

**Organizational Contexts for Union Renewal**  
**Contexte organisationnel et nouveau syndical**  
**Contextos organizacionales por la renovación sindical**

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**Article abstract**

This article seeks to identify organizational structures and processes that contribute to incorporating immigrant identities and fostering democratic participation in unions. Empirical analysis is based on ethnographic observations conducted in four local branches within the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) of the USA that underwent the Justice for Janitors campaign. Despite the fact that all four local unions experienced external revitalization owing to the campaign, internal renewal was most successful in Los Angeles, least in Washington DC, and somewhat successful in Boston and Houston. For each of the cases, I examine the connection between external dimensions of revitalization—initial mobilizing efforts, bargaining power, and political power—and organizational contexts for renewal—formal and informal structures for participation, and the engagement of immigrant members in union activities. While the union revitalization literature has argued that internal union renewal facilitates external revitalization, how external revitalization affects sustained internal renewal has not yet been examined thoroughly. Most studies examining the relationship between internal and external revitalization have had a relatively narrow window of observation ending typically with successful union recognition; thus, we lacked an understanding of the dynamic relationship between internal and external revitalization over time. The present findings suggest that external revitalization can assist internal renewal. However, building a powerful union did not automatically guarantee democratic participation, and acquiring more economic power through the merging of local unions weakened representational structures. The present results confirm the importance of studying revitalization as a process instead of an outcome, an argument which has been advanced by scholars, yet rarely practiced.

# Organizational Contexts for Union Renewal

Kyoung-Hee Yu

**There is both a lack of theoretical development as well as detailed empirical evidence on the organizational contexts that foster union renewal. Scholars have argued that the integration of social identities into unions and sustained 'lay' participation are key to renewal. This article seeks to identify organizational structures and processes that contribute to incorporating immigrant identities and fostering democratic participation in unions. Empirical analysis is based on ethnographic observations conducted in four local branches within the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) of the USA that underwent the Justice for Janitors campaign. The approach taken treats union renewal as a complex and non-linear process unfolding over time—in each city, the campaign entered the complex social structures of local unions, disrupting old processes and structures, and creating new ones. Despite the fact that all four local unions experienced external revitalization owing to the campaign, internal renewal was most successful in Los Angeles, least in Washington DC, and somewhat successful in Boston and Houston. The findings demonstrate the difficulty of achieving transformative change in unions, yet point to key organizational elements that may help achieve it.**

**KEYWORDS:** social movement, unionism, member participation, movement sustainability.

## Introduction

The decline of unions has deprived society of an important vehicle for democratic participation and a force to counter growing inequality (Turner, 2004; Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd, 2004; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Haiven, Levesque, and Roby, 2006). Calls for revitalizing unions have focused on their ability to “generate social pressure that can reform or transform political and economic institutions” (Turner, 2005: 387). The bulk of the vast literature on union revitalization has focused on strategies for enhancing unions’ capacities for reversing the tide of de-unionization. Behrens, Hamann and Hurd, (2004) defined revitalization as a multidimensional process and identified four dimensions for union revitalization in a framework that has been widely used since (Frege and Kelly, 2004; Hurd, Milkman, and Turner, 2003; Phelan, 2007; Turner, 2005). These include three

activity dimensions—mobilization, economic power and political power—and one organizational dimension— institutional vitality. While the first three have been extensively covered in the literature since Behrens and colleagues' formulation of the model (Hurd, Milkman, and Turner, 2003; Milkman, 2006), arguably the least understood dimension of union revitalization is 'institutional vitality'. Behrens *et al.* defined it as a union's "capacity to adjust to new contexts, internal enthusiasm to embrace new strategies, and a sense of introducing something new and 'fresh' to the union that is not adequately captured by the other three dimensions" (Behrens, Hamann and Hurd, 2004: 22). Scholars have referred to union 'renewal' as the attainment of institutional vitality in the internal governance of the union (Fairbrother, 2005: 387; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Turner, 2005). Programmatic calls for research into union renewal have discerned key elements of union renewal that include incorporating relatively new (to the labour movement) social identities (Haiven, Levesque, and Roby, 2006; Tapia and Turner, 2013) and securing sustained participation among members (Gall and Fiorito, 2012b, 2012a). However, key questions remain unanswered. Despite the general consensus that external dimensions of revitalization and internal renewal are inter-linked, we lack an understanding of the inter-relationships between different dimensions of revitalization over time. Does initial grassroots mobilization during organizing ensure sustained member participation? How do structural changes that strengthen the union's economic power—such as mergers—impact union democracy? Furthermore, there is both a lack of theoretical development as well as detailed empirical evidence on the organizational contexts that foster the integration of social identities into unions and sustained 'lay' participation. This article seeks to contribute to unpacking these questions by drawing on and extending two streams of literature, respectively pertaining to union revitalization and social movements.

The lack of progress in understanding organizational contexts for renewal has partly been attributed to the vast majority of revitalization literature focusing on initial mobilization for union recognition. Other reasons have been related to the rarity of genuinely transformative organizational change in unions (Behrens, Hurd, and Waddington, 2004) as well as the need for heavily engaged anthropological forms of investigation (Gall and Fiorito, 2012a: 726-7). This study provides a rare internal examination of the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors (JfJ), a campaign widely recognized as having succeeded in the external dimensions of revitalization as well as being relatively successful in incorporating the social identities of immigrant workers in its *initial mobilization* phase. Thus, it provides a good context to examine how external dimensions of revitalization relate to internal renewal. Based on ethnographic observations conducted in four local branches within the SEIU, this study is able to 'control for' a highly variable factor impacting renewal—union strategy (Turner, 2005). I review

the literature, provide an overview of the SEIU's JfJ campaign as research context, and explain why, despite overall external revitalization, internal renewal was most successful in Los Angeles, least in Washington DC, and somewhat successful in Boston and Houston. Contributions to the literature are outlined in Discussion.

