

Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Union Revitalization in the American Labor Movement¹

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This article addresses the question of how social movement organizations are able to break out of bureaucratic conservatism. In-depth interviews with union organizers and other data are used to identify the sources of radical transformation in labor organizations by comparing local unions that have substantially altered their goals and tactics with those that have changed little. This analysis highlights three factors: the occurrence of a political crisis in the local leading to new leadership, the presence of leaders with activist experience outside the labor movement who interpret the decline of labor's power as a mandate to change, and the influence of the international union in favor of innovation. The article concludes by drawing out the theoretical implications of the finding that bureaucratic conservatism can sometimes be overcome in mature social movements.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the American labor movement seemed moribund, as unions represented ever-smaller proportions of the workforce and their political influence dwindled. Long estranged from their radical roots, local unions confined their efforts primarily to enforcing contracts for members on the

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shop floor. Organizing drives, which occurred with decreasing frequency, were conducted according to long-standing routines and rarely involved significant disruption. Overall, organized labor had become more like an institutionalized interest group than a social movement.

In recent years, however, some unions have started to change. They have begun to organize new members, using a wide variety of confrontational tactics, including massive street demonstrations, direct action, worker mobilization, sophisticated corporate campaigns, and circumvention of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election process. These organizing and contract struggles look very different from the routinized contests that have typified labor's approach since the 1950s. In the wake of an unprecedented leadership turnover in 1995, the AFL-CIO, long fabled for its inertia and rigidity, actively supports this aggressive stance.

This revitalization of the American labor movement presents a paradox for social movement scholars. The union movement is an unlikely place to find the use of new disruptive tactics. Unions, after all, have existed for many years and are formal, bureaucratic organizations. Since Michels ([1915] 1962), both movement scholars (Piven and Cloward 1977; Staggengborg 1988; Fischer 1994) and activists (Epstein 1991, pp. 114, 118) have considered these features antithetical to the use of confrontational tactics in the pursuit of radical goals. The labor movement in particular exemplified the entrenched leadership and conservative transformation associated with Michels's iron law of oligarchy. Thus the current revitalization of the movement raises the question of how some organizations have been able to break out of this bureaucratic conservatism.

Here, we analyze this revitalization. Using in-depth interviews with union organizers and staff, as well as secondary data on particular tactics and campaigns, we look closely at the process by which local unions have developed new goals and tactics. We investigate the sources of radical transformation in social movement organizations by comparing local unions that have substantially altered their goals and tactics with those that have changed little. We ask, what is the process by which revitalization occurs? Why have some union locals and not others adopted confrontational goals and tactics? And how can our theoretical understanding of organizational change in social movements be enhanced by analyzing the labor movement?

In what follows, we first review the social movement and organizations literatures, which offer some guidance but have largely neglected the question of the radical transformation of bureaucratic social movement organizations. We then discuss the process of labor movement revitalization in the context of American labor history. After describing the methodology of the study, we present our findings, which suggest that three

conditions are necessary to overcome bureaucratic conservatism in these social movement organizations: political crisis within the local union, an influx of outsiders into the local, and centralized pressure from the international union. Finally, we suggest possibilities for the diffusion of organizational change and conclude by discussing how our findings illuminate the potential for movements to break out of bureaucratic conservatism.

BREAKING OUT OF OLIGARCHY: THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS LITERATURES

Scholars have rarely taken up the question of how social movement organizations *reverse* conservatism in goals and tactics. We address literature in the fields of both social movements and organizations, looking at how sociologists have approached the question of organizational change and highlighting particular studies with implications for our question.

Based largely on his study of European socialist parties, Michels claimed that all organizations have a natural tendency to develop oligarchical leadership and conservative goals, as officials gain power and organizational maintenance becomes their highest priority. Jenkins (1977) notes that this “iron law of oligarchy” thesis contains two major components. First, over time, organizations tend to develop oligarchical leadership, despite formal democratic practices. Increasing numbers of professionalized staff become indispensable to the organization, and a growing distance between staff and members allows leaders to mold the organization in their interests rather than in those of the members. Second, goals and tactics are transformed in a conservative direction as leaders become concerned above all with organizational survival.

Several studies supported one or both of these claims (Selznick 1948; Messinger 1955; Lang and Lang 1961; Schmidt 1973), but the most influential for social movement scholars was Piven and Cloward’s (1977) study of poor people’s movements. Piven and Cloward, especially concerned with disruptive protest, argued that social movements became less contentious once they built formalized organizations, for exactly Michels’s reasons: with organization came leaders who were vulnerable to co-optation and increasingly concerned with organizational maintenance rather than disruption. Piven and Cloward’s highly influential analysis cemented the association between organization and conservative tactics in the minds of many analysts.

Scholars also critiqued elements of the iron law, beginning with its universality (Clemens 1993; Duffhues and Felling 1989). Several researchers disputed the contention that organizations will inherently develop oligarchical leadership structures (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956;

Rothschild-Whitt 1976; Edelstein and Warner 1976). Others challenged the assertion that organizations necessarily become more conservative in goals and tactics over time, suggesting that this happens only under particular conditions (Zald and Ash 1966; Gusfield 1968; Rothschild-Whitt 1976; Gamson 1990; Gamson and Schmeidler 1984; Jenkins 1977, 1985; Schutt 1986; Greenstone 1969). Still others contested the purported association between goals and tactics, arguing that social movement organizations have used radical tactics to achieve conservative goals (Zald and Ash 1966; Gillespie 1983) and that they have pursued radical goals using conservative tactics (Beach 1977).

However, almost all this critical research was devoted to showing how oligarchy or its consequences could be avoided. Rarely did anyone ask whether change is possible once conservative goal transformation has taken place and disruption has been abandoned. A partial exception is Jenkins (1977), who studied the National Council of Churches (NCC), a social service organization that transformed itself into a radical protest group. Jenkins argued that in the NCC, oligarchy permitted professional staff members to change organizational goals in a radical direction. This transformation happened, he claimed, because the clergy who made up the staff had been radicalized in divinity schools, where liberation theology exerted increasing influence. The NCC was expanding at the time and adding staff positions, and this growing, professionalized staff enjoyed relative autonomy from the more conservative membership. Thus, in this case, the capture of the organization by its staff, a condition usually associated with conservative goal transformation, had the opposite effect.

In recent years, most social movement scholars have turned away from organizational analysis and from explicit efforts to confirm or challenge Michels's iron law thesis. Instead, attention has shifted to contentious events analysis as a way to investigate movement origins and effects more historically and comparatively (Tilly 1972, 1982, 1986, 1995; McAdam 1982; Kriesi et al. 1995; Tarrow 1989; Costain 1992; White 1995; Rucht 1998). Along with this focus on events, scholars have come to highlight the importance of external factors like political opportunities rather than internal organizational dynamics when accounting for movement tactics (McAdam 1983; Tilly 1995).

To the extent that contemporary scholars ask at all about social movement organizations, they tend to reinforce Michels's claim that bureaucratized, established organizations are more conservative in goals and tactics, though usually without explicitly engaging the iron law debate. For example, many scholars contrast informal and formal social movement organizations, indicating that only informal organizations have the flexibility to pursue innovative and disruptive tactics (Morris 1981; Staggborg 1988; Whittier 1995; Jenkins and Eckert 1986; Smith 1996, pp.

108–31). Others highlight the formative moments of social movements—when organizations are most likely to be informally organized—and suggest that the inventiveness of the early period is directly tied to the lack of bureaucratic organization (Koopmans 1993; Kriesi et al. 1995, pp. 134–39).

A few recent studies have inquired specifically about changes in existing social movement organizations. Minkoff (1999) suggests, based on data from 870 women's and racial minority groups, that organizational transformations of all types are more likely to occur when political opportunities and resources are expanding, and in older, more professionalized groups. Tarrow (1989) claims that protest cycle dynamics often trigger changes in contending groups, and especially when cycles peak, established organizations can become radicalized as they compete for attention and support (see also Kriesi et al. 1995, chap. 5). Useem and Zald (1987) argue that countermovements frequently spur organizational changes, as happened when the pronuclear lobby they studied responded to anti-nuclear protest (see also Zald and Useem 1987; Staggenborg 1991; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996).

While the return to organizational analysis is a welcome step, these studies emphasize factors that are unlikely to account for our case of organizational transformation. Minkoff's study includes very few cases of organizations becoming more disruptive, which suggests that her conclusions may not apply to the revitalization of the union movement. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s, when revitalization began, political opportunities and resources for the labor movement were contracting, not expanding, as we show below. Moreover, the United States was not experiencing a protest cycle, as Tarrow might lead us to expect. Finally, while employer countermobilization has certainly eroded labor's position, much as early antinuclear protest undermined government support for nuclear power, oppositional activity by employers has been directed against most of the private sector labor movement, and thus cannot explain the differences between transformed and nontransformed local unions.

In general, then, the debate over the iron law in the social movement literature has remained focused on a single and seemingly final trajectory of movement organizations, rather than on the possibility that movements, once they have become oligarchical, will radicalize their goals. Likewise, the recent emphasis on emerging organizations as sources of disruptive tactics does not explain the appearance of such tactics in an established movement characterized by highly institutionalized and relatively inflexible organizations. And the few studies that have begun to investigate organizational transformation highlight the importance of factors that were not present when the labor movement began to change.

The organizations literature is another place one might look for explicit theorizing about the type of organizational transformation currently under way in the American labor movement. Here, too, however, the causal mechanisms underlying radical change in existing organizations have received far less attention than the reasons for conservative transformation, inertia, and the standardization of organizational forms.

As in the social movement field, many early theorists of organizations highlighted internal organizational dynamics in accounting for conservative transformation in the goals, structure, and tactics of organizations. Simon (1957), Blau (1963), and Selznick (1943, 1957) all argued, like Michels, that organizational changes can often be understood as growing out of a natural tendency for operational goals to supplant purposive ones, and that such changes would be in a conservative direction.

In recent years, some organizational theorists have jettisoned the question of conservative transformation altogether, because in their view, organizations are unadaptable (Hannan and Freeman 1984; Singh and Lumsden 1990; Barnett and Carroll 1995). Once founded, organizations are subject to strong inertial pressures; hence, change occurs primarily at the population level, through demographic processes of organizational births and deaths. In the few studies of change done by these scholars, the key issue is usually whether change increases the risk of failure rather than the reasons for change, as we are inquiring about here (Singh, Tucker, and Meinhard 1991; Delacroix and Swaminathan 1991; Amburgey, Kelly, and Barnett 1993).²

New institutionalist organizational theorists, in contrast, see organizations as mutable (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a; Scott 1995). However, researchers in this tradition have focused on identifying the mechanisms by which organizations become more similar over time, rather than on analyzing why organizations might adopt new, not-yet institutionalized forms (DiMaggio and Powell 1991b; see also Zucker 1991). Thus, only rarely do studies within this tradition address organizational transformation.

