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Organizing the Organized

Trade Union Renewal, Organizational Change and Worker Activism in Metropolitan America

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Purpose of the book[1]

By all standards, Celeste fit the profile of an exemplary union member. A Mexican-born immigrant in her late thirties, Celeste worked as a commercial office cleaner in a region that I call the Southern Shore. For five years, time after time, Celeste had proven herself a smart, courageous, and reliable union activist. In 2000, only three months after she had gotten her cleaning job, her union local organized a big strike to secure family health insurance for all workers in the Southern Shore. Celeste took the lead and convinced her coworkers to join the strike. Celeste believed in fighting for her rights at the workplace, "union contract in hand," and on the streets "to let contractors, [and] building owners know." Whenever union leaders organized a rally, Celeste would show up and tell her coworkers to come out. Celeste was not satisfied with passing out union flyers or holding signs at union rallies. Celeste also attended every training session, be it on organizing skills or contract enforcement, because that was "the knowledge to get more knowledge."[2]

Moreover, Celeste took to heart officers' call to activists to become "the eyes and ears" of the union at the workplace. During the second half of my fieldwork, several building owners in the Southern Shore had replaced union cleaning companies with nonunion ones. It was not uncommon

1 This book is based on my PhD dissertation (Ariovich 2007). Some parts of this introduction and of the conclusions have previously appeared in Ariovich (2008).

2 Interview with Celeste, commercial activist, Southern Shore, translation from Spanish.

for Southern Shore janitors to be laid off without warning and to have to settle for whatever job was available, at lower wages and without benefits. Celeste had heard rumors that a new company would take over the account at her building. A note left on a manager's desk confirmed Celeste's fears. Soon after discovering the note, Celeste talked to a former supervisor and gathered more details about the new cleaning contractor. With that information, Celeste called her union field representative and her union local initiated negotiations with the new company to keep the union contract in place. Celeste's swift reaction helped to save her own job and those of her coworkers, with acquired seniority, and the same wages and benefits.

Celeste was the type of activist that union officers with an organizing vision wanted to recruit and "develop," as they would say. Officers who identified with the organizing local approach sought to put "organizing the unorganized" at the center of union activity. And they rested their hopes on activists such as Celeste to rebuild labor organizations, organize new workers and new industries, and reverse labor decline. As Lerner (1998: 78–9) put it, the organizing local approach depends on a minority of activists ready to stand up and challenge employers even when the majority of workers prefer to stay home. In his words:

> We should begin by doing more with the most active members. If one per cent of labor's membership, 160,000 people, could be organized into an army of activists ready to risk arrest to support organizing, bargaining and strikes, we should have the potential to bring whole cities to a standstill. ... After all, the auto plants were shut down by a militant minority and the bold actions of relatively small groups with the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements in the U.S. sparked national movements.

It would not be a stretch to include Celeste in that select minority, as close as someone could get to the ideal activist that Lerner and others had in mind when planning organizing campaigns and devising, in ambitious terms, the future of the labor movement. At the local I studied, which I call Local Z, top officers fully embraced the organizing local approach and some workers, like Celeste, seemed willing and able to go along with it.[3]

3 I use fictitious names for the union local, its different sections, the people, the companies, and most of the places mentioned in the study to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

And yet, the more I got to know Celeste, and other activists like her, I began to learn a different story. No doubt, Celeste was a committed activist. No doubt, she was there every time she was called upon, and she worked on the union's behalf even when not called. No doubt, Celeste believed in member mobilization and organizing new workers. However, my conversations with Celeste, from the first time I talked to her at a rally, to my interview with her at her place, over mouth-watering tamales, revealed another dimension. Celeste's understanding of her contribution to the union overlapped with but did not entirely match the officers' vision. Top union officers called for member participation by appealing to the benefits of "building power," union density, market control, and better contracts. Activists like Celeste did not deny the importance of all this, but they also brought up a different vocabulary. They talked about long-term relationships, trust, personal indebtedness, and giving and receiving "help."

Celeste gladly took up the duties and responsibilities that top officers assigned to activists like her. But she grounded her contribution in an informal exchange of "help" or "support" with particular union leaders. Leaders "helped" or "supported" activists by assisting them and their coworkers with workplace problems. Activists and other workers, in turn, "helped" or "supported" leaders by participating in contract, organizing, and political campaigns. In Celeste's words: "And one supports them, and then they will support you. ... They support you when you need them in any problem that you may have at your building." And the other side of the exchange: "We go out to the streets to fight, to protest, to scream with our big signs. And that is to support the union." As I argue throughout the book, this informal exchange was at the heart of the union's mobilizing work, one of the bases upon which union campaigns could succeed or founder. By examining how formal structures depend on informal practices and how organizing campaigns are built upon reciprocity-based relationships, I show what leaders and activists actually do in an organizing local. Moreover, my research provides a new look at union revitalization, by exposing the risks of reform projects that overlook, or worse, threaten to destroy those informal patterns.

