Four shades of political coalitions: exploring the possibilities for powerful political coalitions between unions and community organisations

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A key issue for contemporary political activism is how union and community organisations can work effectively together in political coalition. Coalitions are increasingly used as a strategy for community-based movements, where organisations unite to fight for a broader base of concerns. They are also an increasingly common feature of union strategy, as unions reach out to build powerful alliances to rebuild their influence. This paper develops a framework of political coalitions to help explain how coalitions vary in form and power and to help clarify what makes coalitions effective. This paper develops a framework that allows political coalitions to be analysed more clearly.

Political coalitions: an introduction

Political coalitions occur when community organisations and unions come together to achieve a goal in common interest. These alliances can be fleeting or long lasting, the goal can be event-based or a broad campaign, and the common interest can be one-sided or mutual. Political coalitions are used primarily by social movements whose power is derived from collective action. The types of community organisations and unions that come together at a minimum have a common interest in progressive social change. Not all unions or all community organisations engage in political coalitions. Coalition practice is more likely when unions or community organisations have an ideological commitment to community issues, have an organisational commitment to work with

partners, or are facing a crisis in power where they cannot win on their own (Robinson 2000; Cooper 2002). Political coalitions are the engine room behind many successful social movements and community campaigns. Yet, the current literature on coalitions tends not to analyse and break down coalition practice and contrast them according to their characteristics or effectiveness.

Political coalitions vary in their capacity and orientation. They can be contrasted in various ways from how they engage and transform their participants to how they achieve power. They are driven by events and joint activity. Their power is affected by external political opportunities, and by their political and economic environment. This paper analyses political coalitions as strategic agents, and considers how their internal relations, organisation and capacity affect their ability to achieve political outcomes and build strong social movements.

I argue that there are four key features of all political coalitions that change to make political coalitions more or less effective. These features are the common interest underpinning a coalition, the structure and strategy of a coalition, the organisational buy-in, and the scale of a coalition. I draw out how each of these features vary across the four coalition types I identify. Together, these four features reflect the degree of organisational and interest connection within a political coalitions. I argue that the closer the connection between coalition partners, the more likely the coalition is to be effective.

In analysing coalitions, I draw on the industrial relations and social movement literature that has evolved to analyse this phenomenon of union-community coalitions. This literature is most well developed in the United States and Canada, using terms such as labour-community coalitions, community unionism and social movement unionism. Within the industrial relations literature, labour geographers have recently focused on the question of union and community ties, introducing the concept of scale and questioning how place affects union-community coalition power. This paper also draws from this literature to help explain differences between political coalitions.

Ad hoc coalitions

The most common form of interrelationship between unions and community organisations is an ad hoc, episodic engagement. These relationships do not involve significant interaction. They range from one-off requests of support, such as requests to participate in events (for instance, a picket line or a rally) or requests for financial assistance. The character of an ad hoc coalition is heavily influenced by the organisation that initiates it (Fine 2003). Union-initiated ad hoc coalitions include (often reactive) requests by unions for community organisations to participate in pickets, speak at rallies, or provide supportive media for union disputes. Community-initiated ad hoc coalitions include requests for financial assistance or campaign endorsements. The coalition is fleeting; a brief meeting of minds evidenced through these tactical forms of support.

Ad hoc coalitions contain important limitations and possibilities. The limitations lie in the simple and distant nature of their interactions. As Lipsig-Mumme (2003) notes, these relationships are often instrumental, whereby one organisation requests transactional support from another organisation on its own terms. These relationships do not involve joint decision making. Furthermore, the distant nature of the interaction means that the relationship between unions and community organisation is often quite separate from the union membership, with the campaign consigned to union officers.