One such study is Fligstein's (1985, 1991) research on the multidivisional form in large American firms, which examines why existing business organizations sometimes adopt new forms. He discovers that organizational change rarely happens when the organizational field is stable; instead, adoption of the new multidivisional form takes place in the early periods leading up to the establishment of a new organizational field, and when a shock, such as a new federal antitrust policy, is delivered to a

² Organizational ecologists and many social movement scholars thus converge around the idea that change occurs because new organizations are formed rather than because old organizations change.

stable organizational field. When shocks occur, organizational change happens in one of three ways: well-positioned actors in existing organizations offer new interpretations of the shock and use this interpretation to push for a changed strategy within the organization; new firms arise in the organizational field; or, in the later periods, the forces of institutionalization come into play as actors in noninnovative organizations begin to follow the lead of successful innovators. Fligstein's language of "turbulence" and "shocks" suggests that adverse institutional changes are more likely than favorable ones to lead existing organizations to adopt new forms.

In a similar vein, Singh, Tucker, and Meinhard (1991) directly compare the effects of positive and negative environmental shifts on the rate and extent of organizational change. Examining organizational change in voluntary social service organizations in metropolitan Toronto, they find that both expanding and contracting political opportunities spur organizational change, but that contracting opportunities prompt faster and more extensive changes (see also Ikenberry 1989).

In summary, few social movement or organizations scholars attend to the process of change in bureaucratized organizations, nor do they specify the mechanisms of this process. However, the studies we have highlighted indicate two possible causal factors that merit investigation in our case. First, negative environmental shifts—whether produced by contracting political opportunities or regulatory upheaval—seem to spur change in existing organizations. Second, actors who offer new interpretations of organizational goals and strategies also appear to play a central role in organizational change.

In this article, we build on these ideas to develop an explanation for why some American unions have been able to break out of bureaucratic conservatism. We find that in creating change, local innovators do indeed face resistance, as Michels predicted, from both members and staff. Our data reveal that local unions were able to overcome this resistance in order to revitalize only under a special set of conditions. First, some local unions experienced an internal political crisis that fostered the entry of new leadership, either through international union intervention or local elections. Second, these new leaders had activist experience in other social movements, which led them to interpret labor's decline as a mandate to organize and gave them the skills and vision to implement new organizing programs using disruptive tactics. Finally, international unions with leaders committed to organizing in new ways facilitated the entry of these activists into locals and provided locals with the resources and legitimacy to make changes that facilitated the process of organizational transformation.

LABOR MOVEMENT REVITALIZATION

Although it has deep roots in the 19th century, the contemporary labor movement in the United States is generally considered to have originated in the 1930s, when hundreds of thousands of industrial workers joined unions. During this period, union organizers used radical tactics, most famously the sit-down strike, to pursue the radical goals of bringing workers of all skill levels into unions to seek social justice. As many contemporary social movement scholars would predict, in this period inventive tactics and novel organizational forms were associated with emergent organizations: the organizing committees and industrial unions of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The established craft unions, affiliated with the hidebound and conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL), refused to change their organizations to accommodate the needs and desires of industrial workers.

In the postwar period, routine industrial relations procedures came to govern interactions among the state, employers, and both AFL and CIO unions. As this occurred, the labor movement became subject to the processes Michels described: limited leadership turnover, increasingly conservative goals, and correspondingly nonconfrontational tactics. Some commentators see this development as a paradigmatic illustration of the iron law (Piven and Cloward 1977), while others emphasize external constraints, particularly the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which limited unions' tactical possibilities and encouraged purging radicals in unions (Fantasia 1988). Whatever the cause, the labor movement lost much of its oppositional edge, modifying its disruptive tactics and reducing its primary goals to gaining better contracts for members and influencing routine politics through regular channels. The prevailing method of representing members was "business unionism," in which union business agents "serviced" workers, resolving shop-floor and other problems for them.

From about 1950 until the 1980s, unions did organize new members, but with some notable exceptions (particularly public-sector unions), most labor organizations focused on expanding their existing memberships through conventional tactics. These included organizing "hot shops" (firms where workers are enthusiastic about unionizing because of an immediate workplace grievance); focusing primarily on economic issues, especially wages and benefits; conducting top-down campaigns from union headquarters, with minimal participation by bargaining-unit members; reaching out to workers through gate leafleting, letters, and similar kinds of nonpersonal contact; and dropping campaigns that did not develop quickly enough (Green and Tilly 1987; Perry 1987; Bronfenbrenner 1993). Recognition was usually gained through the process established by the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board).

These organizing strategies were often successful in the period between the 1950s and the 1970s, when the climate was relatively favorable to unions. However, beginning in the mid-1970s and accelerating after President Reagan broke the air traffic controllers strike in 1981, corporate leaders stopped playing by the rules. Employers began aggressively to oppose new organizing and refused to concede to union demands in strikes. They began to contest and delay NLRB elections, fire union activists, hire antiunion consulting firms on a regular basis, and stall in negotiating first contracts (Goldfield 1987; Fantasia 1988; Peterson, Lee, and Finnegan 1992; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Friedman et al. 1994). They also began to resist union demands by threatening to shut down or relocate operations. The traditional tactics of organizing were feeble against the onslaught of corporate opposition. And without employer cooperation, state regulations governing labor relations were revealed to be extremely ineffective; the NLRB was slow to investigate claims of legal violations, and penalties for breaking the law were weak.

Other economic changes also contributed to union decline, including the transition to services from manufacturing, the relocation of industrial production to less developed countries or to nonunion regions of the United States, increasing global competition, and corporate consolidation (Freeman 1985; Troy 1990; Boswell and Stevis 1997; Western 1997). Union organizing efforts shrank significantly in this period; while 1.5% of the private sector workforce was organized through NLRB elections in 1950, only .5% was organized in 1970, only .25% in 1980, and only .1% in 1985 (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, p. 5). As a result, unions' share of the workforce dropped from a high of 37% in 1946 (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, p. 2) to less than 14% today, with 9.5% in the private sector (Greenhouse 1999).

In the last several years, however, some unions have begun fighting back. They have begun to pursue new members, developing a strategic repertoire of increasingly aggressive and disruptive methods to counteract virulent employer opposition. They are focusing on workers who have traditionally been excluded from organizing efforts, such as women, minorities, and immigrants. In addition to organizing more workers and mobilizing the existing membership, the goals of this revitalized movement include broader social justice ends. Thus some unions have become increasingly involved in struggles for civil rights, immigrant rights, and economic justice for nonmembers. Since the election of a pro-organizing slate of officers in 1995, the AFL-CIO has actively supported these changes.

The revitalized repertoire comprises tactics used in the heyday of the CIO as well as more recent innovations. These include actively mobilizing workers to confront their employers; focusing on issues such as dignity

and fairness in addition to material concerns; using “corporate campaigns,” which involve interfering in the employer’s relations with lenders, clients, shareholders, and subsidiaries; strategically targeting industries and workplaces to be organized; staging frequent direct actions; pressuring public officials to influence local employers; allying with community and religious groups; using the media to disseminate the union’s message; and circumventing the NLRB election process to demand “card-check recognition,” in which the union is recognized when it has collected 50% plus one of union authorization cards.³ These strategies make up a repertoire of tactics and are often used together in “comprehensive campaigns.” Organizers stress the need to use multiple tactics simultaneously, because it is never clear from one case to another which will prove most effective. Hence, rather than the introduction of a single new tactic into the movement, there is a gradual adoption of a range of tactics and a strategic way of thinking that is focused on challenging the employer’s advantage and preventing employers from conducting “business as usual.”⁴

Researchers have found these tactics to be successful, especially when used together (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1994) found that union tactics accounted for more variation in the outcomes of NLRB representation elections than any other factor, thus suggesting that unions’ approaches have significant consequences for the possibility of gaining members.⁵ More important, unions that innovate in general and in terms of organizing in particular are more successful in

³ The standard procedure under the National Labor Relations Act is that unions submit to the NLRB cards signed by at least 30% of workers saying that they want union representation, at which point the NLRB schedules an election. Unions now consider this process biased against them, largely because of long delays between filing and conducting the election, which are frequently prolonged by employers using technical challenges to the proposed bargaining unit or the managerial status of some workers. This means both that significant worker turnover can occur and that the company has more time to intimidate the workers, to whom it enjoys unrestricted access.

⁴ For a more comprehensive description of these tactics, see Labor Research Review (1991, 1991/92, 1993), Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1994, 1998), Grabelsky and Hurd (1994), Brecher and Costello (1990), Johnston (1994), AFL-CIO (1985), Green and Tilly (1987), Perry (1987), and Howley (1990).

⁵ In particular, the use of an “aggressive rank-and-file intensive campaign” (including worker participation through committee structures, house calls, and the use of rank-and-file volunteers; solidarity actions; highlighting issues such as dignity and justice; and creating community-labor coalitions) was associated with win rates 10–30 percentage points higher than those of campaigns that did not employ these tactics. When used together, these tactics were associated with a 67% win rate, compared to only a 38% win rate in campaigns using fewer than five tactics (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998).

recruiting members—including formerly excluded minority and gender groups—than unions that do not (Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 1995; Sherman and Voss 2000).

Significant organizational changes in local unions have accompanied this radicalization of goals and tactics. The new organizing campaigns require resources. Unions need full-time researchers to find company vulnerabilities for corporate campaigns and to locate strategic organizing targets. Organizing departments, complete with full-time staff and directors, are necessary for many of the intensive rank-and-file techniques associated with worker mobilization. Bilingual organizers are key in sectors with many immigrant workers. Thus, unions that adopt the new tactical repertoire must devote more resources to organizing; consequently, they have fewer left over for servicing current members. The shift to organizing, therefore, has signified a decreased role for business agents and field representatives.

This shift has also transformed the role of current union members, promoting new levels of commitment and participation (Fletcher and Hurd 1999). First, they have been asked to allocate resources to aggressive organizing programs. They are also encouraged to do more of the hard work of organizing, including identifying potential organizing targets, visiting unorganized workers in their homes, and engaging in civil disobedience. Second, the shift of resources away from servicing has led innovative unions to train members to resolve their own problems on the shop floor. For instance, some locals have begun to teach members to handle grievances by enlisting the aid of a shop steward rather than a field representative. They may also encourage members to initiate solidarity actions, such as circulating petitions or collectively approaching management, in order to confront problems in the shop. This approach contrasts with long-standing custom in business unionism, in which union staff took responsibility for resolving grievances and work site problems.

Thus in some ways the labor movement has come to resemble more closely its predecessor of the 1930s. But now, deeply institutionalized, bureaucratic organizations, rather than new, emergent unions, form the core of the movement. As we have seen, these changes fly in the face of conventional theorizing about social movements, which indicates that once institutionalized, movements remain conservative. So we ask, first, how has this revitalization—the radicalization of goals and tactics—been able to occur?