## Unions as Part of the Revitalization Equation

In a recent review of the relationship between commitment, participation, and leadership in unions, Gall and Fiorito (2012: 721-2) point out the importance of treating the union as an 'independent variable' of interest. While examining commitment to the union as a function of individual attributes may have been tenable under conditions of economic growth and employer cooperation, the current context of union decline in dynamic and unfavorable conditions compels the researcher to examine the union as the most relevant agent in motivating members to become involved (Gall and Fiorito, 2012a: 721). Gall and Fiorito (2012)'s call echoes Turner (2005: 392)'s argument for studying unions as "contingent organizations" that can suppress or foster democratic participation. Unions, then, should be seen as "internally complex and variable social entities" and attention must be given to "the social processes by which leadership and capacity building are generated and embedded at the grassroots level" (Gall and Fiorito, 2012a: 718).

If *revitalization* is defined as processes that seek to reclaim unions' role in broader social justice by expanding union boundaries, *renewal* is understood as a process of internal recomposition and reconfiguration (Fairbrother, 2005: 371). Several scholars have pointed out that participatory democracy is key to unions' ability to respond to external challenges (Fairbrother, 2005, 2006; Gall and Fiorito, 2012a; Levesque, Murray, and Le Queux, 2005). Fairbrother (2005: 372) argued for a "form of unionism where processes of union mobilization rest on participative and often, by implication, democratic procedures and practice." Gall and Fiorito (2012a) in turn proclaimed: "lay activism in all its facets is the key part of the equation to producing revitalisation [...] such that both union democracy and union efficacy are enhanced" (Gall and Fiorito, 2012: 716). In a study of Canadian union members, Levesque, Murray and Le Queux (2005) found that democratic process and inclusive decision making was linked to increased member engagement. The relationship between external revitalization and internal renewal has been theorized in terms of the latter influencing the former. Internal politics and governance influence union strategies for adapting to the external environment (Turner, 2005: 392; Heery, 2005: 92). A UK study found that internal pressures for change—such as those coming from member demands and union staff—were more effective in obtaining responses from union officials than external pressures, such as those from coalition partners (Heery, 2005: 103).

Despite the importance of understanding the conditions for renewal, IR scholarship has neglected systematically examining democracy in unions (Fairbrother, 2005: 371-2; Gall and Fiorito, 2012a). Prescriptions for how to achieve transformation have been rare compared to studies on effective organizing or coalition formation (Behrens, Hurd, and Waddington, 2004). In the introduction to a special issue of *Relations industrielles* on the topic, the editors summarized the special issue with the remark “one might conclude that union renewal is doomed to failure,” given that “the renewal process confronts unions with the challenge of learning new roles and developing new capabilities” (Haiven, Levesque, and Roby, 2006: 586). In their study of union restructuring, Behrens, Hurd and Waddington (2004) distinguished between defensive, aggressive, and transformative restructuring. They defined the latter as organizational change that internally, enhances member participation and democracy and externally, increases the union’s political and economic power (Behrens, Hurd and Waddington, 2004: 121). They found that most of the organizational change by unions in their study had been defensive or aggressive, indicating the rarity of transformative change (Behrens, Hurd and Waddington, 2004: 128).

## **Union Renewal through Integration of “New” Social Identities**

A key concern in the renewal literature has been whether unions are able and willing to change in ways that allow them to incorporate “new” social identities into their organizational fold (Levesque, Murray, and Le Queux, 2005; Tapia and Turner, 2013). Hyman (1996; 2001) has long argued that unions must balance their market-based, class-based and social identities. Other scholars, both in the European (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and US settings (Piore, 1995; Piore and Safford, 2006), have argued that to remain relevant, unions must respond to moral codes in society and be able to mobilize based on *social* and not merely or primarily *economic* identities of workers. Recent strategies of ‘social movement unionism’ in the US have hinged on unions including issues of broader social justice in lieu of narrowly defined economic interests characteristic of ‘bread and butter unionism’ (Clawson, 2003). The SEIU has been widely credited for spearheading union revitalization based on the adoption of social movement repertoires through the JfJ campaign (Chun, 2005; Clawson, 2003). However, with very few exceptions (Voss and Sherman, 2000; Yu, 2008), little attention has been placed on examining internal organizational change in the SEIU, and practically none on the extent to which immigrant identities have been integrated into the union. In a review of union revitalization in the US context, Hurd, Milkman and Turner (2003: 111)

remarked that “there is precious little evidence of initiatives to increase member involvement beyond limited participation in organizing.” They observed that the SEIU’s internal restructuring demonstrated the “potential and limits” of organizational transformation in unions; however, empirical evidence was not supplied (Hurd, Milkman and Turner, 2003: 111).

