DENSITY MATTERS: THE UNION DENSITY BIAS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LABOR MOVEMENT REVITALIZATION[*]

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After more than a decade of analyzing efforts to revitalize the U.S. labor movement, many have concluded that organized labor must become a movement again. Nevertheless, most analyses remain based on the traditional view that labor power is derived solely from the portion of the labor market that is unionized. This fact is illustrated by the continued use of union density as the primary means of assessing labor movement strength. This article examines this "density bias" and ways that it constrains analyses of labor revitalization—obscuring alternative sources of movement power, excluding community based labor organizations, and oversimplifying assessments of organizing processes. The article highlights the need for a critical assessment of conventional wisdom in labor studies and argues that treating labor as a social movement may generate new research questions and move theorizing in promising new directions.

For decades, organized labor in the United States has been in a state of crisis. For students of the labor movement, the primary piece of evidence to support this assessment is the low rate of union density. In 2006, the portion of the workforce that was unionized stood at just 12 percent, representing the nadir of a decades-long decline (BLS 2007). For a dozen years, labor scholars, activists, and observers have sought ways to reverse this trend. These efforts have generated a vibrant collection of published research and theorizing about the prospects for a labor movement renaissance. Those working in this nascent field of labor revitalization are asking some difficult questions, reexamining old assumptions, and embracing strategic and analytic innovation. In a recent review of this discourse, Lowell Turner applauds these efforts, claiming, "revitalization researchers seek to cast new light on big questions" (Turner 2005: 394). Indeed, many of the basic assumptions on which orthodox labor studies have been grounded are being reexamined. Revitalization scholars have identified the need for new strategic orientations, attempted to broaden labor's traditional membership base, discovered more effective union organizing tactics, and explored the impact of globalization on the prospects of labor renewal. Yet, despite all of this self-examination, the conventional wisdom regarding the source of labor movement power has not been scrutinized.

For scholars and practitioners alike, it is taken for granted that labor movement power rises and falls along with union density. This tacit assumption is so widely accepted that it appears to be self-evident that labor's transformation hinges on dramatically increasing the unionized share of the workforce. But given the current context in which labor movement scholars are revisiting the "big questions," it is fair to challenge this assumption and to ask whether increasing union density is in fact necessary for labor movement revitalization. In the pages that follow, I take up this question and examine the analytic consequences of relying on union density as the principal means of assessing labor movement power and potential. I

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contend that despite the frequent use of social movement imagery in efforts to theorize labor revitalization, analyses remain conceptually tied to the conventional view that organized labor is not so much a movement as it is an agent in the labor market whose power is derived from the portion of the market it controls. This practice of treating union density as the primary source of labor movement power constitutes what I call the *density bias*.

Treating union density as the key measure of labor movement strength, and as the theoretical starting point for the sociology of labor revitalization, produces significant analytic blind spots. First, by treating movement power as a dynamic of the labor market, researchers overlook alternative sources of power, such as the disruptive power of protests, the economic power represented in the vast holdings of union pension funds, and the potential electoral power in the realm of partisan politics. The density bias also limits the types of movement organizations deemed appropriate analytic subjects, focusing attention exclusively on trade unions. Treating unions as the movement's constitutive organizational form overlooks the contributions of other movement actors, such as community-based labor organizations. And finally, the density bias leads observers to evaluate movement-organizing outcomes in zero-sum fashion, measuring the efficacy of campaigns as either wins or losses. Reducing complex organizing processes to simple binary terms makes it difficult for labor movement observers to account for the more nuanced aspects of social movement recruiting, such as collective identity formation.

I begin this examination with a fuller explanation of the density bias and its underlying rationale. Using historical and comparative examples, I show that density is not the only available source of labor power and follow with a discussion of the analytic implications of the density bias on labor revitalization. Specifically, I explain how the density bias forestalls consideration of alternative sources of movement power, narrows the range of organizational forms comprising the movement, and oversimplifies analyses of movement organizing. I conclude by calling for widening the conceptual lens used to study the contemporary labor movement by critically examining our basic assumptions and incorporating insights from social movement research to strengthen analyses of labor revitalization.

LABOR REVITALIZATION

Over the last decade labor scholars have produced an engaging and wide-ranging body of work addressing the possibility and potential of a "new" labor movement (see Bronfenbrenner, Friedman, Hurd, Oswald, and Seeber 1998; Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Milkman 2000b; Milkman and Voss 2004; Turner, Katz, and Hurd 2001). In the United States, the renewed intellectual interest in labor began in 1995, sparked in large measure by the first contested election in AFL-CIO history and a victory for challenger John Sweeney and his "new voice" team. Coming from the wing of the movement that supported more proactive efforts to organize the unorganized, Sweeney represented a significant change in leadership style and strategic orientation.

Sweeney inherited a movement that had lost five million members since 1979 and had seen union density in the United States nearly halved (Hirsch and Macpherson 2008). Trade unions were hemorrhaging members due to a full-scale assault of businesses seeking to avoid unions, the effects of neoliberal globalization with its corresponding capital flight and competition, and also as a result of organized labor's own failure to recruit new members. In the early nineties, organized labor was moribund and its proponents demoralized. But with Sweeney's victory and his promise to "change to organize and organize for change," the mood among labor intellectuals and activists began to shift. Many wondered if the labor movement might make a comeback. This intellectual dynamism is chronicled in special issues of several well-respected academic journals and a score of edited volumes dedicated to the prospects of labor revitalization, renewal, and transformation.[1]

It was in this context that a burgeoning literature emerged that dealt with the prospects of a labor movement renaissance. In a relatively short time, this body of work became substantial enough that several observers began mapping a sociology of labor revitalization (Clawson and Clawson 1999; Cornfield and Fletcher 2001; Nissen 2003; Turner 2005; Webster and Lipsig-Mummé 2002). Much of the empirical work focused on diagnosing the causes for labor's malaise and prescribing remedies for its transformation. The diverse literature deals with research on effective organizing tactics and strategies (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2003; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Lopez 2004; Sherman and Voss 2000), the need to increase racial and gender diversity in the movement (Bonacich 2000; Cobble 1993; Milkman 2000a, 2006; Nussbaum 1998), promoting internal democracy and innovation within unions (Brecher and Costello 1999; Eisenscher 1999b; Sharpe 2004; Voss and Sherman 2000), identifying obstacles and barriers to change (Fletcher and Hurd 2001; Penney 2004), fostering alliances with and adopting the tactics of social movements (Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Johnston 1994, 2001; Robinson 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001; Waterman 1993), and shifting the locus of organizing from the workplace to the community (Fine 1998, 2006; Gordon 2005; Luce 2005; Needleman 1998; Ness 1998; Nissen and Rosen 1999).

