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Beyond the Workplace:
The Politics of Labor and Society

It's a pleasure to be here in Manchester at this important conference, and I'm honored to have the chance to say a few words. I wanted to start with a joke but couldn't find one that didn't get a sad response at the dinner table at home. I had a friend in college named Mike Beaumont – his jokes were so bad they were typically met with dead silence. So we named bad jokes after him. If you get three seconds of dead silence (and we used to count them on our fingers), it's a "Beaumont"! If you happen to have friends who tell bad jokes, or even worse, puns, try this out . . .

Our biggest joke these days is George Bush – but he's such an easy target, and anyway the national and global damage he is causing is really no joke. While it's a pleasure to watch this lame duck twist in the wind, I'm sure he still has more damage to do. We look forward to the better politics of a new administration, one that will stop wreaking havoc on global society

and at the same time ease up on American unions – and given the makeup of Congress and the growing political mobilization of labor, there is a credible possibility of improvements, including labor law reform or at least reasonable implementation of what we now have, after the next elections. And election and legislative efforts today take place in a context of renewed, coalition-based campaigns that include intense effort by unions – with considerable success, for example, in the most recent congressional elections. Unions, by the way, are stronger today in their capacity to mobilize voters in the U.S. than they have been in many years – ironically given long-term union decline, and an important reason for hope.

Which leads to what I want to talk about today: unions moving beyond the workplace into a broader engagement with society, one that offers the promise not only of renewed union influence but a contribution to broader social change in an era of unleashed global capitalism.

Looking back to the late 19th century and intervening years, there's nothing new about overlapping labor and social movements. The traditional activities of unions though, have focused mainly on the workplace and in

politics. Employers and the state have shaped the context in which unions operate, and in these arenas unions have struggled for influence.

For much of the postwar period, unions in the global North, in different ways in different countries, gained enough influence and institutional protection to function as workplace and political insiders: with collective bargaining and workplace representation, with close ties to political parties and participation in political campaigns and policy making. But since the 1980s in the UK and US, and more recently elsewhere, employer and state-led liberalization, and in some cases open attacks, have in many countries weakened or even swept existing institutional anchors, and unions have defended organizational and member interests in traditional channels with only mixed success. In some places, unions have supplemented those channels, and traditional goals, with a broader engagement in civil society.

Such activity often takes place in metropolitan arenas and is sometimes linked to the building of new urban labor movements. Coalition campaigns address issues such as economic development, union organizing, immigrant rights, affordable housing, living wages, mass transit, and other

environmental and social issues. Campaigns and shifting alliances overlap and often spill over into new campaigns, resulting in the best cases in expanded political influence for unions, policy gains, employer concessions and market re-regulation.

Forces driving labor's renewed involvement with society include the crisis of declining influence in politics and at the workplace, opportunities afforded by the presence of potential allies who have also taken a beating, and the strategic reorientation of innovative union leaders, often in response to the demands of rank-and-file members.

I'm not offering a comprehensive analysis of labor and society, because I don't have one. The intent is rather to call attention to an increasingly important topic for research and analysis. There is much existing work, old and new, on which to build, and there are exciting projects underway. There is also a need for much more. I believe the study of labor and society, past and present, is an important frontier for future research and analysis.

Labor and society: cases of expanding interaction

So I would like to give some examples, among many others, of labor's move beyond the workplace and traditional politics into society. Many of the cases come from recent developments in the U.S., both because those are the cases I know best and because American labor is unfortunate enough to have certain "advantages of backwardness." Union decline in the U.S. has been underway for over 30 years, ever since labor missed the opportunity for revitalization in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, leaving itself open for state and employer attacks in the 1980s. We in the U.S. offer a hazardous testing ground for what may or may not work in future efforts to promote labor's engagement in society, at both national and local levels – in a context of neoliberal global governance in which even unions in countries with strong labor institutions may find themselves under attack.

I've been accused throughout my career, by the way, from my years as a shop steward to my time in academia, of optimism – as if it were a crime. Perhaps this comes from growing up in southern California, too many brain cells fried in the bright sunshine. My only defense is that like a surfer waiting for the next wave, I look for signs of hope.

