Strength in Networks: Employment Rights Organizations and the Problem of Co-Ordination

Charles Heckscher and Françoise Carré

Abstract

In recent decades, alternative organizations and movements — ‘quasi-unions’ — have emerged to fill gaps in the US system of representation caused by union decline. We examine the record of quasi-unions and find that although they have sometimes helped workers who lack other means of representation, they have significant limitations and are unlikely to replace unions as the primary means of representation. But networks, consisting of sets of diverse actors including unions and quasi-unions, are more promising. They have already shown power in specific campaigns, but they have yet to do so for more sustained strategies. By looking at analogous cases, we identify institutional bases for sustained networks, including shared information platforms, behavioural norms, common mission and governance mechanisms that go well beyond what now exists in labour alliances and campaigns. There are substantial resistances to these network institutions because of the history of fragmentation and autonomy among both unions and quasi-unions; yet we also identify positive potential for network formation.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, as unions have declined in the United States, alternative organizations and movements have emerged to fill gaps in the system of representation. These can be roughly sorted into three levels. The foundation is a large number of small organizations and membership associations (‘quasi-unions’). At times, these groups have come together in varying temporary combinations to form campaigns focused on particular issues. At the broadest level have been attempts, so far extremely rudimentary, to form lasting networks that can mobilize in a coherent and strategic manner.

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Quasi-unions represent innovations in organizational form, responding to otherwise unaddressed employment conditions in modern economies. Like others, we begin with quasi-unions to examine whether or not they represent the path for future development of representation structures. The industrial relations field has been looking at innovations in search of ways to revive worker representation in the context of the decline of unions and in the hope that quasi-unions may grow to become viable supplements to or substitutes for mainstream unions (Fine 2006; Heckscher 1988; Wheeler 2002).

As we will see in the next section of this paper, quasi-unions — organizations and membership associations — have achieved some degree of impact, particularly for workers with few, if any, other means to seek redress or obtain voice in their workplaces. They have a distinctive approach and play a key role in domains where unions have not been very active. Nevertheless, they encounter limitations both within and in the political and economic environment that hamper their growth and limit the scope of their impact. In part 3, we will explore the possibility of constructing larger campaigns and sustained networks — co-ordinated sets of organizations, including both traditional unions and quasi-unions — to broaden that impact.

2. Quasi-unions: characteristics and activities

We call ‘quasi-unions’ the broad range of organizations that have emerged to represent the interests of otherwise unrepresented people in their work lives and in their relationships with their employer, seeking to address matters of worker rights and to improve working conditions. These alternative organizations, or quasi-unions, form a very broad and diverse field, which has so far been poorly mapped. The multitude of organizations span a broad range of organizational forms ranging from contingent worker organizations, hiring halls, and immigrant worker centres to underground associations and affinity groups within corporations; campaigns have ranged from support for traditional strike actions to broad community development efforts and even international movements; and networks have formed around centres of interest such as globalization and living wages. Many of these actors are unaware of others whose interests are aligned with theirs, and even those that are aware of each other are often mutually suspicious and slow to collaborate. They have, for the most part, had tenuous relations with the labour movement and have fallen outside the attention of regulatory agencies.

We have constructed a rough map of this landscape, exploring the strategic goals of these forms of action, their major accomplishments and challenges, their trajectory of development, and the main lessons that can be drawn. We weigh these efforts against an ambitious standard: Can they achieve impact on corporations on the scale of that achieved by unions and provide an alternative or major supplement to unions? This question puts the activities of these organizations to a more stringent test than their leaders would put
them at this point, but one that is crucial for thinking about the future of employee representation.

The borders of this category are inescapably fuzzy. First, there are organizations, including many ‘labour market intermediaries’, that seek to bring together employers and employees for mutual gains; our interest is in those whose mission is oriented primarily to the interests of employees, but there are a number of borderline cases. Second, we are focused on organizations that seek to advance the interests of groups rather than individuals; although there are many institutions that represent individuals from general collective categories, we lean towards those that have clearer group focus. We also generally omit organizations that are deliberately ‘pre-union’, conceived by their leaders as on their way to formal unionization; this is characteristic, for instance, of a large set of adjunct faculty associations in higher education.

These organizations, in spite of representing their members and affiliates in workplace matters, are not formal unions. They are generally member associations, but they often lack formal membership mechanisms. They have few ways to collect dues, and are not recognized as bargaining agents by the National Labor Relations Board. They do not seek to become formal unions in the short term, although a few have affiliated with existing national unions as an association.

Sources of Evidence

There have been very few attempts so far to survey the field as a whole, although there are innumerable studies and accounts of particular cases and areas. One of the only systematically studied segments is day labourer organizations, or ‘worker centres’, where Janice Fine has attempted a complete census: she found 135 organizations across the country, with enormous variations in size, structure and longevity, organized in several very loose and often competing federations. Beyond this particular area, we have only a few attempts at broader compilations. There have been a few surveys of employee caucuses in companies (Friedman and Craig 2004; Scully and Segal 2002). Hoyt Wheeler has sampled a broad array of quasi-union efforts (Wheeler 2002). Each of the present authors has also conducted primary fieldwork in such organizations in recent years (Carré et al. 2003; Carré and Joshi 2000; Heckscher 1988; Heckscher 2001).

To this we add our own current small sample, no more systematic, but providing at least a different cut from some other studies. Over the period 1997–2004, we interviewed staff (directors or organizers) of a total of 24 organizations, in two separate projects ran independently by the authors. In some cases, interviews were repeated over two to three years and were part of both projects. The organizations were selected, as is typical for such research, for a combination of reasons: first, because they seemed interesting and important as potential models for change; and second, because we were able to obtain access. Interviews for both projects addressed similar topics: targeted workers; major goals of the organization and particular problems it

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seeks to address; history, details of the approach; successes and obstacles encountered; plans for moving forward and remaining challenges, particularly those involved in replication and expansion. In the time since the initial interviews, we have continued to monitor the activities of these groups and have gathered information on new ones, through web searches, personal contacts and press articles.

