

THE REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE
OLD UNIONISM AND THE NEW UNIONISM:
A NEW STRATEGY FOR U.S. PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS

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ABSTRACT

In his book the *The New Unionism in the New Society: Public Sector Unions in the Redistributive State*, Troy argued that the goal of the “new unionism” (the public sector union movement) is to increase spending on social programs through the redistribution of income from the private to the public sector of the economy. According to Troy, the “old unionism” (the private sector union movement) conflicts with the new unionism specifically over the extent and funding of social programs. Despite this alleged philosophical difference, Troy’s book fails to distinguish the *real* difference between the old and the new unionism, which is centered on using different strategies toward goal attainment. This article describes a potentially successful new unionist strategy and evaluates its effectiveness and limitations in a number of public sector union strikes. The article concludes that this specific strategic orientation may contribute to future public sector union success.

In his book *The New Unionism in the New Society: Public Sector Unions in the Redistributive State*, Leo Troy, a distinguished professor of economics at Rutgers University, made the provocative argument that a significant philosophical conflict exists between the “old unionism” (the private sector union movement) and the “new unionism” (the public sector union movement) [1]. According to Troy, the philosophical basis of the old unionism is “business unionism,” or the “philosophy of more” [1, p. 119], while the philosophical foundation of the new unionism is “social unionism,” or the belief of “increasing government inter-

vention in the economy” [1, p. 134]. Although one could argue that increasing government intervention in the economy is merely a typical characteristic of an advanced welfare state under capitalism, Troy went one step further in arguing that the goal of the new unionism, i.e., social unionism, is the transformation of the economy from capitalism to socialism. He wrote: “Social unionism would bring about a new society based on the socialization of income; it is the New Socialism” [1, p. 134].

In practical terms, Troy’s central argument appears to be that the primary economic goal of the old unionism is to “redistribute income from employers to union members” [1, p. 103], while the new unionism’s economic goal is to “redistribute income from the private to the public sector of the economy, with government redistributing—socializing—income. Its purpose is to increase spending on social programs” [1, p. 104]. And, according to Troy, this is the point over which the two unionisms directly clash: “over the extent and funding of social programs” [1, p. 104].

Through a lengthy discussion of the rise of the U.S. public sector union movement, Troy correctly pointed out that the new unionism is eclipsing the old unionism and that “the New Unionism will become the center of union power in this country, as it already has in Canada, Britain, France and other countries” [1, p. 158]. In addition, on certain aspects concerning public sector unions, Troy is particularly perceptive. For example, his discussion of a possible merger between the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers and the implications if this new union is affiliated with the AFL-CIO is right on the mark [1, p. 43].

However, Troy’s claim that “the New Unionism, together with its political allies [VGD: the Democratic Party], has already achieved a substantial measure of success in erecting a New Society” [VGD: the introduction of the New Socialism] [1, p. 159] is wildly farfetched. Not only has a new society (as defined by Troy) not been created by the rise of the new unionism, but Troy appears unaware that the public sector union movement has been hampered throughout the 1990s by the political situation in the United States. As Anderson accurately pointed out in a review of Troy’s book, the current political climate “make(s) the expansion of public employee bargaining laws very unlikely at either the state or federal level in the foreseeable future” [2, p. 171]. Furthermore, in a comprehensive analysis of modifications in legislation at the state level, Lund and Maranto concluded that such changes have made it more difficult for public sector unions to collectively bargain as well as to organize in the last decade [3].

And the state of legislation concerning public sector collective bargaining is not the only problem currently confronting this union movement. A number of the issues that faced the private sector union movement beginning in the 1970s and 1980s have come (and continue) to haunt public sector unions in the 1990s. For example, public sector unions are now grappling with productivity bargaining and job security concerns due to downsizing, privatization, subcontracting of

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work, and the increase in contingent employment [4, p. 1]. Although Troy did mention that privatization and decreases in governmental budgets may be “two potential checks” on the public sector union movement [1, p. 143], in his final analysis, he is pessimistic that these things will sufficiently derail the new unionism [1, pp. 143-147].