1. Global warming

The first issue I want to address is global warming. Rarely has an issue's profile risen so quickly, along with a widespread sense of urgency and apparent (though perhaps fleeting) commitment to the search for solutions. From Al Gore's movie last year to the Live Earth concert this summer, political, organizational and individual attention to the climate crisis has skyrocketed. Much of the focus is on individual acts of virtue such as changing light bulbs – and there's nothing wrong with that. But policy changes that take on oil and other carbon-producing multinationals – and campaigns to build the power necessary to do so – are also on the table. I believe that unions can no longer avoid the issue. This is too important to leave to the whims of voluntary corporate social responsibility or market-based carbon trading. New opportunities are emerging to join coalitions, to work with other political and social groups in processes that offer unions both legitimacy and spillover into other campaigns.

There are significant obstacles to be overcome: a history of conflict between labor and environmental organizations, conflicting interests, limited union resources, and the overwhelming demands of workplace

representation and new organizing. I believe the possibility exists, however, for a crisis-driven mobilization that many union members will support.

For example, there are now *energy policy coalitions* in which labor plays a central role:

U.S. – Apollo Project, 2003-2007

Key actors: United Steelworkers and Sierra Club, with many other unions, environmental groups and NGOs involved.

Political efforts directed at policies to create good jobs in processes of economic restructuring aimed at reducing carbon emissions.

With progress blocked at the national level under the current administration, Apollo has expanded efforts at state and local levels, with specific goals based on local conditions and alliances: such as mass transit, toxic waste, green building, often with a focus on low-income neighborhoods.

To use another example: **Germany**, much farther along in green politics and environmental technology than the U.S., and with union support:

For example, coalition efforts of the DGB (German Labor Federation) with environmental groups and government agencies to promote policies that create good jobs in construction and related services by *retrofitting buildings* throughout Germany, to reduce carbon emissions.

Two futures, alternative scenarios (Carl Pope of the Sierra Club):

1. Global warming solutions with non-union, low-wage and/or contingent labor – we get renewable energy, mass transit, green building – to save the earth while at the same time increasing economic and social inequality and union marginalization. And some environmentalists would support this, blind to labor and social implications.

2. Global warming solutions with good jobs and wages – mobilization of labor to demand union jobs and to revitalize manufacturing and construction industries – in an expansion of mass transit, clean cars, wind and solar plants and much more. Common solutions for climate change and growing inequality, two of the defining social crises of our era.

I heard Pope's remarks in May of this year at the **North American Labor Assembly on Climate Change**, a remarkable gathering of 350 participants from unions in 20 countries along with a broad range of environmental and related organizations (organized by Cornell's Global Labor Institute in NYC). I was surprised to see the great interest of unions in environmental issues and vice versa, along with a commitment to work together.

Local labor-environmental campaigns, for example:

Los Angeles: Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, a social mobilization aimed at promoting union organizing of port truckers, at the same time linked to broader environmental concerns. Key actors include:

L.A. County Federation of Labor
 Teamsters, Longshoremen and other unions
 SEIU and health care advocacy groups
 National Resources Defense Council and other
 environmental groups

In these and other ways, policies aimed at carbon emissions reduction can become components of labor campaigns at local and regional levels

2. Urban labor campaigns

And this brings up the next area of social mobilization I want to address – the general category of urban labor campaigns. As unions fight for renewed economic and political influence, cities and surrounding metropolitan areas take on new importance as battlegrounds where labor, social and political actors wage common campaigns. For unions, primary goals center on collective bargaining, organizing the unorganized, and union/worker-friendly public policy. For other organizations, the primary emphasis may be on issues of social and environmental justice, economic development, particular community interests. Potential coalition partners are many, including religious, immigrant advocacy, global justice, political, environmental, women's, gay and lesbian, and other community and political organizations – and in some cases employers.

Obstacles vary across regions and countries but include a traditional, union focus at firm, sector and national levels, employer and state counter-mobilization, and conflicting interests among potential coalition partners.

In the United States, for example, the AFL-CIO's "union cities" initiative has encouraged the revitalization of local *central labor councils* (CLCs) – transforming them from dormant backwaters to vibrant centers of union activity (and I experienced first-hand the lifeless dormant version as a delegate to a central labor council in the 1980s):

CLCs, in many cases, act as coalition builders among unions and as a forum for alliances with other social actors – more or less central and active in different cities. For example:

We find important cases of success in Seattle and Los Angeles
But we also find limited effort in New York City and Nashville

Some of the most promising innovations in union strategy involve national campaigns based on urban coalitions:

Hotel Workers Rising, 2006, UNITE HERE, one of the more exciting recent campaigns in the U.S. – across the country, nationally coordinated campaigns, rooted in urban social coalitions, framed as social justice to win coalition partners and public support – with considerable success.

