OBSTACLES TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM: A CASE STUDY OF THE
UNITED STEELWORKERS OF AMERICA

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I attempt to uncover potential obstacles that prohibit a labor union from successfully changing their organizational structure from a model based primarily on servicing and representation -- known as business unionism -- to a more grassroots style, social justice framework of operation -- also called social movement unionism (SMU). Most labor movement theorists have used Michels' iron law thesis to explain the inability of unions to adopt and sustain an SMU framework, focusing on how a conservative, top-down structure prohibits organizational radicalization. Michels argued that centralization is a problem, as organizational elites will seek to push the organization in a conservative direction, thus prohibiting radicalization. Through fieldwork as a union organizer with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), I argue that the opposite is happening: one of the reasons that the USWA has not been able to successfully change their structure to include an SMU framework is because of an inability to overcome a highly decentralized union structure that resulted from the legacy of a business unionism model. My findings indicate that, contrary to Michels’ thesis, centralization of organizational power may be necessary to force the necessary changes at the district and local levels.
Dedicated to my father, a hardworking steelworker
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The American labor movement has been in decline for the past twenty-five years. Union density has recently reached its lowest point since the 1920s, with union membership accounting for only 13.2% of the total workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002). As a response to this declining membership crisis, a few unions have begun to attempt to reinvent themselves to more resemble the militant, social movement organizations that characterized some unions in the 1930s, an approach referred to as social movement unionism (SMU). The general goal of SMU is to move away from the business model of unionism\(^1\), which focuses mostly on servicing and representation (i.e., processing grievances and arbitrations), toward a grassroots model that emphasizes the importance rank and file mobilization. The use of SMU organizing strategies has been empirically shown to lead to higher success rates (see Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). Recent work by labor scholars has analyzed the conditions under which transformations are likely to happen (Voss and Sherman 2000) and attempted to better understand the organizational processes necessary to foster transformation of a local union (Lopez 2004).

\(^{1}\) Also referred to as the "servicing model". Throughout the document I will use both terms interchangeably.
However, despite the call from the AFL-CIO for unions to “change to organize”, only a few unions have been able to successfully adopt and sustain an SMU framework. A handful of unions – the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees (HERE), Communication Workers of America (CWA), and American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) – account for the vast majority of new union members organized each year. Therefore the most pressing problem facing the labor movement is not merely the difficulty of organizing new members but rather understanding why so few unions are adopting organizing tactics that have been shown to be effective. So far, labor scholars have generally framed the issue in terms of Michel’s “Iron Law of Oligarchy” thesis (1915 [1962]), emphasizing the role played by conservative, backward-looking union leaders who have neither the vision nor the desire to radically change their organizations (Craft 1991; Geoghean 1991; see Voss and Sherman 2000 for an alternative view). What is largely missing from the literature is an analysis that goes beyond merely focusing on problems posed by a highly entrenched bureaucratic leadership to examine the obstacles and difficulties posed by other internal organizational structures. This study seeks to provide a better understanding of potential barriers to successful adoption of an SMU framework.

In order to directly study the processes involved with a union’s attempted transformation, I spent three months in the field as a union organizer with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), a union the has verbally and financially expressed the desire to transform, but continues to struggle with declining membership. My research with the USWA provides an understanding that directly challenges Michels’ iron law
thesis. I argue that in the USWA, transformation is hindered not by oligarchic power structures, but by a decentralized organizational structure and the legacy of a culture of servicing. These can both be seen as lingering effects of a postwar system of industrial relations. Organizational structures and practices designed to function within that system now present obstacles and barriers that make it difficult for the union's top leadership to effectively implement their vision of change.

I advance this argument in three stages. First, I will explore how seriously top leaders of the USWA are taking the crisis of declining membership that they currently face, and how they have attempted to deal with the problem. Next, I will summarize how the USWA is approaching organizing new members at the local level, showing how much the strategies they currently use diverge from the ideal-type strategies of SMU. Finally, I explore the organizational difficulties that have prevented the USWA's top leadership thus far from creating a viable SMU organizing program in the USWA.
CHAPTER 2

FROM BUSINESS UNIONISM TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM: DIFFICULTIES TO ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The American labor movement largely developed as a response to worsening social and economic conditions associated with unrestricted employer control under the rapidly developing capitalistic framework (Goldfield 1987; Moody 1988). However, by the 1950s, trade unions had moved away from focusing on class struggles and workers' rights in favor of a more top-down, representational model of collective bargaining, also known as business unionism. This system of industrial relations is often described as an "insurance company model" of unionism, with representation being seen as a service that workers purchase with their dues. Representation, therefore, is a product like any others, with workers acting as the consumers of that product. Under this model, business values dominate, and relationships between unions and employers are kept at arms-length and based primarily upon economic power relations (Nissen 2003). Organizing new members under business unionism is most often conducted in a top-down manner from the union’s headquarters, and relies on conventional tactics as: placing a primary focus on economic issues, such as wages and benefits; reaching out to workers in non-personal ways, such as gate leafleting and mass mailings; primarily targeting "hot shops" (workplaces where workers were already enthusiastic about unionizing, most likely because of recent workplace conflict); relying primarily on the union’s own organizers, with minimal
participation from bargaining-unit members; and dropping campaigns that failed to quickly develop (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Perry 1987; Voss and Sherman 2000).