Studies of European unions indicate that the provision of structural representation and development of leadership among women and immigrants can ensure their autonomy and participation (Heery, Kelly, and Waddington, 2003: 84). For example, UNISON in the UK has introduced self-organization and proportional representation on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and occupation (McBride, 2001). However, the caveat is that without proper integration, separate representational structures for specific groups can lead paradoxically to their alienation and marginalization (McBride, 2001; Cunnison and Stageman, 1993). Empirical studies indicate that genuine respect for diversity that is not instrumental or tokenistic is still relatively rare among unions (Heery, Kelly, and Waddington, 2003). In a comparative study of unions in Italy and the Netherlands, Marino (2012: 17) found that the organizational identity of Italy’s CGIL, which professed a “general solidarity among all workers in the interests of social unity and the country as a whole” rather than the particular interests of an occupational group, was more effective in incorporating immigrant identities. But despite these recent contributions, the IR literature has generally been limited in theorizing the organizational contexts for renewal. Hence, and in response to recent calls to draw on social movement theory in order to understand how unions create and sustain social movements (Tapia and Turner, 2013; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013), I turn next to the literature on social movements.

## **Lessons from the Social Movement Literature**

In comparison to the IR literature, the social movement literature has a lengthy history of theorizing the interplay between organizations and movements (Clemens, 2005; McAdam and Scott, 2005). While historically social movement scholars have categorically denied the possibility of grassroots activism surviving in formal organizations per the “iron law of oligarchy” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), recent critiques to the oligarchy thesis (Clemens, 2005; Clemens and Minkoff, 2004; Leach, 2005) and new theorizations regarding the role of organizations in social movements (Polletta, 2002) have questioned this assertion. Specifically, recent studies have focused on the role of organizations as arenas of social interaction that develop practices and identities for activism (Clemens, 1993; Moore, 1996; Clemens and Minkoff, 2004). Clemens and Minkoff (2004: 158), for example, drew attention to the “creative and generative quality of interactions within movement organizations” that provide contexts for political

conversation and shape strategic actors. Key to maintaining organizational vitality, according to several studies, is the combination of solidarity structures with formal ones. Without one or the other, empirical evidence suggests, movements falter (Clemens, 1993; Polletta, 2002; Staggenborg, 1989). Solidarity structures provide safe environments for members to engage in strategy-making and develop as political actors within large formal organizations (Polletta, 2002). A recent study of participation in four different social movement organizations by Corrigan-Brown (2012) found that organizations with 'flatter' hierarchies created and maintained social ties that induced members to continue participating, and if they left the organization, made it more likely that they would return. Two main routes to combining solidarity structures with formal ones are prominent in the literature: building communitarian networks and creating free organizational spaces for deliberation and participation.

Social movement scholars have argued that actors whose identities are not adequately represented by existing structures may prioritize the construction of a collective identity over that of a collective interest (Pizzorno, 1981: 280). A long-standing stream of scholarship has pointed to the community and communal life as structures that build collective identity and reinterpret existing social values (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Clemens, 1993; Morris, 1984; Polletta, 2002). Communities provide a stable base for associational life where, in the words of Evans and Boyte (1986: 17), ordinary people are "able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue."

A number of studies have found that organizational spaces providing safe havens for reflection and deliberation promote participation (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Ganz *et al.*, 2004; Polletta, 1998). Studies have also found that free and relatively unstructured organizational spaces can incubate change projects (Kellogg, 2009). At the societal level, 'free spaces' have been conceived of as institutions that provide opportunities for ordinary people to reinterpret traditional values and learn about democratic processes. Examples include the African-American churches in the civil rights movement and networks of community-based organizations in the women's movement (Evans and Boyte, 1986). The term has also been used in studies of American unions to designate spaces for social agendas in bureaucratized unions and arenas for competition between social groups. In their study of California labour leaders, Ganz *et al.* (2004) found that organizational free spaces allowed union leaders to incubate social justice projects while fulfilling bureaucratized roles in the union. In Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956)'s classic study on the origins of democratic institutions in the International Typographical Union (ITU), free spaces comprised of pre-existing rivalries among social and occupational groups within the ITU that fuelled members' participation.

## Research Context: SEIU and the Justice for Janitors Campaign

The SEIU, which had organized janitors since the 1920s, was faced with de-unionization in the late 1970s as commercial office building owners in US cities began subcontracting their cleaning. As wages and conditions eroded and part-time work was introduced, demographic changes ensued, where African-Americans and older immigrant groups were replaced by newer immigrants. Starting in Denver in 1984 as a social experiment, the Justice for Janitors campaign has since been waged in 21 cities. The primary aim of the campaign is to reclaim union density in commercial office cleaning. This was achieved on the one hand through grassroots mobilization and coalition building, and on the other through shrewd use of publicity campaigns against building owners (who ultimately decided to hire unionized contractors). The SEIU combined bottom-up mobilizing with bureaucratic clout (Hurd, Milkman, and Turner, 2003; Milkman, 2006) to obtain employers' agreements to recognize the union once 60% of the market's workforce signed cards in favour of union representation (Yu, 2008). As indicated earlier, relatively little is known about the internal organizational reforms the SEIU underwent, the impact of the JfJ on local unions, and outcomes for participation.

The JfJ was primarily driven by the national union's organizing division through the infusion of national funds and organizers into local unions. The nationally driven nature of the campaign is explained by the fact that 'New Left' reformists who masterminded campaigns like the JfJ entered first into the national union (Piore, 1994; Voss and Sherman, 2000) and also that the largest cleaning companies operated nationally. The timing of a particular JfJ campaign was determined by political opportunity structures in a particular city as well as the internal 'readiness' of local unions. Where a local union did not support the credo of revitalization the national union waited until the local leadership turned over, either forcefully through trusteeship, or via elections. Revitalization through the JfJ changed the internal dynamic of a local union—often, workers in public or university sectors were loath to share power with newly empowered workers in the commercial sector. While democratic processes and structures thus needed to be strengthened, one challenge to this was that since the 1990s the SEIU began merging local unions into "mega locals" to create economies of scale and strengthen bargaining and political power. Table 1 provides a profile of each city, summarizing the different external conditions and organizational contexts met by the JfJ.