And the same is true on a more long-term basis, city by city, of SEIU's **Justice for Janitors campaigns** – most recent breakthrough in Houston, Texas, in the non-union heartland.

Going **international, on an urban basis**, UNI, the Global Union Federation for service sector unions, has begun a campaign to organize building services [security guards, janitors, maintenance workers) in 40 global cities: an international campaign based on urban coalition building, including large numbers of immigrant and migrant workers]

3. Immigrant rights

Which brings me to a third example of labor-society interaction: Vast legal and so-called illegal immigration in today's global economy presents national and local labor unions with severe challenges. Do immigrants compete with native-born workers for jobs, offering employers a compliant source of cheap labor that undercuts the interests of union members? Or does exploited immigrant labor offer new opportunities for union organizing? In different cases, either or both are true. Also true is the fact that growing numbers of immigrant workers, especially at the low end, present new opportunities for unions to make common cause with immigrant advocacy groups and their allies in religious, community and political organizations, and many more groups oriented toward social justice.

Obstacles are even greater than for other cases considered here. These include union ambivalence, neglect or outright opposition to organizing

immigrant workers. Union members sometimes see immigrant workers as “other,” second-class citizens who don’t belong in their societies or unions, threats to cultural norms, rivals for employment who bring down labor standards. There is often a sense – if not always a reality – that immigrant workers, transient, desperate and fearful of deportation or job loss, are impossible to organize. Most worrisome of all is that the growing presence of immigrant workers, and union efforts to include them, can provoke right-wing backlash in native-born workforces, including union members. [Note the work of Mike Fichter and colleagues.]

The U.S. population, for example, includes an estimated 12 million undocumented residents. After much debate the AFL-CIO changed its official position on immigrant workers as a result of discussions around the year 2000:

Reform perspective: these are workers and the job of unions is not to oppose them but to organize them.

This union policy change was based on experience in numerous occupations where immigrants are prevalent – home care, construction, hotel housekeepers, taxi cab drivers, cleaners, many of them eager for union representation – and willing to take the risks.

Immigrant worker issues have in many cases helped shape urban labor movements, for example:

The spread of worker centers – with and without union support
 Home care legislation and organizing
 Hotel organizing and contract campaigns
 Los Angeles, where the mobilization of Latino voters is closely
 linked to the revitalization of the labor movement

European cases include:

European Migrant Workers Union – an important effort led by IG Bau in Germany, although one that hasn't really gotten off the ground elsewhere in Europe – but such efforts are much needed

London – TELCO (The East London Community Organisation), and **London Citizens**, who campaign actively on behalf of immigrant workers – and push unions to do more [note the work of Jane Holgate and Jane Wills]

These are, to a large extent, battles for economic and political inclusion, including, at the grassroots, civic integration . . .

4. Civic integration

And this is an important research question: the extent to which union coalition efforts do or do not contribute to civic integration, for native-born and immigrant workers alike. As unions engage in coalition campaigns, in all of the above and other areas, are there processes of grassroots

mobilization that help activate or expand worker participation in civil society and politics, in addition to the workplace?

In 2004, for example, the American Political Science Association issued reports of its Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. In summing up the findings, Margaret Weir emphasized the role of labor as a central (but often missing) actor in coalition campaigns in support of policies to reduce inequality and at the same time revitalize democratic participation. As an example, she writes: “. . . in many localities, community organizations that had never participated in transportation politics joined with environmentalists and organized labor to support initiatives that would increase opportunity rather than exacerbate inequality” (Weir 2004, 678).

In coalition-building efforts, unions may contribute to the building of “social justice infrastructures,” based on active networks of social actors, supportive local politics, and new institutions (such as living wage boards, community development organizations and worker centers). Are there observable effects in the extent of worker participation not only inside unions but in other civic activities and in local politics? As labor moves beyond the workplace to engage more with civil society, can we find broader patterns of social mobilization and inclusion?

I would like to think the answer is yes, that working in social coalitions unions can, for example, help integrate or mobilize the excluded, the working poor, the demoralized working and middle classes, from Paris suburbs to American inner cities. Here I think there are more questions than answers.