In recent years, these strategies have become ineffective, as the postwar system of industrial relations in which this sort of unionism worked has been unilaterally abandoned by employers. Unions have continued to lose their traditional industrial and manufacturing bases, as downsizing and relocation of blue-collar jobs to other countries has become customary. In addition, management has begun to frequently depend on union busting firms to train them on how to best keep unions out of the workplace. Furthermore, employer illegalities during organizing drives and contract negotiations have become increasingly prevalent, mostly due to the inability of US labor law to effectively defend workers' rights\(^2\) (see Weiler 1983, 1984). Traditional organizing tactics have not fared well against the hostile environment of corporate opposition and worker fear, and membership has continued to plummet (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998).

The declining membership crisis has forced labor leaders to realize that unless they fight back, the significance of labor will continue to shrink. The 1995 election of John Sweeney as President of the AFL-CIO marked the beginning of an era where organizing is actively supported and encouraged by the federation. Organizing the unorganized has been prioritized as the key to labor movement revitalization. As a result, some unions have begun to expand organizing capacities, restructuring organizing.

\(^2\) The number of unfair labor practice violations charged against employers have skyrocketed 750% between 1957 and 1983. Further, the number of employees entitled to reinstatement after being found unjustly fired for supporting the union has increased 1000% between that same period (Wieler 1983).
programs with an emphasis on mobilizing the workers. This “social movement unionism” (SMU) approach comprises radical tactics sometimes used in the 1930s as well as more recent innovations. Empirical research on union organizing efforts has shown that using innovative, grassroots mobilizing tactics leads to greater success (Bronfenbrenner 1997; Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 1995; Delaney, Jarley and Fiorito 1996). Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1998) referred to the use of innovative tactics as a “comprehensive union building strategy.” Tactics relied upon under this strategy include: actively mobilizing workers to participate in facets of the organizing process such as housecalling and phone banking; staging frequent direct actions; pressuring public officials to influence local employers; linking with community and religious groups; framing demands in terms of dignity and fairness as well as the traditional material demands; greater visibility in the collective bargaining unit through “solidarity days” (days where employees are encouraged to wear union paraphernalia); using media to disseminate message; and demanding card check recognition instead of the NLRB election process to unionize (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). The focus of an SMU repertoire is to challenge the employer’s advantage by disrupting normal business practices and demanding fair treatment and the right to organize (Voss and Sherman 2000).

Despite research showing the effectiveness of these tactics (Bronfenbrenner 1997; Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney 1995; Delaney, Jarley and Fiorito 1996), only a few unions have readily adopted such a framework\(^3\). This raises the question of why the successful

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\(^3\) The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is the union that has thus far demonstrated the most success with SMU. Its “Justice for Janitors” campaign as well as the successful organizing of approximately 100,000 home health care workers in California gives credibility to using an SMU framework (Nissen 2003). While union revitalization through the use of grassroots strategies is becoming increasingly more widespread – as seen in United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW),
transition to SMU is rarely achieved. To the extent that labor scholars have considered the problem of why so few unions have adopted social movement mobilization tactics, they have generally framed the issue in terms of Robert Michels’ (1962 [1915]) iron law of oligarchy thesis (Voss and Sherman 2000; Craft 1991; Geoghegan 1991). Michels argued that highly bureaucratic organizations will inevitably develop oligarchical leadership. As oligarchical rule is established, elites shift organizational goals in a conservative direction, prioritizing maintenance of the organization at the expense of maintaining original organizational goals. This, Michels argued, is made possible by a growth in the number of professionalized staff needed for organizational maintenance. Professionalized staff becomes essential for organizational operation, leading to “a continuous enlargement of the gulf which divides the leaders from the masses” (113). He saw the creation of a centralized power structure as an organizational obstacle to democratic practices, as elites will come to make decisions in the interest of organizational maintenance.

Through their analysis of local unions that have at least partially attempted transformation to SMU, Voss and Sherman (2000) identified three conditions that enable a breaking of the iron law of oligarchy: the experience of a political crisis within the union, the influx of outside activists, and centralized pressure from the international union. While their research is both compelling and useful, their main argument rests on the assumption that it is unions’ highly bureaucratized organizational structure that poses the principal problem for unions in transformation. In addition, because they focused on Communication Workers of America (CWA), and Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees (HERE)—many local and international unions have either not attempted to transform, or have done so in a piecemeal fashion while still adhering to old practices of business unionism (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Voss and Sherman 2000).
local unions, they failed to examine why some international unions intervene on the side of transformation while others do not. Craft (1991) argued using elements of the iron law that unions are resistant to change because of institutional commitment to the status quo. In line with Michels, he saw centralization of power and decision making and a well-articulated hierarchy as formidable constraints on innovative behavior. Finally, through his analysis of organized labor’s decline in the era of post-industrial capitalism, Geoghegan (1991) indicted a stale and fearful union hierarchy as playing a significant role in undermining the well-being of working people.

Michels’ iron law thesis has also played an important role in the social movement literature more generally, leading to a debate over the role of formal organization in inhibiting or facilitating protest (Edelstein and Warner 1987; Morris 1981; McAdam 1982; Piven and Cloward 1977, Merton 1940). Only a few studies, however, have examined the possibility of radicalization once conservatism has been established. Through their analysis of pronuclear lobby groups in the 1970s, Useem and Zald (1987) argued that highly institutionalized organizations (in this case, pressure groups) moving toward social movement forms of collective action face a different set of dilemmas from social movements that operate on the outside of the political system. These constraints are due to key differences that distinguish pressure groups from social movements: pressure groups’ interests being protected within the system, their ability to mobilize previously organized people, and constraints on disruptive collective action imposed by insider status in the polity. However, the constraints to radicalization identified by the authors are of little relevance to the labor movement, as unions’ interests are not well protected within the system. And while there are constraints on collective action imposed
by US labor law (especially the Taft Hartley Act of 1947), Useem and Zald’s analysis does not really offer a way of understanding how the historical development of the labor movement impinges on its ability to engineer a turn toward grassroots mobilization.