My book has three goals. Borrowing the language of Ragin (1994), the first goal has to do with the question "What is this a case of?" Addressing this question is important because it relates to one of the main issues

under discussion in the debate on labor revitalization, namely, what model of unionism should replace the traditional service or business model. The service model is based on a strict delimitation of responsibilities between union leaders and the rank and file. Members' role is mostly restricted to paying dues. The role of the leadership, in turn, is to represent members at the workplace by handling workplace grievances and at the bargaining table by negotiating wages, benefits, and working conditions (Heery et al. 2002, Banks and Metzgar 1989). The business model became dominant with the emergence of a bureaucratized system of industrial relations and the growth of union-controlled systems of social provision. Combined, these two institutional developments turned unions, as Fantasia and Voss (2004: 86) put it, into "massive bureaucratic organizations with huge financial resources, that employed many layers of specialized staff, organized in various subdivisions" (see also Lichtenstein 2002).

Against the backdrop of steep labor decline, scholars and participants have called for a new model of unionism. One of the most discussed alternatives is what is known as the organizing local approach. In this model, union relationships with external actors, internal structures, the use of resources, and members and leaders' contributions are all directed towards the goal of organizing new workers. Defenders of the organizing local approach see it as a viable and, in some cases, the only available option to "build union power," engage union members, and regain unions' economic and social relevance (Lerner 2003a, 2003b). Furthermore, supporters credit leaders of organizing locals with remarkable victories, while other union leaders, using the language of Fiorito (2004), have "resigned themselves to managing decline" (Sherman and Voss 2000, Milkman 2004/2005). Critics, on the other hand, portray the organizing local approach as a strongly top-down vision for the labor movement, one that dismisses union democracy and reduces member involvement to "showing up" at rallies for campaigns designed and orchestrated from above (Eisenscher 1999, Parker and Gruelle 1999). Critics also liken the organizing local approach to a new form of "bread-and-butter" unionism, devoid of any larger social justice, political, or civil rights' aspirations (Aronowitz 2005, Hurd 2004).

In a very general sense, I answered the question "What is this a case of?" at the onset of my research by selecting a best-practices organizing local. However, my research contributes to developing the content beneath the

label by examining more closely the actual role and influence of activists and their relationships with union leaders and the rank and file at large. In doing so, I expose previously unstudied informal processes fundamental to member mobilization, including what I call an "informal economy of favors" (see Ledeneva 1998), linking leaders' assistance with workplace problems to members' support for organizing activities. Equally important, I uncover different orientations towards union activism among different groups of workers, and different meanings of union participation, beyond top officers' calls for building power and organizing the unorganized. These findings enrich the characterization of the organizing local approach and reassess existing evaluations of its merits and pitfalls.

The second goal of my book is to establish the conditions for successful union reform. This goal can be broken down into two different research questions. First, how can union locals overcome strong external and internal inertial pressures? Second, how can reformers strengthen a local's organizing orientation without undermining members' trust in the union?

In 2009, only 12.3 per cent of wage and salary workers in the United States belonged to a union, down from 20.1 per cent in 1983 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Despite precipitous membership decline, reluctance to commit resources to organizing, lack of initiative to encourage member participation, and organizational inertia remain the reality for most American labor unions (Milkman and Voss 2004). It is true that, especially since the late 1980s, some unions have succeeded at reversing a trend of crushing defeats by mounting what scholars call "comprehensive campaigns" (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004, Waldinger et al. 1998). Comprehensive campaigns differ from more traditional forms of collective action—such as workplace strikes, pickets, and demonstrations—in that they exert multiple points of leverage on employers, combining member mobilization, the disruption of employers' business and political relations, and coalition building with community groups and civil rights organizations. Through these comprehensive campaigns, some unions have managed either to organize new members or to forestall employers' attempt to extract concessions at the negotiating table and even do away with collective bargaining altogether (Witt and Wilson 1999, Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999).

Even when able to mount successful campaigns, however, unions may face the challenge of extending their "campaign mode" beyond the campaign itself. This would entail changing internal structures, everyday union work, and internal and external relationships to capitalize on the expanded advantage achieved during the campaign. As Hickey (2004: 18–19) put it: "The key challenge facing PACE and other unions is how to integrate such a comprehensive approach into the union's core activities in order to fully realize the potential of increased bargaining power. ... Such integrated approach would require unions to re-examine existing structures that isolate bargaining from organizing, and comprehensive strategies from traditional practices."