A second strand of our research, which provides another angle on the field, tracked the web presence of quasi-unions over time: we identified 30 employee association web sites in 2001, and then searched again in 2006 for those same sites to see what had happened in the interim. This gives something slightly closer to a random sample of the associational universe: we did not select these sites for any reasons other than that they came up in a search on ‘employee association’ and met the basic criteria of having an employee-centred mission.

Characteristics of Quasi-Unions

We will begin with a brief overview of the extremely varied terrain, to give a sense of the range of organizations and to suggest categories that might be useful for future researchers exploring it. Organizations that operate as quasi-unions can be first sorted on the characteristics of the workers on whose behalf they act; second, on the structural features of the organization; third, on the basis of their main activities; and fourth, on their primary levers for action.

1. Kinds of workers organized. While quasi-unions can be found in almost every conceivable condition, they are found particularly frequently in two widely dispersed economic areas: among the poorest and most marginal groups, such as low-wage temporary workers or undocumented immigrants; and among relatively advantaged white-collar workers with technical skills who form the higher end of the ‘contingent’ force. A third category of membership that sometimes cross-cuts this economic division is social identity: many organizations have formed around categories of race, gender, ethnicity and sexual identity.

The first category includes, among others, self-employed day labourers whose services are often hired informally and by the day. The St. Lucas Worker Center in Chicago gathers information on day labour operators and advocates at the local and state level for day labourers. The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) educates and organizes immigrant workers, particularly self-employed day labourers, providing construction and landscaping labour (Day Labourer project); these workers are often hired in early morning ‘street corner’ shape ups. The National Day Labour Organizing Network gathers groups dealing with self-employed day labourers, as well as those employed in corporate hiring halls (wage workers). These organizations have often emerged in areas with large minority representation as well as significant groups of recent immigrants, such as major East Coast and West Coast urban centres.
Second, quasi-unions have sprung up among workers in newer industries with recently recognized specialized skills — for example, IT-related occupations or new media jobs — who are self-employed or have tenuous employment arrangements. Working Today represents many freelancers in IT-driven publishing and other media in New York State (Horowitz 2000). The Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech), an association of IT workers in Washington State, was formed to represent temporary and other workers at Microsoft Corporation and other software companies. In those sectors of the labour market, traditional unions based in known industries and occupations have made limited inroads save for a few exceptions.

The social-identity base is found in a large number of associations of black, Hispanic and women workers. Some of the most active associations in the current period are among gays and lesbians. Many are centred in companies and are given at least informal recognition by management, such as Galaxe, the Xerox gay pride organization. There are also contingent worker groups with an ethnic focus. In our sample, New Labour is a day labourer organization with a base among immigrants from a particular region of Mexico.

It appears from our evidence that there are relatively few social-identity organizations that cross the class divide, especially among organizations with an activist as opposed to a service focus. Ethnicity appears as a unifying force among day labourers and immigrants, and also often among higher-income technical workers, but there seem to be few organizations that combine both dimensions. This would be an important question for future mapping efforts.

2. Organizational forms and governance. Quasi-unions are almost by definition voluntary associations. The most frequent organizational form is highly staff-driven, with a small and dedicated staff and a very loose and shifting membership.

There are a few exceptions to this pattern. In our own sample, New Labour has been extremely systematic in getting members to take leadership roles; paid staff consists of only two full-time and two part-time employees, so delivery of training and connections to employers depends a great deal on active commitment from members.

More often, however, quasi-unions have loose notions of worker affiliation. They often do not require dues payments from members that partake in collective action, although that remains a long-term goal. Many have flexible definitions of affiliation that range from supporters (anyone who signs up for information, contributes, participates) to dues-paying member. For example, WashTech and the Alliance@IBM — the association of current, former (retired, laid off) and temporary workers of IBM that operates primarily through electronic communication means (www.IBMalliance.org) — have a far larger number of supporters who sign up for newsletters than actual dues-paying members.

As far as we can assess, quasi-unions do not run union-type formal elections. Networks of organizations (rather than individuals) are run through steering committees (with majority or consensus decision making) and
general assemblies. Delegates to these committees and assemblies are generally volunteers rather than being selected by formal election processes.

In a few cases, membership associations have affiliated with national unions. WashTech and Alliance@IBM are both locals of the Communications Workers of America, although neither has achieved the status of collective bargaining unit. Affiliation with a national union allows these groups to benefit from organizing support as well as access to some benefit programmes. For the national union, these groups are meant to be a ‘beach head’ to work areas where unions seek to establish themselves.

3. Bases for membership affiliation. The basis for membership affiliation can include employment arrangement, industry occupation, social identity or geography. The first group draws on employees of a company or cluster of companies. Examples include the Baltimore Solidarity Sponsoring Committee worker association, which gathers workers of private subcontractors that provide services to the city and are covered by the city’s living wage ordinance. Similarly, WashTech seeks to represent not only employees of Microsoft and other software companies, but also perma-temps working on extended assignments for Microsoft but payrolled by multiple staffing intermediaries. Perhaps the best-known example of a single employer group is Alliance@IBM.