Jenkins (1977) examined how an established oligarchy in a social service organization – the National Council of Churches (NCC) – permitted the radicalization of goals. Growth in membership and resources required a subsequent influx of professionalized staff. Jenkins showed that the growth of staff created a distance from the membership, providing the staff with a higher degree of autonomy. However, in contrast to Michels’ argument, Jenkins also showed that newly hired leaders, trained in divinity schools that were influenced by progressive teachings of liberation theology, used their autonomy to push for a radical shift in direction. What is important to note here is the finding that centralization of organizational power was necessary for radicalization of organizational goals. Labor unions’ high level of organizational decentralization raises the possibility that international union leaders may not have enough organizational power to implement transformative visions over opposition of local leaders.

The problem posed by decentralization could also be viewed using institutional theory as a framework (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Perrow 1979). DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) idea of organizational legacies is useful in examining the case of labor unions. They argued that organizational actors construct around themselves “an environment that constrains their ability to change further in later years” (148). Regularized organizational behaviors are the product of ideas, values, and beliefs that originate in the organizational context. In relation to labor unions, an organizational structure that includes strong local and regional bodies and a relatively
weak national structure makes sense in an era where servicing the members is the main concern, because of the high rate of unionization among industries. The undermining of organizing new members in the business model of unionism led to organizational cultures in which organizing was viewed in negative terms (Foerster 2001).

In this paper, I argue that major obstacles to successful adoption of an SMU framework are not posed by problems of oligarchy, but stem from organizational legacies that the USWA brings with it from the postwar era of industrial relations that emphasized local power over centralized power and servicing over mobilization. The absence of a centralized organizational structure as well as a local culture of servicing, I suggest, explains why the USWA has not been able to implement the new vision of SMU. In what follows, I lay out this argument in three steps. First, I show that top USWA leadership are quite serious about creating an SMU-style program. Next, I show that despite this, the USWA is still relying primarily on traditional, business unionism organizing techniques. Finally, I demonstrate how the lack of centralized power and the culture of servicing have prevented transformation.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

My research with the USWA included participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and examination of various documents published by the union. For three months as an organizing intern, I worked alongside district and international organizers on two separate organizing campaigns in Pennsylvania, both in the health care field. I came on-board when the first campaign was well underway. This campaign was abandoned about six weeks after I joined because of a failure to generate interest needed to sustain the organizing attempt. The second campaign was in its beginning stages, and was still underway when I left the field. The two campaigns taken together are especially useful because they provided the experience of both the beginning and end of organizing attempts.

The internship with USWA was obtained through their annual Steelworker Summer program, developed in 2002 as part of an organizational restructuring and modeled after the AFL-CIO’s Union Summer program. Before placement in the field, Steelworker Summer interns went through a weeklong training session at the international headquarters in Pittsburgh. During the training, interns learned the basics about the history of the USWA, what unions do, and training on how to properly perform housecalls. The training session was designed to teach interns about the struggles workers
have faced when trying to gain a voice in the workplace, and the general importance of re-building the labor movement through the mobilization of both citizens and workers. The USWA was essentially training the next generation of working citizens on what social movement unionism is, heavily emphasizing its importance. After the training session, interns were scattered across the country in pairs of two or three to join organizing efforts already in progress.

My placement in the field enabled me to work alongside individuals representing both traditional and SMU ways of organizing. Two were veteran organizers, Larry Mays and Fred Ansel⁴, both middle-aged white men who have come from the rank-and-file. Both men were still currently employed by manufacturing companies and worked for the union on an as-needed basis. Larry had been on leave from his plant and working as an organizer for over twelve years, while Fred continued to go in and out of the plant on an as-needed basis. Both had extensive experience in organizing, mostly under the model of business unionism. Also in the field was Kevin Turner, a Steelworker Summer intern and recent college graduate. As a social activist, Kevin wanted to join the labor movement to be involved in what he perceived as a social movement. He possessed the sort of youthful energy that Sweeney’s “new voice” campaign has advocated for. Directing our campaign from the international headquarters was Lucy Kroger, an employee who oversaw a majority of current health care campaigns. As a woman of Mexican descent, Lucy’s position reflected the USWA’s attempt to more inclusive of the women and ethnic minorities that comprise much of the workforce in health care related fields.

⁴ All names in this document have been changed.
While in the field, I kept daily, detailed fieldnotes. Given my central interest in examining strategies and obstacles to organizing, the fieldnotes carefully documented how the union was approaching each organizing campaign. In addition to strategies and tactics, I documented insights and understandings generated from conversations with other organizers in the field and various union staff. The informal conversations were organized around general, exploratory themes including past experiences and present practices in organizing and experiences with social movement unionism. These conversations with union staff served to provide a more complete understanding of past and present USWA approaches toward organizing.

In addition, since leaving the field I have conducted six formal interviews with union officials at both the local and international levels. The interviews served to supplement my fieldnotes by providing a more complete understanding of USWA approaches to organizing. The interviews focused on the general organizing process, including the structure and degrees of control of organizing departments at both the international and district levels, as well as how the international union has addressed the crisis of declining membership. Additionally, I have obtained data regarding numbers of people organized and organizing expenditures spanning the past ten years, as well as USWA publications regarding information on recent organizing drives.