At the same time, ad hoc coalitions are filled with possibility. They build relationships between different organisations, sustaining and feeding informal connections through one-off joint actions. The very existence of ad hoc coalitions demonstrates a desire for alignment between unions and community organisations. The simplicity, and short-term nature, of the alignment means that organisations with very different cultures and practices can come together with relative ease, with minimal chance of conflict or tension. They provide tangible patterns for seeking and providing tactical solidarity. Importantly, these relationships create opportunities for greater solidarity between unions and community organisations that may lead unions or community organisations to greater, more powerful coalitional arrangements, such as support coalitions, in the future.

Support coalitions

The term support coalition describes coalitions that operate as short-term, structured relationships between unions and community organisations. A support coalition builds from an ad hoc coalition as it is categorised by a formal coalition structure that allows for closer organisational connection through joint decision making.

The major difference between support coalitions and ad hoc coalitions is that support coalitions have a far more integrated structure and strategy than ad hoc coalitions. Support coalitions develop a formal coalition structure, where face-to-face meetings and/or regular communication allow for shared decision making between participant organisations (Banks 1992). While the structure remains short-term, the interlinking of organisations in a decision making process allows groups to share ownership over strategy and the types of events organised. However, the organisation that initiates the coalition tends to have the greatest ownership and influence over the structure (Fine 2003). If the coalition is union-formed it will often be dominated by unions, with unions exercising both formal and informal influence over the type of action taken (Waterman 1991; Munck 1999). If the coalition is community-initiated, it will struggle to get significant participation from unions, with unions often sending junior staff as coalition decision makers (Clawson 2003).

In terms of common interest, support coalitions share features with ad hoc coalitions, as the interests at the heart of the coalition tend to be dominated by the interests and agenda of a single or narrow group of community organisations or unions. Support coalitions can begin at the initiative of either unions or community organisations (Fine 2003). They can be staged on any issue, indeed issue choice is indiscriminate, ranging from a specific concern from one organisation to an abstract issue such as peace. These coalitions are often reactively formed in response to a crisis (Brecher 1990; Craft 1990; Banks 1992), and tend to be based on a single-issue.

Short-term, reactive support coalitions tend to not play close attention to multiple levels of scale or locality. These coalitions tend to focus their events and campaign strategy on

influencing one scale of decision makers—at the geographic level where the key decision makers are based (Lipsig-Mumme 2003). For instance, if the coalition is working to change state government policy, the coalition's events focus at the level of the state government (and not at the level of individual electorates). Thus, while a support coalition may be able to engage in forms of action at the level of decision makers, it may struggle to connect these forms of action to meaningful forms of member participation. Rallies and forums that act at the state and national level do not require coalitions to provide union or community organisation members with ownership or control in event planning. Thus the people mobilised are used more as a 'rent-a-crowd' than given access to more locally based forms of political action.

A support coalition's greatest weakness is its inability to build organisational participation from coalition partners. A coalition's power comes from its ability to mobilise a movement of people, and to harness the skills and capacities of different organisations in the pursuit of a single goal. However, because a support coalition has a relatively short-term and remote form of organisational buy-in, building and sharing power becomes difficult. In particular, support coalitions struggle to build union participation. While union involvement in coalitions usefully provides social movements or community campaigns with greater power, financial resources, support leverage or influence, they often incompletely engage the resources or capacity of unions (Tattersall 2004).

Support coalitions are staged on any issue, and consequently there is little regard to the types of issues that politicise union members. Rather, participation is sanctioned by the leadership, and often without considering whether the campaign will develop and engage union members. Consequently there is little analysis as to whether the issue will engage union members, and whether it is directly or only abstractly connected to their lives, conditions, experiences or concerns. Furthermore, because support coalitions only rely on the coalition structure to mobilise participants, they struggle to maintain in-depth participation by organisations, particularly unions. Coalitions alone do not provide significant space for union delegate or activist participation in decision making (Clawson

2003), as they limit decision making and action plans to officials. Without ownership or involvement it is difficult to spark locally based organising amongst union members inside unions on community issues.