Affinity groups within corporations, particularly those not recognized by employers, are often based on race-ethnicity, national origin or sexual orientation (Piore 1995; Scully and Segal 2002). Piore (2000) has noted that affinity groups within businesses tend to organize themselves along a template already in currency in US workplaces, which is provided by the ‘diversity’ policy frame. Although a few remain underground within corporations, the vast majority have gained official recognition and allies in higher-level management.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) have spawned work-centred associations, or specific projects seeking to group workers without other means of access to conventional union structures. During the 1990s, the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment and the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN) temp worker projects sought to address the needs of temp workers without other means of advocacy or representation (Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment 1995; McAllister 1995). Their goals were information sharing (about employers, basic rights, etc.), leadership development and advocacy.

4. Primary functions and levers for action. The key divide running through the strategic orientation of quasi-unions is between service and advocacy. The requirements of the two are different: advocacy-oriented organizations must be relatively confrontational and militant, while service-oriented ones focus more pragmatically on demonstrating competency and achieving power through market (e.g. group purchasing of insurance) or other means. Although many quasi-unions seek to combine these, most can be identified rather clearly as emphasizing one orientation over the other.

For some quasi-unions, service is the primary strategy. We have excluded from our definition those that purely provide individual services such as
employment counselling or legal aid; but others see services as a way of strengthening group identity and strength. Working Today views its Portable Benefit Network as contributing to the development and mobilization of the category of ‘independent workers’ that can have viable careers across multiple employers. Others devise strategies in the long tradition of ‘mutual aid’ societies and credit unions. Quasi-unions may, for example, provide health service discount cards (or minimal benefits for glasses as with the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee worker association) to their members.

Other organizations provide services as a short-term approach while organizing is underway and in order to develop loyalty (and eventually membership) among targeted workers. Service provision may include providing or facilitating access to training, providing information about employer and job quality, facilitating access to financing (e.g. through a credit union), or opening a producer co-operative. Conventional unions have also adopted this route with the associational model, which enables interested workers who are not in established bargaining units to get some services (information, credit) as a means to create allegiance and interest in unionization.

We are most interested, however, in the advocacy side — the ability of quasi-unions to develop some form of pressure to change employer policies. The most common means of pressure is political action. Day labourer groups and worker centres recently won the passage of an Illinois law that increases penalties on temporary staffing agencies for short changing pay checks, charging workers for transportation and providing unsafe working conditions (Slife 2005). The Southwest Center for Economic Integrity has gathered partner organizations to advocate (and sometimes win) passage of regulations limiting transportation fees and other activities of the Arizona day labour industry (Carré et al. 2003).

Sometimes, pressure can be applied directly to employers, including those higher up the supply chain, rather than through the political system. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers secured a path-breaking agreement with the fast-food chain Taco Bell for it to pay a higher price for tomatoes it purchases from these workers’ employers (tomato farmers) and ensure the increase be passed onto workers as a raise (Leary 2005). In 2005, the Merrimack Valley Project (MA) exerted public pressure on Gillette Corporation regarding the employment practices of staffing companies that provided workers to its subcontractors (McLaughlin 2005).¹ WashTech reports that enlisting support to exert public pressure on Microsoft Corporation yields behavioural changes it cannot achieve simply through pressure from its own members (Judd 2000–01: 113). A number of organizations of technical workers have developed standards and ‘best-worst’ lists of employers in an attempt to level the playing field up towards better practices.

Legal action can be another effective lever, especially when combined with public advocacy. The well-publicized class action suits brought by ‘dependent self-employed’ workers associated with WashTech compelled Microsoft Corporation to reclassify these workers as employees eligible for some company-sponsored benefits under state law. The National Employment Law Project

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brings cases on behalf of low-wage workers in areas such as enforcing wage and overtime laws, independent contractor classification, and employment discrimination.

Occasionally, quasi-unions enable workers to exert economic power through collective action and united front. This kind of economic power is possible, for example, when the ‘employers’ are a constellation of individuals purchasing services from street corner day labourers. In the late 1990s, the Workplace Project achieved a rise in the base wage for street corner day labour on Long Island, New York, through unity and the withholding of labour (Gordon 2005: 69). CHIRLA has sought to enforce ‘fairness’ rules in hiring practices so that these shape-ups do not end up turning into a ‘race to the bottom’ on the price for day labour services (www.chirla.org; Valenzuela 2003). Other groups have similarly established ‘organized’ day labour sites.

Quasi-unions may involve regulators as parties to collaborate and negotiate with, or exert pressure on, in order to compel more effective enforcement of labour standards such as wage and hours laws and greater scrutiny of the practices of employers engaged in egregious abuses. Regulators may be negotiated with or publicly shamed into providing stronger enforcement. Conversely, they may be enlisted as allies, providers of information to build a case for more enforcement resources.

Whether a constellation of employers in a supply chain or regulators are the target, quasi-unions operate by engaging in visible public pressure and advocacy in situations where their direct power on immediate employers is insufficient. Worker centres gather ‘on the ground’ information about violations and lack of enforcement, and document changes in work settings and industrial organization that render existing mechanisms of monitoring and enforcement ineffective. The Long Island (New York)-based Workplace Project has compelled enforcement of wage laws for landscaping, and other workers, primarily Hispanic immigrants, through public pressure on enforcement agencies (Fine 2006: 172–74; Gordon 2005: 237–60). WashTech formed when the software industry obtained an exemption from the state minimum wage law for its hourly IT workers paid above a certain level (Wilson and Blain 2001: 47).