A qualitative research design is well suited to illuminate the processes involved with revitalization. Much of the recent research on innovation and organizational change in unions has been quantitative in scope (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Fiorito et al 1995). These studies are useful because they allow broad claims to be made about large numbers of cases, however they obscure a detailed
understanding of why and how SMU tactics actually work. It is often taken for granted that unions will be able to easily change gears to accommodate SMU. Therefore, it is through a careful, detailed examination of a single case study that a better understanding of the mechanisms of transformation is revealed.
CHAPTER 4

THE USWA RESPONDS TO THE MEMBERSHIP CRISIS

The decline of jobs in manufacturing – especially in basic steel – mixed with the unfriendly and hostile political climate toward unions has left the USWA facing a membership crisis. Since the 1980s, the number of USWA members has been steadily declining, going from over 1 million members in 1981 to 532,234 members at the end of 2002. Union density in the USWA’s traditional core industries – basic steel, aluminum and other nonferrous, tire and rubber, and metal mining – has dropped from a 1950s height of about 90 percent to under 40 percent in 1998. The USWA’s membership has been hit particularly hard by the sharp loss of jobs in manufacturing, which have numbered 2.8 million since 2001 alone. From 1999-2004, eighty-seven steel companies across the U.S. have filed for bankruptcy. A 1998 USWA estimate indicates “we lose about two percent of our membership annually because of plant closings, mergers, downsizings, NAFTA, bankruptcies and other factors beyond our union’s control” (Report of Organizing Task Force 1998).

Member additions – through new member organizing and amalgamations – have thus far been unable to offset the decline. The USWA in 1998 estimated organizing an average of roughly 13,000 new members annually. However, this figure accounted for only half of the members typically lost each year. To keep pace with membership, the
union has relied upon amalgamations. Since 1985, four unions have merged with USWA, resulting in an addition of 182,000 members. However, even with mergers accounted for, the loss of members has outnumbered gains.

The urgency of the need to organize new members has been recognized by union officials. Beginning in 1998 under then-President George Becker, the Organizing Task Force (OTF) was created. The OTF was comprised of various members of the International’s Executive Board, including current president Leo Gerard. The primary aim of the OTF was to develop and ensure a renewed commitment to organizing. From March through May of 1998, the Organizing Task Force held fifteen meetings involving individuals from all levels of leadership in each of the union’s twelve districts across the U.S. and Canada. This culminated in the 1998 Report of the Organizing Task Force, a document with a tone of urgent appeal that carefully laid out the crisis faced by declining membership and also proposed strategies to reach organizing goals defined by the renewed commitment to organizing.

Along with this publication, the union engaged in a series of mandatory meetings with staff members where slide shows portrayed bleak projections of the union’s future if the current course was continued. These meetings were held by union elites in an effort to deeply ingrain to staff the importance and urgent need of growing the union. The OTF established three primary goals: the commitment to annually organize new members totaling at least 10% of the current membership; the commitment to undertake a massive organizing program involving all levels of the union in its design and implementation; and the commitment to devote at least 30% of its income from various sources to the organizing program. The meetings stressed that the failure to reach these goals carried
with it grim consequences. In the Organizing Task Force’s report, it grimly and accurately predicted that “if current trends continue, we will have a dues paying membership of less than 600,000 by 2002.”

Since the publication of the 1998 report, the USWA has significantly restructured the Organizing Department, increasing expenditures, staff, and other resources dedicated to organizing. The increase in allocation of adequate staff and financial resources indicates that the USWA has attempted an institutional commitment to be more intensely engaged in organizing campaigns. Total expenditures spent on organizing over tripled, going from $12 million in 1997 to $40 million in 2001. The increases in the organizing budget have largely been made available through a restructuring of membership dues to include an organizing fee of two cents per hour. The new commitment to organizing is also clearly evidenced through the 2001 creation of a newly created organizing department at the international headquarters in Pittsburgh. Prior to that year, a few individuals working out of a first floor conference room performed organizing duties. The increase of staff and resources created the need for more space, leading to the designation of the entire 9th floor of the building to organizing. Concurrent with the increase in staff has been the development of various training programs with the hope of better preparing individuals to deal with issues pertaining to legal support, first contract coordination, civil rights, women’s issues, and bargaining.

Restructuring has also included placing a stronger emphasis on organizing outside of the traditional manufacturing base, especially in the health care field. The USWA is among the many unions that have begun to organize outside of traditional sectors to
target the health care and service industries\textsuperscript{5}. These industries are often targeted because they are growing fields that have been traditionally non-union, presenting unions with opportunities to organize large numbers of people. In 2002, the USWA created the Health Care Workers’ Council (HCWC), a division of the Organizing Department that is dedicated specifically to organizing health care workers. Additionally, that same year the USWA entered into a formal alliance with the California Nurses Association known as the Health Care Workers’ Alliance (HCWA). The primary goal of this alliance includes targeting chains of hospitals as well as entire regions with the hope of establishing a greater degree worker strength and solidarity in targeted geographic areas. Examining recent USWA data on membership reflects this shift away from organizing in manufacturing. In 2003, 56 percent of new members came from the service sector, and less than half of newly organized members – 44 percent – work in manufacturing jobs (Dickey 2004).

