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Interrogating the interaction of race, gender, and class within U.S. labor movement revitalization efforts



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SYNOPSIS

This article engages the subject of labor movement 'revitalization' in the United States (U.S.), and considers the integrated challenge of building the representation and leadership base of females of color in labor organizations. The project methodology draws on participant data gathered from the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) Union Summer program — a national campaign that brought mostly college student interns to work on campaigns throughout the U.S. beginning in 1996. The author finds that the AFL-CIO was unable to maintain longer-term commitment or 'buy-in' from most activists of color as subsequent labor movement actors. Furthermore, working class females generally, and working class females of color particularly, were very under-represented among those retained as emergent activists. The study highlights the need for strenuous consideration of the racial and gender dynamics entrenched in labor movement culture.

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Substantial feminist analysis focuses on prospects for improving the rights of female workers, particularly women (and girls) of color and 'third world' women (and girls).¹ However, feminist analysis of gender politics in labor movements is still thin (for exceptions, Clawson, 2003; Melcher, Eichstedt, Eriksen, & Clawson, 1992; Milkman, 1985; Roby, 1995), which is surprising given that a number of scholars and advocates assert that a transnational labor movement is one of the most needed responses to the exigencies of globalization. The salience of gender based labor exploitation in the globalization of work is, in contrast, quite well documented (see e.g. Babb, Morgan, & Williams, 2001; Benería, Berik, & Floro, 2003; Collins, 2009; Elson, 1999; Freeman, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Joekes, 1997; Mills, 2003). In this paper, I engage the subject of labor movement 'revitalization', and consider the challenges involved in an approach to revitalization that might build the representation and leadership base of female workers of color.

The term 'revitalization' is rarely well defined in existing social movement and labor studies scholarship but can refer to a constellation of activities. United States (U.S.) revitalization

efforts are often linked to attempts to organize new members using confrontational and innovative tactics, including circumventing National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election processes, and strategic corporate campaigns.²

Until recently, the U.S. labor movement embodied "oligarchic inertia" and bureaucratic conservatism, generally and when compared to other multi-generational social movements (e.g. Martin, 2007; Voss & Sherman, 2000). Scholars and unionists have characterized post-WW II labor relations as an "accord" between employers and unions (for e.g. Clawson, 2003). The contours of this accord vary, but they are typified by de-politicized cooperation between the two parties. Some employers embraced unions as vehicles to control workers by enabling them to release angst in ways they could manage and contain. Though the scope of activities is limited in these cases, some unions have resolved grievances and secured wage increases for their workers, though other unions have managed to benefit only their highly paid staff and leaders.

In 1995, new AFL-CIO leadership prioritized the goal of revitalization. John Sweeney's "New Voice" platform emphasized massive organizing efforts and aggressive action, in line

with the successful example of his own union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). SEIU and a few other large unions began mobilizing workers excluded from the union movement—namely, those who are low-wage earners, immigrants and females, and used confrontational tactics in order to do so. Leaders began devoting more resources to mobilizing new members, using militant tactics, and incorporating new constituencies, most notably college students (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998; Cornfield & McCammon, 2003; Milkman & Voss, 2004; Voss & Sherman, 2000). The New Voice administration increased the scope of their agenda by using the AFL-CIO's existing Organizing Institute (OI), their organizer training program (formed in 1989). In the summer of 1996, the OI implemented the new administration's largest, most concerted attempt at revitalization through its Union Summer program, which brought young interns to work on union campaigns throughout the country. I pose the research question: To what extent did the Union Summer program represent an effective attempt to recruit and retain young women of color into the labor movement as future movement leaders?

In understanding the backdrop in which labor revitalization efforts have become so pressing, it is helpful to acknowledge the changing landscape of labor law. Reflecting on the larger U.S. political climate sheds important light on major external barriers to labor movement revival. Attempts at pro-labor law reform failed when the AFL-CIO's revitalization project emerged. It is noteworthy that this was during President Clinton's administration, which was widely considered comparatively labor-sympathetic by modern standards.