**Effectiveness: Obstacles to Sustained Growth**

Here we weigh the efforts of quasi-unions against what we have termed an ambitious standard: Can they achieve impact on corporations on the scale of that achieved by unions? Quasi-unions have shown some ability to operate in areas where unions have been absent and to provide important forms of representation to otherwise neglected groups. Nevertheless, as they have developed over more than two decades, very few have managed to break through from the early experimental and local stage to more sustained organization, and none to our knowledge has begun to approach the level of power needed to change the overall economic trend towards increased inequality and insecurity.
On the positive side, quasi-unions have a distinctive approach to worker issues that has led them to act effectively in pockets of the labour market where conventional unions only have a slight presence, if any. They display resourcefulness in the ways they define workplace justice issues and the means they devise to address these. They have established a presence in areas of the labour market where unions have a limited presence — at the bottom of the job market where few labour standards are respected, in settings of multiple and ambiguous employment arrangements, and in mid- and high-level occupations that are comparatively ‘new’ (e.g. IT-related occupations). Unions have little, if any, presence in these settings either because of structural limitations (multi-employer bargaining units are rarely authorized with the exception of a few industries) or because unions themselves have overlooked certain workforces in their organizing goals, or failed to secure representation.

Quasi-unions operate as one of the rare organizational witnesses of abuses and as advocates for the employment rights of very vulnerable workers. As this overview indicates, quasi-unions have, in some settings, and sometimes, been effective in redressing worker abuse and in drawing public attention to particular issues. In effect, they have been active where few others — few enforcement agencies or labour organizations — are present and effective. The community of worker advocates receives information about ‘on the street’ (even underground) employment conditions primarily through the activities of these groups. Fine (2006: 250–52) concludes similarly about the role that worker centres in particular play at the bottom of the labour market: they witness labour violations before regulators or even legal aid lawyers learn of them. Alternatively, quasi-unions can serve as forms of experimentation with collective issue setting and as voice for white-collar workers unfamiliar with labour unions, as has been the case with Microsoft or IBM workers and with affinity groups within corporations (Scully and Segal 2002).

But in terms of broader impact, the picture so far is much less encouraging. Some theorists, including one of the current authors, have suggested that quasi-unions or new social movements might grow into a new model of unionism as industrial unions decline (Heckscher 1988; Piore and Safford 2005). Our evidence suggests that they have not come close to meeting that standard: that, although individual organizations have had significant achievements, they remain very far from attaining enough power to make major changes in employer policies and practices, even within industries or geographies, to say nothing of a national or international scale. Even more significant, those organizations that have won battles have not yet managed to translate those victories into sustained momentum and growth.

The evidence for this is still fragmentary, but it is beginning to accumulate. At the most obvious level, if there was a quasi-union that was reaching anywhere near the power of traditional unions to affect employment relations, we would expect to have heard of it. There have been a few moments of
promise, such as the significant impact of the Black Caucus at Xerox (Deinard and Friedman 1990) or the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), driven by a network of disabilities activists with virtually no union involvement. These and other similar cases, however, have hit plateaus: the Black Caucus becoming regularized as part of Xerox HR policies without inspiring other successful efforts; the ADA being whittled away by the courts while the organizations that had helped pass it fell to feuding with each other rather than continuing united pressure.

We can go a little way beyond this general observation by gathering the fragmentary evidence collected so far on quasi-unions. Fine’s (2006) survey of worker centres concluded that they have sometimes been successful in using publicity to call public attention to the issues of these workers and to alter the terms of policy debates; on the other hand, most remain isolated and financially fragile, with small staffs and budgets. Wheeler’s (2002) sampling of quasi-union efforts finds none that have had major impact — at least by our criterion — but hopes that they can be co-ordinated for a wider reach. The surveys of caucuses within companies have found that they have generally become vehicles for mutual support within existing systems rather than for any kind of challenge to employer policies.2

Thus, one can draw from the existing, very scattered, literature a tentative proposition that quasi-unions have proved viable on small scales relative to most unions and for opening new experimental avenues, but that they have nowhere overcome the obstacles to wider effectiveness and growth. They generally remain small and highly insecure; funding is uncertain; their average lifespan appears to be short. Their effectiveness has primarily been through appeals to public opinion, which has led to some instances of governmental regulation and of voluntary changes in corporate behaviour.

Our own studies converge with this basic conclusion. None of the organizations we studied had achieved anything close to ‘breakthrough’ in the sense that we defined initially, of impacting employment policy in a sustained way in a geography or industry. A few had managed to achieve very focused victories on the basis of legal or political action, but it is significant that in cases we could document, these successes did not lead to major growth. WashTech, an association of Microsoft employees linked to the Communications Workers’ union, can claim partial credit for court decisions that limited the ways in which Microsoft could use temporary employees; the organization has, however, stagnated since that initial campaign. Working Partnerships received considerable publicity for advocacy on behalf of contingent workers and played a role in a successful Living Wage campaign in Silicon Valley, California. However, its association of temporary workers has not taken hold and the organization now plays more of a ‘think tank’ role for the regional Central Labour Council. Those organizations that have had more sustained success, by contrast, have focused almost exclusively on training, job access or benefits. Several of them had essentially focused on job placement: the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership placed 1,500 people, and the Seattle Jobs Initiative placed 3,600, in about the same period from 1995 to 2003. A
A different angle was taken by Working Today, which succeeded in establishing a Portable Benefit Fund with an excellent healthcare package for contingent workers.

Although hard measures are hard to come by, quasi-unions remain small in scope compared to national unions. For example, WashTech reported it had 250 members and about 2,000 people on a news list group (Judd 2000–01: 103); the Workplace Project reported 500 members in our 2004 interviews. Even where numbers are larger, connections are often circumscribed and fluctuating: Working Today reports over 15,000 members, but only members of the health plan have a solid ongoing link; others participate in voluntary activities such as educational sessions or virtual ‘town hall’ meetings (www.freelancersunion.org). Most groups, particularly membership associations, are local and do not gather large numbers of workers. Resource constraints also limit the ability of quasi-unions to sustain public pressure campaigns or other membership mobilization efforts. Save for a handful of exceptions, they are hampered by weak financing, the lack of dues collection mechanisms available to conventional unions, and often depend on fluctuating philanthropic resources and donated time. As far as we have found, only one case has developed a route to financial self-sufficiency other than the traditional one of union dues: Working Today achieved this goal in 2006, after nearly a decade, on the basis of income from its portable benefits network.

