

## **Trade unions and urban governance : Evidence from German and U.S. cities**

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Over the past decade, union strategy has been changing. Whether in 'social Europe' or the more 'neoliberal' English-speaking world, declining membership, aggressive employers, and neoliberal politics pose fundamental problems for unions. In the face of these structural conditions, changes in workers' collective agency become ever more important. This paper examines coalition building as one response.

Like most writers on trade unionism, we assume that new union strategies could lead to a renewal of unions' bargaining power, political power and gains in membership. The question, then, is under which conditions unions change their strategies. Institutional arguments stress the 'advantages of backwardness' of US unions, as opposed to the 'institutionally embedded' nature of German unions, and suggests that change is more likely in the former than in the latter (Baccaro et al, 2003). More organization-centric perspectives focus on factors internal to unions, such as the roles of national unions in forcing local-level change, perceptions of the outside environment, and the hiring of staff from outside the union movement (Voss and Sherman, 2000; Katz et al, 2003). Finally, writers on 'community unionism' tend to emphasize local social embeddedness, factors such as the availability of partners in civil society (Locke 1992), perceptions of shared interest (Tattersall 2005), and the individual trade unionists who build these local networks (Doerre et al, 2002). Our central objective is to assess these perspectives in light of a broad data base, and generate a single, empirically grounded argument on the changing patterns of local trade unionism.

Our fundamental assumption is that in Germany and the U.S. the institutions of urban governance matter for unions (Turner and Cornfield, 2007). In times of political exclusion, unions mobilize in order to win more channels of influence; if they gain this insider role, however, mobilization becomes less and less important. As German unions have been frozen out of decision-making (Greer, 2008), we observe an increase a rise of coalition building with a strong element of mass mobilization. Conversely, in the U.S., we observe a renewal of insiderism, as unions stabilize their membership and consolidate their influence in state and local politics. While local politics shape the kinds of coalitions unions build, economic and demographic structures and the national institutions of industrial relations shape the issues at stake in these coalitions.

We ground this argument in a comparative analysis of ten urban case studies, five in the US (Buffalo, Miami, Los Angeles, New York, and Seattle) and five in Germany (Berlin, Chemnitz, Dortmund, Hamburg, and Stuttgart). We examine the roles of unions in a shared set of policy areas – economic development, workforce development, public-sector restructuring, and other mass mobilizations (e.g. the WTO demonstrations in Seattle). Because these cities vary in terms of economic vitality, demographic diversity, and industry structure, they provide a good window into the within-country variation present in the German and US trade union movements. The case studies are based on more than 150 interviews, mainly in 2006-7, with staff at the major unions, the umbrella organizations (DGB and AFL-CIO) and infrastructure bodies (like Jobs with Justice), as well as politicians, coalition partners, employer representatives, and local academics. We augment the case studies using press and statistical sources (mostly publicly available), policy reports, and academic articles.

Our paper will begin with an overview of the union revitalization literature, including the institutional, societal, and organizational factors that seem to matter for coalition building. Second, we will describe the ten cities in terms of local union scenes (density, key unions, roles of umbrella bodies) and patterns of coalition building (issues, extent of mobilization, degree of institutionalization), and consider the relative importance of within- and between-country variation in this sample. Third, we will assess the hypotheses from the literature in light of this variation, based on the observed demographic, economic, institutional and political structures, and local patterns of coalition building. Finally, we will discuss implications for industrial relations theory, including a discussion of which institutions matter and how unions' search for influence could lead to revitalization.

Our proposed paper is for track two, 'voice and representation.' It addresses most of the issues raised in the track's description, including the differences between the English-speaking and continental European trade union traditions, the theories of trade unionism that follow from this distinction, and how in different contexts unions struggle to rebuild their power. Our data contain many examples of organizing, mobilizing and bargaining, including campaigns to represent 'new' groups of workers. Our argument has major implications for the intersection of race, gender and class, and for the changing role of the state. Finally, we innovate theoretically by synthesizing insights from international-comparative strands in urban studies, political economy, and industrial relations; we innovate methodologically by using the city, rather than the nation-state or firm, as the unit of analysis.

### **Works Cited**

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