Participation in union activities required high levels of commitment from janitors under difficult situations. Most janitorial work was carried out at night, with full-time work typically starting at 5 p.m. and ending at 3 a.m. and part-time work ending at 9 or 10 p.m. Part-time workers typically worked two jobs. Those with young children could not afford childcare, and made arrangements for family or friends to look after them.



**TABLE 1**  
**Profiles of Four Justice for Janitors Localities**

	Los Angeles	Washington DC	Boston	Houston
<b>External dimensions of revitalization</b>				
Initial mobilizing	1986-1992 Iconic campaign, full-fledged activism	1987-1997 Protracted, militant, confrontational	2000-2002 Brief, external mobilization + internal reform	2003-2006 Community-centered approach
Bargaining power	12,000 (9,500 full-time)	8,000 (4,000 full-time)	13,000 (4,000 full-time)	6,000 (0 full-time)
Membership	Majority national	Majority local	National + local	National + local
Employer composition	67%	28%	N/A	36%
Top 2 contractors' market share <sup>1</sup>	13.8%	8.3%	13.2%	5.4%
Union density <sup>2</sup>	HIGH: Part of strong coalition among progressive groups	LOW: Weak labor & community coalitions	MEDIUM: Strong connection to some groups but not all	MEDIUM: Community-based alliance seek to overcome anti-union politics
Political power				
<b>Organizational contexts</b>				
Integrating immigrant identities	Integral part of Latino community 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation immigrant staff Bilingualism	Separate sectors and identities Weak connection to immigrant communities	Weak connection to immigrant communities	Campaign relies on immigrant communities; sustained connection potentially threatened
Free spaces & representation	Anchor local for representational structure Union work vehicle for social standing among members	Representational structure reduced by merger Weak connection between sectors & between informal and formal structures	Representational structure shielded from merger Training & informal ethnic representation	Initial associational fervor may be jeopardized by merger
<b>Outcomes for renewal</b>	Vibrant participatory democracy	Weak engagement	Promising signs of engagement	Promising signs of engagement

1- SEIU Research Department 2- Private and public sector average. <http://www.unionstats.com/> accessed January 25, 2014

## Methods

### Case Selection

Common campaign outcomes—all JfJ campaigns resulted either in new union recognition or increased union density—and the uniformity of union strategies in the JfJ provided important controls for this study. Nevertheless, controlled pairwise comparisons were not possible given that the timing of campaigns differed and no two cities had the same mix of external conditions. The decision was made to vary the cases by elapsed time since initial mobilization under the JfJ, given the strong prediction in the literature regarding the negative relationship between time since initial mobilization and grassroots participation (Zald and Ash, 1966).

### Data and Analysis

Observational data collected during 2005 to 2007 as part of a larger project on organizational change in the SEIU were analyzed for this article. Scholars have called for ethnographic observations in studying participatory democracy in unions: “Participant and non-participation observation are obviously more suitable means where the degree of embeddedness is higher and nuanced familiarity with the subjects greater” (Gall and Fiorito, 2012a: 726-7). Six full-time equivalent months of observations were carried out in four local unions (Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, and Washington DC) of the SEIU’s building services sector and at the national union in Washington DC after obtaining permission from the national union and local union presidents. Events observed included meetings, protests, social events, and informal gatherings. The author also spent countless hours on the road with staff and members of the union travelling to and from meetings and protests.

Within-case data from each city was analyzed initially as a separate case study (George, 1979). Subsequently, cross-case patterns that helped identify similarities and differences were assessed using the principle of “structured focus” comparison (George, 1979). A structured focus comparison asks the same set of research questions for each case, comparing across the cases on relevant dimensions. Examples of questions asked of each case study were: How did organizational change since the JfJ contribute (or not) to institutional vitality of the union? What practices, processes, and structures impacted the integration of immigrant identities and participation, and how? External and internal elements of revitalization and renewal were analyzed separately and then jointly. The subjective and expert view of the researcher was employed in order to assess dimensions of revitalization and renewal instead of relying on existing indices that inadequately measure complex concepts (Langley, 1999). For example, the level of participation in a union is not fully captured by counting the number of members in a particular meeting because it includes qualitative dimensions such as the fervour with which

committee spots are coveted and the regular spillover of scheduled meetings. I drew on the revitalization literature to assess factors in the external dimensions of revitalization including strategies for initial mobilization, the union's range of economic powers, and the union's political power, including coalition-building (Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd, 2004). How these factors influenced or were in turn influenced by the organizational changes undergone in each local were then assessed. Finally, indicators taken into account in assessing outcomes included members' attendance in meetings, participation in rallies and protests, members' abilities to influence union governance, and mechanisms for internal conflict resolution (Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd, 2004; Gall and Fiorito, 2012b, 2012a).

## Los Angeles

### JfJ History (initial mobilization: 1986-1992)

When janitorial work became subcontracted in the 1970s, non-union ethnic entrepreneurs (Mexican, American, and Korean) entered the market in large numbers. In addition, as the metropolis sprawled, double breasting—the practice of operating union in downtown Los Angeles and setting up non-union operations in nearby suburbs—became common. Unlike Washington DC and Boston, where the federal government buildings sector and universities respectively provided the last pockets of unionized work, the Los Angeles market consisted primarily of rapidly proliferating commercial buildings. The SEIU fought back with the second (after Denver) and, some would say, most iconic of its JfJ campaigns, involving a large-scale strike in 1991. The local union has since negotiated three rounds of collective bargaining agreements that stabilized working conditions (Erickson *et al.*, 2002). The JfJ in Los Angeles produced a long lasting legacy of member activism, with several members gaining stardom through media coverage and a feature film (*Bread and Roses*).

