to 28%.

Other organizing activity or commitment indicators from Tables 1-4, namely the organizing budget share estimate and self-reported commitment to organizing, correlate with each other ($r = .58, p < .01$), but not consistently with NLRB organizing activity. This may reflect the former two measures’ common source in the 1997 survey, but also the 1997 point-in-time perspective of these items versus the specific time periods for the NLRB organizing activity indicator (either 1990-95 or 1999-2004). In particular, genuine change in organizing commitment that occurred in the Sweeney Era or late in the preceding transition period (1996-98) would not be reflected in the 1997 survey. This is an important point in that the NLRB organizing activity measure clearly shows changes for *some* unions, although often the change is a dramatic drop. On average, although win rates improved by five to six percentage points on a same-unions basis, relative organizing activity did not change significantly on that basis, as shown in Table 4. Finally from Table 4, the organizing self-rating on a same-unions basis dropped significantly.

As revealed by some of the evidence already noted there is some *intra-union* consistency over time, i.e., evidence of stable types in the correlation evidence. Although there is little consistency over time in membership growth ($r=.12, NS$), this indicator is contaminated by mergers, absorptions, and such. Win rates ($r=.58, p<.01$) and relative organizing effort ($r=.53, p<.01$), as well as self-rated organizing effectiveness ($r=.41, p<.01$) tend to suggest that there is some consistency over time. There has been *some* shuffling of the ranks. Some nationals’ NLRB win rates changed by 10 percentage points or more, for example (see Table 1). Some unions’ growth rates changed dramatically. Relative organizing effort increased and decreased by +/- 30 percent for some nationals.

Are unions organizing (more) yet? That is, despite all the noise in the signals, can we say that organizing is increasing? The answer seems to be “no,” at least at the aggregate level. At that level, the organizing surge has been more rhetoric than reality. Is this a rational union responses to hostile environments, a failure to exploit opportunities, or some of both? Regrettably, there have been limited analyses of between-union differences as yet. Such analyses are needed to address “Why?” Examining the experience of specific national unions might be illuminating.

Obviously there are many indicators one might consider, and unfortunately they sometimes diverge and some may involve tradeoffs that complicate interpretation. NLRB win rates and relative organizing effort measures represent conceptually and practically important indicators in a potential tradeoff relation. A union might be able to organize more extensively, but with lower success. Conversely, it may scale back its efforts but improve its success rate,

i.e., focus its efforts more intensively. If a union increased *both* its organizing effort *and* its win rate, that would seem unambiguously positive, and in contrast, if its effort and win rate *both* fell, that would seem decidedly negative. Chart 1 lays out this point in graphical terms. Quadrant 1 (top right) shows increased both organizing efforts and win rates. Quadrant 2 (lower right) shows increased win rates, but decreased organizing efforts. Quadrant 3 (lower left) shows decreases in both, and Quadrant 4 (upper left) depicts decreased win rates but increased organizing efforts.

-- Please see Chart 1 --

Figure 1 applies the scheme of Chart 1 and plots changes in relative organizing effort and win rates for the 11 largest U.S. union, those with 500,000 or more members in 2004. Most of these “giants” improved *both* their relative organizing effort and their win rates between the Kirkland and Sweeney eras. Only one had decreases in both, three improved win rates while diminishing organizing effort, and none expanded efforts with reduced success. The tradeoff referenced earlier is not evident in Figure 2; rather, win rates and effort improved together, on average. This positive relation weakens in a more inclusive figure for all unions with 50,000 or more members (see Figure 2) and does not hold in a similar plot for “all” unions (all those with non-missing data; see Figure 3), but even among all unions, a plurality of unions fall in the first quadrant, coupling increased efforts and improved success.

-- Please see Figures 1-3--

These plots put a rather different light on changes in organizing efforts. Although the aggregate figures show improved win rates, they show diminished or unchanged efforts. In contrast, Figures 1-3 emphasize diversity among unions, and suggest that many unions, particularly larger unions, have coupled increased efforts with greater success. How does one reconcile these seemingly inconsistent perspectives? A: “Blame the Teamsters” (and a few other large unions with organizing activity declines). As Table 1 shows, the Teamsters “drove” about 1600 fewer elections in the Sweeney Era vs. the Kirkland Era. Some other large unions also showed large decreases in organizing effort, and collectively these cases offset increases by many national unions.