My first question, then, deals with the conditions necessary to transform organizational habits and routines so that the "comprehensive approach" does not remain confined to particular union campaigns. I answer this first question by comparing the outcomes of organizational reform in two different branches of a "best-practices" organizing local, which I call Local Z. In one of these branches, the residential division, changes in the union structure contributed to averting de-unionization and strengthened bargaining power in contract campaigns. However, reforms did not fully change everyday union work. They failed to make member mobilization a permanent feature of union activity and to connect collective bargaining to the local's broader organizing agenda.[4] In contrast, in the other branch, the commercial division, reforms succeeded in expanding the scope and the pace of member mobilization and fully integrating contract negotiations into the local's organizing program. Comparing these two sections clarifies what is needed to counteract the obstacles to union reform. It also illuminates the larger implications of incomplete or unfinished union reform, vis-à-vis incumbents' position within the local.

4 Katz and his associates (2003) showed the importance of integrating organizing activities, collective bargaining, and political action in the case of the Communication Workers of America. Union contracts negotiated in the 1990s included special clauses that facilitated member recruitment, such as the employers' pledge to remain neutral in union organizing drives. In exchange for new contract clauses, the CWA agreed to support the employers' lobbying efforts for regulatory changes at the state level.

The second question deals with the potential disruptions caused by organizational reform in terms of members' trust in the union. Scholars have written profusely about the need for union reform and the obstacles in the road to union revitalization. Weil (2005: 344), for example, contended that one of the major obstacles to union reform is the temporal lag between building "organizational capacity" and increasing the union's "strategic leverage." As he explained, "Lag times can leave union leaders in a politically difficult and sometimes vulnerable position. They must convince their fellow officers, staff, and most importantly, membership to accept change—often internal changes that entail perceived personal and political stakes and interests—for the sake of 'union building.'" Union leaders must do this even when the potential benefits of change in terms of the union's "strategic leverage" are not yet in sight (see also Fletcher and Hurd 2001).

Revitalization studies have only begun to address the potential pitfalls and negative consequences of dramatic organizational change in labor organizations. Some observers and scholars have warned against the risks of merger activity, an all-too-common, top-down strategy to achieve economies of scale, stronger financial capacity, and greater political and bargaining power (Waddington 2006). Local Z, in particular, belongs to an International union that aggressively promotes mergers of union locals, under the conviction that mega-locals with a clear industry and market focus are more effective at increasing union density and contract gains than both small locals and locals with members dispersed in different industries and markets. Crosby (2005) and others strongly criticized such approach because of the costs of consolidation in terms of union democracy and member involvement in decision-making. Other scholars cautioned against dependence on a contentious workplace to keep members involved and against building organizing capacity at the expense of service (Fletcher and Hurd 1999, Jarley 2005).

More research is needed to understand the consequences of union reform on membership trust, especially in organizing locals where members are already engaged in union campaigns. My book contributes to this discussion by comparing the outcomes of organizational change in two different sections of Local Z's commercial division, which I call the Northern Shore and the Southern Shore.

The Northern Shore is a densely populated urban area, comprising a central business district, where commercial office buildings are located close to each other. The Southern Shore is a much larger area, comprising small towns, suburbs, and exurbs. In this area, commercial office buildings tend to be smaller and are dispersed in a larger territory. The union's history and relations with employers were different in each of these regions, and during the time of my fieldwork, different union teams were assigned to each territory. In the Northern Shore, building owners and managers were signatories of the collective bargaining agreement and the union had a comparatively stronger service focus. In the Southern Shore, the union negotiated with cleaning contractors and had a stronger organizing orientation. In addition, the demographics of the workforce varied between the two regions. In both cases, commercial janitors were largely an immigrant population. However, Northern Shore workers were older immigrants, the large majority of them coming from Eastern and Central Europe, especially from Poland. Southern Shore workers were more recent immigrants, most of them from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

In both sections of the commercial division, reforms succeeded in intensifying mobilizing work and strengthening the links between collective bargaining and organizing campaigns. Only in the Northern Shore, however, did organizational change achieve these goals without eroding members' trust in the union. Through this comparison, my research reveals the unintended consequences of union reforms to enhance organizing capacity. Such reforms could be counterproductive if they overlooked members' views of union assistance and undermined reciprocity-based relationships between leaders and members.

The third and final goal of my book is to contribute to the study of the outcomes of organizational change by addressing recurring dilemmas of reform processes. As Seo et al. (2004) pointed out, all processes of planned organizational change expose tensions or contradictions between different facets of organizational life. While such contradictions are inevitable, reform processes tend to amplify them by focusing on certain dimensions of organizational structures and practices, while ignoring others. Often, however, the dimensions overlooked by reformers re-emerge during the implementation of change in the form of unplanned consequences and