

SOCIAL-MOVEMENT UNIONISM AND U.S. LABOR'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Based on Moody's discussion of social-movement unionism (SMU) in *Workers in a Lean World*, in "Global Labor's Uncertain Future," Roukis states that SMU is a "class-based approach" in which unions "organize beyond their organizational bounds and liaison with neighborhood/community organizations" that has been somewhat successful in South Africa and Brazil. In Roukis' treatment of SMU, however, he fails to mention that even though this form of unionism is not the dominant type in the United States, it has been successfully used, and continues to be utilized, as a strategy by a number of U.S. unions. Thus, the purpose of this article is to outline the development of SMU in the United States and to provide several examples of the successful use of SMU among U.S. labor unions. The article concludes with a discussion of how SMU has played a crucial role in living wage campaigns, an issue of extreme importance to low-wage workers, in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s.

George Roukis covers much ground in his timely and well-written article, "Global Labor's Uncertain Future" [1], in discussing how globalization has impacted employment and unionization throughout the world. Specifically, he argues that globalization has undermined unionization and collective bargaining although he acknowledges that workers and global labor possess options in attempting to revive a weakened unionism under a neoliberal worldwide economic restructuring

in the first decade of the 21st century. One particular strategy that Roukis discusses for combating the decline of global labor is social-movement unionism (SMU), which he defines as “a class-based approach” that develops a “new form of labor movement organization that goes beyond the traditional collective bargaining relationship” where unions “organize beyond their organizational bounds and liaison with neighborhood/community organizations” [1, p. 276]. He then states that this approach has experienced “some degree of success in South Africa and Brazil” [1, p. 276]. Furthermore, in Roukis’ treatment of SMU, he points out that this form of unionism has achieved prominence in a number of developing countries where foreign direct investment has been targeted combined with an embryonic industrial working class that must constantly deal with unemployment and economic uncertainty. Although Roukis claims that the Western European labor unions have not been impacted by SMU, there is a variant of SMU that can be found in the unions of “the former Communist countries” [1, p. 276].

What is curious about Roukis’ discussion of SMU is his failure to mention the not insignificant role that it has come to play in the U.S. labor movement. Although it is far from being the dominant strategy in U.S. trade unions at this time, SMU has gained increasing importance in the discussion of what is needed for labor movement revival in the United States. And while SMU’s implementation in the United States has not been unproblematic, real gains have been achieved which indicate the viability of this approach for U.S. trade unionism in the 21st century. Thus, the purpose of this article is to briefly outline the historical development of SMU in the United States and to critically analyze the implementation of this form of unionism in the first decade of the 21st century and beyond.

The term SMU was first formulated by Peter Waterman [2, p. 217], a Dutch labor theorist in the late 1980s, although it was first utilized by Rob Lambert and Eddie Webster where, imbued with both a class and popular community dimensions, it exerted political and academic influence on the South African labor movement [3]. Moody defines how this type of SMU operated in practice:

In social-movement unionism . . . (u)nions take an active lead in the streets, as well as in politics. They ally with other social movements, but provide a class vision and content that make for a stronger glue than that which usually holds electoral or temporary coalitions together. That content is not simply the demands of the movements, but the activation of the mass of union members as the leaders of the charge—those who in most cases have the greatest social and economic leverage in capitalist society. Social-movement unionism implies an active strategic orientation that uses the strongest of society’s oppressed and exploited, generally organized workers, to mobilize those who are less able to sustain self-mobilization: the poor, the unemployed, the casualized workers, the neighborhood organization [4, p. 276].

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM IN THE UNITED STATES

SMU in the United States developed in response to, what was perceived as, the inadequacies of business unionism, defined as unions acting as “businesses” in which these labor organizations provide workers with services such as negotiating collective bargaining agreements and contract administration in exchange for members’ union dues. Under business unionism, according to SMU theorists, beginning in the 1950s, U.S. labor unions no longer were organized for obtaining social justice per se but became elaborate bureaucracies run by union leaders and staff dedicated to providing an increasing array of services for demobilized union members [5].