### External Dimensions of Revitalization

Ongoing mobilization in Los Angeles was assisted by the presence of long-term members who carried out union tasks alongside staff and trained other members. Because unionized work was full-time, members had relatively more time to spare for union activities than members in cities who worked two to three part-time jobs. The JfJ strengthened the market share of national cleaning contractors operating in Los Angeles—who could be threatened with industrial action in other cities they had business in—and pushed out smaller, non-union companies. Bargaining power was reinforced as the union successfully organized nearby large suburbs and key facilities such as Los Angeles airport. The union benefited from and actively participated in the central labour council, which had strong ties to

the Latino community and elected politicians, many of whom were Latino. The local was a respected participant in a network of progressive organizations whose collective political power was apparent in events such as the marches for fair immigration reform of Spring 2006, which the author attended.

### **Organizational Context**

As with other locals in this study, the Los Angeles local was affected by ongoing mergers to create a 'mega local' across Southern California. However, unlike other locals, as anchor of the merged local, Los Angeles hosted its executive board meetings. In addition to official representative posts, there were numerous committees in the union whose seats were coveted by members. Union work served to bestow social status to members—at the highest level of recognition, executive board membership, members were likely to wield considerable influence. There were numerous political and personal alliances designed to win elected posts and influence local union policy. The most durable of these were the pro-SEIU and the opposition factions—the latter had successfully fought an election against SEIU-designated candidates in 1995. Although a re-organization of the local two years later derailed their plans, the opposition continued to galvanize grassroots activism.

At different levels of the organization free spaces existed in which affinity groups could compete, choose leaders, and win followings or elections. Workplace 'lunches' at 10 p.m. provided venues for impromptu meetings held by union delegates and occasional visits by union staff. 'Zones' that demarcated different regions in the city-wide collective bargaining agreement emerged as units for governance, with "super delegates" overseeing other delegates. Each zone had a distinct culture and reputation—for example, Century City had a reputation for militancy and Downtown South was known as a hotbed of opposition activity in the union.

The janitors' struggle, which was extensively covered by the local Spanish language media, entered the public narrative of the Latino community. Many janitors expressed that community-based media helped them understand how intimately the plight of the immigrant was tied to lack of power in the workplace. Staff working on the JfJ campaign had either grown up in the Latino community or had been politicized through close interactions with the Latino community. The union served as an entry point to the labour movement for children of immigrants. Although official meetings were conducted in English, all members of staff were bilingual, and Spanish was the most commonly spoken language. The Los Angeles local exhibited a truly vibrant, often boisterous, democracy. Meetings started early and lingered on in hallway chats (and sometimes fights) well after they had ended. Members made social contacts, vied for recognition, and engaged in heated debate over just about anything the union did. A frequently heard phrase among members was "the union is us".

## Washington DC

### JfJ History (initial mobilization: 1987-1997)

Organizing in Washington DC was a protracted affair due to large resistance from employers, friction between the national and local unions, and organizational instability. Achieving union recognition entailed ten years. Unionized members in the federal government buildings sector, a group that was primarily African-American in origin, and local staff were ambivalent towards the JfJ, which they saw as a top-down organizing of employers (and less of workers) imposed by the national union. To the national union, located within blocks of the local, complaints from existing members registered as a reluctance to see the benefits they enjoyed being extended to a predominantly Latino workforce in the commercial sector. Staff deployed to the Washington DC JfJ from the national union worked hard in a hostile environment and turned over quickly.

### External Dimensions of Revitalization

The majority of Washington DC building owners was local, and did not have a relationship with the SEIU in other markets. The Washington DC cleaning market was also less consolidated than others, forcing the union to bargain with many employers. In Los Angeles, approximately two thirds of the market was cleaned by two national contractors, whereas in Washington DC the top two contractors cleaned only 27.6% (SEIU Research Department Various years). Even after achieving recognition, the local faced continued lack of cooperation. Employers regularly failed to inform the union of newly hired workers, jeopardizing dues collection and contributing to the union's ongoing budget crisis. Compared to Los Angeles, where the vast majority of union members worked full-time, the Washington DC local's total membership of 8000 was approximately equally divided between full-time and part-time work.

Opportunities for building political power were relatively limited. The city was afflicted with a series of poorly managed municipal governments, and the central labour council was also relatively ineffective. There was a sense in Washington DC that grassroots and local politics were overshadowed by national organizations partaking in politics at the federal level.

### Organizational Context

Formal structures of representation in the Washington DC local were vastly reduced as a result of a merger in 2006 with the New York- based SEIU local. Where previously 13 members had represented the local, after the merger only one executive board seat was allocated to to the combined area of Washington DC, Montgomery County, and Baltimore. As a result, prominent member

activists who had served on the executive board experienced a hiatus in their engagement. Workplace meetings in commercial buildings were rushed, as there was no ‘lunch time’ for part-time workers. They typically lasted between five to ten minutes and consisted mainly of information dissemination. Many buildings lacked workplace union delegates. Two additional structures for participation existed in the form of union sponsored English classes for immigrant workers and “time-outs”—secondments of members from their workplace to the union—for members to learn about union work. However, because these structures were not integrated with representational structures, participating in them was not likely to lead to continued involvement. The federal government buildings sector had a relatively stable workplace culture led by long-term activists. However, the two sectors were separated from each other by design—they held meetings separately and were even serviced by different staff members.