These trends in the public sector are occurring because of two dominant strategies being played out: one focuses on increasing governmental efficiency through the implementation of “innovative practices and a movement away from the bureaucratic, civil service model” while the other emphasizes cost cutting in an era when government at all levels is under attack [4, p. 2]. These changes in public employment are partially driven by an erosion of public confidence and support for governmental services. Significant sectors of the population no longer view government as the mechanism for the solution of social problems and have grown to distrust both government and politicians. Besides contributing to a reduced demand for public services, these attacks by angry taxpayers have been extended to public employees and their unions by calling for public employee compensation and job security to be based on the private sector model [4, p. 8].

In addition, governmental budgets are suffering due to an increasing inequality among U.S. income earners. At the bottom end of the distribution, wage earners have an increasing dependence on public services, although their declining (or, at best, stagnant) real incomes cannot provide the necessary tax base to support the continued delivery of such services at their present level. On the other hand, while wage earners at the top of the income distribution have the ability to finance public services, they have become increasingly ideologically unsupportive of such programs, preferring to contract out to private agencies for their personal needs, e.g., education, and protective and sanitation services [4, p. 5].

While Troy’s book ignores this present and future reality confronting U.S. public sector unions, it also fails to distinguish the *real* difference between the old unionism and the new unionism. As opposed to the alleged philosophical differences between the two unionisms, the genuine difference between the old and new unionism is centered on different strategic and tactical orientations toward achieving these two unionisms’ collective goals. And with the possibilities of additional attacks on public sector unionism combined with the further erosion of state protection for such unionism, the continued success of the new unionism in the twenty-first century is dependent on the effective implementation of this new unionist strategy.

JOHNSTON'S THEORY: BASIS FOR A NEW PUBLIC SECTOR UNION STRATEGY?

This new unionist strategy has been outlined by Paul Johnston in his path-breaking book, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and*

the Public Workplace [5]. In his monograph, Johnston pointed out the major difference between the private sector and the public sector union movements, which leads the two movements toward utilizing different strategies for obtaining their goals. According to Johnston, public workers' movements differ from their private sector counterparts over "their demands, their resources, and their historical roles" [5, p. 4]. Specifically, public workers' movements are required to voice their demands as public policy that would ostensibly serve the public interest. Such movements, unlike their private sector counterparts, do not emphasize constructing alliances in their labor market or in their market location but rather focus on building coalitions based on their political position as public agency employees [5, p. 4]. Because "private sector unions organize within and against labor markets" [5, p. 9], these unions try to remove wages from competition by forming coalitions among similar workers employed by firms participating in the same labor market. However, public sector unions ignore the labor market and focus on forming coalitions to influence the policy within a *single* public agency [5, p. 9].

Within the public agency, Johnston argued that the possibilities for workers exerting their power lies with the utilization of "political-organizational" resources such as "legal rights, organizational status, and established procedures" as well as "strategic alliances within the shifting political universe of the public agency" [5, p. 11], which may include clients, constituents, public agency managers, and politicians. And, as discussed above, another crucial dimension of public workers' strength emanates from their ability to articulate their demands in terms of "the public interest" [5, p. 11].

Due to the organizational location of public employees within the governmental agency and because these workers' demands are constructed to appeal to the public interest, public sector workers are in a unique and powerful position for engaging in public policy debate. Their views of what constitutes the public interest necessarily coincide with their own employment interests, which may be connected with the survival and funding of the public agency. Because of the public sector workers' stake in the outcome of this public policy debate, these employees often organize coalitions that may include clients, other public sector workers in the agency, the agency's managers, politicians, etc. to promote their vision/definition of the public good [5, pp. 12-13].

On the basis of the theoretical model presented above, Johnston argued that the success of any public sector union collective action depends on the union's ability to frame its demands in terms of the public interest, as well as the union's ability to form coalitions during the collective action. Utilizing two case studies of different occupational groups contained in one municipal employee union in San Jose, Calif.—the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees' (AFSCME) Local 101—Johnston proceeded to test his theory on "the women of the city" [5, p. 55], San Jose's municipal workers and "the custodians of the city" [5, p. 147], San Jose's custodians.