Furthermore, union revitalization, while increasingly widespread, has not by any means come to characterize all unions. Many local and international unions still do not pursue significant organizing of new members. Of those that do, most remain wedded to old tactics or use new tactics in a piecemeal fashion (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998), rather

than adopting the entire repertoire described here. Even in the few international unions that have fully endorsed the new approach to organizing, many locals continue to rely on old tactics or eschew new organizing altogether. Hence, the second major question of this inquiry asks, why have some local unions taken on a social movement cast while others have remained conservative?

RESEARCH DESIGN

In the American labor movement, which has a federated structure, local unions have a great deal of autonomy from international unions.⁶ They decide on matters ranging from the number of officers and how they are selected to the frequency of union meetings, to if and when to conduct organizing campaigns.⁷ Because local leaders and staff usually decide whether to innovate and implement new organizing tactics, variation in our dependent variable occurs at the local level. Yet very little recent research features in-depth comparative analysis of particular locals; most investigators choose as the unit of analysis either organizing campaigns (Bronfenbrenner 1993) or the international union (Delaney, Jarley, and Fiorito 1996). Therefore, we took local unions as our unit of analysis. Our research strategy was to study both locals that have been revitalized and those that have not, so we could discover through comparison what differentiates more and less transformed locals.

Furthermore, we decided that a comparative qualitative approach would best illuminate the mechanisms of the process of revitalization. Most recent studies of organizational change and innovation have been quantitative (Minkoff 1999; Delaney et al. 1996; Bronfenbrenner 1993; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1994, 1998; Fiorito et al. 1995; Fligstein 1985; Singh et al. 1991). Although statistical methods allow researchers to make broad claims substantiated by large numbers of cases, the lack of detail about individual cases often obscures an understanding of how

⁶ As a rule, local unions undertake the day-to-day servicing and representation of members, while international unions with which locals are affiliated supervise broad national-level planning, institutional political activities such as endorsements and lobbying, and coordination of the union with the AFL-CIO. Local unions pay a percentage of their dues income to the international and in return receive resources and support. Local unions are also usually responsible for collective bargaining. The locals in our sample are typical in terms of this relationship. (For discussions of the relationship between international unions and their member locals, see Freeman and Medoff [1984, pp. 34–37] and Yates [1998, chap. 3].)

⁷ Especially in the past decade or so, international unions have sometimes undertaken their own organizing campaigns, either working through existing locals or running campaigns in places where local affiliates do not exist. However, these campaigns occur with much less frequency than those primarily conducted by local unions.

these processes actually work. Qualitative work on the labor movement has the opposite weakness: it tends to focus on descriptions of single case studies (see Brecher and Costello 1990; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Mort 1998; Milkman 2000) that provide rich detail but lack comparative leverage and explanatory power. Hence, we chose to rely primarily on open-ended interviews and careful comparison of several cases in the belief that the resulting data would better reveal the mechanisms of transformation.

We began by consulting with labor leaders and labor scholars in Northern California to find out which international unions active in the region had affiliated locals doing significant amounts of organizing. We started with international unions because we did not want to choose locals based on prior knowledge that they were revitalized or not, as this would constitute sampling on the dependent variable; but we did want to choose a sample in which locals were “at risk” of being revitalized. Our informants identified three international unions that met our criteria: SEIU (Service Employees International Union), HERE (Hotel and Restaurant Employees), and the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers). We then focused on the local affiliates of these international unions. This approach had the advantage of allowing us to compare locals both within and among internationals, so that we could better distinguish the features common to revitalized locals. Our design also reduced some potentially confounding variation: because all our internationals organize in the same sector of the economy and in the same region of the country, industry and regional variation cannot account for the differences we observed between more and less innovative locals.

We conducted interviews of approximately two hours with union staffers and organizers in almost all the major Northern California locals affiliated with SEIU, HERE, and the UFCW, a total of 14 locals. We conducted 29 interviews in all—23 of them with organizers and staff members. We also interviewed six people affiliated with other labor movement institutions (including one local labor council, the AFL-CIO, two building trades unions, and a labor law firm). We conducted the interviews in 1996–97 and then did follow-up telephone interviews during late 1997 and early 1998. We focused on the current situation in the local at the time of the interview, as well as on the local’s history. We also obtained extensive NLRB data on organizing campaigns conducted by the locals we studied in the period 1985–95. In addition, we reviewed the local and labor press, as well as international and local union publications, for information on organizing drives.

Measuring revitalization was a challenge, because the definitions used by scholars and activists are often vague, limited, or prescriptive. It is sometimes characterized as social movement unionism by which authors

mean elements as diverse as rank-and-file participation in union affairs (Turner 1999, p. 4); militant, disruptive, creative unionism; or unionism that takes into account workplace issues related to other social and political struggles, such as those for comparable worth and appropriate neighborhood development (Johnston 1994). Here we are specifically concerned with how social movements break out of conservatism in goals and tactics. Thus, we defined “revitalized” locals as those that had shifted away from servicing current union members to organizing the unorganized and that used unconventional disruptive tactics in these organizing campaigns.

Gauging the shift in goals from servicing to organizing was also difficult. Most union leaders espoused organizing and claimed to consider it a goal, but their practice did not necessarily match their rhetoric. Thus we measured the shift from servicing to organizing by examining the extent to which each local had developed a comprehensive program for organizing the unorganized,⁸ had implemented organizing campaigns, and had made organizational changes to direct resources to organizing. The most straightforward measure in this regard—the percentage of local resources devoted to organizing—turned out to be unreliable.⁹ Our criteria then became the ratio of organizing to servicing staff (so that there was at least one organizer for every two field representatives) full-time researchers on staff, bilingual organizers on staff, formal educational programs in the local to persuade members about the need for new organizing, programs to train members to do some of the work in organizing new members, programs to teach current members how to handle the tasks involved in resolving shop-floor grievances, and the overcoming of resistance to change among the local’s staff (see table 1).

In terms of tactical revitalization, we measured the extent to which locals had used labor’s new tactical repertoire in their organizing campaigns, including non-NLRB recognition, strategic targeting, corporate campaigns, mobilization of workers being organized, disruptive direct action, and community alliances (see table 2). In general, then, locals that had an articulated organizing program, had made corresponding organ-

⁸ Organizers who articulated a comprehensive program demonstrated that they understood the basic elements of strategic organizing campaigns, including the necessary organizational shifts and tactical approaches. Some organizers claimed to be doing organizing but were clearly unfamiliar with the elements of the strategic model.

⁹ This was because the amount locals are spending on organizing is currently highly politicized in the labor movement. International unions and the AFL-CIO are pressuring locals to spend more on organizing, and locals compute the figures differently, based on whatever method suggests that many resources are being devoted to organizing. Moreover, even with the best of intentions, it can be a difficult figure to calculate, especially for smaller locals that combine the job of organizer and field representative.

TABLE 1
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Locals	Organizer:		Researchers		Member Education*	Member Training (External)*	Member Education (Internal)*	Overcome Staff Resistance	Articulated Program†
	Representative 1:2 or More	on Staff Full-Time	Bilingual Organizers	Full-Time					
Full:									
HERE A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (1989)
HERE B	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (1994)
SEIU F	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (1989)
SEIU G	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (1992)
SEIU H	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (1994)
Partial:									
SEIU J	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (1996)
HERE E	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y (1997)
SEIU K	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y (1997)
SEIU L	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y (1997)
UFCW X ...	N	N	N	N	N	Y‡	N	N	Y (1996)
UFCW Y ...	N	N	Y	N	N	Y‡	N	N	Y (1995)
UFCW Z ...	N	N	N	N	N	Y‡	N	N	N
HERE D ...	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
HERE C	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N

* We define formal educational efforts as systematic attempts to educate members about the need for new organizing, such as membership conferences or educational workshops.

† The articulated program variable measures whether respondents described a comprehensive, strategic model of organizing that was supported by the local's staff, including the following elements: the need for strategic planning of campaigns, the need to shift resources to these campaigns, and familiarity with the tactical possibilities of the campaigns and the resources these would entail. Dates refer to the year the program was put in place.

‡ The UFCW locals all used members participating in the Special Projects Union Representative (SPUR) program, in which they were taken off their jobs to help with organizing campaigns. This effort was funded primarily by the UFCW international.

TABLE 2
UNION LOCALS AND NEW TACTICS USED

Locals	Confrontational Non-NLRB*	Strategic Targeting [†]	Corporate Campaign [‡]	Mobilization of Workers Being Organized	Disruptive Direct Action [§]	Sustained Community Alliances
Full:						
HERE A	Y	2	2	Y	2	Y
HERE B	Y	2	2	Y	2	Y
SEIU F	Y	2	2	Y	2	Y
SEIU G	Y	2	2	Y	2	Y
SEIU H	Y	2	2	Y	2	Y
Partial:						
SEIU J	N	2	1	Y	0	Y
HERE E	Y	1	1	Y	1	N
SEIU K	N	1	0	Y	0	Y
SEIU L	N	1	0	N	0	Y
UFCW X ...	Y	0	0	Y	1	N
UFCW Y ...	N	1	0	N	1	Y
UFCW Z ...	N	1	2	N	0	Y
HERE D ...	N	1	0	N	0	N
HERE C	N	0	0	N	0	N

* By "confrontational non-NLRB," we mean the local's refusal to go to an NLRB election against the wishes of the employer, rather than a top-down agreement for a card check.

† By "strategic targeting," we mean that the local has both targeted an industry and chosen strategic employers to organize within the industry. Locals that have done both are rated "2," while locals that have done one or done both to a lesser extent or inconsistently are rated "1."

‡ The range of possible corporate campaign tactics includes pressure on the employer's parent or subsidiary companies, clients, lenders, and stockholders; interference with development opportunities; and pressure on state officials in their capacity as regulators or clients. Locals that used several of these tactics are rated "2," while those that used only one or two are rated "1."

§ The range of disruptive direct action tactics includes civil disobedience, large demonstrations, arrest actions, and regular picketing. Locals that have used all four are rated "2," while locals that have used some or used them infrequently are rated "1."

izational shifts, and had used all the tactics in labor's new tactical repertoire were identified as fully revitalized locals. Locals that had used only a few of the new tactics and had made fewer organizational changes were identified as partially revitalized locals.¹⁰

FINDINGS

Fully and Partially Revitalized Locals

Five of the 14 locals were fully revitalized. They include HERE locals A and B and SEIU locals F, G, and H.¹¹ These locals had all established major organizing programs, beginning between 1989 and 1994. Organizers understood the strategic organizing model, articulated it clearly, and had used it more than once. Locals had made significant organizational changes in order to be able to pursue aggressive organizing. They reported establishing organizing departments, including full-time researchers and sizeable staffs of full-time bilingual organizers. These locals also had instituted new programs to train current union members to take on some of the tasks involved in organizing and to handle some of their own problems on the shop floor (see table 1). As a result of these shifts, they had all been able to carry out significant organizing involving strategic targeting, worker mobilization, non-NLRB recognition, civil disobedience, public pressure, and community alliances (see table 2).