As one of the oldest locals in the SEIU chartered in the early 1940s, the local had prided its African-American cultural roots. An oral history project of the local union conducted in the 1990s revealed that members and staff saw the local union as an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement (Chenven, 1997). The local had initiated a variety of community activities and social programs, with staff often serving as board members in community organizations. At the time of this study the union had lost much of its connection to the African American community and had difficulty establishing new connections with the Latino community. The Central American communities in Washington DC were relatively new to the area and only recently were finding their political voice. Staff stated that immigrant community organizations in Washington DC had shifted their focus from grassroots mobilization to lobbying for federal legislation. As a result of the union’s relatively weak economic and political power, reduced opportunities for representation, lack of linkages between informal and formal participation, and loss of connection with immigrant identities, the Washington DC local experienced severe difficulty in keeping members engaged.

## **Boston**

### **JfJ History (initial mobilization: 2000-2002)**

Similar to Washington DC, the Boston local union witnessed a gradual erosion of wages and working conditions in its commercial buildings and had become dependent on members working in the many universities in its vicinity. In addition, the local had been governed for decades by two generations of a family that cut deals with employers and undermined members’ interests. Only after trusteeing the local union in 1998 could the national union launch the JfJ campaign, the goal of which was to raise wages and conditions and transition part-time work in the commercial sector to full-time.

## External Dimensions of Revitalization

Boston's membership included 9000 commercial sector janitors who worked part-time, and 3000-4000 workers in higher education facilities, including janitors and skilled maintenance workers, who worked full-time. Using its bargaining power over large employers, the local has recently been able to include incremental transition clauses to full-time work in its city-wide agreement. The local union has not faced the same financial hardship as other part-time locals due in part to employers reporting membership numbers more honestly. A key leverage that the Boston local union has had is alliances with faith-based community organizations and, importantly, student organizations on some of the nation's most elite universities. These coalitions helped mount a social movement around the plight of immigrant janitors during initial mobilization and acted as an implicit threat to employers.

## Organizational Context

At the time of this study, the Boston local had not yet merged into the mega East Coast local based in New York (it eventually did). The local's system of representation was galvanized by historical tensions between members in high-skilled maintenance occupations and janitors, as well as between members in higher education and commercial sectors. Social cleavages between newer immigrants and members who belonged to older ethnic communities were also reproduced in union politics. For the majority of commercial sector janitors who worked part-time, limited opportunities for communal interaction existed in the workplace. However, free spaces occurred outside of workplaces through the purposeful intervention of staff. For example, a members' training program combined English language classes, organizing, and civic activities, including a tour of American heritage sites in Boston. Members participated in deliberations around training design and criteria for selecting trainees, as well as discussions to formulate strategies for organizing and bargaining.

Janitorial members in the Boston local came from relatively diverse communities, including the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala. While the Dominican community had longer histories in Boston and had more established community-based organizations, other communities were recently settled. During the relatively brief initial campaign, the union did not have adequate resources to engage these communities. Ties with immigrant communities were being built at the time of this study, but not all ethnic communities possessed organizations that could coordinate with the union. Local union staff tried to create structures within the union that validated the social identities of the union's diverse membership. For example, "community representatives" were elected by members belonging to the same ethnic community, and acted as

a conduit between the union, union members of the same origin, and the community. In Boston, formal structures of representation were relatively accessible to members and reflected social and economic divisions among members. In addition, informal structures for training and ethnic group representation complemented and replenished formal structures.

## **Houston**

### **JfJ History (initial mobilization: 2003-2006)**

The SEIU's entry into Houston was conceived as part of a strategic plan to organize in the South and South West of the US which have traditionally been anti-union. For the SEIU, Houston was a testing ground for the union's ability to organize from "ground zero" with no existing janitorial members or other SEIU local unions. In the absence of a union base, the SEIU sought to build connections between multiple and simultaneous union campaigns on the one hand, and the union's program on immigrant civic participation on the other. This represented a deviation from the usual approach of negotiating with large employers for card-check recognition. Over the first two years, the union built relationships with community-based organizations that gave moral endorsement to unionizing the working poor. Observations in Houston were carried out after recognition had been obtained and before the union started bargaining for a contract.

### **External Dimensions of Revitalization**

With support from community groups, the JfJ team launched a successful organizing convention, and employers with majority market share signed a neutrality agreement without the union having to engage in large-scale protests. In July 2005, an early victory was proclaimed. However, turnover among part-time members invalidated a number of union cards and the union was thrust into a second round of card collection in 2006. Realizing the importance of securing workers' commitments to a unionized job, the union included more direct mobilization of janitorial workers as well as demonstrations and rallies in a second-phase organizing. At the same time, the union strengthened pressure on building owners by leveraging its relationships with elected politicians and community organizations. This led to a historic victory and union recognition where janitorial workers had never before been members of the SEIU.

### **Organizational Context**

Although the union did not yet have a representational structure at the time of this study, the potential for a vibrant democracy could be observed in workers' expressed desire to be selected into the bargaining committee. Workers also



demonstrated great zeal in being trained and in turn training other workers in mobilization tactics. The union's nascent quarters were supplemented by unstructured deliberative spaces that churches and community organizations provided. In meetings, workers appeared to find, and learn to assert, collective interests. Their visions of what could and *should* be possible to demand of employers often clashed with the union's own strategies—which tended to be tempered by knowledge of employer resistance.