In spite of business unionism’s inherent weaknesses, a number of factors concealed these structural inadequacies until the early 1980s. During the 1945-1975 era, often viewed as the halcyon days of the U.S. labor movement, due to four features, business unions were able to increase the living standards of their membership. First, overall union density remained fairly high, based on union strength in core manufacturing industries, peaking at 35 percent in 1955 but falling to 25 percent in 1975. Second, through its domination of world markets, the United States’ significant economic growth provided a favorable climate for union influence. Third, in spite of the passage of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley and Landrum-Griffin Acts in 1947 and 1959, respectively, a “New Deal Coalition” offered a reasonably hospitable political environment for unions. And finally, large corporations in heavily unionized industries accepted the unions’ existence as long as they continued to narrowly focus on collective bargaining and contract administration [6, p. 160].

With union density continuing to plummet, however, into the early 1980s due to traditionally unionized industries shuttering plants and outsourcing jobs combined with new industries aggressively combating unionization through the hiring of union-busting consultants, unions were confronted with a changing environment. With worldwide competition increasing, economic growth slowing, and profit rates being squeezed, the United States was no longer the economic powerhouse of the three decades following World War II [6, p. 160]. A changing political climate represented by the firing of 11,000 air traffic controllers by President Reagan in August 1981¹ [7-12] and the fraying of the “New Deal Coalition” lay bare the dynamics of business unions which

¹ The PATCO strike was the first major labor dispute confronted by the Reagan administration in which the federal government successfully crushed a work stoppage among public employees. This strike is often seen as the defining moment in providing private sector employers with the “green light” to take on their unions. For detailed discussions of the PATCO strike, see 7-9. For perspectives on the PATCO strike’s effect on the U.S. trade union movement a quarter of a century later, see 10-12.

had trouble continuing to deliver the economic goods to constituencies. This became apparent at the bargaining table where, in the early 1980s, U.S. unions engaged in concession bargaining² [13-18] and received, in exchange for economic concessions, the implementation of labor-management cooperation programs³ [19-29].

In spite of the problems experienced by business unions in the early 1980s, SMU did not immediately emerge as a widespread alternative for dealing with the crisis. In fact, according to SMU theorists, the U.S. labor movement missed a crucial chance to reinvigorate itself a decade and a half earlier by failing to link up with the social movements of the 1960s and the 1970s [30, pp. 14-17]. From the SMU advocates' viewpoint, unions could have joined forces with anti-Vietnam War, the civil rights, and the women's movements in challenging corporate hegemony in U.S. society. Not only did most unions keep their distance from such movements, but they also often expressed open antagonism to them.

While the AFL-CIO refused to treat the above-mentioned social movements as potential allies, however, the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA), formed in July 1968 by the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) and the Teamsters Union, sought to connect with the social movements at the time in reenergizing the U.S. labor movement. Upon announcing the ALA's formation, UAW President Walter Reuther and Teamsters Union President Frank Fitzsimmons claimed that the new labor combination would endeavor to organize the millions of unorganized U.S. workers and would attempt to create "community unions" to assist poor and unemployed people. Furthermore, the ALA sought to achieve a guaranteed income, national health insurance, and free education for all U.S. citizens. In the spirit of the organization's slogan "to find answers to the urgent problems of our society," the ALA penned position papers on health care and national health insurance, the housing crisis in the United States, pension reinsurance, tax reform, and national security [31, pp. 71, 73].

The SMU component of the ALA's program revolved around the creation of community unions. Viewing labor unions as being unsuitable for helping "the isolated human beings living in poverty" [31, p. 74], the Alliance expected

² The advent of concession bargaining during the early 1980s is probably the first overt crisis of business unionism in U.S. private sector unionism. While concession bargaining was primarily a private sector phenomenon, it did occur in the public sector as well. For pertinent articles on concession bargaining in the private sector, see 13-18. For a relevant article discussing concession bargaining among government employees, see 17.