JOHNSTON'S CASE STUDIES OF AFSCME LOCAL 101

The women of the city, which included clerical, professional, and technical employees located in San Jose's libraries, parks, city hall, and other municipal departments, comprised one of the three major occupational groups represented by AFSCME Local 101. Local 101's other two occupational groups were comprised of the semiskilled, blue-collar workers of San Jose's public works department and San Jose's predominantly Latino janitors, the custodians of the city [5, pp. 59, 147]. Until the 1978 local union elections, the 150 public works department employees controlled the local through constituting a "well-organized bloc" [5, pp. 59-60]. However, this group lost control of the local when the custodians united with the women of the city union activists in the 1978 elections.

With the transfer of power to a new union leadership and the onset of fiscal austerity resulting from Proposition 13's passage in July 1978 (which severely limited local government's share of property tax revenue), the contract negotiations between Local 101 and the city, scheduled for mid-1981, occurred within a rather unique context. What complicated matters was that in 1979, San Jose initiated a "citywide job classification and salary standardization study" for both management and nonmanagement positions, which provided the perfect opening for Local 101 activists to introduce the concept of comparable worth into the wage-setting process [5, pp. 61-62].

The discussion of comparable worth adjustments became a major issue in the 1981 negotiations between the local and the city of San Jose. The subsequent nine-day strike by Local 101 in July 1981 can be characterized as successful from the union's point of view. The city provided 7.5 and 8 percent wage increases for each year of the two-year contract with comparable worth adjustments totaling \$1.45 million, which compared favorably to the city's initial offer of 4.5, 5.0, and 5.5 percent over three years [5, pp. 62-67].

According to Johnston, Local 101's strike success was due to the union's ability to frame its comparable worth demands in terms that would appeal to the public interest. Specifically, the focus on obtaining both gender justice and equality enabled the local to frame its demands in terms of fighting for the interests of "all the women of the city" as opposed to merely negotiating for its own bargaining unit members. In addition, Local 101 was highly effective in forming three coalitions before and during the 1981 strike. One coalition activated city services users around defending both the continuation of services and the current budget, while a second coalition involved the building of an alliance with agency managers to protect departmental budgets and favorable policies. Finally, the formation of a labor-management coalition with San Jose's mayor provided the necessary political support for the implementation of the comparable worth adjustments [5, pp. 81-84, 86].

Although they participated in Local 101's strike in 1981, the custodians did not obtain their collective goals. They wanted to end the contracting out of their jobs to private sector building maintenance contractors, which was initiated shortly after Proposition 13's passage in 1978. Although the contracting-out issue was initially on its bargaining agenda, the local dropped it early in its negotiations with the city [5, pp. 148-149].

Upon the conclusion of the strike, the custodians attempted to organize on their own to eliminate the contracting-out policy. In 1983, they flooded the city with a plethora of grievances, allegedly orchestrated by the newly elected shop steward. Later that year, the custodians took a more drastic step by attempting to decertify Local 101 as their collective bargaining agent, hoping to replace it with another union, the Operating Engineers. Even though the custodians collected the requisite number of signatures on the decertification petition, the election was never held. A city ruling (permissible under California's public sector labor law) invalidated the petition because it sought to carve out a separate custodial bargaining unit from San Jose's municipal employee bargaining unit [5, pp. 149-150]. The killing of this decertification drive ended the custodians' collective attempts to eliminate the city's contracting-out policy [5, pp. 149-150].

Johnston theorized that the custodians were neither successful in the 1981 strike nor in their post-strike collective actions because they had failed to express their demands in public interest terms and because of their inability to construct coalitions with other influential actors in the public sector labor relations arena. Johnston argued that the custodians' campaign could have achieved success if their demands had been articulated as a "racial justice" issue for the Latino janitors, with the union local engaging in coalition formation around this public interest demand [5, pp. 153-157].

APPLYING JOHNSTON'S THEORY BEYOND AFSCME LOCAL 101

While acknowledging that Johnston's theory holds for the public sector union case studies presented in his monograph, Draper argued that his theory might not be relevant for public sector unions operating outside of California because effective coalitions are much more difficult to construct in situations where "local party systems are more mature and racial divisions are more imposing" [6, p. 490]. However, case studies from outside of California support Johnston's theory that framing demands in terms of the public interest and forming appropriate coalitions can lead to public sector union success in collective actions.