In initial stages of organizing, the union was an unknown and often suspicious entity to immigrant janitors. The union was successful in drawing from the trust that workers bestowed on religious and community organizations by being identified with the latter. A staff member at an inter-faith organization expressed this well: "you had a lot of people who were really afraid because they were undocumented. And [the union] noticed a really big change as soon as [our organization] did these couple of weekends of announcements and everything in the parishes." Houston, then, represented the potential for a new organizational form in which the union's identity and deliberative structure fused into the community. However, challenges to integrating community-based elements were already evident at the time of this study. For example, the Latina organizer responsible for building relationships with community organizations in the initial years quit her job over disagreements about campaign management. Once the union achieved recognition, it flew experienced union staff into Houston from other regions who "took over" the bargaining. Local organizers felt that linkages with the community had merely been used instrumentally to obtain workers' trust. With an impending merger into a Mid-West regional local based in Chicago, the prospect of retaining the community-based identity of the Houston entity remained unclear.

## Discussion

This study examined the organizational context of union revitalization, also termed *renewal* (Fairbrother, 2005; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003). It builds on and extends the extant literature on union revitalization by drawing from social movement theory and by going beyond external dimensions of revitalization to identify structural and procedural elements internal to the union that foster ongoing participation. This study uniquely assessed variation across local unions that successfully adopted strategies for revitalization and yet differ in the extent to which these strategies have resulted in internal transformation (Behrens, Hurd, and Waddington, 2004).

The findings demonstrate the difficulty of achieving transformative change in unions, yet point to key organizational elements that may help achieve it. Members' participation was motivated and kept alive when social and political cleavages—whether factions in Los Angeles or past wrongs in Boston—found organizational

expression. These cleavages provided the prefigurative structures for politics (Polletta, 2002) that fuel democratic participation. Social and political cleavages had a way of expropriating formal structures, as can be seen in the way 'zones' in Los Angeles and representational structures in Boston provided opportunities for groups to compete. Participation was also enhanced when local unions integrated immigrant identities into the union's organizational identity. Connecting with immigrant communities and community-based organizations was a common way in which this was achieved. Houston provides the most vivid example of the extent to which identification through community organizations reduced the perceived risk associated with unionization. The Los Angeles local did this by inserting its own project into broader municipal politics—this local's insider status in the Latino community was evident by the extensive coverage it received from the local Spanish language media. But identification could also be achieved through organizational processes, as seen in Boston's ethnic ambassador scheme and in the entry of second generation immigrants into staff ranks at the Los Angeles union. Lastly, successful identification required constructing broader social justice goals out of the particular experiences of diverse immigrant groups. Boston sought to achieve this through training programs that provided a common experience base for members of different backgrounds. In comparison, Washington DC, whose associational life had for some time been separated into the federal government and commercial sectors, experienced difficulty in integrating African American and Latino identities in the union.

The current findings indicate that the relationship between internal renewal and external revitalization is far from one-way or automatic. The union revitalization literature has maintained that internal renewal facilitates external revitalization (Heery, 2005; Turner, 2005). Empirical evidence for this was provided in Voss and Sherman (2000)'s study of local unions in California that adopted radical organizing strategies. However, most studies examining the relationship have had a relatively narrow window of observation ending typically with successful union recognition; thus, we lacked an understanding of the dynamic relationship between internal and external revitalization over time. The present findings suggest that external revitalization can assist internal renewal, with a caveat explained below. Higher levels of bargaining and political power make it possible for the union to invest resources into member participation instead of expending energy in defensive mobilizations against hostile employers. For example, despite a relatively high proportion of its membership working part-time, the Boston local did not have to fend budget crises because employers in a "union city" such as Boston dared not misreport membership figures. Similarly, owing to its success in organizing surrounding suburbs and being part of a strong progressive political network, the Los Angeles local was able to focus on building institutional vitality.

It is, in some sense, intuitive that union capacity for renewal would depend in part on its economic and political powers. However, the present findings also chal-

lenge the assumption that is implicit within the social movement unionism credo, of participation following on from building a powerful union. Acquiring more economic power can hinder institutional vitality in at least one important aspect—the merging of local unions into ever-larger entities consolidates, and thereby weakens, representational structures. Large-scale mergers, the likes of which the SEIU and many other unions have pursued, can undermine institutionalized mechanisms for resolving conflict. In the present study, only those locals that were shielded by mergers (Boston) or hosted the mergers themselves (Los Angeles) maintained adequate representational structures. Based on the current study, one could argue that it becomes even more imperative in the context of large-scale mergers to provide unstructured spaces that foster the development of political actors.

Finally, the present results confirm the importance of studying revitalization as a process instead of an outcome, an argument which has been advanced (Behrens, Hamann, and Hurd, 2004; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Haiven, Levesque, and Roby, 2006) and yet rarely practised. In each city, the JfJ campaign entered the complex social structures of local unions, disrupting old processes and structures, and creating new ones. Learning how to achieve institutional vitality was non-linear—locals experiencing the JfJ in later years did not find it easier to sustain democratic participation. In the case of Houston, the most recent of the four, a unique model of community outreach developed in initial years came under threat of bureaucratic standardization over time. Los Angeles and Washington DC, two of the earliest JfJs, underwent initial mobilization around the same time, yet witnessed opposite participation outcomes. Future research examining the relationship between union renewal and revitalization would do well to adopt a process-based approach.