To accommodate these changes, greater emphasis has also been placed on hiring a more diverse population of organizing staff to be more demographically representative of the targeted workforce, to include more women and racial and ethnic minorities. In addition, significant resources have also been put into the Organizing Department’s research and communications staff, who help to initiate and coordinate organizing opportunities in health care, public sector, manufacturing, mergers, and internal organizing. This is evidenced through the recent creation of the Strategic Programs

\textsuperscript{5} A 2001 estimate indicates that at least nine international unions have staked out jurisdictional claims by organizing at least one hospital. These unions include: Operating Engineers, United Food and Commercial Workers, American Federation of Teachers, Communication Workers of America, Teamsters, Laborers International Union of North America, United Mine Workers, and Service Employee International Union. (Kelber 2001).
Department, which serves to explore the best approaches to build bargaining power within certain sectors and industries. Strategic targeting of campaigns is opposite the business unionism “hot shop” approach, which relies on calls coming in from disgruntled workers seeking a union. Gary Roberts, an employee of the international, spoke of the recent development of the department as an indication that they are serious about change:

[The Strategic Programs Department] is in charge of strategies to go beyond the traditional means of organizing... Some labor leaders saw themselves as part of the establishment, and as time went on, it became clearer that this was NOT the case. The establishment would be happy if unions disappeared. Labor woke up to the fact that we weren’t part of the A-team, that we were considered adversaries. This realization led unions to want to be part of the broader social movement again, because after all, it is about workers’ rights. Now, USWA is involved in many social movements. Maybe not anti-war stuff as much as SEIU is. But, they are involved in a lot of the WTO/fair trade demonstrations. They are committed to civil rights, worker health and safety, and even environmental issues.

Strategic Programs also works to build coalitions with other, larger social movements. The USWA has been involved in many of the recent larger demonstrations, such as the 1999 WTO rallies in Seattle, and the 2003 anti-Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) rallies in Miami. This illustrates their commitment to social justice that goes beyond issues specific to their union, a key component of SMU.

The Steelworker Summer program of which I took part is also evidence of a renewed commitment to organizing that relies on SMU framework. Steelworker Summer is a clear attempt to bring young, energetic activists into the labor movement. The Steelworker Summer training session mentioned above reinforced the notion to the young organizers that the USWA is serious in its verbal commitment to using such a framework.

Through an examination of the union’s published documents and website, as well as through interviews, it is evident that the goal of much of the restructuring activities
was a specifically SMU approach to organizing. In the next section, I draw on my experience as an organizer to overview what the USWA is doing on the ground during an organizing effort. The specific focus upon entering the field was on discovering whether they are using SMU tactics at the local level, and if not, seeking to discover potential obstacles.
CHAPTER 5

MIRED IN BUSINESS UNIONISM

Despite a training session advocating the use of an SMU approach, the general strategy used in both campaigns deviated from an SMU framework. Much of the literature on SMU has indicated that there is perhaps no stronger organizing asset than building an internal organizing committee comprised of workers representative of the bargaining unit who desire to have a union and are willing to assist the union from the inside (Early 1998, Nissen 1998, Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). Having an internal organizing committee facilitates the building of solidarity and commitment to the union through the use of internal and external pressure tactics directed toward the management. The fate of the first campaign depended upon a creation of internal organizing committee, especially because management had hired a union busting consulting firm to keep the union out. The failure to build such a committee—leading to a lack of union support—was in large part a reason why we abandoned the first campaign. Also missing from our repertoire was the use of mobilizing events such as direct actions, rallies, solidarity days, or other events in which function to raise consciousness. Additionally, we never used the media to communicate the effort or reached out to community groups outside of the labor movement. Thus, we lacked the support of the general community, and our presence and purpose was unknown.
The overall strategy we did employ in both campaigns mainly involved distributing mass mailings, holding general and small group meetings, and housecalling workers. The content of the mass mailings included both glossy fliers produced by the international union and letters written by Larry, Kevin, and myself. The fliers were professionally made informational sheets describing the importance of unionization and the benefits of joining the USWA. They also outlined who the membership is made up of, emphasizing the diversity of industry representation, and referred to the USWA as “everyone’s union”. The organizers also wrote letters designed to counteract management disinformation. Overall, the potential membership for each campaign received three to four mailings from the union during the course of each campaign. Distributing mass mailings is a tactic that is traditionally relied upon in business unionism campaigns. Its effectiveness has been questioned because of its impersonal nature. During home visits, some workers mentioned receiving the mailings, and often times would admit to only briefly glancing over them.

We also relied upon holding general and small group meetings. Meetings served to both educate members on the union by answering workers’ questions, and to build a rank-and-file organizing committee that could educate other workers or, as Larry would frequently say, “to carry the flag for the union from the inside.” Our approach to the meetings differed slightly for each campaign. For the first campaign, meetings were held bi-weekly and were open to any workers who wished to come. However, only the same few supportive workers would regularly attended the meetings. Because the hospital had launched a union-busting campaign, many workers were afraid to attend the meeting, fearing management would somehow find out. In addition, the few supporters we did
have also expressed fear of talking about the union while on the job, indicating a general reluctance to take leading roles on the shop floor.

For the second campaign, we decided it would be more strategic to hold meetings where we invited only the few known supportive individuals. It was thought that this would help to minimize the fear that management would send spies to the meetings, which may happen in more general, open meetings. We also decided to put more of an emphasis on building a rank-and-file committee, and thought it was best to meet only with those who were seriously committed to helping the union from the inside. At these meetings, we answered questions about the union and discussed strategies to build the union from the inside. We assigned tasks to the two initial workers who made up the rank-and-file committee. These tasks included such things as compiling full lists of workers in each department, identifying potential union supporters as well as detractors, and bringing potential supporters to the next meeting. However, for the following six weeks, the committee never grew past about four core supporters, three of who were reluctant to do more outside of attending the meetings. Therefore, the union relied heavily on one core supporter, who was also the person that initially contacted the union for help.