³ In the industrial relations literature, labor-management cooperation programs, for the most part, have been viewed quite positively for the alleged benefits that they provide. For characteristic articles and books from this viewpoint, see 19-25. Nevertheless, there are articles and books representing a pro-union perspective that are highly critical of union participation in labor-management cooperation programs. For such works, see 26-29.

that community unions would be made up of principally minority (e.g., African-Americans, Latinos, etc.) groups of community residents including welfare recipients, the working poor, the underemployed, and the unemployed. These disenfranchised people themselves would ultimately devise their own objectives and policies, deciding on the significant issues that affect them as community members such as, for example, dealing with “public officials about the breakdown of public services in poor neighborhoods . . . or with slum landlords about exorbitant rents and horrible living conditions, or to attack the core problem of poverty besetting an entire community” [31, pp. 74-75].

Although the Alliance unionized thousands of workers in its Atlanta Union Organizing Offensive from 1969 to 1971, it failed to devote adequate resources to the organization of community unions. With the ALA’s collapse in 1972, SMU as a significant force in the U.S. labor movement did not reemerge until the late 1980s with the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU) “Justice for Janitors” campaigns. Intentionally modeled after the civil rights movement, these initiatives were launched for obtaining representation rights and collective bargaining agreements for a workforce largely made up of immigrants and/or people of color toiling in large office buildings in urban areas [32, 33]. Another union that successfully adopted SMU tactics at the same time included the United Mine Workers in its 1989 strike against Pittston Coal [34, 35].

Other examples of the successful use of SMU by individual unions in the United States during the 1990s include the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees’ (UNITE) establishment of community-based Garment Workers Justice Centers in New York City which helped UNITE construct “ideological and political consciousness” in support of unionization among workers in a community dealing with a decentralized and fragmented industry [36, p. 100]. Sciacchitano discusses the United Electrical Workers’ launching of a campaign in the mid-1990s in Milwaukee which combined shop floor mobilization with organizing among a wide array of community groups, for achieving a first contract for a mostly African-American workforce at Steeltech Manufacturing [37]. And Sherman and Voss discuss how local unions affiliated with the SEIU and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) created community alliances when organizing immigrant workers in Northern California [38].

Finally, other examples of the practice of SMU in the 1990s include a number of central labor councils becoming “union cities” [39, 40], the existence of union-led chapters of Jobs with Justice, and the 1999 “Battle in Seattle” [41]. Perhaps the most successful and wide-ranging demonstration of SMU in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, however, involved the role of unions and/or central labor councils in municipal and state-wide living wage campaigns [42, 43], a social movement connecting labor organizations with community groups, discussed in the following section.

LIVING-WAGE CAMPAIGNS AND SMU IN THE UNITED STATES

The concept of the living wage, derived from calculating the official poverty line for a family of four, is based on the idea that people who have full-time jobs, and their families, should not be required to live in poverty. While the fight over obtaining a living wage dates to the creation of minimum wage laws in the early 20th century, the modern-day living wage movement first emerged in Baltimore in the 1990s after pastors, in an organization called Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, who ran food pantries became aware that many of the people that they served were working yet still impoverished. While unemployment was down and municipal officials argued that local economic development projects would alleviate poverty, the number of working poor continued to grow impelling the local clergy to take action. Affiliated to the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), these pastors embarked on an energetic campaign with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), a public sector union, in encouraging the mayor to resolve this problem [44, pp. 402-403].

Although the city administration responded that it did not have the power to require all employers to increase their wages, it proclaimed that the city's prevailing wage law, which mandated that city construction and service contractors pay higher wages, could be enlarged so that any company with a city service contract would have to abide by the ordinance. The city's decision raised the hourly pay of employees earning the federal minimum wage of \$4.35 in 1994 to \$7.70 over a four-year period, a wage which enabled a family of four to live at the federal poverty threshold. Although only 1,500 employees' wages were actually increased by Baltimore's living-wage statute, the victory was more than symbolic, spurring the initiation of living-wage campaigns in other cities and counties throughout the nation [44, pp. 402-403].

In other cities, religious organizations, community groups, and labor organizations, including the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the Direct Action and Resource Training Center, the SEIU, the HERE, several central labor councils, and the New Party, united with the IAF and AFSCME on living-wage campaigns. These efforts were successful, and during 1996, living-wage ordinances were implemented in New York City, Santa Clara County (California), Milwaukee, and Jersey City, with additional campaigns cropping up in other areas. Los Angeles instituted more comprehensive regulations than those found in other living-wage statutes in 1997, providing workers with benefits. Ten years after the victory in Baltimore, 130 living-wage ordinances could be found throughout

the United States including those in large cities such as Denver, Minneapolis, and St. Paul [44, p. 403; 45, p. 424; 46, pp. 35-36, 219-222].