Summaries of two of the case studies supporting Johnston's theory are presented below. One deals with low-paid, unskilled blue-collar workers who participated in what has come to be a relatively famous strike, while the other concerns highly skilled, white-collar workers engaging in a strike whose story is not widely known.

THE 1968 MEMPHIS SANITATION WORKERS' STRIKE

On February 12, 1968, a sewer workers' pay dispute led to a walkout of over 1100 (out of 1375) sanitation employees in the Memphis Public Works Department (PWD). Although an economic issue touched off this strike led by AFSCME Local 1733, within two weeks the collective action came to encompass both racial and human-dignity issues of extreme importance to these African-American workers, as well as to the Memphis African-American community at large [7, pp. 99-100].

Less than two weeks into the strike, an event occurred that altered the nature of the dispute. On February 23, 1968, a violent confrontation erupted between police and strikers/strike supporters, which broadened the primarily economic basis of the strike. Although the local's initial demands focused on traditional trade union issues such as union recognition, increased pay and benefits, union security, and an equitable promotion system, the demands became framed in terms of African-American dignity, a public interest demand that resonated within the entire African-American community. This struggle for human dignity was eloquently articulated by the strikers' signs, carried after February 23, which simply stated "I AM A MAN" [7, pp. 101, 107-109].

Now viewed as a struggle for racial justice, the outcome of the strike was deemed to be important to the future of all African-American residents of Memphis as well. Even though the community rallied around and supported the strikers (forming, in a sense, a coalition with the sanitation workers), it could not force the city to change its position on the strike [7, pp. 109-110].

To broaden this coalition, Memphis African-American ministers invited nationally known labor and civil rights leaders to the city in hopes of focusing national media attention on the strike, as well as increasing financial and public support for it. The appearance of Dr. Martin Luther King at strike support meetings led to contract negotiations resuming on March 23 [7, p. 111].

To organize a second march in support of the strikers, King returned to Memphis on April 3, 1968 only to be killed by an assassin's bullets [7, pp. 112-115]. Upon Dr. King's death, the strike entered a new stage in which the national media focused on the dispute for the first time. Shortly thereafter, the media condemned the city's handling of the strike. Upset with the negative publicity generated by the strike, a number of powerful white clergy and businessmen urged the mayor to resolve the strike before any further damage was done to Memphis' reputation [7, p. 115]. Through federal government mediation, an agreement was reached on April 16, 1968, which included union recognition, dues checkoff, a merit promotion plan, a grievance procedure terminating in advisory arbitration, no-strike and discrimination clauses, as well as a small wage increase [7, pp. 115-116].

THE 1975 COOK COUNTY HOSPITAL HOUSE STAFF ASSOCIATION STRIKE

The Cook County Hospital House Staff Association (HSA), composed of residents and interns, struck on October 27, 1975 after more than four months of unsuccessful contract negotiations with Cook County Hospital (CCH). From the beginning of the bargaining, the union framed many of its demands in terms of the public interest. Approximately half of the union's contract proposals concerned hospital and patient-care conditions. For example, the union requested that CCH hire an adequate number of staff members so all emergency room patients would be examined within two hours of their admission [8, pp. 122, 125].

Even before the strike commenced, the HSA formed a coalition with community organizations in Chicago. On October 23, the union met with leaders of community organizations as well as individuals served by CCH to elaborate on the issues that could lead to a possible strike. "General support" was given to both the HSA's negotiating demands and proposed strike, while suggestions were offered that the union continue to educate both out-patients and community members concerning the union's stance and strike plans [8, p. 125].

Three days later, the HSA took two additional steps in mobilizing community support for the upcoming strike. On October 26, the union distributed to community residents served by CCH a leaflet that described the key issues of the labor dispute and called for community support. That same day, HSA representatives attended three church services in the communities bordering the hospital to present the union's position on the impending strike [8, p. 125].

Besides receiving overwhelming support from a variety of community organizations during the strike, the union also was able to construct a coalition with the nonstriking senior staff physicians. Toward the end of the second week of the strike, these senior physicians stated they would discontinue their practice of performing nonroutine duties in the hospital's clinics and emergency rooms beginning on November 10, arguing that fatigue was the major factor in preventing them from delivering "safe and adequate care" to the hospital's patients [8, p. 129].

