

Understanding what makes union-community coalitions effective: A framework for analysing union-community relationships

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ABSTRACT

Relationships between unions and community organisations are an important feature of Australian union renewal. This paper develops a three part typology that categorises these union-community relationships, ranging from simple instrumental union-community relationships, to union-community coalitions and finally to community unionism. The paper argues that the deeper the union-community relationship, the more likely it is to yield union power and achieve successful campaign victories. The most important contribution from this framework is that effective union-community relationships require not only a relationship of trust and reciprocity between the coalition partners, but most importantly require a significant depth of commitment and participation by unions.

Introduction

Union renewal is occurring in Australian unions, as they grapple with changes to their practice and structure to increase their power. A key part of union renewal is the drive towards new organising strategies. Supplementing this commitment to organising is an evolving discussion around union-community relationships, in particular union relationships with community organisations. In this paper the term community unionism is invoked to analyse the trend of unions and community organisations working together. This trend is developing as a tactical response to a climate of declining union density and falling union power, and where employer hostility and aggressive anti-union legal impediments are narrowing the capacity for traditional forms of union action.

However there is not yet an effective framework to describe the different ways in which unions and community organisations engage with each other. This paper seeks to bridge that gap. It discusses three different levels of union-community relationships, defining and describing their practice and outlining their ability to enhance union power. This paper begins with a discussion of basic union-community relationships (instrumental union-community relationships), then moves through an analysis of union-community coalitions, before defining community unionism as the most effective form of union-community practice. Finally this paper briefly reflects on what this diverse union practice means for union renewal, and the role of community unionism.

Union relationships with community organisations can vary from episodic engagement to deep transformative relationships. This section establishes a framework that describes and categorises the different levels of union-community relationships, and their strengths and weaknesses for building union power.

Instrumental union-community relationships

Many relationships between unions and community organisations begin and end without significant interaction. These relationships are simple and distant, ranging from one-off requests for support, endorsement of events, one-off participation in events (such as a picket line or rally) or financial assistance. These relationships are the most basic interaction, and though capable of expanding into a deeper alignment, are fairly limited. These basic relationships are only dealt with sparingly in the literature on union-community relationships.

These relationships can be defined as ‘instrumental union-community relationships’ (Lipsig-Mumme 2003). The term describes all union-community relationships that involve episodic engagement or requests between unions and community organisations without the formation of a joint structure. This term occupies the space between unions acting alone and when unions form temporary union-community coalitions.

The episodic nature of this type of relationship limits its potential, yet it signifies an important step in union and/or community organisation practice. The existence of instrumental union-community relationships demonstrates a desire for alignment between unions and community organisations, signalling the possibility of greater coalitional practice. Instrumental relationships establish tangible patterns for seeking and providing tactical solidarity for unions and community organisations. While an instrumental relationship may only provide short-term potential for future action, it does create the possibilities of greater solidarity between unions and community organisations, which may lead unions or community organisations to greater, more powerful coalitional arrangements in the future. It is to the more powerful arrangement of a union-community coalition that we now turn.

Union-community coalitions

A union-community coalition is a descriptive term for a short-term, structured relationship between unions and community organisations. The term attempts to cover the field and describe all the possible forms of union-community relationship practice (Brecher 1990; Craft 1990). I use this term to define the most basic form of coalition, where the key feature is a broad relationship between a variety of community organisations and unions. The literature on structured union-community relationships investigates four key aspects of coalitions: the issues and common interest campaigned on, the structure and planning within the relationship, the place of the relationship and the type of union participation. The term union-community coalition has practical utility, because most structured union-community relationships are simple tactical, short-term, single issue, union-dominated formations.

Much of the literature on union-community coalitions attempts to define these coalitions by describing all the possible variations in their style and practice. They try to develop a definition that covers the field of the different types of practice. Early writers such as Brecher and Costello emphasise the multiplicity of issues that union coalitions campaign on, while acknowledging that union coalitions are mostly reactively formed by unions in response to a crisis (Brecher 1990; Craft 1990; Banks 1992). This suggests union-community coalitions can be staged on any issue, from a union issue to peace or refugees. Similarly, the writers emphasise the multiplicity of different structures for union-community relationships, arguing that they can operate within a ‘coalitional’ structure or inside a particular organisation (Banks 1992).

The literature mirrors and demonstrates the limitations of union-community coalitions in practice. While noting the importance of equality and trust between the coalition parties, there is no suggestion in the literature that any pre-conditions need to be met before a union-community coalition is said to occur (Craft 1990; Banks 1992; Tuffs 1998). Similarly in practice, when coalitions form they often are limited by unequal participation and influence by coalition partners. Unions tend to dominate the coalition decision making (Waterman 1991; Munck 1999), and newly formed coalitions tend to not pay close attention to scale or locality, operating at any spatial level, from the local, city-wide, national or international, and across industry or craft (Lipsig-Mumme 2003).