Nine of the 14 locals were partially revitalized. They include HERE locals C, D, and E, UFCW locals X, Y, and Z, and SEIU locals J, K, and L. All the locals in this group reported an increased emphasis on organizing new workers, beginning between 1994 and 1997. All had launched more organizing campaigns than they had previously, and all had experimented tactically. However, none of the locals in this group had initiated and carried out a disruptive, comprehensive organizing campaign. Nor had they made the organizational shifts necessary to put their rhetorical commitment to organizing into practice. They had smaller organizing departments than the fully revitalized locals and smaller ratios of organizing to servicing staff. Several locals in this group lacked bilingual organizing staff even when most of their potential organizing targets had immigrant workforces. Few of these locals hired researchers. For the

¹⁰ Due to the sense of pressure the locals in our sample felt to organize, none of them acknowledged not innovating at all, and we are thus reluctant to classify them as totally unrevitalized. However, it was clear in talking to organizers that some were much more committed to and experienced in using new tactics than others.

¹¹ To protect the confidentiality of our informants, we have identified them by pseudonyms, and the locals are identified by letters rather than by their actual numbers. In a few cases, quotations are attributed to anonymous interviewees to further ensure confidentiality.

most part, these locals had made few efforts to mobilize their members in support of organizing, either in terms of helping with membership drives or in resolving more of their own grievances. The few that trained shop stewards had much less developed programs than those of the more innovative locals. In terms of tactics, these locals had adopted a few of the new techniques and combined these with more traditional strategies. Few had attempted to avoid the NLRB process or use corporate campaigns; some failed to involve workers in campaigns; and several eschewed disruptive direct action.

It is important to note that the partially revitalized locals were a more heterogeneous group than the fully revitalized locals. Among the partially revitalized locals we found a broad range of transformation; a few locals seemed well on their way to becoming fully revitalized, while others had implemented only a very few tactical and organizational changes. SEIU locals J, K, and L and HERE Local E had used more of labor's new tactical repertoire, and they had also recently made several organizational changes. The difference between these locals and the fully revitalized locals may be mostly a matter of timing, as these partially transformed locals had begun the process of change later than the fully transformed locals (see the section on "Future Possibilities for Overcoming Oligarchy," below). The other partially revitalized locals, in contrast, had made few organizational changes and used fewer new tactics; moreover, their organizers were not comfortable with or knowledgeable about many of the elements of a strategic model.

In looking at these two groups, we noticed that these locals were not differentiated on the basis of their experience of membership decline. While three of the fully revitalized locals had lost significant numbers of members in the preceding decade or so, the other two had not. Some of the partially revitalized locals had also lost large numbers of members, while others had not. Nor did experiences of employer opposition differentiate the partially from the fully revitalized locals. Therefore the explanations suggested by the literature that economic crisis (which arises from membership decline) or countermobilization lead to innovation fail to explain the differences among these locals. As we will discuss below, however, the fully and partially revitalized locals were differentiated by the interpretations their leaders offered of actual or potential membership decline.

The Process of Change: Overcoming Member and Staff Resistance

In order to comprehend how transformation occurs, it is important to understand why members and staff of the organization resist change. We asked our informants about resistance to change and how they dealt with

this resistance. Informants in both types of locals indicated that the traditional servicing model was convenient to both members and union staff and that both groups resisted change. They described changing “the culture of the union” as the most important hurdle to transforming the priorities and practices of the local. Fully revitalized locals made more attempts to change and were more successful than partially revitalized locals.

One organizer in a fully revitalized local called member resistance to becoming more active on and off the shop floor the local’s “single biggest problem” in implementing the shift to organizing. Revitalization requires directly challenging the old mentality of servicing, in which members pay dues in exchange for a union staff that acts like “an insurance agent,” as one organizer put it, by processing grievances and taking care of members’ problems for them. As another organizer who had worked with both fully and partially revitalized locals said, “Part of it is just the orientation that the members have. They have this culture that ‘we pay our dues, the local union hires representation staff, and therefore they take care of my needs. And therefore they file grievances for me.’ It’s . . . a third-party mentality. It’s ‘the union office will deal with work site problems for me,’ as opposed to, ‘we’re the union here and we oughta be able to work out our problems directly with the supervisor’” (Rosa: SEIU, Local H). One organizer described member resistance this way:

There’s also a lot of pressure from the membership to do things the old way. They don’t want to get involved, in large part, they don’t want to have to take responsibility; they’d much rather have someone that comes in and takes care of their problems for them. And if that’s their experience, and that’s how they’re used to having things done, if someone new comes in and says, “No, you have to do it. You pay your dues, yeah, but you have to stand up to the boss, that’s not my job,” their initial reaction is “Geez, service has just gone down the hill. Now we have a union rep that has no backbone or that’s a wimp or that won’t stand up for us or take care of my problems. What do I pay my dues for?” So it’s not just laziness or complacency or conservatism on the part of the union staff. There is a real resistance that you have to fight through. (Mike: HERE, Local B)

Staff resistance is another major obstacle to implementing organizational change, largely because staff tasks are redefined as the shift is made to organizing. An AFL-CIO organizing leader called local staff “the major cause of resistance to institutional change” (George: AFL-CIO). As Michels predicted, longtime staff members fear losing power, or even losing their jobs. They also resist having to perform unfamiliar and daunting tasks, as organizing means working harder and being more confrontational than they are accustomed to as business agents. As one organizing director of a fully revitalized local said about her staff:

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For most field reps, it scares them 'cause it means they have to give up a little power. . . . I've had comments from local staff [who] say, "Well, if we train our shop stewards to be able to process grievances, what are we gonna do?" . . . It means working differently. It also means . . . longer hours, 'cause to build up an internal structure at a work site, that's a lot of one on ones [meetings with workers]. You've really gotta know what your unit is like and know who the leaders are. And it's also doing a fight. Taking on the boss, where you may have kind of a decent relationship with the boss, right? So I think it's a real challenge. (Rosa: SEIU, Local H)

An informant in a partially revitalized local explicitly invoked oligarchical reasoning for staff resistance:

In these small locals, you get elected to this job, and it's every three years, and after a while you don't feel like going back and tending bar anymore. Well, you start bringing in real sharp, young people [the stewards]. And [the officers] say, "wait a minute, they might want my job." So I think that's one of the reasons it's kind of slow to change some of this stuff. In the past it's been very difficult to bring young people along without making people nervous that they're going to lose their jobs over it because it's not like a tenure situation. (Peter: HERE, Local C)

Another organizer also saw oligarchy as promoting resistance to change, particularly in terms of increasing members' participation: he said, "Once you start to move people into activity, they're going to want to know a little more about the union, right? This could be a little bit problematic to your control" (Phil: SEIU, Local F).

Other organizers pointed out the rewards union staff gained from resolving people's problems for them. The following comments were typical:

There's also kind of a natural resistance from people who are doing the field staff kind of stuff. They want to help people. They want to do for people. It's a lot easier to take care of someone's problem than it is to train them how to take care of their own problem. (Josh: SEIU, Local J)

The reps get a lot out of doing grievances, a lot of personal worth. When you're knocking on doors in new organizing and you don't see anybody for two days, you begin to wonder what you're doing, and there's a lot of inherent ego things in business unionism. . . . It's pretty easy to get into, "Oh, I'm competent doing grievances." (Mark: HERE, Local B)

Clearly both members and staff had become attached to the servicing model and had difficulty understanding the need for change. The fully revitalized locals approached this resistance primarily through major educational efforts, including membership conventions and training, to demonstrate to members the importance of organizing to their own contracts

and standard of living. These efforts included the active participation of the members in role plays and small group discussions. They involved communicating to members the idea that the labor movement is facing a crisis and that without augmenting the membership and the shop-floor strength of local unions, they will cease to exist. In cases when the local itself was in decline, leaders illustrated the need for change with local examples; when it was not, educators spoke of the decline of the movement as a whole and the eventual effects of that decline on the members themselves. As one organizer put it:

My experience has been that we [have to] have the discussions with the rank-and-file leadership, like the executive board, give them the political framework. "Here is the labor movement in the United States. And here is what we represent. And here are 100 million people who ain't got a union, folks, and we have to organize them in order to maintain the standards that we've been able to get. And it's in your best interests to take a look at those 100 million people and get 'em into unions so that we don't lose our standards." It's just kind of giving them that political framework. . . . For the most part, [members] view power as the union being successful in filing grievances and negotiating good contracts. And that's one part of it. But then I ask folks, "What's the power within your department? Do you have power in your department? Does the boss deal with your chief shop steward directly? And does your chief shop steward deal directly with the supervisor?" Then I get a blank stare, 'cause that's not what happens. So it's having that discussion. (Rosa: SEIU, Local H)

These efforts have largely been successful in the fully revitalized locals. In some cases, members of these locals have defined their self-interest as new organizing and prioritized that over traditional concerns such as increasing their own wages or benefits, or augmenting their strike fund. In 1996, for instance, HERE Local A members voted overwhelmingly to redirect the \$2 each member paid every month for a strike fund into an organizing fund, despite their recent experience of a major strike. In HERE Local B, workers at one restaurant chain temporarily gave up their employer's contribution to the pension fund in exchange for his guarantee of neutrality in organizing drives at his future restaurants. At the same local's membership convention in 1997, members signed pledges to spend at least two hours a month participating in union activities outside their own workplaces.

The fully revitalized locals have dealt with staff resistance much as they have dealt with member resistance: education and retraining. As one organizer described it:

There's definitely resistance from reps here who don't understand what organizing is, who think it's gonna be so much harder—it's new, so they're freaked out by it. [In] all staff meetings, let's talk about the fears. Let's get

people trained—and the answer has been not to fire people . . . but [to] get people the training to make sure they feel comfortable with it, and to explain why we have to do it. If you work for the union, you work for the union. You aren't a grievance handler; you have to help build power, and that takes many different forms. (Steve: SEIU, Local G)

However, when retraining has not worked, resistant staff in some of the fully revitalized locals have been let go or encouraged to quit. Significantly, though, these locals have not faced as much staff resistance as have partially revitalized locals because they have experienced more leadership turnover of a particular kind, which we discuss below.