Support coalitions are useful structures for reactionary, single-issue campaigning, but these remain closed to building significant mass-based engagement in action. Organisational involvement is focused on the form of the coalition, which can become reified as a structure rather than treated as simply a tactical space for mobilising support action. Support coalitions are able to capture and co-ordinate a diverse array of different types of organisations. However, they regularly fall victim to tension and conflict, and are often short-lived because of the unequal dominance of particular parties through an imbalanced structure and unequal ownership over the issues at the heart of the campaign. A more effective form of coalition sees unions and community organisations activated on issues jointly, while engaging in a longer-term structure, such as mutual-support coalitions.

Mutual-support coalitions

A mutual-support coalition extends and deepens the common interest and structure of a support coalition by extending the frame of issues, the length of campaigning and the form of decision making. A mutual-support coalition is more likely to develop as a longer-term support strategy for a group of organizations, each of which recognises that it cannot achieve broader political goals acting on its own. To move from a support coalition to a mutual-support coalition requires unions to consciously reorient themselves to external allies. If unions willingly open up their frame of vision and allow other organisations to have greater control over decision making, they can help build stronger political coalitions that can more readily achieve progressive change.

The most significant difference between a mutual-support coalition and a support coalition is the type of issues that are campaigned on. A mutual-support coalition stretches the bounds of common interest, so the issue at the heart of the campaign is in the mutual self-interest of the participating organisations, not simply the direct concern of

one of the parties (Clawson 2003; Fine 2003). Thus, each of the participating groups has a direct interest in the success of the coalition because its success supports its particular collective political aims. The need for joint direct interest means that the 'issue' at the heart of the coalition is often drawn broadly. Rather than the aim of the coalition being to 'stop a fee increase' it may instead be 'more funding for public education.' This expansion in the breadth of issues at the heart of the campaign allows different organisations to see their personal interest in the coalition's common interest.

For unions, this type of common interest is significant in two ways. First, it demonstrates that a union has consciously transformed how it frames its concerns, placing itself inside a community movement and not remaining a separate entity. The union actively recognises its role as a social actor, rather than just a bargaining agent. This transition is not equally easy for all unions and may be an easier shift for unions engaged in public service, such as public sector unions or service unions where the work of union members directly effects members of the general public (Johnston 1994; Walsh 2000). Indeed, mutual-support coalitions may not be a viable or useful strategy for unions that cannot establish a meaningful common cause with external constituencies. Second, this type of common interest means that the issues that a union selects are more likely to be in the direct, material, self-interest of the membership, such as when teachers campaign for public education funding. Thus the union may find it easier to engage its base in line with the coalition's agenda.

The shift from single interest to direct interest creates the space for a closer structure and strategy in a mutual-support coalition. The mutuality of interest becomes a vehicle for sharing decision making between the groups. Because each group has a vested interest in the outcome, the coalition becomes a space for negotiating demands to ensure each group has their concerns included. Direct interest and mutuality increase trust and exchange between the partners (Tuffs 1998; Nissen 1999; Nissen 2003). This relationship of trust may not only include formal equal participation but the participation of individual bridge-builders who have experiences in both community organisations and unions and can help translate contrasting cultural practices (Estabrook 2000; Rose 2000). A flat coalitional

structure is able to effectively harness the contrasting power sources of community organisations and unions (Fine 2003). For instance, a union may be the most capable partner for mobilising people, while one community organisation may have the most authoritative voice in the media, and yet another may have the greatest informal influence over a government department or employer. Sharing organisational power allows joint decision making to operate at the level of strategy formulation.

Strategy sharing and mutuality also hint at the boundaries of exclusiveness for a mutual-support coalition. The deeper the exchange between organizations, the higher the threshold for trust and familiarity between the organisational partners. A mutual-support coalition requires long informal relationships to underpin it, and a high degree of trust, predictability and reciprocity. In particular, there is a need for the participating parties to recognise that each of the participating partners has limitations and constraints, and that these boundaries need to be respected. The level of trust required may also mean that the organisations in mutual-support coalitions may either have a history of relationships and/or a similar political practice (Dreiling 1998). The need for this deeper level of trust also implies that a mutual-support coalition will often have an exclusive membership. Mutual-support coalitions are more likely to be made up of invited partners rather than have an open, 'come one, come all' structure.