THE DENSITY BIAS

Despite the advances that this body of work represents, most of the contributions remain tied theoretically to the view that union density is the principal source of labor movement power. Even efforts to theorize a "new" labor movement or to promote "social movement unionism" are predicated on the implicit assumption that organized labor operates primarily within the context of the labor relations framework, with union density being the key to success. Indeed, all things being equal, increasing the portion of the unionized workforce would be an unqualified good as far as the labor movement is concerned. However, the point I make here is that when density is effectively treated as the *only* source of labor movement power, efforts to theorize and understand labor revitalization are constrained.

Logic of Density as Power

Union density has a compelling logic rooted in the dynamics of supply and demand in the labor market. It stands to reason that in markets with short supply of needed workers, their power rises. The inverse is true in situations where there are too many workers for the number of available jobs. Therefore, one early strategy of organized labor was to control the supply of labor in a particular craft in order to maximize its leverage over the terms and conditions under which labor would be offered. This was often the tactic of the guilds—which were responsible for training future generations of skilled workers—and worked best where the supply of skilled labor was sufficiently scarce that owners were forced to concede to workers' demands. However, as advancing industrialization deskilled the workforce, the labor supply tended to outstrip demand, thus undercutting the power of the skilled laborer and rendering a greater portion of the workforce easily replaceable.

Industrial unions emerged in response to this change. When workers could no longer collectively control the skills needed for production, they had to find a way to control the labor force itself—or at least a large enough portion to make production impossible without it. For this strategy to be effective, a significant proportion of workers within an industry or geographic region had to be organized (and willing) to withhold their labor. While craft unions gain leverage by controlling the supply of skills, industrial unions seek to accomplish a similar outcome by controlling a large share of the labor market to impact wages and working conditions. To do so, union density must be high enough to materially affect production in the event of a strike. In short, union density matters because it has a direct bearing on the leverage

labor has at the negotiating table. When density is low, labor's collective bargaining power is weaker than during periods of high union density (Bell 1960; Goldfield 1987; Rose and Chaison 1996).

The use of union density to measure the relative strength of organized labor began at roughly the same time the New Deal labor relations regime was being established in the 1930s and 1940s—a time when an answer to the "labor question" was beginning to take shape. The Bureau of the Census began reporting union membership data in 1897, but union membership as a *percentage* of the workforce was not reported until 1930 (U.S. Census Bureau 1975). During the years of the Roosevelt administration, labor made dramatic gains in membership, due in no small measure to the emerging state-sponsored system of labor relations advanced through policy initiatives such as the National Labor Relations (NLRA) and Wagner Acts. These policies were buttressed by an intellectual movement among prominent labor scholars who felt that an institutionalized collective bargaining system would ensure labor peace, and thus serve the nation's interests (Lichtenstein 2002). Establishing a labor relations system based on collective bargaining helped institutionalize the labor movement and also established union density as the primary means of assessing the strength of organized labor.

The Problem

The use of union density as the proxy for movement power may make sense within the context of a functioning collective bargaining system, but questions arise about its validity when that system breaks down—as many in the labor movement believe it has. In this environment, continuing to focus on union density has implications for theorizing the possibility of labor's renewal. The enduring emphasis on union density essentially reduces it to the *only* measure of labor movement power that is considered, and as a result, alternative sources of power available to and used by other movements are overlooked. While this oversight is problematic, it is especially so for scholars who advocate various formulations of "social movement unionism." Despite the rhetoric being used, most efforts to link social movements with labor revitalization are implicitly grounded in the density-as-power logic. Consequently, such efforts do not take us very far beyond traditional labor studies and its incumbent assumption that its position in the labor market is what matters most.

It is difficult to find a book or article on labor revitalization in the last decade that does not invoke declining union density figures in its opening salvo. Between 1995 and 2007, more than a dozen monographs and edited collections dealing with labor revitalization have been published and almost every one of them refers to union density in the first few pages.[2] Indeed, declining union density has become exhibit "A" to illustrate the need for labor revitalization. Union density clearly enjoys a privileged place in labor studies, representing the analytic starting point and the central research question on which revitalization scholarship is focused.

The density bias is also found outside the intellectual wing of the movement. In the summer of 2005, three unions, having grown frustrated with the pace of change within labor's most powerful organization, split from the AFL-CIO to form an alternative labor federation called Change to Win (CTW). The break was in large measure due to dissatisfaction over the direction of the labor movement. Specifically, the CTW coalition felt the need to pursue a strategy that would reestablish labor power through consolidating its scores of unions into a smaller number, eliminate competition among unions organizing the same industrial sector, and dedicate the resources necessary to organize new workers. The member unions comprising the CTW coalition,[3] some of which are among those most celebrated by revitalization scholars, contend that the AFL-CIO has been too slow to adapt to changing circumstances. They claim that the CTW represents a fresh approach to changing the culture and the prospects of the labor movement (Milkman 2006).

Steve Lerner, a key architect of the CTW strategy, proposes restructuring the labor movement into ten to fifteen sector-focused unions, creating a broader vision for the labor

movement, and committing more resources to organizing (Lerner 2002, 2003). Lerner's plan is based on the belief that the only way for the labor movement to regain the collective bargaining power necessary to insure its survival is to increase its market share in each of the primary industrial sectors of the U.S. economy. As such, the Change to Win strategy is fundamentally (and unapologetically) centered on increasing density. Therefore, the defections from the AFL-CIO ostensibly to build a "new" labor movement actually represent a recommitment to *old* strategies and *traditional* notions of labor movement power that focus on union density.

It is difficult to demonstrate the existence of the density bias because an idea or practice that is widely used and accepted invariably becomes enshrined as common sense. "Settled" ideas are rarely questioned, and for labor scholars the importance of union density appears settled. One way to highlight this is to point out that while density is used routinely in labor studies discourse, it is rarely accompanied by an explanation or justification for using it. Union density has become so fundamental to how the movement is understood that it becomes a challenge to critically assess our use of it, much less to suggest that relying on it may be problematic.

Decoupling Density and Power

To presume that density is a necessary precondition for labor movement power is to ignore the fact that there are other sources and different means of exercising power. For instance, labor movements in other developed countries have considerable influence despite having low density rates. In addition, the labor movement's own history indicates that movement power can be harnessed during periods of very low union density; the Knights of Labor, the International Workers of the World (IWW), and the strike waves of the 1930s are some well-known examples. Furthermore, treating density as the necessary and sufficient source of labor power ignores insights gained from students of social movements who have identified sources of collective power that rarely, if ever, are based on proportionate membership.