In terms of longevity, of the 30 quasi-union web sites we surveyed in 2001, 26 were no longer operating five years later. Those that had disappeared included — to give a sense of the sample — the Northern California Black Employees’ Association, The Business of Women, GLOBE at Centers for Disease Control (Gay and Lesbians), the Asian Pacific American Employee Association, and Hispanic Association of Communications Employees. Of the ones that survived, the only one which sought in any way to be a pressure group affecting employment policy was the gay and lesbian caucus at AT&T, which was officially recognized by the company.

What we see in all these stories and pieces of evidence is the difficulty of growing a powerful, sustained organization. The modal type has been one of dedicated staffs providing valuable services to loose memberships. Occasional dramatic victories through mobilization of public pressure have not led to sustained growth. So far, where quasi-unions have had an impact, it is circumscribed by geography (day labour groups, city living wage ordinance) or the employer (e.g. Microsoft and its staffing vendors). The number of workers affected may be limited as well to a particular neighbourhood or employer. The impact of quasi-unions does include a demonstration effect (setting a ‘floor’ for labour standards), but not one commensurate with the union threat effect of old. Victories take the form of an improvement in one aspect of employment (e.g. a wage floor for day labourers). When compared to the range of work conditions governed by a multi-year collective bargaining agreement obtained from conventional unionization, the scope is narrow.

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3. Networks as actors

The core problem facing quasi-unions is the same one underlying the long-term decline of traditional unions: the inability to mobilize workers in large, disciplined organizations. The roots of this problem run deep. The willingness of workers to commit to large-scale organizations has been declining for many years. The unifying effect of the class divide has dissipated as the workforce has become more differentiated, with increasing percentages of service and professional workers (Bell 1973; Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979; Wright and Martin 1987). The growth of individualistic values and multiple loyalties have diluted the unity of mass organizations (Castells 1997; Hofstede 1983: 63; Leinberger and Tucker 1991; Theriault 2003). Political support for unions has declined throughout the industrial world, from Sweden to Britain to the USA — and unions have always depended for centralized power on governmental recognition and certification (Heckscher 1988: 34–52). Finally, many labour issues can no longer be managed through national governments but require international co-ordination — and if it is difficult to build organizational unity within countries, it is even more challenging to do so across them. For all these reasons, organizations lack the power they once had to balance the strength of employers.

If organizations, whether unions or quasi-unions, are unable to mobilize enough power on their own to impact large-scale labour markets, then can some forms of *networks*, linking multiple organizations together in co-ordinated action, perform better? The labour movement in the USA has historically been based primarily on large and powerful organizations linked rather weakly and loosely in a federation; another possibility for the future would be, in contrast, smaller organizations linked strongly through federative mechanisms.

There are strong theoretical reasons to favour such a model. First, large employers have moved increasingly in this ‘network’ direction over the last few decades: they have as a general trend decentralized their hierarchies and linked the pieces through more collaborative systems of cross-boundary teams organized into ‘value chains’. At the limit we have companies like Li and Fung, Nike, and Cisco, which have very few employees of their own but ‘orchestrate’ large networks of suppliers (Brown *et al.* 2002; Camuffo and Volpato 2002; Cohen and Mallik 1997; Häcki and Lighton 2001: 26–39). One result is that they are far more able than in the past to respond flexibly to traditional union tactics, including strike action, by moving operations and reconfiguring supply chains; in addition, it is much harder to mobilize masses of workers in relation to a single employer, which may be at two or three removes from the company which they identify as theirs.

On the other side of the equation, *movements* have also tended in this ‘networked’ direction: the last few decades have seen a proliferation of movements with varying identity bases, competing with the essentially working-class identity of labour unions. Many of them have taken the form of ‘new
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social movements': deliberately decentralized, highly democratic, focused at least as much on identity development as on social change. This multiplication of cross-cutting identities has diffused the leading role of the labour movement in social change and has made it more difficult to organize large numbers in massive actions (Heckscher and Palmer 1993; Kurtz 2002; Offe 1985; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Zald 1988).

In theory, a collaborative network might respond to both these developments. In combating employers, a network may be more effective than a large organization. The increased flexibility of corporations has strengthened their ability to deal with mass actions, but it has created new vulnerabilities: value chains are tightly integrated and therefore can be effectively disrupted by small actions at critical links. The auto industry has discovered this in recent years when small strikes at suppliers have brought production to a halt across a huge corporation. Unions, however, are normally not well organized to take advantage of this kind of employer vulnerability: critical links or points of employer weakness may lie in different industries or different countries outside the union's formal organizational reach. The problem is to mobilize people and groups who are not part of the union's hierarchy — and this is a network problem.

Network mobilization could help the labour movement extend across political boundaries and connect to the large number of groups that are not unions and do not intend to be, but that can sometimes exert effective pressure for workplace change. Those who have studied networks in various settings have found that their particular strength is the ability to mobilize across diverse groups and to utilize differences in capability and knowledge. Living Wage ordinances could not have been won in over a hundred cities by the labour movement alone, nor by community groups alone: it was the combination that made the movement effective.

But networks also have serious weaknesses, the most evident of which is their tendency to fragment and splinter, and the difficulty of maintaining strategic unity over time. This has been one of the main weaknesses of campaigns. For the most part (we will shortly examine some partial exceptions), they have been single-issue, opportunistic gatherings but have not produced sustained co-ordination.