Unions as organizations have benefited from the passage of living-wage statutes because implementing these ordinances has made it hypothetically easier to unionize low-wage workers. This has occurred because card check or neutrality provisions that city/county contractors or service providers must abide by are often included in the living-wage regulations. Because the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 bars cities or states from requiring companies to recognize these two types of procedures, they can only be incorporated into living-wage statutes if it can be shown that without their presence, work stoppages or industrial conflicts would imperil the city's financial investment. Under a card check provision, employers freely consent to union recognition without a certification vote as long as signed authorization cards stating that workers desire union representation have been collected from a majority of the employees. With a neutrality agreement, employers willingly refrain from trying to dissuade workers from organizing unions through, for example, the holding of captive audience meetings where anti-union propaganda is delivered or the threatening of union organizers with termination [45, p. 425].

Union organizing has been further assisted by living-wage statute sections that forbid the expenditure of public money on anti-union activities. Furthermore, such clauses prohibit employers from firing or disciplining workers who discuss their right to earn a living wage. This second provision can be valuable during union organizing campaigns because workers who mention their right to join a union cannot be removed from their jobs if discussed within the context of their right to be paid a living wage [46, p. 183].

Two examples of successful union organizing efforts linked to living-wage campaigns include the 1,500 municipal employees organized by Communication Workers of America Local 7026 in Tucson and the United Transportation Union Local 23 achieving union recognition and a collective bargaining agreement for 150 van and bus drivers in Santa Cruz (California). Furthermore, living-wage campaigns have aided in organizing employees in other successful unionization drives in Berkeley and San Jose (California), Chicago and Miami-Dade County (Florida) [46, pp. 183-185].

Moreover, besides leading to union formation, living-wage movement participation has helped labor unions advance their political programs, including the extension of labor rights, through establishing labor-community coalitions in cities and communities throughout the United States. For example, these coalitions have assisted in the revival of the Los Angeles labor movement, the formation of a Workers Rights Board in Tucson for furthering industrial justice for nonunion workers, and, in Boston, the creation of close ties between the city's central labor council and ACORN [46, pp. 200-202, 204-205].

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF U.S. SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM

Although the future of U.S. labor remains uncertain due to existing legislation that allows employers to act with impunity during union organizing drives [47], the split between unions affiliated with either the AFL-CIO or the Change to Win Federation [48] combined with the continuing pressure of globalization as discussed in Roukis' article [1], SMU has provided U.S. unions with the needed ammunition so they at least have a fighting chance in an environment that has been increasingly hostile to unions for more than a quarter of a century. As has been presented in this article, numerous examples of the successful implementation of SMU exists, so that such tactics warrant continued inclusion in the arsenal of U.S. labor's weapons.

This is not to imply, however, that utilizing SMU is a panacea for confronting all of the unions' woes in the early 21st century. Certainly, for U.S. labor to have the kind of dramatic influence and power that it exerted 40 to 50 years ago will require a remarkable increase in union density which, of course, is not likely in the immediate future. Nevertheless, U.S. labor unions can use SMU as a way to help reinvigorate a desultory labor movement while actively promoting and working toward the implementation of major policy initiatives, such as the living wage, that resonate with large sections of the public.

While the increase in U.S. union density from 12 percent in 2006 to 12.1 percent in 2007 [49] hardly signals that a stunning turnaround in labor's fortunes are imminent, it is the first time in years that union density in this country has actually increased. In addition, the SEIU, which is perhaps the most active advocate and practitioner of SMU in the United States, has claimed that a major reason for this modest rise in union density in 2007 is due to its organizing efforts and successes attained during that calendar year [50]. Such credentials merit, at the minimum, the continued use and creative development of SMU by U.S. unions already utilizing such an approach. Furthermore, it also calls for unions not currently implementing such a strategy to consider adopting SMU in the years to come.

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