International Comparisons

The French labor movement provides a classic example of a developed country with low union density and a relatively high degree of influence. Union density in France was 8.3 percent in 2003, approximately a third lower than in the United States (Visser 2006); yet, arguably the French labor movement is more powerful than its American counterpart. Recent attempts by the French government to alter tenure policies to give companies more flexibility to hire and fire young workers were met with resistance from a coalition of student and labor groups (*Economist* 2006). The *Economist* reported that between one and three million people took to the streets in March 2006 in what it called "the biggest single day of strikes and demonstrations that the country has seen for well over a decade" (2006: 22). And this type of mobilization is not unusual. The French labor movement played a key role in the nationwide protests in 2005 over the government's privatization schemes. And in 1995, a strike and protest wave brought the country (and ultimately the ruling party) to its knees when the government proposed pension and welfare reforms viewed as unfavorable to workers (BBC 2007).

There are important differences between the American and French labor movements that help explain why labor in France has more influence despite its relatively low union density. For example, the relationship between labor and the state is much different in France, where the labor movement plays a significant institutional role in the political apparatus controlling unemployment compensation and pensions. Likewise, the French state plays a more active role in collective bargaining than does the U.S. government. Another key difference is that union membership status is different. Union members in France for the most part represent the activist edge of the labor movement (Bouneaud 2007).

While the proportion of union members in France is lower than in the United States, a much higher share of these members are actively engaged and committed to the movement. Conversely, in the United States workers are counted as union members even if they have been compelled to join or feel very little affinity to the broader goals of the labor movement. Moreover, this smaller group of French union members is supported by a wider band of non-member supporters who are sympathetic to labor movement goals. More than half the French population has a favorable view of its principal labor organization, and it is considered to be more credible than political parties and churches (Bouneaud 2007: 70). In other words, union density in France measures something different than it does in the U.S. It reflects a movement's activist vanguard leading a broad base of supporters who identify with the movement goals even though they lack union membership cards (Fantasia and Voss 2004: 24-5).

Although these differences are significant, they do not negate the point being made here, that there are sources of labor movement power beyond union density. The French labor movement illustrates that a high rate of union membership is not, in and of itself, a necessary precondition for labor movement power. Equally important are the level of activist mobilization and the popular support for movement goals. Density rates cannot capture the intensity or breadth of support for movement goals. As social movement scholars know, an important source of movement power is the extent to which a movement is supported by the wider public of bystanders, constituents, and potential sympathizers. With popular support, a labor movement with a small member base can make a considerable impact. The point of this comparison is not to suggest that the U.S. labor movement could or should adopt the French model, but rather to suggest that there is theoretically more to labor power than union density. The French case provides tangible evidence that alternative sources of power exist and that they are being used to great effect. Failing to consider them as we build theories and prescribe solutions for labor revitalization weakens these efforts.

While France represents a case where low union density does not translate into labor movement impotence, we find other examples where high levels of density coexist with low levels of labor efficacy. For more than thirty years, union density in the United Kingdom has been roughly twice as high as in the United States (Visser 2006: 45). Despite a current union density of 29 percent, British labor scholars lament the loss of power and the moribund character of the labor movement (Fairbrother 2000; Fernie and Metcalf 2005; Kelly 1998). British labor researchers, like their American counterparts, are trying to explain the decline of trade union power—even though union density is twice as high. The challenges facing labor in the United Kingdom are unique. For one, the decline in density has been more dramatic in percentage terms than in the United States (Visser 2006). Despite its comparatively high density, it would be difficult to persuade British labor scholars that their labor movement is twice as powerful as the one in the United States. In fact, they are just as troubled by the state of the labor movement in the United Kingdom and are eager to reverse its fortunes.

Density in Labor's Golden Age

The U.S. labor movement's own history, punctuated by episodes of dramatic mobilization during periods of relatively low density, belies the notion that union density is a necessary precondition for power. For instance, the campaign for the eight-hour day, led by the Knights of Labor in the late nineteenth century, was eventually successful in getting the number of hours worked reduced for thousands of workers (Brecher 1997; Voss 1993). Likewise, textile workers in New England, angered by the poor pay and working conditions, excited the popular imagination in 1912 with the "bread and roses" strike (Cameron 1993). Perhaps more than any other decade, the 1930s represents the golden age of the U.S. labor movement. The period saw the rise of broad-based industrial unions, rank-and-file militancy, general strikes, sit-ins, and the rise of the CIO. By the end of the decade, labor had entered the mainstream of American political culture.

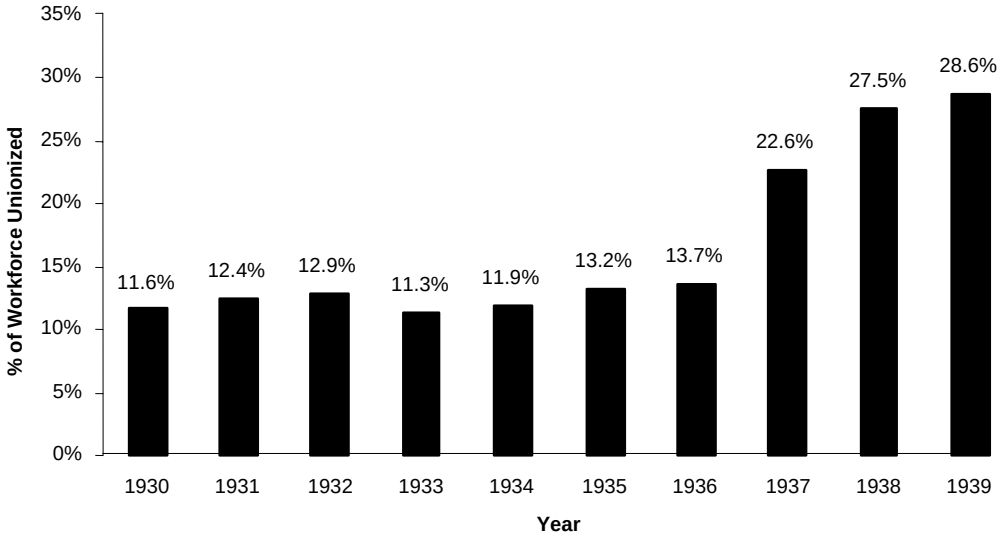
In many of the pieces dealing with revitalization, authors conjure this period, pointing to it as a model for contemporary efforts to transform the labor movement (Clawson 2003; Eisenscher 1999a). While many scholars long for a movement that looks and acts more like it did in the 1930s, they continue to treat union density as the source of labor power and its decline as labor's most pressing problem. But these observers overlook an important detail: for most of the 1930s union density was actually *lower* than it was when John Sweeney took over in 1995 (Census Bureau of the US 1975). In fact, the legendary general strike wave of 1934, in which the cities of San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo were essentially taken over by organized workers, coincided with a national union density rate of just 11.9 percent (Brecher 1997; Dobbs 1973; Korth and Beegle 1988; Selvin 1996; Wellman 1995).