Campaigns and Beyond: The Infrastructure of Collaborative Action Networks

The potential power of networks is suggested by the growing use of ‘campaigns’. Corporate campaigns, uniting community groups with unions, have been used for about 20 years. More recently, the Living Wage campaign has been successful in passing local ordinances in well over 100 localities. And the current action against Wal-Mart, uniting a very diverse set of constituencies, has created enough pressure to force one of the world’s largest companies to defend itself in public and to consider some changes in policy.

But campaigns are by definition temporary, focused on particular goals. A ‘new actor’ should be something more lasting, capable of taking multiple
types of actions and adjusting to changing circumstances. Thus, behind the campaign, we need to look for a second level; we will reserve the term ‘collaborative network’ for this level, defining it as an enduring set of co-operative relationships. Thus, the question becomes: Could the ‘labour movement’ be structured as a collaborative network capable of generating campaigns in a strategic and persistent manner?

There has not been enough experience and study of employee-centred networks to give much evidence about the conditions for success. But there is now a great deal of knowledge about networks in other arenas, which might help in thinking about the problem:

1. Employers have formed increasingly sophisticated networks. In the hospital supply industry, to take one example, a set of producers and distributors have formed an incorporated entity called ‘GHX’ for the purpose of driving costs out of the supply chain and providing common standards and platforms for business relations; they have been able to unite companies that are often market competitors around shared systems and purposes, and to achieve end-to-end process integration across the industry. The result has been gains in efficiency that have benefited the entire industry and its consumers (Applegate 2006: 387–403). These and similar examples have achieved stability and large-scale effectiveness; if this impact could be duplicated in the social arena, it could be revolutionary.

2. Open-source software has shown an extraordinary capacity to pull volunteers from widely dispersed cultures into sustained goal-oriented efforts that produce very complex and integrated products. This is almost unprecedented in human history: in the past, virtually all sustained collective activity has been organized through bureaucratic hierarchies. But today the Firefox network can go head-to-head with Microsoft and not only survive, but grow.

3. Students of warfare have given us an unexpected look at the potential power of campaign-like actions. Researchers at the RAND corporation, in studying military strategy, have found that in many situations of modern warfare, a network-based ‘swarm’ is more effective than traditional brute-force massing:

Swarming — a seemingly amorphous, but deliberately structured, co-ordinated, and strategic way to strike from all directions, by means of a sustainable pulsing of force and/or fire, close-in as well as from stand-off positions — will work best, and perhaps will only work, if it is designed mainly around the deployment of myriad, small, dispersed, networked manoeuvre units. . . . Swarming cannot work if it is based on traditional mass or manoeuvre formations. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2000: 45)

They go on to note that the technique of swarming has proved useful not only in military battles but also in social struggles; their prime case study is the Zapatista movement in Mexico, which brought together the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) with a transnational
network of sympathetic non-governmental organizations. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2000: 39)

From these and similar arenas we can draw some general lessons about the necessary foundations for successful collaborative networks. It is becoming apparent that effective networks are not loosely structured, spontaneous groupings; they have strong and stable linking mechanisms — far stronger than those of traditional labour federations — that enable them to reach defined goals effectively. Swarming, for example, requires a stable framework of ‘top sight’ that generates and structures swarms, producing reliable ‘pulsing of force’. It is these mechanisms that could make possible the construction of collaborative networks as new actors.

A successful network is not centralized in the normal sense of a hierarchy of command, but neither does it allow complete autonomy. Its essential principle is neither dependence nor independence, but interdependence: the members have to ‘prove their worth’ and gain rights to access to the community by providing value and adopting common standards.

The mechanisms needed for collaborative networks are far stronger than those of existing labour federations:

1. **Shared information platforms.** The most fundamental element is a system by which the members of the network can share information. This requires at a minimum an agreement on the format and nature of information that members will share, and the conditions of its use. Organizations are typically reluctant to open their data to the outside, so a rather difficult process of trust-building is a necessary first step. Today, furthermore, information-sharing requires a common software platform; investment in the software and computer infrastructure can be substantial.

   Finally, information-sharing requires time to input and convert data. This should not be underestimated: again and again, in corporate and open-source cases, it has proved to be a struggle to get people to take the extra time needed to document their activities. Once this system is established, however, it facilitates an enormous range of activities, from short-range co-ordination to long-range planning.

2. **Shared behavioral norms.** A more difficult level is establishing common codes of behaviour. In all collaborative efforts, these norms involve honesty, open discussion, transparency, reciprocity and attention to others’ interests. In different situations these are specified in different ways: open-source projects have expectations of ‘civility’ in online exchanges; corporate value-chains orchestrators insist that members input regular information on their production processes; and so on. Beyond that, core values may differ according to the network: some put much more emphasis on democratic norms of equality, others stress meritocracy. In the open-source world, a great deal of debate has focused, for instance, on whether and when it is acceptable to ‘break away’ from the main stream of activity to build a separate project. Those focused on democratic values argue strongly for it, whereas the more ‘efficiency’-focused argue against it.
Either version can lead to a strong network, but disagreements over this norm can be deeply divisive.

In many networks these norms remain informal, hardly noticed until they are violated; but as networks grow more complex and ambitious, the behaviours are generally made more conscious and formal. The open-source community has faced a long series of challenges to its core norms from ‘outsiders’ who wanted to push commercial interests or who acted with an aggressiveness that undermined trust. Many open-source efforts have therefore spelled out their codes, and have even embodied them in legal documents such as the ‘General Public License’, which governs the distribution of open-source programmes (DeLanda 2001), which they have defended in court against commercial entities that they claim are trying to apply different norms.

3. **Common mission.** Beyond behavioural expectations lies a common sense of the long-term shared goal. For open-source projects this is usually relatively clear, although there may be debates about the scope and nature of the anticipated products. For corporate collaborations, it usually concerns achieving cost reductions or quality improvements. The more developed networks have deliberate processes for debating and creating consensus on the mission, and for modifying it as necessary (Applegate 2006).

