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## **The possibilities and limitations of collaboration for union power: exploring collaboration with community organisations in Australia, Canada and the United States**

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Unions are challenged by declining organisational power, while union members, and working people more broadly, live in a political and economic environment shaped by the dominant interests of global capital. The term union renewal broadly captures the desire of unions to increase their organisational strength to reshape work, politics and the economy. The term union renewal captures a variety of strategies, most commonly described as social movement unionism. Social movement unionism is a broad and expansive term that refers to union activities such as organising new members, re-engaging in political debates and electoral activity, building stronger relationships between unions (at a local, national or global scale) and building stronger relationships with community organisations. Consequently, in social movement union debates the idea of union collaboration is a central part of rebuilding union power.

While these union activities are proffered as solutions to unions organisational and political challenges, they are rarely used to demonstrate when and how the process of increasing a union's organisational resources or social change will be achieved. For instance, coalitions between unions and community organisations are often assumed to be useful for unions. The practice of collaboration is rarely broken down to assess under what circumstances coalitions are powerful for unions, and what *kinds* of power coalitions can deliver unions.

This paper explores the concept of union collaboration in order to contribute an analytical foundation to this important element of union renewal. It focuses on one type of collaboration, collaboration with community organisations (coalition unionism). It defines coalition unionism, and then presents a threefold framework for understanding when and how union collaboration is powerful for unions. It suggests there are three distinct types of union power that can arise from collaboration - relational power, class-movement power and place-based power. Relational power is when a relationship with another organisation allows for the sharing of organisational resources. Class-movement power develops when a union's working relationship with a community organisation allows it to change internally by broadening the political consciousness of its membership and more

successfully move an agenda that shapes a union's political context. Place-based power emerges when collaboration allows a union to build the capacity of its membership to take self-directed activity, such as increasing the campaigning, coalition building or organising skills of union organisers, delegates and members, in the process of coalition work.

This conceptual framework is explored briefly across three case studies, located in Australia, Canada and the United States. The cases are the Public Education Coalition in Sydney Australia, from 2001-2004; the Ontario Health Coalition in Toronto from 2001-2006 and Chicago's Grassroots Collaborative from 2003-2006. These three case studies are used to provide examples where one of these forms of union collaborative power are dominant, and to show how these different forms of union power are cultivated over time. In Sydney, class-movement power dominates, in Toronto place-based power is most successful, and in Chicago relational power is most prominent. The case studies highlight the unevenness by which union collaboration produces union power, demonstrating both the possibilities and the limitations of collaborative strategies for achieving changes to the political and economic environment and rebuilding unions organisational power.

A central argument in the paper is the difference between understanding union collaboration as a zero sum or positive sum relationship. In much of the literature on organising, in particular, the term 'comprehensive campaigning', implies that collaboration with community organisations is a tactical resource, where community organisations can be brought into union campaigns to influence decision makers and thereby help achieve union outcomes. This interpretation of the potential of collaboration is limited by its zero-sum conception, as it sees coalitions as a resource 'for' unions. In contrast, adapting Walton and McKersie's analysis of union bargaining, collaboration can also be a positive-sum relationship, where the process of sharing power between unions and community organisations increases the power of each of the organisations in the process of achieving change. The difference is that a positive sum relationship, because it is more reciprocal, is more likely to deliver sustainable power for a union into the future, as there is a mutual self-interest in both the community organisation and the union to see the relationship continue. Yet, achieving positive-sum relationships is difficult, and requires particular coalition practices - such as shared decision making processes, an issue based agenda that incorporates the interests and values of each of the organisations present and campaign strategies that allow for member participation and the achievement of coalition goals (such as political victories). Positive sum coalitions may provide the richest form of long term union collaborative power, but they may not always be a strategic objective of unions (given the time pressures and the goals of a particular campaign) or possible in the political climate.

In the conclusion, the paper explores the implications of a theory of union

collaborative power for other forms of collaboration, such as inter -union collaboration (such as in peak councils) and global union collaboration.