The sit-down strikes that began in Flint, Michigan in December 1936 represent another highlight of U.S. labor movement history. This series of strikes became the defining moment for the young CIO, resulting in the establishment of the United Automobile Workers union as a key player in the labor movement. These dramatic strikes excited workers nation-wide and have become part of labor movement lore, even though the inspiring actions began in 1936, when union density in the United States was only 13.7 percent (see figure 1).

Furthermore, many of these celebrated events took place in a context in which workers had fewer legal protections than they do today. The right to form unions was still being contested by many corporate leaders despite the passage of the NLRA in 1933, which granted workers the right to form unions and bargain collectively. There was no real enforcement mechanism until the Wagner Act of 1935, and even that was met with resistance by corporations until 1937 when the Supreme Court upheld section 7a of the Act.

Finally, it is useful to note how labor historians characterize the movement during this period. They frequently highlight the significance of the 1930s to the development of the U.S. labor movement, citing symbolic and material gains for workers and the movement. Examining the historiography of the period complicates the link between union density and labor movement power. Nicholson contends that 1937 represented "the peak of labor's political influence" (2004: 222), even though union density would not reach its peak for another twenty years. Meanwhile, others contend that "by 1938, the labor movement's momentum began to ebb" (Clark,Lichtenstein, Levine, and American Social History Project 2000: 423)—at precisely the moment when density rates were *beginning* to climb (see figure 1). Clearly this

Figure 1. U.S. Union Density in the 1930s



Source: Census Bureau of the U.S. 1975: 178

reading of labor history suggests that even with low density the movement is capable of flexing its muscle and advancing its goals.

Labor and Social Movements

Another way to highlight the density bias and its limitations is by comparing analyses of the labor movement and other social movements. The field of labor studies in the United States is unique in its reliance on proportionate membership data to assess the movement's strength. No corollary exists in other social movements where membership data is more likely to be used in absolute rather than proportional terms. It would not occur to a student of the black civil rights movement, for example, to posit that the movement emerged or gained prominence because a critical portion of the nation's African Americans belonged to the NAACP, CORE, or SNCC. Among the range of explanations given by movement scholars for the rise and ultimate impact of the civil rights movement are the role of grassroots leadership (Dittmer 1994), the importance of indigenous organizations (Morris 1984), political opportunities (Piven and Cloward 1977), or some combination of these (McAdam 1982). However, analyses involving membership density are not found.

It is unlikely that scholars would accept a density-as-power line of reasoning if applied to a movement other than labor. If we examined the Civil Rights Movements using one of its most prominent organizations, the NAACP, we would find that its membership crested in 1963 at 400,000 (Meier and Bracey 1993: 27). An African-American population of roughly 21 million at the time would produce a density rate of less than 2 percent during one of the movement's most influential periods (Census Bureau of the U.S. 2004). The point can be made with other movements as well. For example, the National Organization for Women (NOW), the principal movement organization for the women's movement in the United States, has 500,000 members. As a percentage of a population of approximately 150 million women, the density rate is just one-third of one percent (NOW 2007). Finally, the environmental movement has been one of the most visible and effective movements of the last thirty years, yet membership density in the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, or any other of the movement's organizations would be impossible to calculate, and would be meaningless even if it could be. The proportion of African Americans, women, or environmentalists who are members of their respecttive social movement organizations produce extremely low density rates when calculated against their constituent populations. Nevertheless, these movements are understood to have achieved significant advances and continue to shape the social and political landscape. However, for students of the labor movement, member density remains sacrosanct, a somewhat ironic fact in light of ubiquitous calls to "make labor a movement again."

It is important to consider why it has proven challenging to link analyses of labor and social movements. First, labor is a qualitatively different type of movement, and second, the imagery of labor as a social movement has been used loosely by revitalization scholars. Unlike other movements, labor is firmly embedded in a political-legal structure that gives it significant clout. This standing compels employers to negotiate, entitles unions to legal remedies to settle grievances, and provides labor with mechanisms to accrue and leverage resources. But its status within the labor relations system is also constraining. It limits the movement's use and timing of certain tactics, burdens unions with legal obligations that consume resources, and has a moderating effect because unions can be held accountable. Dan and Mary Ann Clawson identify the conceptual dissonance between labor unions and the labor movement, noting that unions are an institutionalized, "legally constituted collective bargaining agent that represents workers in complex economic and juridical relations with employers and government," while the labor movement "is a more fluid formation whose very existence depends on high-risk activism, mass solidarity, and collective experiences" (1999: 109).

This important distinction has not been adequately addressed by labor scholars who frequently use social movement *rhetoric* without carefully applying a social movement

analysis to labor. This is most apparent in the use of "social movement unionism," which can mean a union that adopts social movement tactics yet continues to operate within the labor relations framework, limiting its goals to workplace concerns (Nissen 2003); or it can refer to a broad, class-based movement intent on fundamentally transforming society by engaging in militant collective action (Moody 1997; Waterman 1993). Without greater conceptual precision, the idea loses its meaning, undermining the analytic work that applies it. In any case, if we invoke the imagery of social movements, it is appropriate to apply the same analytic lens used to study them. Squaring our rhetoric with the analysis can only strengthen labor revitalization theorizing.

IMPLICATIONS OF DENSITY BIAS FOR LABOR REVITALIZATION

The overreliance on union density produces three important analytic problems. First, by reducing movement strength to a function of the labor market, observers overlook other sources of power. Second, the density bias limits the types of movement organizations deemed to be legitimate units of analysis, condensing a heterogeneous movement to a single organizational form—the trade union. And finally, the impact of the density bias can be seen in the way the complex process of labor organizing becomes simplified into zero-sum terms whose outcomes are measured in wins and losses.