Partially revitalized locals, in contrast, had made fewer systematic efforts to counter member and staff resistance. Except for Local J, these locals did not have fully functioning member or staff education programs. Nor had they brought in new organizers to replace intransigent business agents. The organizers we interviewed in these locals were often in the minority in their commitment to organizing, and they lacked the expertise and the institutional support to implement strategies for changing organizational culture. As an organizer in one partially revitalized local expressed:

In reality, [the amount of resources devoted to organizing] is so low it's almost embarrassing. . . . We're lucky if we're doing three [percent]. But then again three years ago, five years ago, there was nothing. . . . I mean even though [the local's president] professes an interest in organizing, and he actually does have more of an interest in organizing than his predecessor, it's still not something to go into the red because of. That's something, if that's gonna make us go into the red we're not gonna do it. Even though if I was president, we would be in the red to organize. (Anonymous)

Another local staff member said of getting organizers on board, "I don't see any way to [bring in new staff] unless somebody dies, or quits, or something" (Peter: HERE, Local C).

In addition to problems of explicit staff and member resistance, these organizers described deeply entrenched cultural and practical obstacles to organizing. For example, one organizer noted,

We plan to activate our stewards and get them to be doing more stuff, but I don't see them handling grievances. That is not our philosophy. I mean, it is mine. . . . I've been pushing it for years, but the predominant feeling at least in California locals [of this union] is that business agents handle grievances, not the members. . . . So the stewards that we have, their job is pretty much to disseminate information and maybe observe if there's contract violations, and so on. (Bob: UFCW, Local Y)

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This informant and another UFCW organizer also saw contract provisions as an obstacle to increasing member participation, as contract language fails to protect stewards and does not give them the right to handle grievances, which makes them reluctant to become active on the shop floor.

Other informants in the partially revitalized locals cited lack of time and resources as a barrier to change:

You just can't do it automatically. We don't have the money to just go out and hire three people and say, let's go organize. So we are trying to get the situation where everybody would say, okay, two days a week you'll do nothing but organizing. So if you got a grievance, handle it Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or something like that. And we've still got a problem that we've got to collect about 20% of the dues by hand because we don't have checkoffs in these small houses. So you're running around, and people don't pay their dues, and it just is a lot of time that you've got to do it. . . . It's been difficult to just draw a line, say, "you can't do anything two days a week except organize," because you've got these grievances come up seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and you can't tell a guy, "well, I can't talk to you for three days because it's my organizing day," so you can't really schedule that. . . . You've got city council meetings and things that you've got to attend, or unemployment hearings, or workmen's comp problems. I mean you're sort of at the mercy of somebody else to try and squeeze this stuff in. (Peter: HERE, Local C)

This local is much like any other local, in that they believe in organizing, but it's just so hard to put the resources in. And so I think they've always wanted to do it but not really been able to bite the bullet and make it happen. I mean I know that the [half-time] organizer who was on staff before me, even though he was [only] a half-time rep, spent most of his time doing rep work. So, he was able to run only like one campaign in a couple of years. (Donna: SEIU, Local K)

Organizers in fully revitalized locals did not identify such entrenched cultural obstacles, largely because they had already resolved these problems. Because leaders in these locals were committed to changing to organize, they had overcome institutional impediments and had surmounted resistance to transformation. They had changed the culture of the union. Organizers in partially revitalized locals lacked knowledge and institutional power to make these shifts. What explains the difference, then, between these two types of locals?

CAUSES OF TRANSFORMATION: POLITICAL CRISIS, OUTSIDE ACTIVISTS, AND CENTRALIZED PRESSURE

Our data show that three factors in conjunction distinguish the fully revitalized locals from the others: the experience of an internal political

TABLE 3
FACTORS EXPLAINING FULL REVITALIZATION

LOCALS	EXPLANATORY FACTORS		
	Political Crisis within Local	Leaders and Staff with Experience in Other Move-ments before Revitalization	Sustained IU Intervention during Revitalization
Full:			
HERE A	Y	Y	Y
HERE B	Y	Y	Y
SEIU F	Y	Y	Y
SEIU G	Y	Y	Y*
SEIU H	Y	Y	Y
Partial:			
SEIU J	N	Y	Y
HERE E	N	N	Y
SEIU K	N	N	Y
SEIU L	N	N	Y
UFCW X ...	N	N	N
UFCW Y ...	N	N	N
UFCW Z ...	N	N	N
HERE D ...	Y	N	Y
HERE C	N	N	Y†

* As noted in the text, Local G's innovation arose in response to conflict with the International in the wake of the trusteeship.

† We have coded this variable "Y" because at the time of the interview the HERE IU was attempting to foster local organizing by sending IU organizers to run a campaign out of this local. Their focus on organizing had some impact on the local respondent's rhetoric about organizing, but the local clearly had not made its own organizing a priority. The IU organizers worked out of a different office, and eventually the campaign was dropped and the organizers were relocated.

crisis, which facilitated the entrance of new leaders into the local, either through international union intervention or local elections; the presence in the local of staff with social movement experience outside the labor movement; and support from the international union. Any one of these factors alone was not enough to spur full revitalization; only in combination do they explain why fully revitalized locals both had staff committed to making changes and were successful in making those changes, while others did not (see table 3).

Political Crisis

First, fully revitalized locals had all experienced political crises, ranging from disastrous strikes to mismanagement of the local. These crises were important primarily because they resulted in a change in leadership. Some-

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times locals were temporarily taken over by the international union (placed under “trusteeship”), while in other cases, electoral shake-ups occurred.

As one organizer described the process prior to the trusteeship: “What had happened . . . was a lot of concession bargaining and general chaos, things just not being together, having no administrative systems, you know, contracts lapsing for not being reopened. . . . One [problem] was mismanagement of the union, cronyism, you know, different stuff like that” (Phil: SEIU, Local F).

Another organizer described how a series of strike defeats meant that a new slate of elected leaders committed to organizing came into power:

In 1984, there was rather a disastrous turn, in that we had a strike in the restaurants and clubs, which the union lost. . . . And it really demonstrated a lot of other organizational problems in the union. . . . [Before that] organizing existed in a vacuum, primarily. So, that kind of non-broader-organizing mentality came home to roost in 1984 [in the strike], which the union lost, and in the worst case, in certain restaurants and private clubs, the union not only lost the strike, they broke the union. So out of that, in 1985 there were elections for leadership of the union, and [new people] became the elected leadership of the local. And . . . the important thing was [the new president] understood organizing. Not just organizing in the nonunion sense, but organizing for union power. (Paul: HERE, Local A)

Similar political upheaval occurred in Local B: “[The challenging president] had been brought on staff with the old group and was really just sort of discouraged and put off by how they did things. How they didn’t do things, basically. So she ran a campaign against the current leadership at that time and was successful. And then asked the international to come in and assist in rebuilding the local” (Mike: HERE, Local B).

The partially revitalized locals had not experienced the same kinds of political turmoil. None of the informants in this group described major political crises leading to innovative leadership. Only one of the partially revitalized locals was placed under trusteeship, and in this case, the trustee was not interested in new organizing programs using disruptive tactics. And when electoral turnover occurred in these locals, new leaders were not committed to organizing.

Individual Innovators and Outside Experience

The political crisis, then, facilitated the presence of new leaders in the local. And these were not just any new leaders—they were people with a particular interpretation of the situation of the movement: that it re-

quired organizing in order to survive. These individuals had the knowledge, vision, and sense of urgency required to use confrontational strategies and take organizational chances. One AFL-CIO organizing department leader suggested, "I think that it's people who have a vision and who are willing to take political risks. . . . They were individuals who were in authority, who were willing to take a chance, and most other union leaders haven't been" (George: AFL-CIO).

We found that these individuals understood and supported alternative models largely because they had worked in other social movements. In all the locals we identified as full revitalizers, at least half the organizing staff had been hired from outside the rank and file, and almost all arrived with prior experience in other movements.¹² Many leaders over 40 had had experience in community or welfare rights organizing or the United Farm Workers (UFW).¹³ Younger informants (in their twenties and early thirties) had also participated in community organizing or in student activism, particularly in Central American solidarity groups and anti-apartheid struggles on college campuses. Thus there are two types of experience, related to age: the organizers who came out of 1960s and 1970s organizing and political activism and those who were trained in campus activism and identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s.

Informants from all fully revitalized locals saw outside activism as an important force for change. One HERE organizer, when asked what differentiated unions that had innovated fully from those that had not, replied:

I would say a big part of it is a lot of activists from the sixties. . . . Similar to John Lewis saying, "let's bring in the Communists 'cause they know how to organize" . . . I think SEIU realized that let's bring in these activists who were involved in the Civil Rights movement, the antiwar movement . . . some sort of political organization, some sort of socialist organization, even, who are actively committed to building the union movement, and have some new ideas about how to do that, and will use the strategies developed in the Civil Rights movement, and the welfare rights organizations, the women's rights movement, all these different organizations, and get them plugged in and involved. . . . And where unions have done that, there's been more militancy. (Mike: HERE, Local B)

¹² Major figures in the SEIU and HERE international unions also came out of nonlabor activism. John Wilhelm, now the president of HERE, was involved in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); the architect of the Justice for Janitors strategy, Steven Lerner, worked originally for the UFW (see n. 13, below); Andy Stern, the current SEIU president, was active in the student movement of the 1960s.

¹³ While the UFW is, of course, a labor organization, it was never committed to service unionism and always used more disruptive tactics and empowerment strategies than the more institutionalized industrial and service unions.

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Another local organizer echoed this comment, when asked what had driven changes within SEIU: “I would say that a lot of the people that are now in leadership positions within, let’s say, the international, within different locals, I think a lot of people were kind of steeped in the struggles of the sixties, you know, in terms of civil rights, the women’s movement, probably the movement against the war in Vietnam, the fight against racism, all that stuff, so I think a lot of today’s activists, they’re leading the locals and also in leadership positions in the international” (Phil: SEIU, Local F).

These experiences contributed in several ways to these individuals’ developing and embracing a revitalized vision of the labor movement. First, the experience gave them a broader perspective on social injustice and helped them see beyond the universe of unionized workers, thus leading them to consider organizing crucial to the movement’s survival. One international staff member described the worldview of people from outside the movement:

[They] don’t have a world vision that everything’s okay. We haven’t been encapsulated in the rather safe union world, we’ve been out in the rest of the completely nonunionized world. And bringing in people I think with that kind of vision and energy has really driven some of our [growth]. . . . [For example, one organizer] is really driven to organize, and it’s not because he was a bellman or a dishwasher somewhere, he just got a certain world-view of poverty and power, and he worked for [a community organizing group], I mean, he has not been out talking to unionized workers! He’s out talking to people on the threshold of total disaster. So his world vision is really different than a UFCW retail clerk investing in his vacation home for 15 years. . . . And that’s how he came into this and said “We gotta organize, man. I like what unions have, I’ve never had it, I’ve been talking to people that don’t have anything.” (Pamela: HERE, International Union)

As one AFL-CIO leader pointed out:

The leaders that I can think of have an ideological commitment, not ideological like, “I have some sectarian left ideology,” but they have a fanatical belief in building power for working people and also that organizing is the way to do it, and they have it in their guts, and it’s what drives them. It’s what drove them to become leaders of their unions. It wasn’t like careerism, and it wasn’t so they could preside over something. It’s because they wanted to organize and build real power. . . . I just think people are doing it from a political-moral belief as opposed to they got into the labor movement and they advanced. (George: AFL-CIO)

Second, these organizers were less caught up in traditional models of unionism and were familiar with alternative models of mobilization. They were not accustomed to the servicing model prevalent in the labor move-

ment; rather, they saw organizing people as the way to build union power. One organizer described the worker-centered approach to organizing he and several colleagues implemented at HERE Local A: “We didn’t know any different. We all came out of the Farmworkers [with] a lot of experience. . . . So the idea of, like, ‘if you’re gonna win, you’re gonna involve workers’ . . . we never thought there was any other way to do it” (Paul: HERE, Local A).