Finally, a mutual-support coalition is defined by deeper union participation, transforming how it campaigns on issues. Mutual-support coalitions express their demands as common issues, often framed as 'community' concerns rather than simply union concerns. This situation derives in part from necessity, as unions learn to express their concerns as issues that the other community partners in the coalition can agree to. Thus, demands for wages become demands for valuing quality services. This shift in framing flows through to the public framing of union demands, where the coalition opens up a union's vision to express its demands as community concerns beyond the language of wages and conditions (Rose 2000).

In addition, even while the issue at the heart of the coalition is expressed as a community issue, mutual-support coalitions work because the issue is also of direct concern to the participant union(s). Consequently, it is easier to activate and mobilise members in a mutual-support coalition because they have a greater sense of ownership over the issues being campaigned. This increased capacity for union mobilisation further increases the strength of the coalition, providing it with greater movement power (Nissen 2003).

Further depth of coalition practice opens up participation to a variety of levels—leadership, delegate and active membership—increasing the capacity of a coalition to mobilise power at different scales. I call these deep coalitions.

Deep coalitions

Deep coalitions extend the practice of mutual-support coalitions; deepening the support provided by coalition partners by increasing the ability of their members to participate. Coalitions are usually categorised as having breadth, breadth of common interest and breadth of organisational diversity. While that is a critical element of coalition action, a deep coalition adds to that breadth a depth of organisational support. The depth comes from the increased capacity to mobilise delegates and rank and file members because the coalition activates participation at a variety of geographic scales, from the local to the state/national/global.

Deep coalitions achieve this greater level of participation by integrating a more complex organisational structure that can operate at a variety of scales. Scale is a concept used by labour geographers to understand how power is organised at different geographical levels (Sadler 2004). Labour geographers focus on how union and community connections are constituted by and constitute space (Massey 1984; Herod 1997). Because unions and community organisations are people-based organisations, they are tied to place and have the greatest forms of participation when they can connect to where people work and live, at the local scale (Martin 1993; Ellem 2004). The term scale demonstrates how the local is an important element in coalition power, because activity at the local scale engages

meaningful participation by union and community organisation members as well as leaders.

Deep coalitions harness the opportunity of local action by operating at a variety of scales. Instead of relying on only one coalition structure, they facilitate action and decision making at a variety of scales. While a coalition may operate as the key decision maker between organizations, deep coalitions also resource, support, and encourage action and connection between unions and community groups at the membership level. This decentralised structure is critical for allowing individual union and community organisation members to participate in decision making (De Martino 1999; Clawson 2003). Decentralised structures may operate within individual unions or community organisations, such as through regionally based union delegate councils, or may be externally oriented such as through locally based coalitions of unions and community organisations.

Opening up coalitions to expand the participation of organisation members increases the extent to which a coalition is connected to union members, rather than just union leaders. A key weakness of coalitions is that they only provide for the limited engagement of union members, focusing agency in union leaders (Clawson 2003). Social movement unionism writers stress that unions must move beyond centralised and hierarchical decision making in order to engage effectively their membership in coalition activity (Moody 1997; Nissen 1999). Deep coalitions require unions to engage in renewal and create spaces for membership participation. This may require unions to change. Unions may renew membership participation by engaging their members in social questions through education programs, increasing their members ability to take action through skill development, and support delegates taking some form of autonomous action through local decision making structures (Waterman 2001). To organise local power, unions must not only organise union members, but organise power from local communities, such as through locally-based political coalitions (Jonas 1998). The effect of this organization is that a deep coalition builds the capacity to mobilise large numbers of rank and file

members at the same time as building their ability to connect to their local community as activists and leaders.