In developed systems, the mission becomes the basis for participation rights: those who invest more in furthering the shared objectives get more governance power in the network. The ‘investment’ or contribution may be measured simply in terms of money, or it may be measured by gathering views of fellow members — a formalization of the mechanism of reputation (Heckscher and Adler 2006; Martin 2006).

4. **Governance.** Finally, effective collaborative networks have strong mechanisms of governance, which is to say mechanisms for decision making and enforcement. In developed cases, they typically take the form of overlapping councils and teams with specified roles. These will normally include dispute-resolution mechanisms, although unlike the bureaucratic kind, they encourage the mutual understanding of interests as the first and most important step; they also include reputational mechanisms for tracking and verifying the contribution of members and supplying accurate information on capabilities to other members.

There is also enforcement, which may happen through unorganized ‘flame wars’ around violations of ‘netiquette’ in web projects, but may also take far more structured forms. Even the most democratic open-source systems have increasingly developed ways of expelling people who do not adhere to the behavioural norms, and gateways that test competencies and motivations before allowing members to move closer to the centre of decision making.

All of this is co-ordinated, in these more complex cases, by an actor which has been called the ‘network orchestrator’, which has developed in industries
from clothing to finance to healthcare (Brown et al. 2002; Häcki and Lighton 2001): this is a kind of ‘hub’ with relatively little power or size, but with the credibility to co-ordinate wide ranges of independent players. The orchestrator is a strong integrating institution: far stronger than a ‘bridge builder’, in Rose’s (2000) terminology; far stronger even than an ongoing forum or membership council. It is an independent body with responsibility, delegated by the members, for co-ordination and relationship-building, and it has powers to hold members accountable to agreements.

Obstacles to Sustained Worker-Centred Collaborations

There are significant resistances to moving towards a network model of representation. The industrial labour movement has historically thought primarily in terms of building organizational power — creating disciplined size and scope so as to match up well with large employers. This leads to difficulties in making a mental shift to the interdependence required in network and webs of alliances.

Even from this abbreviated overview of successful systems of network organization, it is clear that they cut deeply into the autonomy of their members. In effect, you cannot belong to a business consortium or an open-source software process without changing your computer systems, giving up a lot of information, investing a lot of time in arguing and consensus-building with others, and making a genuine contribution to shared purposes. This shared infrastructure is what makes possible the creation of new collective value.

Labour leaders have tended to value organizational autonomy and independence very highly and have tended to be wary of entangling alliances. Even within the federation of labour, which is composed of naturally close allies, there has been great difficulty in achieving co-ordination around organizing or other strategic goals. Thomas Buffenbarger, President of the Machinists’ Union, has put it with great clarity in protesting against the centralizing proposals of the coalition:

The AFL-CIO [is] . . . a federation of fifty-seven independent and autonomous unions. . . . We are proud of the battles won, independent in our thoughts and approaches to the battles that must be waged and completely autonomous in deciding what is in the best interests of our own unions. (Buffenbarger 2005)

But if relations among unions are weakly governed, those between unions and other progressive associations have been almost totally lacking in sustained co-ordination. In general, there is a strong divide between the labour movement and ‘new social movement’ groups.

Compelling evidence of this divide emerges from a recent network study of the positioning of unions in the larger web of voluntary associations. Using large membership data sets — the only study we know of that goes beyond anecdotal evidence — the authors find that ‘Unions are more peripheral to American inter-organizational culture than just about any other type of
voluntary organization’ (Cornwell and Harrison 2004: 877). Anecdotal cases can serve to illustrate the problems. One of the original efforts to build larger coalitions to include ‘new social movement’ groups was the Solidarity Day march in Washington in 1981, organized by the AFL-CIO but including central roles for representatives of women’s, civil rights and other groups. There was tremendous enthusiasm at the time about the idea of broadening the movement, and many efforts at building more lasting relationships; these faded out, however, within just a few years. A study of a Jobs with Justice campaign concerning bus routes in Miami a decade ago found a powerful coalition between labour and the Black community against cutbacks in the transit system; but the unity quickly waned and the various parties went their separate ways (Heckscher and Palmer 1993: 300–302). Finally, there are recent efforts around globalization, in which labour and other groups have come together at times but then drifted apart at others. Most notably, labour was a central part of the coalition in the anti-globalization marches in Seattle in 1999, but when the scene moved to Washington a year later, the labour movement held its own separate rally several days before the other activists (Cooper and Phillips 2000).

The reason for this isolation in many cases is what Bruce Nissen characterizes as a tendency of labour leaders to seek ‘vanguard coalitions’ where ‘the labour movement requires coalition partners to simply support labour-defined and labour-led activities’ (Nissen 2004: 72). We heard many similar complaints in interviews with community groups involved with Jobs with Justice in the 1980s (Heckscher and Palmer 1993). Steven Kest, of ACORN, echoes this in describing his experiences:

. . . we have run into a number of problems in building coalitions with labour unions, including:

- Coalitions as one-way streets: Too often union partners are quick to request community support for an organizing drive or a contract campaign, but are unwilling to utilize their power to support a community organization’s goals. . . .
- Race and gender: Not surprisingly, some union leaders are still caught in an older world and are more comfortable dealing with white males — while community organizations like ACORN more often than not are led by African American and Latino women. (Kest 2003: 91–92)

In addition to divides between unions and ‘new groups’, the latter have also not worked particularly well among themselves. Janice Fine, for example, has documented the isolation of actors within the growing movement of immigrant worker centres: although there are some developing coalitions, most worker centres are poorly informed about what others are doing and are resistant to spending time on integrative activities (Fine 2004). The Disabilities movement, after its spectacular success in achieving a major expansion of rights under a conservative administration, went back to its previous more scattered form, with some severe splits; it has been largely unable to sustain pressure or to monitor enforcement of the Act which it worked so hard to pass.
In general, the problem for many ‘new social movement’ groups in engaging in networks is almost the opposite of that of unions: whereas unions value centralized organizational strength, the new groups often value identity-based solidarity that translates into intense small-group bonds. This is the case, for example, for New Labour, built heavily on the sense of community among immigrants from a small area of Mexico, as well as for the immigrant groups that Fine cites, and for many groups based on women’s or ethnic or gay identities; much of the Disabilities movement has fragmented into the same kind of small solidary grouping with strong in-group values (Triano et al. 2003).