With the help of federal mediators, on November 13 an agreement was negotiated that contained a number of key patient-care demands over which the union had fought vigorously. These demands included the addition of more Spanish translators to help physicians on patient intake, faster X-ray and blood-test processing in emergency cases, the addition of more nurses to bring the number of nursing personnel to the same level as in other Chicago-area teaching hospitals, training the nursing staff and paramedics to administer intravenous solutions to relieve the physicians from having to perform this function, a 20 percent

decline in the work week from 100 to eighty hours, as well as a change in the number of “on call” nights from once in every three nights to once in every four nights. Referring to the proposed contract as a “victory,” as well as emphasizing the public interest nature of this successful strike, Dr. John Raba, the HSA president, commented, “Never before have M.D.s done so much for their patients” [8, pp. 129-130].

DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING JOHNSTON'S PUBLIC SECTOR STRATEGY

Although the expression of demands in public interest terms and the construction of appropriate coalitions by public sector unions were successful strategies in the strikes of both AFSCME Local 1733 and the HSA, a public sector union's framing of demands in terms of the public interest does not necessarily lead to the formation of coalitions that result in successful collective actions. For example, prior to the Florida teacher walkout, led by the Florida Education Association (FEA) in February 1968, the teachers had stated the collective action was occurring “for the sake of the children” [9, p. 134]. The “public interest” orientation of this strike was reinforced by the National Education Association (NEA) president, who argued, “the real issue in the Florida school crisis is the improvement of the school program for the 1.3 million school children” [9, p. 134]. The FEA continually framed the strike in terms of public interest demands in its journals as well as in speeches made by union officials. A typical comment that appeared in these places was, “I know how tired you are of seeing kids cheated” [9, p. 134]. One local teachers' association took out a newspaper advertisement that stated, “We have put our jobs on the line for you and your children. . . .” and “we have resigned to obtain better schools for YOUR children” [9, p. 135]. In spite of these positions, neither the public nor the students' parents rallied to the side of the striking teachers, preventing the formation of an effective coalition [9, p. 141].

And there have been collective actions in which the interests of public sector unions and their constituencies have been directly counterposed. For example, the United Federation of Teachers' 1968 strike in New York City's Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district and the Newark Teachers' Union's 1971 strike against that city's schools pitted minority parents struggling for community control of the schools against unions fighting to defend collective bargaining gains achieved in past contracts [10, pp. 239-246; 11].

Thus, one can argue that the framing of demands in terms of the public interest does not always lead to public sector unions forming effective coalitions during their strikes. In addition, there is evidence that public sector unions do not always express their demands in terms of the public interest.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF U.S. PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS

In the final chapter of his book, Troy reiterated his position that the new unionism (the public sector union movement) differs from the old unionism (the private sector labor movement) “in its origins, make-up and most importantly its goals, its philosophy” [1, p. 157]. However, as I have argued in this article, the real difference between the two unionisms is not one of philosophy but of strategic orientation, where the new unionism has the advantage over the old unionism through the potential to build and mobilize successful multi-actor coalitions in collective actions by the framing of union demands in public interest terms.

Troy’s statement that “(t)he future of the new unionism seems assured” [1, p. 158] is an indication of his belief that there will continue to be an uninterrupted upward trajectory for the U.S. public sector union movement in the years to come. However, even with the new unionism’s strategic advantage of having the potential to express its demands in terms of the public interest, the future of the public sector union movement is uncertain. As has been discussed in this article, this strategy has been highly effective in certain cases, although it has not always been successfully implemented by public sector unions. In addition, in a number of situations, public sector unions have even taken positions directly counterposed to the expressed public interest.

Public sector employment is undoubtedly in a period of transition, not only in the United States and Canada [4, 12], but throughout the European industrial democracies as well [13]. However, the outcome of this transition has yet to be determined. Since it is highly unlikely that the state will provide additional protection for U.S. public sector unions in the near future, these unions must become proactive in their attempts to build public support for their goals by framing their demands in terms of the public interest, where and whenever possible. The ability to successfully carry out this strategy will be a major factor in determining both the destiny and the future of U.S. public sector unions.

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