Third, these activities gave organizers the skills they need to mobilize workers. One HERE organizer described how he learned to build committees when he worked in community organizing: “Yeah, that’s where I learned to build committees, and what a committee does and how it functions. . . . It really came from that training . . . you have to have committees because you don’t have money. You can’t pay staff. . . . So getting people to do it themselves. Also, it’s the philosophy of empowering people. That comes more from the community organizing than the labor movement, unfortunately” (Mark: HERE, Local B). Another organizer described a similar dynamic: “So [community organizing] was an experience that was very formative. . . . Just getting exposure to role-playing, raps, door-knocking, going door to door, trying to agitate people around issues, identifying people who had some leadership, pushing people to do things, you know, all the sort of skills that you need in union organizing are very similar in community organizing” (Mike: HERE, Local B). An SEIU organizer saw herself as learning particular skills from community activism: “When I did Filipino community work . . . [I got] a lot of training in terms of . . . political analysis. And [another organizer] taught me a lot in terms of how to pull together big events, ‘cause we organized these festivals where 500 people would come. And then we organized a West Coast-wide convention of Filipino activists, so I learned good skills there” (Rosa: SEIU, Local H).

Fourth, union staff said that outside experience had influenced how they thought about tactics. One organizer said that because there was “less to lose” in community organizing, “there was more creativity, more pushing the limits,” which she and others imported into their union organizing (Brenda: SEIU, Local G). One labor lawyer renowned for using creative tactics attributed his understanding of the need for nonroutine approaches to his experience in the antiwar movement:

The entire labor movement was like that, it followed proper channels. Just exactly what we learned during the Vietnam war does not work. That the proper channels are laid down to defuse energy that’s directed at the ruling class, not to impair that class’s interests. And that’s one of the ways that working in the antiwar movement was so helpful to me, because I realized as a result of the experiences there that reason and proper channels are

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only for defusing energy, not for channeling it. And you have to act outside those structures if you intend to get anything done. (Oliver)

Speaking specifically of the use of corporate campaign tactics, which target employers' corporate structure and particular corporate leaders, in the pioneering J. P. Stevens organizing campaign during the 1970s and 1980s, he said:

I can't minimize the influence of the Vietnam War on [the corporate campaign]. One of the things that we did during the antiwar struggle was to start understanding how corporations were making a huge amount of money off the war. . . . Most of the major U.S. corporations were making money on the war. . . . And that was a part of the war that the teach-ins were all about. The teach-ins weren't just to tell about the atrocities being committed, but to explain the economics behind the war. So then of course we started thinking about things like that. And remember that the Berrigans were very big on these invasions that they did, the pig's blood invasions. And they didn't just go to the headquarters, they would go to the directors too. So they were doing the same type of corporate structure analysis. (Oliver)

Finally, organizers described more tangible benefits to outside activism in terms of making alliances and bringing new kinds of resources into the local. An SEIU organizer said that outside activists were important "just in terms of building community ties" (Rosa: SEIU, Local H). One HERE organizer described staff participation in other movements as "totally crucial. Absolutely crucial. Because you bring that with you. The union completely benefits by having people that work with it that have their own base, their own community, and that have their own networks. Because if you run the kind of program that we're running, those networks need to be tapped into" (Michelle: HERE, Local B).

In contrast, the partially revitalized locals hired few organizers from outside the labor movement, or even from outside the local. As a consequence, leaders in these locals did not interpret their situation as requiring a shift to organizing. Instead, in the face of employer attacks, they decided to try to protect the members they still represented. Respondents from two UFCW locals, despite having lost almost all their power in the retail sector, still spoke of "not having to worry about market share" because they had simply decided to think of themselves as representing only grocery workers. One leader of a HERE partially revitalized local described a typical approach to declining power in the 1980s: "We probably made an unconscious decision, which was to [say], 'look, let's batten down the hatches, circle the wagons, see what we got here, let's try [to] keep what we got inside the fold, by the time this tornado is through maybe we'll not have lost half our membership.' And so that was probably

an unconscious decision from the mid-80s 'til early in the '90s to try to do that. And even as a result of that, we dropped a thousand members. Just circling the wagons" (Maurice: HERE, Local E).

In addition, leaders in these locals were clearly not as committed to the idea of mobilizing workers, or as familiar with tactics and strategies of doing so. One local leader described the local's relation to the worker committee in an organizing drive as "keeping them updated" and "utilizing" them in public events, rather than empowering them on the job (Scott: UFCW, Local Z). Another informant described the process of house-visiting workers being organized, which was clearly new to him, highlighting its difficulty and his own resistance:

The only way to successfully organize, *it appears*, is to go to people's houses and talk to them because you can't get them on the job. So you've got a hotel . . . and there's four or five hundred people you've got to interview and *try and convince them to be union or back us or whatever, or at least tell them what's going on*. It's a lot of houses you've got to hit. Then you can't catch them at night because nobody wants people after dark walking up to their house. . . . You can't catch them on Monday nights during football season. You've got to time all this stuff. A lot of people don't want to be bothered on weekends. You know, you're not sure of their schedules. *It's real difficult*. That's just after you find their address out, you try and catch up to them. Well, if it's a woman, you don't want two guys walking up to the house, and maybe you walk up there and you find out—they open the door and *maybe nobody speaks the same language* so you've got to—you're talking probably hitting every house four or five times before you get the thing going. If you can do two or three a day and you've got five people, you know, *it's a slow process*. (Peter: HERE, Local C; emphasis added)

The reluctance to hire from the outside is related in some cases to generalized resistance to change. One interviewee described how an organizer from outside the rank and file had been met with suspicion in the local: "And he came on board and . . . he just was always doing so much more work than we paid him for, and he was really into it, and scared the shit out of the other people in the local. 'How come he's doin' all this stuff for free? There must be somethin' wrong with him! What's his agenda?'" (Anonymous).

Union culture also stands in the way in the partially revitalized locals:

I have to say, [hiring only from the rank and file] is something we have to get away from also. There's been a mindset for years that you have to be a member of a local union to go to work for the UFCW. . . . Locally, you still see by and large representatives coming out of the ranks. Some of it is political, they're on your e-board, they're vice-president, an opening oc-

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curs, they have the qualifications, [they might as well] go there. Could you find more qualified people if you went outside? Probably. And that has to be done. . . . But the UFCW was somewhat parochial in that area, "this is our organization, we come from within." And I think that's detrimental to the organization. (Scott: UFCW, Local Z)

In sum, activists with experience outside the labor movement brought broad visions, knowledge of alternative organizational models, and practice in disruptive tactics to the locals that became fully revitalized. Much like Jenkins's radicalized clergy and Fligstein's actors with new points of view, these individuals interpreted the local's political crisis as a mandate to change, and they had the know-how and vision to develop new programs to aggressively organize the unorganized.

International Union Influence

A third major factor in full revitalization, which we have already touched on, is the activity of the international union (IU). In the cases of the fully revitalized locals, IU activity came together with the situation of crisis in the local to facilitate innovation. The IU helped ameliorate local oligarchical tendencies by placing people with a commitment to organizing in locals that were under trusteeship or had new leadership. The IU also gave IU-trained organizers and financial resources to these locals, and thus provided them with the know-how and the capability to carry out innovative organizing. In the partially revitalized locals, IU influence was not as great.

The three international unions relevant to this study differ in how much and how consistently they press locals to organize. Each has a history of business unionism, and they vary in the extent to which they have overcome this organizational legacy. The SEIU is the most institutionally committed to organizing and has now mandated that locals develop an organizing program.¹⁴ The IU itself is currently directing more than 30% of its resources to organizing and has been actively promoting a model of militant organizing longer than most other unions. For many years, the international regularly sent its own organizers to locals to lead organizing drives and now directs national campaigns. The renewed commitment to organizing came during the presidency of John Sweeney and was further institutionalized under Andy Stern, the former organizing director who became president when Sweeney moved to the AFL-CIO.

Organizing has not become as fully institutionalized in HERE, which

¹⁴ The international mandated that locals devote 10% of their budgets to organizing in 1996, 15% in 1997, and 20% in 1998. Locals that did not comply with this mandate were threatened with the removal of IU subsidies and support.

has not undertaken significant nationwide campaigns; nor has the IU mandated organizing officially. However, the IU is directing increasing resources to locals that organize and provided major support to intensive organizing campaigns in Las Vegas in the 1990s, which it hopes will provide a model for future HERE campaigns. As in SEIU, the rise through the IU hierarchy of individual leaders committed to organizing has contributed to its growing importance. Particularly notable in this respect is the 1998 ascension to the union's presidency of John Wilhelm, the architect of the union's organizing program in Las Vegas.

UFCW organizers did not relate as clear a narrative as SEIU and HERE organizers about their IU's stance on organizing, but in the wake of major loss of market share in the Midwest in the mid-1980s, the IU began to pay more attention to organizing. In 1994, the IU instituted the SPUR (Special Projects Union Representative) program, in which the IU pays the expenses of member organizers temporarily taken off their regular jobs. Furthermore, the former organizing director became the IU president, which at least two interviewees saw as favorable to organizing. Yet the initiative seems to rest primarily with the locals; one organizer characterized his IU's attitude as "if you show me you're gonna do something, I'll match you" (Milo: UFCW, Local X). This program appears less comprehensive than SEIU's, and interviewees did not mention particular leaders who strongly influenced organizing. Other labor movement informants were also skeptical about the depths of the UFCW IU's commitment to organizing.