In addition to mass mailings and meetings, we also visited workers at their homes, a tactic known as housecalling. Housecalling is a tactic typically associated with an SMU framework for organizing. Through housecalling organizers can talk one-on-one with workers about their lived experience (or lack thereof) with unions and also discuss workplace grievances. Furthermore, housecalling allows organizers to identify the strongest people and to attempt to get them to commit to take an active role on the
campaign. However, the ability of housecalling to make a difference in the outcome of the campaign depends upon how well or poorly it is conducted (see Lopez 2004 for detailed example), and the way in which it is used as a tactic.

Much like our use of meetings, our use of housecalling differed slightly in each campaign. For the first campaign, we attempted to housecall any employee for whom we had an address. Our purpose was two-fold: to talk to workers about how unionization would benefit them, as well as to identify potential committee members. Most times, workers would tell us that they were not interested in joining the union, and organizers would never make it past the front door. On several occasions, workers expressed overt hostility toward us, and on one occasion a woman threatened to call the police if we did not leave her property. This can perhaps be partially attributed to the management’s anti-union campaign waged against the union. Management had warned workers that they might be visited by union organizers, and urged them not to talk to us. This made it difficult to even begin a conversation with workers.

When workers did take the time to listen to us, I often times felt as if we were trying to sell them a product. Housecalls were framed to emphasize wages and benefits, which are seen as traditional business unionism demands. Instead of listening to their concerns about what it means to unionize—including their previous experiences with unions—we would launch into a sales pitch about the benefits that unionization can bring them. We came to their door armed with statistics about the union’s dues structure, the number of hospital workers it represented, and stories about improvements that the union brought to other area hospitals. We were therefore reinforcing the notion that the union was an outside agency, separate from the workers, that sought to provide a service in
exchange for a fee. This was further underlined by our failure to get supportive workers to come out and housecall with us.

For the second campaign, we initially decided to be more strategic about who we housecalled, only visiting employees recommended to us by our core supporters. It was thought that this would serve to better build an organizing committee, and reduce the chance that management would launch a counter-attack. We found through being strategic that there was support for the union out there, but many of the supporters were reluctant to get involved. Our housecalling efforts failed to add to the organizing committee, but we were able to build our list of supportive workers. Once the recommended people were visited, however, there was little for us to do and eventually we ended up visiting anyone for whom we had an address. Again, we ended up using the salesperson pitch when organizing “cold” workers (who we knew nothing about). Despite our effort to be more strategic, we eventually reverted to using a business unionism approach.

Because we relied primarily on mailings, meetings, and housecalling, once the addresses ran dry and meetings were over there was little for us to do. This resulted in a fair amount of downtime. At several points during both campaigns, Kevin and I got together to discuss new ideas to try to bring life into the efforts. The ideas we came up with included such things as planning a rally or direct action, contacting other community groups for support, or writing an editorial for the local paper. These ideas were suggested various times throughout the first campaign, but were never put into action. Because we faced so much opposition and very little support during the first campaign, there was a sense of hopelessness and even apathy that surrounded the effort. Our suggestions
seemed to be dismissed in the manner that it was pointless to bother because it would be
only a matter of time before we would halt the campaign.

It is worthwhile to note that although this campaign sought to organize workers
outside of the USWA’s traditional jurisdiction, there did not seem to be too much
deviation from how it might approach a more customary, manufacturing-based campaign.
Both veteran organizers, for example, came out of manufacturing workplaces and fit the
proto-typical steelworker union member stereotype. Despite the fact that the
overwhelming majority of the bargaining unit was female, I was the only woman on each
campaign (although our supervisor was a woman, she was rarely on-site). Additionally,
al organizers on the campaign were white. At some point in each campaign – especially
the first – we faced workers who were uncertain of the ability of a steelworkers’ union to
be adequately prepared to protect their interests. Interns had been instructed that when
questions arose about USWA organizing hospitals, to stress that the USWA has been
organizing in the health care field for over fifty years, and to mention the special division
called the Health Care Workers Council designed specifically to better protect workers in
the health care industry. The lack of a real strategy in dealing with health care workers’
concerns illustrates how organizers failed to think creatively about how workers would
respond to the USWA.

In sum, although interns were trained under a framework of mobilization, the field
experience that followed resembled a typical business union style approach. A well
thought out SMU campaign places at the center of importance issues that the workers
care about, and discovers what these issues are by using face-to-face organizing
techniques to listen to workers’ concerns. Our campaigns were mostly conducted in an
arm’s-length fashion where the union’s organizers did all of the work, demands were
framed in the typical business unionism approach of wages and benefits. When we did
use face-to-face organizing – such as with housecalling – it was as if we were trying to
sell the union to the workers, instead of centering on their lived experience. However, the
union has demonstrated in various ways a commitment to transforming organizing
practices to adopt an SMU approach – increasing expenditures, hiring outside
individuals with activist experience, developing training programs, and publishing
literature emphasizing the commitment. This organizational dissonance begs the question
of why hasn’t the USWA been able to put into practice that which it preaches?
CHAPTER 6

OBSTACLES TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM

Data collected from field notes, various union documents, and interviews point to a combination of two factors that has acted as a significant barrier to organizational transformation: the presence of a decentralized power structure and the lingering effect of a culture of servicing. These factors do not operate separately from one another; their interrelation poses significant obstacles to reaching the goal of adopting a framework of mobilization. Both factors can be seen as part of the legacies persisting from the highly developed and complex organizational structure of a labor union.