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## SUMMARY

### Organizational Contexts for Union Renewal

This article seeks to identify organizational structures and processes that contribute to incorporating immigrant identities and fostering democratic participation in unions. Empirical analysis is based on ethnographic observations conducted in four local branches within the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) of the USA that underwent the Justice for Janitors campaign. Despite the fact that all

four local unions experienced external revitalization owing to the campaign, internal renewal was most successful in Los Angeles, least in Washington DC, and somewhat successful in Boston and Houston. For each of the cases, I examine the connection between external dimensions of revitalization—initial mobilizing efforts, bargaining power, and political power—and organizational contexts for renewal—formal and informal structures for participation, and the engagement of immigrant members in union activities. While the union revitalization literature has argued that internal union renewal facilitates external revitalization, how external revitalization affects sustained internal renewal has not yet been examined thoroughly. Most studies examining the relationship between internal and external revitalization have had a relatively narrow window of observation ending typically with successful union recognition; thus, we lacked an understanding of the dynamic relationship between internal and external revitalization over time. The present findings suggest that external revitalization can assist internal renewal. However, building a powerful union did not automatically guarantee democratic participation, and acquiring more economic power through the merging of local unions weakened representational structures. The present results confirm the importance of studying revitalization as a process instead of an outcome, an argument which has been advanced by scholars, yet rarely practiced.

KEYWORDS: social movement unionism, member participation, movement sustainability.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Contexte organisationnel et renouveau syndical

Cet article cherche à identifier les processus et les structures organisationnelles qui contribuent à l'intégration des identités chez les immigrants et à la promotion de leur participation démocratique au sein des syndicats. L'analyse empirique repose sur des observations ethnographiques menées auprès de quatre succursales du Syndicat international des employés de service (*Service Employees International Union*) des États-Unis qui ont lancé la campagne Justice pour les concierges (*Justice for Janitors*). Malgré le fait que les quatre syndicats locaux aient connu une certaine revitalisation externe du fait de cette campagne, le renouvellement interne fut le mieux réussi à Los Angeles, un peu moins à Washington DC, et assez réussi à Boston et Houston. Dans chacun des cas, nous examinons la relation entre les dimensions externes de revitalisation – efforts initiaux de mobilisation, pouvoir de négociation, et pouvoir politique – et les contextes organisationnels favorisant le renouvellement – structures formelles et informelles de participation –, ainsi que l'engagement des membres immigrants dans les activités syndicales. Bien que la littérature sur la revitalisation syndicale soutienne que le renouvellement syndical interne facilite la revitalisation externe, la manière dont la revitalisation externe affecte durablement le renouvellement interne n'a pas encore fait l'objet d'un examen approfondi. La plupart des études examinant la relation entre revitalisation interne et externe n'ont eu qu'une fenêtre relativement étroite d'observation se terminant typiquement

avec la reconnaissance du syndicat; ainsi il nous manque une compréhension de la relation dynamique entre revitalisation interne et externe dans le temps. Nos résultats suggèrent que la revitalisation externe peut agir comme support au renouveau interne. Toutefois, la construction d'un puissant syndicat ne garantit pas automatiquement la participation démocratique, tout comme le renforcement du pouvoir économique à travers les fusions de syndicats locaux peut affaiblir les structures de représentation. Ces résultats confirment l'importance d'étudier la revitalisation en tant que processus plutôt que comme un résultat, un argument souvent mentionné pas les chercheurs, mais rarement mis en pratique.

Mots-clés : mouvement social, syndicalisme, participation des membres, renouveau syndical.

## RESUMEN

### Contextos organizacionales por la renovación sindical

Este artículo busca identificar las estructuras y los procesos organizacionales que contribuyen a la integración de identidades inmigrantes y a fomentar la participación democrática en los sindicatos. El análisis empírico se basa en observaciones etnográficas conducidas en cuatro secciones locales del Sindicato internacional de empleados de servicios de Estados Unidos que sostuvieron la campaña Justica para los conserjes. A pesar de resultados variados, las cuatro secciones locales experimentaron cierta revitalización externa como consecuencia de la campaña; la renovación interna fue exitosa en Los Ángeles, menos en Washington DC, y más o menos exitosa en Boston y Houston. En cada caso, se examina la conexión entre las dimensiones externas de revitalización – esfuerzos iniciales de movilización, poder de negociación, y poder político – y la adhesión de miembros inmigrantes en las actividades sindicales. Mientras la literatura sobre la revitalización sindical ha argumentado que la renovación sindical interna facilita la revitalización externa, la manera cómo la revitalización externa afecta la renovación interna sostenida todavía no ha sido examinada de manera exhaustiva. La mayoría de estudios que examinan la relación entre revitalización interna y externa han tenido un ámbito relativamente estrecho de observación incluyendo principalmente casos de reconocimiento sindical exitoso; perdiendo así una comprensión de la relación dinámica entre revitalización interna y externa a lo largo del tiempo. Los resultados sugieren que la revitalización externa puede sostener la renovación interna. Sin embargo, la construcción del poder sindical no garantiza automáticamente la participación democrática y la adquisición de mayor poder económico por medio de fusiones de secciones locales debilita las estructuras representativas. Los resultados confirman la importancia de estudiar la revitalización como un proceso y no cómo un resultado, un argumento que ha sido avanzado por los universitarios, pero raramente practicado.

PALABRAS CLAVES: movimiento social, sindicato, participación de miembros, sustentabilidad del movimiento.