In collaborative social movement, the issue of behavioural norms is especially difficult because there is often a divide between those who advocate highly militant and solidary action to those who adopt more co-operative or gradualist approaches. Sometimes, such groups can come together briefly over a particular campaign — the campaign for the ADA, for instance, united Act-Up anarchists with large and stolid mainstream interest groups; but they are unlikely to agree enough to form a longer-lasting network with shared norms.

Thus it is clear that there are many obstacles between campaigns and sustained collaborative networks. Both labour and non-labour groups, although often for different reasons, put heavy emphasis on autonomy and independence, which undermine longer-lasting co-ordination and the necessary give-and-take of collaborative networks.

Prospects

In the last decade, despite these obstacles, there has been significant movement towards labour involvement in campaigns with community and other groups. Jobs with Justice and Justice for Janitors have engaged large numbers of associational and quasi-union actors along with unions, especially around support for low-income workers, Living Wage proposals, and more recently, resistance to the expansion of Wal-Mart.

The vast bulk of these efforts have been single campaigns with a very concrete focus and have not led to sustained networks capable of mounting repeated actions. What is still largely lacking are ongoing orchestrators that can create a larger vision and commitment beyond a series of exchanges. There are some developing examples of at least proto-‘orchestrator’ organizations — that is, independent bodies involving an array of associations that have been given some co-ordinating power by the members. ACORN and the Industrial Areas Foundation (Osterman 2002) have played a key co-ordinating role in a number of cities that approaches the notion of stable network governance. ACORN’s efforts include school reform coalitions such as ‘CC9’ in the South Bronx, and continuing political bodies like the Arkansas State Electoral Coalition (Kest 2003). The Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network and the TIRN are examples of coalitions of up to 50 to 60 community groups, faith-based organizations and tenant groups. Both ran temporary worker projects for fact finding, to inform workers of their rights,
and to lay the groundwork for policy advocacy. The North American Alliance for Fair Employment is a broad federation that includes national networks (members include among others the National Day Labor Organizing Network, ACORN, and Jobs with Justice) as well as individual organizations (CBOs, unions and policy think tanks) all working on temporary and casual employment.

Living Wage campaigns have drawn upon the support of such federations as well as the labour movement. Their organizing staffs manage the participation of organization representatives on their steering committees and other governance structures. The staff time of member organizations has usually been donated towards the federated structure. These at least begin to build entities that can have a weight beyond campaigns, that corporations and governments can negotiate with, and that can begin to advance a more ambitious vision.

4. Conclusion

This line of analysis suggests that what is needed is not an organization but a network — but one that is both stronger and wider than the AFL-CIO, and that can build the demonstrated power of campaigns into long-term, effective representation strategies. This is certainly a daunting prospect. A review of the record of successful networks suggests that it is possible to build coherent actors from very diverse groups, but it requires a sustained and focused course of action including:

1. The creation of an orchestrating body, similar to traditional labour federations, but including a new set of key players — in particular, associations based in ‘new social movement’ identities, and ones from other countries. The membership would be determined by an analysis of the key potential contributors to a social movement that would advance social justice.
2. The development, through extended dialogues, of a vision that unites these players; it would likely involve some but not all of the traditional labour agenda, and would extend to issues that have not been central to unions in the past.
3. Agreement on a set of shared processes and norms that would be a ‘platform’ for constructing co-ordinated campaigns.

There has been a great deal of work and progress in the last decade or so in building campaigns and even multiple campaigns springing from ongoing mutual relationships that produce repeated alliances. Yet, even the most developed of these cases, as far as we are aware, lack the key elements we have sketched above, of shared information systems, disciplined governance around agreed-on standards, and a common vision; and there is no sign of an orchestrator with powers of enforcement to sustain the common norms that make such networks function.

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Overall it appears that other key social institutions, including employers, have gone a great deal further in developing the power of networks as social actors than have the labour movement and its potential allies. However, there has been enough collaboration in the labour-community arena to give some hope that if a focused attempt was made to create a new orchestrating body, it might have a wider impact than any single organization, no matter how large.

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Notes

1. In international production chains, anti-sweatshop campaigns have supported unionization among far-flung subcontractors (Ross 2006).
2. For these references, see the section above, ‘Sources of Evidence’.
3. Of these, three now redirected inquiries to general job sites such as Monster.com.
4. The decline of strikes has been well documented. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2002) data for the US (http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstsp.t01.htm); and for Europe, see Boeri et al. (2001).
5. In this short space we cannot elaborate or justify many of the claims below. Key sources on which we have drawn include:
   For open-source software: DeLanda (2001); Froomkin (2003); Krogha et al. (2003); Lakhani and von Hippel (2003); Mayfield (2005); and Raymond (2002).
   For corporate networks and consortia: Applegate (2006); Brown et al. (2002); Cross et al. (2005); Häcki and Lighton (2001); and Hage and Alter (1997).
6. ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) is one of the oldest and perhaps the largest community action group in the USA, claiming 175,000 member families and 850 neighborhood chapters as of 2006.

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