Alternative Sources of Power

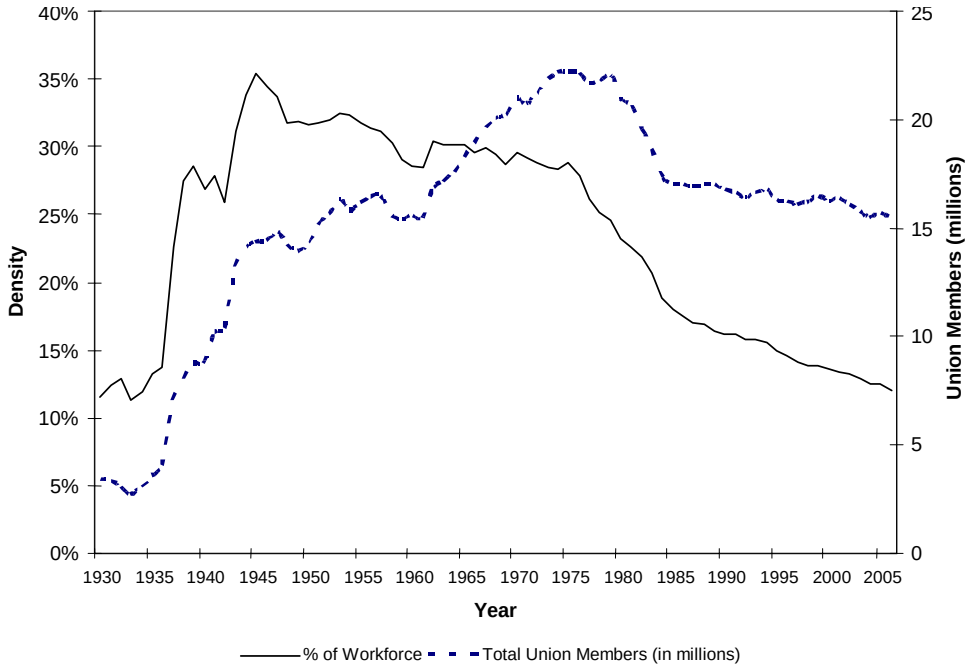
The density bias is based on the assumption that the labor movement is principally a player in the *economic* arena whose power is drawn from its position in the labor market. This assumption leads scholars to rely on union density figures to assess the movement's relative strength and to overlook alternative sources of potential power. One way to address the density bias is by examining union membership in absolute rather than proportional terms.

Movement Power: Mobilizing Existing Members

During the decades-long decline in union density aggregate membership rates have remained fairly steady (see figure 2). For more than twenty years union membership has fluctuated between 15 and 17 million, and the number of union workers today is roughly the same as it was in 1953—the year that union density reached its peak in the United States (Working Life 2007). However, presenting union membership as a proportion of the workforce, may understate the collective power of labor's 15 million members. No other social movement can claim anywhere near this level of participation. The Sierra Club, NOW and the NAACP, three of the largest movement organizations in the United States, have a *combined* membership of approximately 1.4 million—less than one-tenth the membership of trade unions (Curry 2006); NOW 2007; Sierra Club 2007). Nevertheless, these organizations and the movements they champion are widely seen as relevant and politically powerful despite their comparatively small member base.

One reason that a relatively small number of movement participants can be influential is that they are willing to act on behalf of movement goals. Frances Fox Piven and and Richard Cloward (1977) examined the power of disruptive protest, noting specifically that the power of workers is bound up in their ability to collectively withhold their labor and thereby influence employers (see Brecher, Costello, and Smith 2000; Marx 1977; Schwartz 1976). Whether withholding labor power through a strike or withholding compliance through street protests or boycotts, the greater the potential disruption, the greater the leverage to redress grievances or to win concessions. Social

Figure 2. Union Density and Union Membership 1930-2006



Source: Union Sourcebook 1947-1983; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics compiled by Labor Research Association (Working Life 2007); for figures prior to 1948 (Census Bureau of the US 1975: 178); for figures since 2004 (BLS 2007).

movement scholars generally accept this understanding of movement power, and it explains much of their interest in protest events.

While movement scholars focus their attention on the power of disruption and protests used to achieve movement goals, these strategies play a relatively minor role in the labor movement. Martin and Dixon (2007) have demonstrated the variability in unions' use of the strike as a weapon since the 1980s. While there are many celebrated instances of unions utilizing the power of disruption—with the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors being one of the most familiar—for the most part unions have been reluctant to engage in prolonged boycotts or work stoppages. One reason is that they are often prohibited from doing so by contract language or by law. It is standard practice in contract negotiations for unions to give up the right to strike for the term of the contract, and many workers are prohibited from striking by law or other state intervention. The New York City transit workers strike in December 2005 provides a strong example. Transit workers walked off the job in the midst of the busy holiday shopping season, effectively shutting down the city. Despite the strategic effectiveness and widespread popular support for the action, the courts fined the union $1 million for each day the strike continued, workers were threatened with fines and penalties for staying off the job, and the union's leader ultimately served jail time for calling what was technically an illegal strike. These actions mitigated the leverage the workers had and defeated the strike.

The legal and financial risks to unions for engaging in protest tactics that violate the law are often significant. Union leaders may calculate the potential risks and rewards and reasonably conclude that engaging in an illegal strike or boycott would incur too high a price for the union in fines, bad publicity, and possible jail time for its leaders. Never-

theless, it is precisely the refusal to abide by the law and the willingness to suffer the consequences that makes civil disobedience powerful. And it is this sort of disruptive and often risky activity that social movements use routinely. In many ways, the risks confronted by civil rights activists during the civil rights movement were equally if not more serious than those faced by striking union members today. For blacks in the south in the 1950s and 1960s, registering to vote, sitting at whites-only lunch counters, and riding in the front of buses were prohibited by law and by custom. Nevertheless, movement participants and their leaders took the risks of marching without permits, boycotting city buses, and sitting in at lunch counters. And for it, they were beaten by police, went to jail, and in some cases were killed. But by taking these risks and defying authority through acts of civil disobedience, they overturned legal segregation and gained political equality.

Shrewd observers might quarrel, pointing out that poor, disenfranchised blacks in the south had much less to lose by engaging in risky actions than do legally bound, financially accountable unions. But this argument overlooks the fact that the NAACP—at the time the most prominent and well-funded organization for black civil rights—was persecuted and even outlawed in several southern states after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling by the Supreme Court in 1955 (Morris 1984). As Aldon Morris demonstrated, while the NAACP was forced to defend itself, other movement organizations, with different strategic and tactical orientations, emerged. These groups, the SCLC and SNCC among them, became key organizational actors during the movement's most effective years. The attacks on the NAACP were certainly a serious threat to its existence and financial resources, but the circumstances created a political opportunity leading to a stronger and more organizationally diverse movement.