Preliminary Conclusions from the Descriptive Analysis

One can quibble about the adequacy of NLRB data and other indicators of union organizing activity, growth, and vitality. Despite data limitations, however, it is hard to escape the view that aggregate U.S. union organizing activity and union vitality continue long term downtrends. There are, however, encouraging exceptions to this gloomy generalization. Many national unions have increased organizing efforts *and* success, no small accomplishment in the political economy of the early 21st Century.

Despite growing recognition and rhetoric of organizing’s importance, modeling efforts designed to establish fuller understanding seem to have been largely abandoned. This seems a “doubly grim vineyard” in addressing a somewhat necrotic topic with limited explanatory success. Better data would help. Trite as this may sound, it is important. Consider that when Sweeney called for unions to boost organizing budgets, no one could offer a solid estimate of organizing expenditures, a baseline. It is hard to assess progress when we don’t know the starting point. Broader conceptualizations are also needed. Amidst the focus on quantitative organizing goals and the confusion that has often accompanied “organizing model” rhetoric, means and ends have often been confounded. Organizing is a means toward for improving worker well-being, not an end in itself. Union density may be the single best indicator of union capacity to improve advance worker interests, but it has limitations (Sullivan 2007) and is not synonymous with vitality.

Broader conceptualizations are needed as well in terms of union environments. It is said that a national union leader vowed to fire any organizer who organized a workplace in the union's (declining) traditional jurisdiction. Refocusing gone berserk, or a rational response to the futility of organizing workplaces almost certain to disappear in the face of daunting global competition? Similarly, union decisions to organize or not have to be considered within specific worker and employer attitudinal climates. We cannot gain a solid understanding when we simply compare Union A and Union B, or even Federation A and Federation C, without considering the differing environments they face.

Richer models of union organizing efforts are needed that consider both organizational and environmental factors. Toward this end, a brief review of previous literature may be useful.

Prior Research and Modeling Efforts

Union growth and decline and the processes by which workers join or form unions have been the focus of numerous studies. A recent review (Godard 2007) provides a guide to much of the literature. Here we briefly sketch some of the major lines of research.

Several studies have examined union growth and decline, typically in an aggregate time-series framework (e.g., Stepina & Fiorito 1986). These studies tend to focus on costs and benefits of union membership from an individual worker's perspective to derive inferences about macroeconomic influences, including effects for unemployment rates, inflation, and wage changes. A larger body of studies examined organizing success in representation elections (Heneman & Sandver 1983). Typically using the representation election as the unit of analysis, these studies have linked union win rates and pro-union voting outcomes to election unit characteristics such as number of employees and employer opposition, environmental factors such as area unemployment rates, and other variables, including union characteristics in a few instances. A still larger number of studies explore individual worker decisions to support or oppose unions in representation elections and more often in hypothetical elections (e.g., Blader 2007). Most often these studies emphasize attitudinal and perceptual variables such as job satisfaction and union instrumentality views, and their potential role as antecedents of voting-related behavior or intentions. Some relatively recent research has examined growth and organizing success on a union-by-union basis (e.g., Fiorito, Jarley, & Delaney 2002, Heery, et al. 2003), or linked individual decisions or intentions, or election unit outcomes to union characteristics (e.g., Charlwood 2004). More than others, these studies have emphasized union strategies and structures as antecedents in efforts to explain differences in outcomes.

All these lines of research have limited relevance for the question of union organizing *effort*. Their main focus is on workers' joining or voting decisions and the *outcomes* of union organizing. Union organizing efforts are implicitly part of the "black box" by which individuals' calculations, beliefs, and feelings translate into membership or election outcomes, but union decisions to offer representation services, or more properly in most cases, to seek the right to provide representation services, are obscured. Any inferences from these studies about union organizing effort, or the supply of union representation services, are largely indirect. Research on the supply side, or union organizing activity and effort per se is scant.