Yet this literature tends to overlook the question of union involvement in a union-community coalition. By focusing on the source of power that external community organisations can potentially provide unions, they overlook whether a particular type of internal union practice contributes to the effective operation of a coalition (Brecher 1990; Craft 1990). This is a critical omission. Union participation in coalitions is frequently remote, with union officials often substituting for union members, with limited reporting procedures back to the union membership (Clawson 2003).

In practice it is the lack of union participation in coalitions that is the major weakness of union-community coalitions as an organisational form. While union involvement in coalitions

usefully provides social movements or community campaigns with greater power, financial resources or influence (such as in the refugee campaign in NSW) (Tattersall 2004), they often incompletely engage the resources or capacity of unions. Because union-community coalitions can be staged on any issue, there is little regard to the types of issues that politicise union members. Rather, these formations are organised by the leadership often without considering whether the campaign will develop union members.

Furthermore, reliance on a coalition structure limits in-depth participation by unions. Coalitions alone do not provide significant space for rank and file union member participation in decision making, as they limit decision making to officials. Without ownership or involvement in decision making it is difficult to spark local organising amongst union members inside unions on community issues.

The characteristics of instrumental centralised unionism, such as hierarchy and an economic focus on wages and conditions over social issues, play a role in limiting union participation in union-community coalitions. Union involvement is limited to the coalition rather than supplementing coalition participation with activism amongst union members. A more effective form of union-community action sees union members activated on the concerns of a coalition at the same time as the coalition operates between unions and community organisations. Indeed, this deeper form of union-community relationship brings into focus the category community unionism.

Community unionism

Community unionism is an evolving and sometimes ambiguous term. I use it here to define a deeper form of union-community coalition practice than a simply coalition, where there is a higher level of integration between the participating union and the campaign of the coalition. Community unionism creates this deeper relationship firstly through a more integrated form of union involvement, secondly through a deep and reciprocal coalition structure, thirdly through focusing on issues of mutual self-interest to participants and finally through a concern for the importance of place.

Community unionism is most sharply distinguished from a union-community coalition by the existence of union participation. Several writers single out the role of unions because unions generally have the largest membership and greatest resources out of the organisations participating in coalitions (Nissen 2004). The issue of union participation is evident on two levels, first from the perspective of union participation in the external coalition, secondly, in terms of the internal operation of the participating union.

In terms of the external coalition, Nissen argues that union buy-in to the coalition is a central determinant of its success (Nissen 1999; Nissen 2004). He argues 'buy-in' is evidenced by a union's willingness to mobilise in support of a campaign, the seniority and number of members or officials it gets involved in the coalition's decision making structure and its willingness to provide financial resources. The greater the buy-in the greater the effectiveness of the union-community coalition (Nissen 1999; Nissen 2004).

The internal organisational structure, strategy and vision of the participating union also plays a critical role in the overall effectiveness of the union-community coalition. The writers suggest that unions must move beyond centralised hierarchical unionism to effectively engage their membership in a union-community coalition (Moody 1997; Nissen 1999). The goal of this change process is to create unions who are effective participants in union-community coalitions. These writers argue that unions must shift from service unionism, and become 'community orientated' by broadening their vision to include issues beyond wages and conditions, involve their membership in decision making, education and mobilisations around the issues supported by the coalition. Thus a community union is a union more open to rank and file participation, has a social vision and concern for the conditions of working people (beyond the confines of wages and conditions), and a structure that facilitates local organising capacity (Waterman 2001; Wills 2002; Clawson 2003).

Union-community coalitions have the deepest structure when they establish a relationship of trust and exchange between the partners (Tuffs 1998; Nissen 1999; Fine 2003; Nissen 2004). 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, who can help translate contrasting organisational and cultural practices (Estabrook 2000). A flat coalitional structure is able to effectively harness the contrasting capacity of community organisations to wield political power, with a union's capacity to exercise economic power (Fine 2003). Some argue that while a coalition structure is necessary, it is not sufficient. They argue that effective union-community coalitions must also enable individuals to participate in the structure, in particular stressing the importance of rank and file union member participation (De Martino 1999; Clawson 2003)

Certain issues make union-community relationships more effective. Fine and Clawson suggest that when the issues at the heart a coalition are in the mutual self-interest of participating organisations, then it is more likely that there will be significant organisational commitment to the coalition, making the coalition more effective (Clawson 2003; Fine 2003). For unions, this would mean that the types of issues selected would be more likely to be in the direct, material self-interest of the membership, such as teachers campaigning on public education. Lipsig-Mumme also suggests that the longer the relationship the more likely that the relationship will be effective and transform the participating organisations (Lipsig-Mumme 2003).