The fully revitalized locals have clearly been connected to the organizing efforts of their internationals. Two of the three SEIU fully revitalized locals were trustee. In the case of Local F, new leaders were brought in as a result of the trusteeship, which allowed the organizing model to be implemented:

[Before the trusteeship], those were . . . much more old school locals, you know, just entrenched leadership that didn't represent the workforce, that couldn't speak Spanish, that was just holding onto this dying thing. So there was a real housecleaning when [the new local president] came in . . . he came in first as a trustee and then was elected president. That laid the ground work for doing this kind of organizing. . . . [He] is very strategic and has a clear understanding of this industry and what that takes, and he saw that this was the way to go. He had tried to make some of these changes earlier on and been unsuccessful. So he was really important in that and also having the international support for what was at that time a pretty small local. I don't think the campaign, the organizing, could have happened without those things. (Julie: SEIU, Local F)

Another organizer from the local said that the drive to organize was, "in a lot of ways, coming from the international staff that were embedded

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in the local. . . There were certain people in place that were driving the program. . . [The IU] hired people based on their compatibility with the program” (Phil: SEIU, Local F). Another former IU staffer described how this process worked:

I [used to work] for the international. . . [At one local], I worked with them to develop and organize; [at another local], I worked with them to get up an organizing program, to get involved. So there was a big emphasis, and we would go back and have our meetings and talk about which locals had our program, how to get them on the program, and what we could do to help. Part of it was just going in and doing campaigns and winning and saying it can be done, and part of it was engaging in the political conversations. (Josh: SEIU, Local J)

Local F continues to receive large subsidies from the international as well as some staff. Local H also received major support from the international, including organizing directors and organizing staff, as well as assistance from the IU president on how to target their organizing strategically.

In SEIU, Local G, IU influence was less direct but still crucial. As in the other fully revitalized locals, organizing began as a result of the opening generated by a trusteeship. But in this case, the local split with the international over conflicts arising from the takeover, so innovation continued in the absence of the international rather than as a result of extended international involvement. However, even here, the IU’s commitment to innovative organizing spurred local innovation, because local leaders were determined to reestablish their independence and beat the IU at its own game.¹⁵

Fully revitalized locals A and B of HERE benefited from their contact with the pro-organizing sector of the international, in a process that was similar to what happened in SEIU locals F and H. Vincent Sirabella, an organizing pioneer in the international, worked with staff at Local A in the early 1980s, so they learned from his organizing focus and experience. Later in the decade, international organizers again came to the aid of the local after it had developed its organizing focus and was facing difficult contract negotiations. Several times, the international also provided funds to the local for organizing. At Local B, when internal crisis led to a change in the elected leadership, the IU furnished an organizer, now president

¹⁵ As one organizer noted, “We had the understanding that if we were gonna figure it out, it had to be independently of the international, and that’s where the organizing department started getting more resources and more focused. Each year that I’ve been here until now, where it’s really being mandated by the international, we’ve gotten better and better and better at it, basically by being on our own. Having to figure out how we’re gonna do it” (Steve: SEIU, Local G)

of the local. This organizer had himself worked previously with several of the more experienced IU organizers and went on to become the trustee of a nearby local that was merged into Local B. The international has continued to support the local with organizers and resources.

In the partially revitalized locals, the IU was less influential. As we have seen, the IU did not intervene significantly in these locals, in part because they had not experienced the local political crisis that paved the way for change. Only one of the eight locals was trustee. In the one that was—partially revitalized HERE Local D—the trustee was not committed to innovative strategies, so while the local has added members, this has occurred primarily through negotiated recognition agreements with employers rather than through the use of disruptive tactics.¹⁶ In other HERE locals, the IU did attempt to spur change, but local resistance and lack of consistency on the part of the international prevented comprehensive change. For example, international organizers in one of the HERE partially revitalized locals remained marginalized, because no one in the local was part of the sector of the IU committed to militant organizing. A leader of a third partially revitalized local, asked how the organizing emphasis had begun there, described the IU's influence in terms of changing his interpretation of the situation:

I'd say probably in the early '90s the awareness came from leaders within our international union, who came to visit us. We had an industry-wide negotiation in 1989, and the employers here, who used to negotiate as one group, broke up individually. And so we had negotiations that were going to be going on with 12 hotels at the same time. And so we had help from the international, and during that time I was able to see a different side of what needs to be implemented within the local in order to turn around some of the stuff that we had been experiencing during the '80s. So that's probably where the first idea came that "look, there's another part of the program that you need to incorporate into a local, or else you're gonna be heading south." (Maurice: HERE, Local E)

However, the presence of the IU in this local diminished after the contract negotiations, and the local did not implement a real organizing program until 1997, after sustained IU support reemerged.

The SEIU partially revitalized locals did not experience sustained IU intervention until recently. Yet leaders explicitly attribute their increasing revitalization to IU influence; these locals were responding to the SEIU international's aforementioned mandate. In SEIU Local J, this process is

¹⁶ The trustee, now president of the local, comes out of the IU's old guard and is not convinced of the need for social movement unionism. Other informants suggested that the contracts that cover the local's members favor the employers, largely due to the nonconfrontational stance of the local.

more advanced than it is in the other locals because of the local leader's participation in SEIU's Committee on the Future, an IU-coordinated effort to discuss and disseminate organizing, which led to the IU mandate. The other two locals have begun more recently to respond to the mandate. As one organizer described her local's situation:

In terms of organizing, our local is just starting to get a statewide program off the ground. . . . There's never been any statewide-run program throughout the entire local. And there's never been a lot of money dedicated to organizing. And this past year, the international union . . . has set some standards, and [is] requiring locals to spend a certain percentage of our per capita. So we were actually spending closer to 5% in 1996, and we're taking a leap to 15% in '97. And so we're taking a huge jump in terms of the amount of money that we're putting into organizing, and we're absolutely starting from scratch, pretty much. (Donna: SEIU, Local K)

The UFCW locals had not been particularly influenced by their international. No UFCW organizer mentioned a major influx of IU personnel or philosophical influence. Nor had the IU taken advantage of opportunities to intervene in these locals at moments of organizational change, such as the 1992 merger that created Local X. The IU had sometimes supported these locals by subsidizing the SPUR program. However, this support clearly followed initiative taken by the local, rather than the IU's actively promoting change.

Overall, international union leadership was crucial in leading to full revitalization.¹⁷ The international initiated or supported much of the change in local unions; this process was not one of "bottom-up," local innovation that later reached the top echelons of the bureaucracy.¹⁸ Rather, progressive sectors of the international exerted varying degrees of influence over locals in crisis, which led to full revitalization. Furthermore, IU influence helps explain the differences among the partially revitalized locals; those that have made more changes, in particular HERE Local E

¹⁷ However, interviewees from both fully and partially revitalized locals pointed out some drawbacks to IU involvement in organizing. First, it can engender conflict between the international and the local staffs. Conflicts can also arise when IU organizers are sent into locals where there is no significant commitment to organizing, or where the philosophy of organizing is different, and the outcome of these kinds of conflicts then becomes tied into the internal politics of the local. Furthermore, locals can become dependent on IU staff for organizing, while local staff remain focused solely on servicing the membership. Some interviewees cited this problem as part of the reason HERE and especially SEIU have begun to encourage locals to develop organizing, in order to reduce their dependence on the international.

¹⁸ How—and whether—oligarchical tendencies were overcome in the IUs is beyond the scope of this article. It is an important question, though, and should be the subject of future research.

and SEIU Local J, acknowledge significant influence by the IU, as do the other SEIU locals, which are responding to the SEIU mandate. The UFCW locals did not experience major IU intervention, and the other HERE partially revitalized locals were either not receptive to the organizing emphasis of the IU or did not experience IU intervention that attempted to promulgate an organizing focus.

The three factors we have identified—crisis, outside activists, and international union influence—are related in complicated ways. In most cases, the pattern was that the local was opened up to outside influence by a political crisis, which allowed particular elements of the international to encourage innovation through trustees, other staff, training, and material resources. Leaders with new interpretations of the situation of the labor movement and new strategies for increasing union power, who had often developed these views in other social movements, came to wield influence through these openings. In some cases, though not all, the outside activists within the local arrived there because of this opening to the international. In any event, these factors in combination were crucial to transformation; locals that did not have crisis, sustained IU intervention, and outside activists did not revitalize fully.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR OVERCOMING OLIGARCHY

So far, we have focused on the factors that led some locals to change more comprehensively and earlier than others. But given the shift to a more pro-organizing climate generally in the labor movement, these factors are unlikely to converge in the same way again. So, what implications do our findings have for locals that have not yet innovated completely? Organizations theory suggests that they may not follow the same path to revitalization, as the dynamics of organizational change are likely to be different in the organizations that adopt innovative forms early and those that adopt them late (see Tolbert and Zucker 1983; DiMaggio 1988).

In particular, DiMaggio and Powell's (1991*b*) discussion of organizational fields is useful for thinking about what might happen to unions that cling, even partially, to traditional organizations and tactics. They identify three types of institutional forces that encourage organizational change. We see "coercive isomorphism," which refers to the pressure dominant organizations and cultural expectations exert, in the increased commitment of the HERE and SEIU internationals to organizing. In SEIU in particular, the mandate to organize and the refusal to give resources to locals that do not is clearly the major reason for change in the partially revitalized locals. Two of our HERE interviewees believed that it would soon be more difficult for people who had not made the commitment to organizing to ascend in the union's hierarchy. Our finding that the influ-

ence of the IU is crucial to change suggests that locals affiliated with international unions that have begun to push for organizational and tactical changes will probably innovate sooner than locals affiliated with international unions that have been slower to transform themselves.

The AFL-CIO's call to organize is another example of a pressure likely to lead to coercive isomorphism, although the organization has no power to force unions to change. The AFL-CIO's endorsement of the strategic model suggests that the "cultural expectations" within the labor movement are shifting, and that unions that do not innovate will be held in lower regard as innovation becomes more widespread. In that respect, the AFL-CIO's mandate to organize may also prove to be a major force in convincing international and local unions of the necessity of transformation. As one organizer who faces resistance in his local said of the AFL-CIO shift: "I think it's the greatest thing to happen in a long time. Because even though [to] some people it's penetrating very slowly, it's there. And it's a constant bug up their ass that this is something you know you should do, and if you don't remember, we're gonna remind you. And if they don't remind him, I'm gonna remind him. And I'm gonna constantly pound on you about the 30%. And if you don't hear it from me, you're gonna hear it from [John] Sweeney" (Milo: UFCW, Local X). An AFL-CIO leader said, "What we're trying to do is move it past these heroic leaders and say there's an institutional formula that can be developed out of this. . . . Now it's beginning to change because of the culture of the labor movement and the language within the labor movement says, 'if you do these things you can be successful.' So people who in the past maybe hung back a little bit can now take this risk, but it's not such a big risk because it's becoming sort of the norm" (George: AFL-CIO). The increase in the sheer numbers of organizations pursuing a strategic model and restructuring themselves accordingly may also lead to greater legitimacy and therefore to reproduction of the form (Minkoff 1994).

"Mimetic isomorphism," a process in which organizations copy other organizations, may also encourage innovation. Several of our interviewees remarked that earlier-innovating locals provided a model for them. One UFCW organizer said, "Y'know, HERE has done a lot to keep me going. I've always watched their tenacity, and it started out with [a major hotel campaign]. 'Cause I worked right next to that building, and I was out there a lot with those guys, and I admired that tenacity, and it gave me the realization that this is what it takes. And it's not been easy for me to transfer that to myself and to here, 'cause they're a whole different level than I am, 'cause they came from a different place" (Milo: UFCW, Local X). However, it is unlikely that this type of mimesis will be unconscious, as DiMaggio and Powell say it may be, given the high level of explicit discussion of the model in labor organizations, as well as the

major changes needed for its implementation. These quotations suggest that later-innovating locals consciously reflect on the experience of earlier innovators in designing their own approaches.