This lesson can be applied to labor revitalization. Perhaps the solution for a labor movement with too much to lose is to develop alternative movement organizations to engage in riskier movement work. Or, at the very least, rather than assume a defensive posture because the costs for engaging in militant tactics are too high, we might argue for *bolder* actions on the grounds that unions are resource rich and therefore in a *better* position to withstand the consequences. In any case, there are solutions to what is actually labor's happy dilemma—a movement with too many resources. Resources are typically viewed as critical assets having a significant effect on whether social movements succeed or fail. It is incongruous that labor's vast resources are so often used to justify inaction, implying, in effect, that unlike other movements, labor's resources *limit* its power.

Political Power: Labor and the Democratic Party

Mobilizing labor's membership base need not take the form of protest. Another source of power, with little relationship to union density, is electoral power. In a closely divided political milieu, a voting bloc of more than 15 million votes has the potential to shift the balance of power nationally. According to exit poll data in the 2004 presidential election, 24 percent of voters live in union households and 59 percent of voters living in these households voted for the Democratic presidential candidate (CNN 2006). If the proportion of Democratic votes increased merely 4 percent among union households, it would result in a 1 percent swing of votes cast nationally—enough to spell the difference in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. By comparison, white evangelical Christians, a group vital to the Republican base, comprises 23 percent of all voters. In 2004, 78 percent of them voted for George W. Bush (PEW 2004).

Even as union density continues to decline, the absolute number of union members and their families who vote represent an easily identifiable and strategically critical constituency. To be sure, organized labor has spent tremendous amounts of energy and resources to maximize its electoral influence (Moberg 2004). Unions and their federations have spent tens of millions of dollars and supplied innumerable volunteer hours to help Democratic candidates win elections with the hope that doing so will pay political dividends for organized

labor. However, the return on this investment has been mixed. While organized labor has worked tirelessly to support Democratic candidates, the party has often been unable or unwilling to deliver on issues important to the movement. NAFTA is a good example of a policy that was championed and ultimately enacted by a Democratic president and Senate despite the objections of labor. Moreover, it appears that the Democratic Party's message is not resonating with rank and file union members and their families. In 2004, only 36 percent of voters in union households identified with the Democrats, down from 50 percent just four years earlier (Stanley 2006: 178). This represents the nadir of a downward trend since the 1960s. If the relationship between workers and Democrats were cultivated to promote deeper and more enduring ideological bonds, labor's share of the Democratic vote might increase. Even a modest change in this area could profoundly affect the political landscape and put labor in a better position to achieve its policy goals. It is fair to consider whether mobilizing *current* union members and their families may ultimately have a greater strategic impact than a marginal up-tick in union density.

Certainly unions do not have unlimited resources to devote to electoral politics given their other obligations. However, it is worth questioning whether some of the resources being spent on organizing new workers should be directed to internal organizing aimed at strengthening the ideological ties between workers and the Democrats. As most observers and union leaders know, it is resource intensive to organize new workers—and when these campaigns fail, the investment goes for naught. Moreover, with only one-third of union families identifying as Democrats, it would require organizing three new union members to yield one that identifies with the Democratic Party. On the other hand, current union members and their families are readily identifiable, and therefore less expensive to organize. They are already on union mailing and phone lists, are already connected to movement organizations, and are more likely to sympathize with labor's agenda. Furthermore, the task of "re-organizing" this group would be less daunting for unions that might be reluctant to commit the necessary resources to new organizing.

In terms of political power, focusing on organizing current members might be more efficient and be more likely to produce meaningful gains. For example, if the current level of party identification (36 percent) were increased to 50 percent, it would be enough to shift the electorate by four percentage points.[4] Internal organizing to educate workers about the importance of party politics, and to more clearly tie the interests of the movement to the party, may serve the movement's long-term interests. As Democrats are able to count on a larger and more reliable share of labor's vote, it may provide the political cover for them to support labor's policy initiatives—such as labor law reform to make it easier and less costly to organize new workers.

The density bias, however, diverts our attention away from such alternative analyses of power and the important questions they raise. How can the Democratic Party increase its share of support within union households? Might it be more cost efficient and more strategically effective to engage in internal organizing of current members and their families? What issues resonate with union members that could be adopted to make the Democratic Party platform more labor friendly? We can answer these questions by expanding the way we conceptualize labor movement power. Doing so may lead to a new understanding of the central problems confronting revitalization. It may turn out that mobilizing labor's existing members may be just as important as increasing union density.

Pension Power: An Alternative Market-Based Power

Another alternative source of power is the power derived from workers' pension fund assets. It has been reported that organized labor has full or partial control of $4.7 trillion (Weller and White 2001), while the value of the combined pension fund assets of all workers now exceeds $10 trillion (Anand 2000). This represents a significant portion of the total value

of the equity market. In the United States, 47 percent of the nation's equity is controlled by pension funds (Carmichael 2005: 4), and according to Tessa Hebb, worker's pension savings "represent the largest single source of capital in the world" (Hebb 2001: 2). These assets constitute a source of power that the labor movement could exercise by refusing investment in strategically situated companies as leverage for securing workers' demands, or by making investment conditional on union recognition and good faith bargaining. Unions have been experimenting with these types of strategies, and they are being advocated by some policy analysts and labor economists. These strategies include: socially responsible investing (Becker and McVeigh 2001); shareholder activism such as the use of proxy voting (O'Connor 2001); direct investment through union-based investment vehicles and Economically Targeted Investments (Calabrese 2001); and improving efforts to educate fund trustees, money managers, and beneficiaries (Zanglein 2001).

Weller and White (2001) identify some of the ways that unions are using their power the way other large institutional investors attempt to influence the behavior of the companies whose stock they hold. One case involves the Hotel and Restaurant Employees union (HERE) that was able to thwart an attempt by Marriott International to divide the company in such a way as to leave union shareholders with a debt-ridden company while folding the profitable units into the parent company under its control. Labor's main federation is also getting involved. The AFL-CIO started the Capital Stewardship Program in 1997, and it continues to support The Center for Working Capital to facilitate the implementation of asset-based strategies (Silvers, Patterson, and Mason 2001). Some unions have pursued their own efforts on this front, exploring ways to more effectively employ their financial power (Carmichael 2005; Fung, Hebb, and Rogers 2001). These efforts suggest that some quarters of the labor movement are beginning to recognize the powerful influence they might have through the strategic use of their assets. But while some labor economists, policy analysts, and union officials have considered the possibilities, the idea is absent from the sociological discourse on labor revitalization.