The location of a union-community coalition affects its capacity to be effective and deliver power. Labour geographers analyse the conditions under which unions can exercise power through the manipulation of spatial power (Herod 1998). In particular they analyse how local action can be strategically useful when capital is fixed and needs to work in a narrow spatial area, such as in industries like mining, human services and the public service (Johnston 1994; Savage 1998; Walsh 2000; Ellem 2003). They note that 'organising local power' requires unions to not only organise union members, but to organise power from local communities, such as through locally-based union-community coalitions (Jonas 1998; Walsh 2000). In addition, writers such as Wills also suggest that local action may be effective because it can allow for the direct participation by the union rank and file (Wills 2002). Thus writers suggest that union-community coalitions will be more effective in conditions where spatial power and resources are locally based.

Community unionism denotes the deepest form of union-community relationship, where a breadth of activity between unions and community organisations is complemented by a depth of activity within participating unions. This is the most powerful form of union-community relationship, as it not only provides a serious commitment of union resources to a campaign, but also expands the movement capacity and power of the participating unions. Thus this arrangement not only typifies the greatest way for union-community campaigns to facilitate objective political outcomes, but also acts to enhance the movement's resources and power of unionism.

A typography of union-community relationships

Section One developed a language to categorise the different ways in which unions and community organisations engage with each other, and to suggest the ways in which these different relationships provide resources and power. The range of relationships and their different features are outlined in Table 1.

The different categories developed in this paper serve to link variations in union practice to a schema that reveals the extent to which such practice enhances power. It is important to note that while these categories are distinct, they must not be seen as black and white descriptors. Instead, they operate on a continuum of possible union practice.

Conclusion

Discussions on union renewal increasingly are considering how unions engage allies in rebuilding union power. Yet, unfortunately the literature on this topic is somewhat ambiguous. This paper has sought to bring together the various methods and practices of unions and community organisations and to develop a typology for distinguishing between simple episodic engagement between unions and community organisations, to transformative and radical engagement.

TABLE 1
A typography
of union-
community
relationships

	<i>Instrumental Union-Community Rel'ship</i>	<i>Union-Community Coalitions</i>	<i>Community Unionism</i>
<i>Issues and Common interes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any Issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any issue Issue often selected by union 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues framed as a social vision for working people Issues of mutual self-interest to participating organisations
<i>Structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single, one off requests No formal or ongoing structure to the relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any structure Union tendency to dominate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unions and community organisations involved in joint decision making structure Relationship of trust and reciprocity within coalition Capacity for individual/rank and file participation
<i>Place</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships can be at any level: local, city-wide, state, national international 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tends to be at a local level Often more successful in industries where capital is fixed, eg services, mining, public sector
<i>Union Participation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental participation only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Union officials participate Instrumental participation Campaign separate/distant from members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Union buy-in to planning process Union vision beyond wages and conditions Union members active participants in coalition

My framework develops a three fold categorisation of union-community relationships. Firstly there are one-off instrumental relationships, which are tactically advantageous but not highly powerful. Secondly are union-community coalitions, which are more structured, allowing for shared organisational participation in a campaign. However, for coalitions to be truly powerful they must practice community unionism. In such a case the relationship is on an issue directly in the interest of the membership, there is often an open and reciprocal structure for organisational participation, a localised space for rank and file participation, as well as significant union buy-in and internal union commitment.

Usefully this framework not only demonstrates how unions and community organisations can escalate their engagement, but it also argues that the closer and more reciprocal the relationships, the more likely they are to yield union power. The paper has argued that the most difficult yet most fruitful partner in a union-community coalition is the union itself. It is the union that is so difficult to engage, due to its centralised and hierarchical structure. Yet if the issue at the heart of a union-community coalition is also in the mutual self-interest of the union, and if the union demonstrates an organisational, long-term commitment to the coalition, then the breadth and depth of action across the coalition and inside the union can yield a significant increase in union power.

As the union movement continues to renew its strategies and practices and rebuild unionism, it is likely that unions will continue to increase the trend of reaching out to community organisations to enhance their capacity and their power.

As this paper suggests, the process of reaching out is not only useful to maximise a union's capacity to achieve objective victories, but is also essential for unions to again be the central agents for improving the livelihood of working people, both inside and outside the workplace. This paper seeks to contribute to this reaching out process by providing a typology that is a guide for action, suggesting how pathways to effective action can be drawn from very basic relationships, but also emphasising that the key to successful union-community relationships is a significant commitment and internal reform process within unions themselves.

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