Finally, DiMaggio and Powell's "normative isomorphism," which occurs primarily through professionalization processes, is also present in the labor movement. What they call "the filtering of personnel" (1991*b*, p. 71) is now occurring through new channels, in particular the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute (OI), which recruits both rank-and-file and other activists into the labor movement. The training provided by the OI and international unions will presumably produce organizers and staff committed to the strategic model. The changing recruiting practices of particular locals will also encourage a different kind of professional, as will the redefinition of organizing as a higher-prestige occupation within a local. Furthermore, organizers suggest that as the culture and the outward face of the labor movement change, unions will attract young people with a more activist orientation. As one organizer noted, "I think increasingly there's people who are getting into labor who might have taken the route that I took 10 years ago [via other activist organizations] but who are now getting straight into labor. It seems to me there's a lot more of a direct path at this point. . . . There's a lot of recruitment, for one thing, and I think the labor movement is becoming a little more dynamic, so young, progressive activists think that's a cooler thing to do than maybe was true at another time" (Julie: SEIU, Local F).

It seems likely that the conjunction of the three factors we have identified as leading to revitalization will not be necessary to spur change in the future. Specific local crises will probably diminish in importance as the interpretation of generalized crisis requiring innovation takes hold. The new staff of labor unions may eventually have less experience outside the movement, as the training model becomes more developed and such activism becomes less necessary. We can already see in the SEIU partial revitalizers that, given a mandate, locals may not need to have either a situation of crisis or individual, independent innovators present in order to change. Our evidence suggests, rather, that the role of the international will increase in importance as more of these centralized organizations pressure their locals to revitalize.

It is possible, of course, that in response to pressure from above unions will adopt the rhetoric of the model without making concrete organizational and tactical changes, or without making them comprehensively. The SEIU partially revitalized locals appeared not to be doing this, as their leaders articulate a comprehensive program, which is not surprising given the amount of support they have from the IU. In contrast, it seems likely that the UFCW locals will continue to use some aspects of the model without using all of them, as the IU does not appear to be en-

couraging the kind of total transformation advocated by SEIU. In HERE, locals receiving more attention from the pro-organizing sector of the IU, which is growing, are likely to make comprehensive changes, while others may languish or implement the model only partially.

Notwithstanding uncertainty about the completeness of their adoption, it seems likely that strategic organizing programs will proliferate, given these increasing isomorphic pressures. However, the impediments of organizational culture we have mentioned—particularly staff and member resistance—may stand in the way more than they have for our fully revitalized locals, in which conditions within the local provided an impetus for change as well. The relationship between diffusion and oligarchic resistance remains to be investigated in this respect.

CONCLUSION

Recent developments in the American labor movement suggest that highly institutionalized and bureaucratized organizations can sometimes radicalize their goals and tactics. Our analysis of local unions that have overcome oligarchy highlights three factors: localized political crisis resulting in new leadership, the presence of leaders with activist experience outside the labor movement who interpret the decline of labor's power as a mandate for change, and the influence of the international union in favor of innovation.

These findings have several implications for the study of the transformation of social movement organizations. First, the mere existence of change in these organizations suggests that social movement scholars should revisit the widely accepted notion that innovation arises almost exclusively from informally organized, emergent social movements. Some of the local unions we studied have adopted new, inventive tactics and have undergone profound internal changes, even though they are bureaucratic, formally constituted, "old" social movement organizations.

Second, the role of crisis contradicts the predominant belief in the social movement literature that expanding political opportunities are critical for triggering disruptive collective action. While this relationship may hold for emerging movements, in established movements it is crisis that propels organizational change and paves the way for the adoption of new, confrontational tactics. Thus, scholars in the organizations field are right to highlight the importance of turbulence and shocks for provoking changes in existing organizations. For several years, researchers have been calling for closer interaction between social movement scholars and organizations scholars; this research suggests the fruitfulness of greater consultation, especially if social movement scholars begin to turn their attention to institutionalized movements.

However, even the organizations literature has largely failed to specify how crisis triggers change. Scholars point to the importance of crisis or countermobilization and argue that these create the need for transformation, but they do not discuss the ways that organizational inertia and resistance are overcome, perhaps because they rarely challenge or engage with the iron law of oligarchy. In the labor movement, the broad crisis of membership decline and growing employer opposition did matter—much as scholars like Fligstein or Zald and Useem might predict—as it spurred the need for change and provided a justification for transformation. However this general crisis was not itself enough to prompt innovation. Several unions in our sample suffered membership decline and did not innovate, while some innovating unions had not lost significant numbers of members. Instead, localized political crisis was a crucial differentiating factor, as it led to the presence in local unions of individual leaders with new interpretations.

Third, the importance of these leaders confirms Fligstein's and Jenkins's claims that actors with different views are crucial to change. Like Jenkins's new actors in the NCC, who had been radicalized in divinity schools, new union leaders developed their alternative interpretations primarily via their experience in other social movements, from the 1960s to the 1980s. These innovators not only shared interpretations that called for change, but also possessed particular skills that allowed them to devise and implement disruptive tactics. While it has been established that activists from earlier movements sometimes participate in and help shape subsequent movements (McAdam 1988; Meyer and Whittier 1994), the extent to which outside activists transform existing movements in new directions has not been investigated.

This finding further adds a new dimension to Tarrow's (1989) argument that cycles of protest trigger radical change in existing organizations. He believed that competition between new and established social movement organizations spurred the radicalization of established organizations. Yet in the labor movement, it was the previous radicalization of activists that mattered, not organizational competition. This suggests that even after a protest cycle is long over, its effects can linger on in the tactics and outlook of a movement that was not part of the original cycle.

Finally, the importance of the international union in facilitating change indicates that in federated organizations, centralized pressure is key to transformation. It may seem counterintuitive that the impetus to change came in part from the IU; we tend to think of "progressive" change as originating with small, local-level organizations and making its way up to the entrenched bureaucracy at the top (Rosenthal and Schwartz 1989). Nonetheless, in our study, the bureaucratic power of the international was an important factor in both initiating change (by encouraging new leaders)

and supporting ongoing revitalization (by providing continuing resources and legitimacy to locals). Furthermore, it appears likely that the IU bureaucracy will play a major role in widely diffusing the revitalized model to other local unions. This finding confirms Jenkins's claim that bureaucracy can sometimes facilitate change, because it diffuses new ideologies through resources and individual career paths (see also Greenstone 1969). It also supports Staggenborg's (1988, 1991) suggestion that social movement scholars distinguish types of formalized organizations rather than lump them all together as "bureaucratic."

Our findings also have implications for broader issues related to Michels's theory. First, and perhaps least surprising, these findings confirm previous research arguing that the iron law is more malleable than Michels believed. Yet, as we have seen, other scholars have primarily argued that organizations can avoid conservatism in their initial development, and thus never become oligarchical. We have contributed to this research by demonstrating that the goals and tactics of formalized, bureaucratic organizations that have become oligarchical can also be transformed in a radical direction. Our findings in this regard indicate that, as Michels's work implies, radical changes necessitate new leadership. Yet his pessimism about this prospect, and the subsequent inattention of other scholars to this possibility, have impeded the specification of how such change arises and the importance of various features of the organization and its context.

Second, this study indicates that entrenched organizational culture, as much as leaders' concern with organizational maintenance, can reinforce bureaucratic conservatism. Leaders were reluctant to risk their own positions in the unions we studied, thus illustrating Michels's view of oligarchical resistance. But beyond these narrow interests of individual leaders, we also found that union culture stood in the way of transformation, as both staff and members had developed and defended symbiotic understandings of their roles as business agents and consumers of services. Revitalized locals had to transform this organizational culture, which they did through participatory education and by emphasizing a new, more expansive model of membership. This new model stresses the development of political skills and a sense of efficacy on the part of members, along with greater rank-and-file activism in the labor movement. The salience of this cultural dimension suggests both that members can grow as habituated to oligarchy as leaders, and that changing organizational culture is an important key to radical transformation.

It is commonly believed that only democratic movements from below can vanquish bureaucratic rigidity. Our research challenges this view, for in the locals we studied, this was not the means by which change happened. Often, as when locals were placed in trusteeship, the change was

not democratic at all. In the labor movement, rather than democracy paving the way for the end of bureaucratic conservatism, the breakdown of bureaucratic conservatism paves the way for greater democracy and participation, largely through the participatory education being advocated by the new leaders. Thus, the third implication of our study is that we must reexamine the presumed link between bureaucracy and conservatism. While the locals we studied did make significant organizational shifts, none became less bureaucratic, less professionalized, or less formally organized. And the IU was able to play its crucial role because it was part of a bureaucratic structure, not in spite of that.

Fourth, these conclusions call into question the supposed relation between two basic elements of oligarchy—a concern with organizational maintenance and conservatism. Under conditions of crisis, organizational survival is no longer necessarily best pursued by aiming small and adhering to conventional tactics, as is demonstrated by the locals that tried to do this and continued to decline. Indeed, contra Michels, labor activists in some locals argued that survival could only be achieved by the radical transformation of union goals and tactics. Those are the locals that revitalized and grew. It remains to be seen whether these leaders will become entrenched, and whether, if they do, goals and tactics will once again become more conservative. As we have seen, union activists who believe in organizing are ideologically motivated to give power to working people and see disruption as the only way to accomplish that end, which may ameliorate the development of conservatism (Rothschild-Whitt 1976), as may the new model of membership promoted by revitalized locals.

The tendency for innovative leaders to maintain a radical stance will probably be related to the power of the labor movement in the future. This likelihood brings us to a fifth issue linked to organizational development: the relationship of the organization to its external environment. External circumstances, which Michels neglected (Schutt 1986), played a key role in the growth of new organizational forms and disruptive tactics in the labor movement. The general decline of unions provided the need and justification for change, and the outside experience of activists gave them new visions of what was needed in the labor movement. The role of the international unions, which are internal to the movement but external to the locals under study, also demonstrates how local organizations are subject to external pressures that influence their development.

We have a fascination with the new and the dramatic in the social movement field and are often disdainful of older movements. Yet to limit our focus narrows our theoretical vision. If we are right that the iron law is more malleable than social movement theorists have acknowledged, much remains to be learned about when and how bureaucracy functions in mature social movements. The three factors we have identified provide

a useful template with which to examine other institutionalized organizations that innovate in a radical direction or fail to do so. While we do not expect other organizations to pursue exactly the same path to transformation, the elements of crisis, new leaders with novel interpretations, and centralized pressure are likely to be key.

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