There have been some notable efforts to analyze or at least describe and qualitatively interpret *aggregate* union organizing activity (e.g., Chaison & Dhavale 1990; Farber & Western 2002), or to explain differences across the U.S.-Canadian divide (e.g., Rose & Chaison 2001). These have highlighted the importance of the "supply side" for union growth and noted the comparatively low level, stagnation, and decline of union organizing efforts. Others have taken the low level of organizing effort as a starting point, and focused on questions of why unions aren't organizing more and whether and how organizational change within unions can boost

organizing (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 2001, Fiorito & Jarley 2003, Hurd 2007). This latter body of research has noted that amidst the aggregate statistics showing low and stagnant or declining organizing efforts, there are large differences across similarly-sized unions in their organizing effort levels. Thus key related questions addressed by these studies are why some unions seem far more committed to organizing than others, reasons for differences in organizing strategies, and how high commitment to organizing can be diffused to more unions. Much of this work is descriptive and impressionistic, but it offers insights toward a more systematic understanding.

Also highly germane are previous efforts to *model* differential union organizing efforts. Studies by Block (1980) and Voos (1987) found support for some theoretical predictions. Block (1980) found some support for hypothesized positive effects of employment growth and negative effects of membership concentration and density in unions' primary jurisdictions on a relative organizing activity measure (elections per member across national unions). There were murkier miscellaneous results, including some on union democracy and interactions. Voos (1987) modeled organizing expenditures per primary jurisdiction employee by national union. She found some evidence of a link to primary jurisdiction density in an inverted-U shape relation.

Block concluded that "Union success, union democracy, and union growth through organizing may therefore be incompatible" (p. 112). Voos, however, concluded that "[T]he supply of union organizing services suffers not because union membership is too high, but because it is too low" (p. 29). On related questions, Voos' earlier (1983) evaluation of organizing showed that it had a favorable cost-benefit ratio, but nonetheless that organizing activity was declining.

Both Block and Voos were able to explain only small portions of observed variance in organizing activity across unions. Voos' (1987) R^2 values ranged from .07 to .16, while Block's ranged from .10 to .23. It is possible that relative organizing efforts are subject to many random or idiosyncratic influences such as the ideologies or strategies of particular union leaders. Even so, it is hard to interpret such results as highly successful modeling efforts. Indeed, modeling efforts have been unsatisfying. They offer "thin" conceptual models, low "explained" variance, some anomalous results, and are based on data from the 1960s-70s.

More recent and mainly qualitative assessments have been offered by several scholars. Bronfenbrenner (2001) stressed a harsh environment, political distractions, union education cuts, polling excesses, and union failure to undertake needed cultural change. Farber and Western (2002) noted that "[E]xplanation is difficult to come by" (p. 398), but suggested that key factors might include a harsh political or economic environment and differential union-nonunion sector growth. Heery et al. (2003) found that the use of organizing specialists (signaling commitment?) was linked to growth. Hurd (2004) suggested that contributing influences included excess emphasis on the "organizing model," dysfunctional and jealously-guarded national union autonomy, excess focus on numeric goals, and too little focus on "spirit and purpose."

Concluding Remarks

One of the Great Myths of organizing in both the UK and US is that millions of workers are ready to join unions and just need to be asked. Polls do indeed show that millions say they would vote for a union in a hypothetical election, or possibly even join one, but again, *in the abstract*. Even though unions enjoy their support to a degree, it is clear that for many workers, unions are still a long way from providing something that workers want to be part of badly enough to commit their votes in real campaigns, much less their dues and their continuing activism. National and local unions are experimenting, as they should. Both successes and failures can be instructive. In the long haul, it will be unions that create an internal climate that fosters innovation and accepts occasional failures as a necessary consequence that are likely to

find the revitalization formula that works for their circumstances. Scholars would do well to study these experiments and their results, not only in careful case studies and impressionist assessments, but also in broader attempts to model union processes and outcomes.

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