Making sense of social links

The issues discussed above are cases among many others, including, for example, women's rights campaigns, capital asset strategies, and international alliances with NGOs that target trade agreements, human rights, and more broadly the institutions of global governance.

Labor's move into society will look different across nations, given contrasting political, institutional, industrial relations and social configurations. If comparative evidence from the U.S. is an accurate indicator, labor-society linkages may be more likely to emerge in liberal than coordinated market economies, at least in recent years and in the immediate future. Where labor institutions are still strong, where relations of social partnership still have meaning, unions may forego social coalitions to pursue strategies of institutional revitalization (as IG Metall is now doing

with innovative strategies of member mobilization and recruitment). But even here, we see the growth over the past few years of broad social coalitions to defend social policy.¹

Analysis requires both empirical investigation and causal explanation. The empirical question is: to what extent is labor's engagement with society expanding? One indicator would be the extent of social coalition-based campaigns. The analytical questions are: under what conditions do such coalitions emerge? Under what conditions do they expand and spill over into other campaigns, with the same and other social actors? Separate questions would address relative success as well as the contribution expanded labor-society collaboration might make in strengthening the labor movement.

Some of these questions are addressed in a recent book co-edited by Dan Cornfield and myself, with contributions from a group of colleagues,

¹ Social coalition building, by the way, is not at all the same thing as social partnership, a term that encompasses institutions and processes in which both unions and employers' associations participate as insiders in national economic and labor policy negotiations as well as comprehensive collective bargaining. For reasons that elude me, British unions and academics have followed the lead of Tony Blair and British employers in borrowing this continental European term while stripping its meaning down to firm-level labor-management cooperation. Since I am surrounded and outnumbered by British academics, I want to make clear this is a friendly criticism.

some of whom are here at this meeting.² Evidence indicates the importance of both opportunity and choice. **Opportunity** located especially in institutional openings and social context: when existing *institutions*, for example, as a result of weakness or internal contradictions, provide openings for innovation; when the *social context* offers willing coalition partners. Unions may or may not take advantage of such opportunities, may or may not choose traditional or innovative strategies, depending on leadership and internal organizational processes that are difficult if not impossible to predict.

In comparative urban case studies, for example, we have found evidence that highlights the independent significance of the strategic choices made by labor unions. We find cities where opportunity is rich but unions have failed to capitalize in coalition-based campaigns to build political and economic power (Boston and New York City). We have also found cities where unions have battled to create opportunity, challenging institutions and helping to build or strengthen new coalition partners (Miami).

² *Labor in the New Urban Battlefields: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Beyond the paradigm

I want to conclude with a brief reference to the literature and future research directions. The literature on industrial relations, and more broadly on comparative political economy, has become infused with a “varieties of capitalism” orientation. Already in the literature on democratic corporatism of the 1970s and 1980s, contrasting types of capitalism were identified and defined. The varieties literature has provided a useful framework for understanding comparative capitalism. Much recent work has consisted of what Thomas Kuhn considered “mop-up” operations for the dominant paradigm: accepting the central analysis and filling in the details, making clarifications, debating modifications and qualifications, updating the analysis in line with current developments – one example is an excellent if somewhat redundant recent book called *Beyond Varieties of Capitalism* – co-edited by Bob Hancke, Martin Rhodes and Mark Thatcher.

I do think there are limitations to the literature, to a focus on economic institutions and the incentives facing firms that in fact downplays politics, conflict and social change (no matter how varieties theorists dress it up). There is also a saturation effect that has not only exhausted the framework but squeezes out other important questions and concerns. There is, for

example, a more or less muted tendency to celebrate comparative institutional advantage – even while acknowledging important differences in relative equality. There is a tendency to pass judgment on workers – whether, for example, they and their unions deliver labor peace and wage moderation, which often comes across as judging whether or not workers are “well behaved.” I believe there is to some extent a loss of moral compass.

My plea is to bring society back in, to consider labor as a social actor and workers as more than employees, to examine the extent to which unions and workers do or do not participate actively in coalitions that address broad concerns – from defending social policies to integrating the excluded and saving the earth. Studying labor and society is also a way to renew the emphasis on social justice that underpins trade unionism and, along the way, brought most of us to the study of labor and industrial relations in the first place.

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