Decentralization of Power

The center of the USWA’s power structure is the international headquarters - located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – where the international officers and organizing department is located. Power is then broken down into twelve districts throughout the United States and Canada, each district having its own structure of power headed by a District Director. The districts are part of the international union, and District Directors sit on the Executive Board of the USWA. Under the districts are the over 1800 local unions, which largely operate separately from the international union. The locals have their own structure of government that has little influence from the international union:
They have their own government structure, the local unions. And the international doesn’t really tell them what to do. The staff reps assist with bargaining, assist with arbitration – and the staff reps work for the international. But the locals do have a certain amount of autonomy. They have their own treasury, they have their own leadership. All of their dues go to the international, 100%. But then 40% are sent back. [Bill H. International Staff Member]

Because what is happening at the local level is highly disconnected from the top of the organizational hierarchy, those at the local level lack accountability to the international. Therefore, the international has little control over what happens at the local level.

Organizing is chiefly directed out of the international union^6, mostly through the districts. Typically, someone who desires a union will call either the local, district, or international office, and the district will respond by sending out an organizer to try to start a campaign. If the campaign looks promising, then the district will bring in more organizers from other workplaces (such as Larry and Fred) or other districts. Occasionally, outside organizers are brought in from the international (as was the case with Kevin and I), but because organizers employed by the international are few, usually district organizers are used. Although the districts are in theory accountable to the international, each district has its own political structure and therefore its own set of political interests. The structure is comprised of District Directors, who are elected, and their appointed District Representatives. District Directors sit on the international’s Executive Board; however, because each District Director is in charge of overseeing the districts, s/he is given quite a bit of autonomy over how district business operates:

The District Reps answer to the District Director...[The District Directors] are part of the [Executive] Board. They technically answer to the President Leo Gerard. But, they have a lot of autonomy...the have a lot of independent

^6 Though the international does most of the organizing, some local unions do organize. This is especially the case for the larger locals that have the monetary resources. However, this is more the exception than the rule.
power. If you want to compare it to something, it’s like the federal government – you have the President and you have governors. Governors don’t really answer to the President of the United States, they answer to their constituency in that state...Although [in the USWA] our system is more federalized, in that our District Directors really do have to answer to the President, in a way that governors don’t have to, at all. But still, there is that autonomy, like a governor. [Bill H. Union Staff]

Although the international union has the ultimate executive power, the structure is such that districts are provided with a great deal of power over how operations are performed.

The decentralization of powers among the districts and local unions poses several problems to organizational transformation. One particular problem noted by several informants arises out of the struggle of elected officials in the district to grab and maintain power. Many district directors have worked their way up from a rank-and-file heavily entrenched in an atmosphere of business unionism, where organizing new members was low priority. Therefore, in some districts, organizing is still not a priority, and may not be seen by district officials as being in their best interest:

[District Directors may] pick staff reps who are loyal to them. Not necessarily because they’re competent. They’re people who help [directors] to get elected, stay in office. See, so you have this system that, in the district level, is really built against organizing...and there’s been a critique of that. [Bill H. Union Staff]

It is interesting to note that at this level – the middle level – elements of the iron law are evident. District directors may make decisions that counter what is best for the organization – in this case, de-emphasizing organizing – to maintain power. However, this reluctance to change becomes a barrier to overall transformation not because power is centralized in an organization, but because power is decentralized.

Decentralization also creates a high degree of separation and distance among the international, districts and locals. Because districts and locals have become accustomed to operating with a considerable amount of autonomy from the international, in some
districts, feelings of reluctance and resentment have emerged when the international attempts to intervene:

Most districts and the directors that run those districts do not want Pittsburgh types running around their districts unless they really know exactly what they are doing. You must always remember these directors are elected kings of their district. [The President] might tell them what to do, but the directors still control the members in their district. [Larry Mays, Union Organizer]

District directors and local presidents, therefore, may see transformation as a threat to their power. Even though organizing new members may be seen as necessary to survival, the power centers at the district and local levels may not be willing to take action that will change the system, thereby jeopardizing their positions of power.

Because the decentralization of power in the structure of the USWA may be acting as a significant barrier to organizational transformation, it is necessary for the international to centralize the power to shift the organization from the top. In districts that are directed by individuals with a high level of self-interest, a shift toward using a mobilization framework may be hindered by the reluctance of directors to want to change, for many of the same reasons put forth by Michels’ iron law thesis. The international, however, technically has significant power over how districts and locals operate:

The president doesn’t always reward people who do organize well, nor does he remove people who aren’t doing a good job. If the president did that, then it would become clearer about how important it is to commit, and more people would fall into line [Tony C., former USWA staff].

This raises questions regarding the ability of the international to intervene at the local level. The decentralized structure of the USWA can be seen partly as a by-product of business unionism. Because servicing was prioritized under business unionism, strong local centers of decision-making power were necessary. The need for centralization at
this level provided local presidents and district directors with a significant amount of power and autonomy.

*The Culture of Servicing*

Fieldwork experience and interviews with respondents also point to legacies of a culture of servicing as presenting a challenging set of organizational obstacles to mobilization. This theme is also echoed through much of the literature on labor movement revitalization (Lopez 2004; Voss and Sherman 2000). The entrenched culture of the union under the servicing model has shaped the expectations of both union members and staff. Members expect the union’s representation when necessary, and union staff expects to perform the required services for the membership, independent of membership input. An attempt at revitalization directly challenges the old mentality of servicing, and requires members and staff to perform duties that may be unfamiliar and daunting. For members, it is much easier to let the union perform the required duties; conversely, for staff, carrying out functions themselves means not having to train or depend on the membership, making the staff person’s job easier (see Fletcher and Hurd 1998 for further explanation). The attachment of members and staff to the servicing model, therefore, may be leading to resistance on the parts of both members and staff.