Note that the AFL-CIO's motivation to alter their recruitment and organizing strategies is related to major demographic and industrial shifts. There has been a steady increase of white women and people of color in the U.S. paid workforce. The quickly expanding service industry corresponds to the changing demographics. For example, Latina/os comprise a burgeoning proportion of service sector employees.³ Thus, it is not simply a lack of bodies, but the need for an influx of energy, networks and resources that amplifies the need for new leadership development sensitized to a contemporary context.

Labor movement revitalization literature details the conditions under which attempts at renewal are likely to occur, and the range of revitalization strategies involved (Aronowitz, 2000; Clawson, 2003; Cornfield & Fletcher, 2001; Mantsios, 1998; Meyerson, 1998; Voss & Sherman, 2000). However, few evaluate the outcome of these attempts (except for Rooks, 2003; Turner, 2005; Van Dyke, Dixon, & Carlon, 2007). I know of no other study that considers the development of new activists and leaders who change the 'face' of the U.S. labor movement.

In this paper, I evaluate the revitalization efforts through a feminist lens. This project involves surfacing the question of what is made more 'vital.' The U.S. labor movement has a problematic legacy in its treatment of female workers, workers of color, and those who occupy compound vulnerabilities based on gender, race, and immigrant status (see Honey, 1993; Melcher et al., 1992; Milkman, 1985; Obadele-Starks, 2001; Roby, 1995; Roediger, 1997).

The consequences of racial and gender stratification in union representation and leadership on persisting income disparities should not be underestimated. Data on the economic effect of union membership demonstrate that union protections confer substantial economic advantage. The 2011 U.S. data on union workers and wages show that union members earn an average of \$938/week, while non-union workers earn \$729/week. Also, when women and people of color are represented in organizational membership, unions particularly raise wages for them more so than they do for white males—likely because white males already out earn all other groups.⁴ The important potentials are underscored further when we consider that the labor movement is by far the largest U.S. organization of women, Latina/os, African Americans, and Asians: it is bigger than NOW, La Raza, NAACP, and LULAC combined (Bronfenbrenner & Warren, 2007). Union representation, therefore, helps determine whether broader systemic economic, racial and gender stratification may be reduced. While leadership training and delivery of membership are not simply collapsible, I consider the question of leadership and power as one crucial element embedded in the question of 'representation', and certainly implicated in the question of whose interests labor movements are likely to promote or prioritize.

It is clear from AFL-CIO rhetoric that 'diversity' and incorporation of previously excluded populations into union membership and leadership have been recognized as strategically important as a way to increase labor movement power. But to what extent do efforts at revitalization also shift the underlying racial and gender ideologies and structures that have long typified labor relations in the U.S.? One element implicated in this agenda involves recruitment and retention of movement leadership. In order to explore this element, I consider the Union Summer case.

Union Summer provides a valuable example of the potentials and tensions in reinvigoration attempts. I examine the consequences of the program's first year, paying attention to the interns' experiences engaging in labor movement activism, and documenting any demographic and biographic patterns in relation to whether or not interns remained involved in union activism shortly after the program, or completed OI training to be full time union organizers. These data and analysis yield insights about the possibilities for, and barriers to, revitalization and a diverse and intergenerational alliance for economic justice.

During the three and a half week Union Summer internship period, or 'site wave,' 1045 young people (mostly college students) were immersed in 185 labor movement organizing campaigns in cities throughout the nation. Concretely boosting the AFL-CIO's organizing efforts by infusing campaigns with activists in an attempt to revitalize the labor movement was the central aim of Union Summer. The AFL-CIO advertised the new program to international unions, local unions and labor-connected community groups and focused its efforts on those that would (ideally): be well-organized; successfully utilize interns; and be run by leaders supportive of the activist-driven revitalized vision. The AFL-CIO identified cities and locales in which a substantial group of local unions responded to the call for participation. The 1996 program included 20 U.S. cities, Puerto Rico, and a Southern Bus Tour, which was

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