Considering this type of financial leverage as a source of movement power would be a departure from conventional wisdom that workers' collective power is rooted in the labor market. Indeed, it would be an ironic twist for organized workers to demand greater influence in *capital* markets to achieve labor movement goals. Nevertheless, this is a type of leverage capital is more likely to respond to and may even be more effective at this juncture than a threat of strike. More important, it is a source of power that the labor movement could exercise immediately. The financial power of union pension funds exists independently of density rates and is available in times of movement abeyance. There is no need for union density to increase before deploying it.

The challenge is to find ways to effectively utilize this power. While it is not a new idea to direct the labor movement's collective financial assets to advance labor's broader agenda, it has proven difficult for several reasons. First, these assets represent deferred wages of workers that they will rely on in retirement. It is the fiduciary responsibility of trustees of these assets to maximize returns while minimizing risks. Therefore, generating market rate returns becomes the primary goal. Second, even if fund managers and trustees wanted to, it is difficult to pursue "collateral" goals—such as union friendly policies—as an investment rationale. Doing so may invite a regulatory response, placing trustees in legal jeopardy. Finally, many trustees and beneficiaries are not aware of the investment options that *can* be used to advance union-friendly investment practices (Zanglein 2001). Although constrained within these institutional parameters, very real possibilities exist.

By any measure, trillions of dollars worth of financial assets constitute a significant source of power for the labor movement, and it ought to be analytically mined and strategically exploited to the fullest extent possible. Yet, because the received view in labor studies equates power with membership density, this potential source of power has not been considered by labor sociologists, nor has it found its way into the discourse on labor revitali-

zation. The density bias inhibits our ability to recognize the power embedded in workers' pension assets—just as it prevents us from considering fully the power of protest and electoral politics. Focusing more intellectual energy on alternative sources of power may lead to discovering ways to use them more effectively.

Union-Centric Labor Revitalization

As the preceding suggests, the density bias tends to limit consideration of sources of power that leverage something other than union density. But there are additional analytical consequences emanating from the density bias. For one, it reduces a heterogeneous movement to a single organizational manifestation, the trade union. While social movements include a wide variety of organizations for labor, trade unions are the movement's exclusive organizational form. Focusing too intently on one type of movement organization inevitably impacts the way we theorize and strategize labor revitalization.

If we begin with the presumption that union density is the necessary and sufficient requirement for labor movement power, it follows that the path to revitalization rests on increasing the unionized portion of the workforce. Since only one movement organization is capable of increasing density, the trade union becomes the exclusive unit of analysis in labor revitalization research. Unions are so central to the way labor scholars theorize the movement that unions and the labor movement have become synonymous. Indeed, it is common for labor scholars to refer to the labor movement as the *union* movement. One indication of this point is the widespread and accepted use of the term social movement *unionism*, which suggests that even the putatively "new" labor movement remains conceptually linked to the union form. Treating unions as the *constitutive* movement organization in this way has strategic and analytical drawbacks. When unions and "the labor movement" are conflated, the range of strategic and tactical options is reduced to those that can be accomplished within the parameters of the trade union and the labor relations system. This union-centric feature of contemporary labor studies—which is derivative of the density bias—prevents consideration of other organizational forms, particularly those operating outside the collective bargaining framework, that may be contributing to labor's revitalization.

In recent years, living wage campaigns, worker centers, and other community-based labor organizing efforts have emerged as promising sites of movement revitalization (Sullivan 2004; Tait 2005). Worker centers, for instance, are one organizational form obscured by union-centric labor movement analyses (Fine 2006, 2007; Gordon 2005). Since they operate outside the formal labor-relations framework, the contributions worker centers make to the broader labor movement go unnoticed, largely because they do not—and by definition cannot—increase union density. While a handful of scholars have explored the viability of alternative organizational forms, and movement innovators have identified them as sites of promising movement activity, mainstream labor revitalization research remains fixed on unions.

Reducing a large and diverse movement to a single organizational form is unique to labor movement studies. Students of social movements typically recognize a much more diverse range of organizations that contribute in various ways to a movement. If the labor movement were to be treated more like a social movement, unions might become one of several social movement organizations constituting a broader multiorganizational field (Armstrong 2002; Curtis and Zurcher 1973; Klandermans 1992). The effect might be that rather than being relegated to the margins of the labor movement, community-based labor organizations and other types of extra-union activity might find its way into analyses of labor revitalization (see Sullivan forthcoming).

Union-centric analysis may also cause labor observers to fail to recognize the limits of the union form. In an era of neoliberal economic globalization, there are many settings where collective bargaining is simply untenable due to competitive pressures at the firm level, or overt antipathy toward unions at the state level. Furthermore, the increasing mobility of

capital may ultimately undermine the viability of collective bargaining in more sectors of the economy. In such an inhospitable environment, where organized labor has been eviscerated and where workers are exploited with impunity, whether trade unions can survive, much less thrive, becomes a fair question that some have contemplated (Farber and Western 2001; Lipset and Katchanovski 2001; Moody 1997; Troy 1999; Wallerstein and Western 2000). It may be necessary for students of the labor movement to consider the possibility that a revitalization strategy based on unions and density may be insufficient to alter the balance of power, at least in the near term.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine organized labor reversing the current trends, effectively confronting the political momentum of neoliberalism, and successfully organizing workers on a scale sufficient to produce density levels that could affect wages and living conditions in the global economy. Farber and Western (2001) argue that economic restructuring will offset any gains unions may make through increased organizing. Moreover, in the context of a globalizing economy and the documented difficulty of organizing workers in it, it is doubtful that international labor solidarity or cross-border union organizing will occur on a scale large enough to have a significant impact (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005). In the present context, it is unlikely that workers of the world could unite, even if they wanted to.

Equating power with union density and the labor movement with the union form is problematic and limits the sociology of labor revitalization. One important step to take is to expand the parameters that have long-defined the labor movement and its forms. Reducing the study of such a diverse and complex movement to a single organizational manifestation constrains our efforts to understand labor revitalization in all its dimensions. Incorporating "extra-union" organizations that operate outside of the traditional collective bargaining framework into our analyses might shed light on the ways that labor is acting like a movement.

Labor Organizing as a Binary Process

The underlying logic of density as the source of labor movement power leads to union-centric research, but it also impacts the way the organizing process is understood. This point can be made by summarizing its underlying logic: if labor movement power is a function of union density, than trade unions are required to establish it, and therefore union members are essential. With union members as the unit on which labor power is ultimately based, the central problem for labor practitioners and scholars interested in organizing becomes identifying the tactics and strategies that most effectively produce "union members." In other words, what matters most on a practical level is the presence or absence of union members, and workers are considered to be organized only when they become members of formally recognized unions. This in turn leads to the practice of assessing the efficacy of labor organizing tactics in simple binary terms, measuring outcomes as campaign victories or defeats.