Deep coalitions are also categorised by a deeper union participation in the external coalition. Nissen argues that union buy-in/participation in a coalition is a central determinant of its success (Nissen 1999; 2003; 2004). He argues that buy-in is made evident by a union's willingness to mobilise in support of a campaign, the seniority and number of members or officials it involves in the coalition's decision making structure, and its willingness to provide financial resources. Thus, a deep coalition is categorised by high levels of union participation in the external coalition structure. Deep coalitions build a structure that has the capacity to develop strategy and to campaign on broad issues for the longer term. They harness a breadth of resources across movements to build increased power and resources for their social change goals. The issues at the heart of deep coalitions are expressed broadly, not only as the mutual interest of participating organisations but as issues framed as a social vision for working people.

Deep coalitions describe a committed and long-term relationship between unions and community organisations, where a breadth of activity between groups is complemented by a depth of activity by participating organisations. This is the most innovative form of political coalition, as it not only provides a serious commitment of union resources, but requires several orders of union transformation for it to be achieved. Such a coalition first requires unions to have committed their leadership to reaching out to external organisations to achieve greater political power. Second, unions must shift their frame of vision. Third, unions must empower their own delegates and members to simultaneously engage in the campaign. Deep coalition practice seeks to return trade unionism to its movement origins (Nissen 2003).

A framework for political coalitions

The central argument of this paper is that political coalitions come in different shapes and sizes and that these different forms have a variety of distinct characteristics and access to

varying forms of power. This matrix of coalition forms is represented in the diagram below.

Figure 1: a framework of political coalitions

	Ad hoc coalition	**Support coalition**	**Mutual-support coalition**	**Deep coalition**
Common interest	Can be initiated by union or community organisation. Issue is in the direct interest of initiating organisation.	Specific group's agenda/issue/event . Issue indiscriminate, no necessary connection to union members.	Common interest is in the mutual direct interest of all participating organisations.	Issue framed as social vision for working people.
Structure -strategy	Episodic 'coalitional' engagement. Tactical not strategic engagement.	Short-term coalition. Some formal shared decision making. Informal union dominance OR limited union engagement. Hasty, reactive engagement between organisations with different or similar political practice.	Coalition includes leadership and officials. Joint decision-making structure, trust. Mid-term focus and planning. Coalition may be invite only, not open to all.	Decentralised structure, connections between union and community groups at membership level. Long term strategic plan to build power.
Org./ Union	Instrumental engagement. Campaign distant from members.	Union officials involved, campaign distant from union members.	Union vision framed as 'community'. Increased mobilisation of members through union.	Union/Community Organisations actively engaging rank and file. Significant buy-in.
Scale	Any place	Coalition operating at same scale as decision makers.	Effective longer term scale at site of decision maker.	Mobilising capacity at several levels, including the local.

The different categories of political coalitions link variations in coalition practice to a schema that demonstrates how coalition practice varies depending on the types of practice engaged in. In general, the deeper the engagement between organisations, the more powerful the coalition. It is important to recognise that while these coalition categories are distinct, they must not be seen as black and white descriptors. Instead they operate on a continuum of possible coalition practice. They demonstrate passages to deeper practice.

Conclusion

Political coalitions of unions and community organisations are increasingly a feature of social movement behaviour and union renewal strategy. In order to understand them effectively this paper outlines a framework for examining how coalition capacity changes depending on the level of interaction between coalition partners. I argue that the power and capacity of a coalition is greatly influenced by its internal practice. The framework in this paper seeks to explain how different practice, from ad hoc engagement to deep alignment, varies the capacity of a coalition and how it engages union members, organisations and individuals in the process of a campaign. Importantly, this paper also emphasises that a critical element of an effective political coalition is an active and engaged union. The passage to deep coalitions requires transformations that open up a union's structure, first at the level of 'issues and vision,' and second at the level of membership participation. These transformations not only increase the movement capacity of a union; they also increase the power of a political coalition. This understanding of political coalitions builds a greater understanding of how and when political coalitions are a useful strategy for unions and community organisations.

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