The enduring culture of servicing also poses problems for other reasons. Because servicing has been historically prioritized, the importance of organizing has been minimized. The union has relied on its membership to draw individuals to work as union reps, business agents, and organizers. Many of the organizers are rank-and-file members who take leave from their plants to do work for the union on an as-needed basis, much
like Fred and Larry. Both Fred and Larry mentioned that many union members desire to work for the union, but that most want to work in servicing. Organizing requires frequent traveling, long hours and a great deal of legwork, especially in regards to making the necessary housecalls. Some member organizers have come to see organizing as a vacation:

Sometimes other members become disgruntled or jealous at those who are pulled out of the plant to work with the union. Working with the union is perhaps seen as a way to escape the plant, to take a vacation, in a way. And that some people who get into those positions become lazy after awhile, or don’t take it seriously enough. [Fred, Union Organizer]

Because organizers are often times put up in hotels by the union, it is even easier to see organizing as a vacation from working one’s regular job.

In addition to seeing organizing as a vacation, the union culture under the service model also devalued organizing and the work of organizers. One staff member of the international explained that organizing was also seen as a means of punishment:

Some may think of it as a vacation, but other people look at it as punishment....People would rather service, than organize. That’s true, staff reps want to service, not organize...because you have to go out on the road more, you have to make the evening housecalls, and all that stuff. No how effective are you going to be if it’s viewed as a punishment? By putting people in there against their will to punish them? It’s not going to be very effective. That happens a lot...We’ve actually been sued by older people saying that they’ve been discriminated against by being put into organizing...That it’s viewed as an adverse employment action is very important as to how organizing is viewed by many people. [Bill H. Union Staff]

That legal action has been taken as a response to being put into organizing clearly illustrates the devaluation of organizing under the business model. This sentiment was echoed in an article by Foerster (2001), who conducted interviews examining the creation of the AFL-CIO’s innovative organizing program, the Organizing Institute (OI). She
interviewed one of the founders of the OI, who also recognized the devaluation of organizing:

...organizers were typically the lowest paid...you know, it was historic in my union that if somebody was a bad rep [business representative] you dump them into organizing. 'Cause you didn’t want them to be around the members. And that was true in the labor movement – [organizing] was a dumping ground or a stepping stone to something higher, which was servicing. [Interview conducted by Amy Foerster (2001) on 10/30/97]

Because of the historic minimization of organizing under business unionism, staff resistance has been a particularly problematic obstacle for the union to overcome when attempting to shift to a mobilization model that emphasizes the importance of organizing.

The union has attempted to deal with legacies that devalue organizing by implementing various training programs, as discussed above. Additionally, the union has attempted to bring in outside individuals – including activists and young people – who view organizing as part of a broader social movement. However, careful attention must be paid to long-standing staff and union members who are entrenched in the culture of business unionism. This is deftly illustrated by an experience Fred had at a training session led by Lucy that left him feeling embittered. Lucy had come into the room full of mostly middle-aged white men and declared that the days of using “potbellied fifty year old white men” to organize were numbered, and that the new focus must be on women and minorities. Fred understood the message of needing to embrace diversity, but felt alienated by the presentation of ideas, as many of the other men did as well. Many of the conversations we had indicated that his attitude toward “new” ways was one of tolerance, but not of confidence or faith. This experience illustrates the importance of directly addressing the lived experience of those individuals deep-rooted in business unionism culture. Not paying attention to those lived experiences risks alienating staff and
members from the grassroots model, which would be counterproductive to organizational transformation.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore the processes involved when a union attempts to shift organizational gears to adopt and sustain an SMU framework of organizing. By studying a union’s process of change, I sought to gain a better understanding of how and why unions may struggle with successfully implementing a framework of mobilization that has been shown to lead to greater success in organizing new members. Such an understanding is important to achieve at a time when the power of labor has been eroded by a political environment that has been becoming increasingly more hostile toward organized labor.

Many labor researchers and scholars of organizational change have used Michels’ iron law thesis to explain how backward-looking, conservative leaders inhibit radical transformation of organizational goals (Voss and Sherman 2000; Craft 1991; Geoghegan 1991). However, I argue that such a claim is shortsighted and does not consider problems posed by the larger organizational structure, including organizational legacies. Through my experience with the USWA, I make three primary claims about the USWA. First, the USWA has in recent years shifted organizational resources to accommodate an SMU
framework of organizing new members. Second, despite these changes, at the local level a business unionism approach is still being primarily relied upon. Third, explanations for the union’s inability to fully implement an SMU framework of mobilization point to a combination of the decentralized power structure of USWA and the enduring culture of servicing as posing significant barriers to change.

Important implications flow from this research. My findings indicate that, contrary to Michels’ thesis, centralization of organizational power may be necessary to force change at the district and local levels. Thus, the onus falls on the international to reclaim authority necessary to make those at the district and local levels more accountable for how organizing is approached. As suggested by a former staff member at the international, perhaps what is necessary is for top power structures to reward those taking initiative to use an SMU framework and to sanction those who do not. Until such measures are taken, political struggles for power and legacies of business unionism may persist throughout the district and local levels, further inhibiting change. The failure to change organizational capacities carries with it grim repercussions. Not only may membership continue to decline, but the union may face an inability to attract and retain eager, qualified organizers and staff that have helped other unions with organizing efforts.
REFERENCES