The primary goal for labor organizing is the accretion of new members. This is done most commonly in one of two ways: through certification elections overseen by a state agency such as the National Labor Relations Board, or alternatively by card check agreements between unions and employers. In either type of campaign, the winner takes all. If the union wins a majority of votes in a certification election or secures a majority of support in a signature campaign, the workers are considered to be "organized." Outcomes are thus measured in zero-sum terms—unions can only win or lose—and since only those efforts leading to formally recognized unions count as victories, scholarship on labor organizing tends to focus on the tactics and conditions leading to this outcome (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Rose and Chaison 1990; Sharpe 2004; Sherman and Voss 2000).[5]

Assessing organizing practices in terms of winning or losing cannot capture critical aspects of movement building such as collective identity formation. Students of other social movements view these dynamics as key to understanding recruitment processes and have not found it necessary, or useful, to reduce them to binary terms (Gamson 1992; Jasper 1997;

Melucci 1995; Taylor 1996). Moreover, labor organizing outcomes do not necessarily lend themselves to simple means of evaluation in part because they are not always clear. For instance, it is not uncommon for workers who "lose" a campaign to come away with a newfound sense of solidarity, political consciousness, and political efficacy (Johnston 2000; Rachleff 1993; Rosenblum 1995; Schleuning 1994; Weinbaum 2004). In other words, a losing campaign may actually generate enduring movement identities among participants (Jasper 1997). Conversely, there are cases in which "successful" unionizing campaigns result in recognition and collective bargaining agreements, but leave workers feeling disaffected or antagonistic toward the labor movement (Markowitz 2000; Sullivan 2003). Such examples raise questions about the validity of binary measures to assess organizing outcomes. By continuing to do so, we may fail to recognize some of the more subtle aspects of movement recruitment and the impact they have on labor's rebuilding efforts.

CONCLUSION: RECONCEPTUALIZING REVITALIZATION

In this article I have addressed the analytic implications stemming from the use of union density as the sole means of assessing labor movement power and potential. I have shown how this density bias restricts theoretical development and may limit strategic innovation by excluding alternative sources of movement power, reducing the movement to a single organizational form, and oversimplifying the way labor scholars understand the complex processes of movement recruitment.

Indeed, density *does* matter. Having a higher percentage of the labor force unionized increases labor's leverage at the negotiating table and leads to tangible benefits for workers in the form of pay increases, better working conditions, and improved job security. In no way is the preceding argument meant to suggest that union density is irrelevant. But while union density is important, it is not the *only* source of power available to the movement.

Other social movements, for instance, rely on the power of disruption and political mobilization to achieve their goals, and they are often successful despite having low levels of membership density. As the movement's history demonstrates, labor too can be strong even when union density rates are low. Furthermore, labor enjoys sources of power not available to other movements. It controls significant financial assets and already possesses a standing army of voters that can be marshaled in service to movement goals. But because revitalization scholarship remains grounded in the assumptions of labor studies orthodoxy, we are failing to appreciate, much less utilize, the full range of strategic or analytic options.

While labor scholars focus on explaining why the portion of unionized workers is declining and how to reverse this trend, a fact that gets lost is that with more than 15 million card-carrying members, even in its beleaguered state, labor's membership is many times greater than any other social movement. Organized labor enjoys a membership base that is more than ten times larger than the Sierra Club, one of the largest social movement organizations in the country. If other social movement organizations like ACT-UP or Earth First had the number of members that unions have they would likely consider it a sign of strength. But due to the preoccupation with proportional membership, labor observers routinely—and paradoxically—view this level of participation as evidence of the movement's weakness.

Understanding membership and its relationship to power, in terms other than density, may lead to reconsidering the very nature of labor's current crisis. Perhaps the most pressing issue for labor revitalization is not how to increase membership *density* but rather figuring out how the movement might better utilize the members it already has. If the movement were comprised of millions of active members, it would represent a potent political and social force, irrespective of its share of the labor market. Moreover, if workers who are not unionized but who are actively pursuing similar goals via community-based organizations were counted as participants, the movement's power would surely be enhanced. Rethinking our

analytic assumptions regarding membership and density in such ways may ultimately lead to focusing on new questions: How can labor mobilize a greater portion of its existing membership? How can strategists tap other sources of power? What other types of movement organizations might contribute to revitalization? How can organizers strengthen the movement identities of workers and their families? Or, what does it mean for workers to be "organized"?

We are likely to find answers to these questions by looking to the field of social movement studies where collective identity formation, activist mobilization, tactical repertoires, social movement organizations, and recruitment processes are routinely examined. Labor scholars may be well served by utilizing some of the tools and insights of their social movement counterparts. Although labor scholars have been advocating "social movement unionism," the on-going practice of equating union density and labor movement power suggests that we have yet to fully adopt and adequately apply the theoretical framework of social movements to labor revitalization. The goal here has been to show the value of doing so by critically examining one of our most fundamental assumptions and demonstrating the ways it constrains our research and theorizing. Recognizing the density bias and acknowledging its impact may ultimately lead to better understanding the labor movement's ongoing efforts to regain power.

NOTES

[1] Special issues on the topic were published in Work and Occupation (2005) and Sociological Focus (2004). Among the edited volumes published are: Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Fernie and Metcalf 2005; Frege and Kelly 2004; Herman and Schmid 2003; Mantsios 1998; Milkman 2000b; Milkman and Voss 2004; Nissen 1999; Tillman and Cummings 1999; Turner, Katz, and Hurd 2001; Wood, Meiksins, and Yates 1998.

[2] Among treatments of labor revitalization that refer to union density in the initial pages are: Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998: 2; Clawson 2003: 1; Fernie and Metcalf 2005: 1; Kumar and Schenk 2006: 15; Lichtenstein and Century Foundation/Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Future of Unions 1999: v; Lopez 2004: 2; Mantsios 1998: xv; Milkman 2000b: 1, 2006: 2; Milkman and Voss 2004: 1; Nissen 1999: 11; Tillman and Cummings 1999: 1.

[3] The members of the CTW coalition which represents six million members are the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC), United Farm Workers of America (UFW), United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), and UNITE HERE, a union of hotel, restaurant, and textile workers formed in 2004 as a result of a merger between the Hotel Employee Restaurant Employees (HERE) and the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE).

[4] Assuming that all those newly Democrat-identifying members and families vote for Democrats and that the proportion of the electorate from union households remains the same.

[5] Both the title of one of most influential books published on the topic, Organizing to Win, as well as the "Change to Win" coalition reflects this win or lose view of the organizing process (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998).

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