Union-Community Coalitions and Community Unionism:

developing a framework for the role of union-community relationships in union renewal

A look at the pattern of recent relationships between unions and community organisations in NSW, Australia

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Abstract

Relationships between unions and community organisations are an important feature of current strategies for union renewal. This paper develops a three part typology that categorises these union-community relationships, ranging from simple instrumental union-community relationships, to union-community coalitions and finally to community unionism. The paper argues that the deeper the union-community relationship, the more likely it is to yield union power and achieve successful campaign victories. The paper then explores this typology by analysing three case studies that consider each of these relationship forms, examining some recent practices of the Central Labor Council in Sydney Australia (Labor Council of NSW). Through these case studies the limitations and strengths of each of these relationship types are drawn out. The most important lesson is that effective union-community relationships require not only a relationship of trust and reciprocity between the coalition partners, but most importantly require a significant depth of commitment and participation by unions.

Across the industrialised world, unions are in a state of change. In Australia, the change process is focused on debates about renewal strategies. The rapid decline in union membership has momentarily levelled, while unions continue to develop strategies for growth and power, predominantly focused on new organising strategies. Supplementing this commitment to organising is an evolving discussion around union-community relationships, in particular union relationships with community organisations. In this paper the term community unionism is invoked to analyse the trend of unions and community organisations working together. This trend is developing as a tactical response to a climate of declining union density and falling union power, and where employer hostility and aggressive anti-union legal impediments are narrowing the capacity for traditional forms of union action.

However there is not yet an effective language to describe the different ways in which unions and community organisations engage with each other. This paper seeks to bridge that gap. It discusses three different levels of union-community relationships, defining and describing their practice and outlining their ability to enhance union power. Section One of this paper begins with a discussion of basic union-community relationships (instrumental union-community relationships), then moves through an analysis of union-community coalitions, before defining community unionism as the most effective form of union-community practice. Then in Section Two, I consider three case studies of union-community relationships involving the Labor Council of NSW, the peak trade union body for unions in Sydney, NSW. This union council, the largest and oldest in Australia, has had a varied history of union-community relationships. The paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the three forms of union-community relationships outlined in the first section through three case studies. The first case study reflects on the Council's weekly meetings as an example of instrumental union-community relationships, secondly I discuss the case study of the Walk against the War Coalition as a union-community coalition, and thirdly I consider the establishment of the Transport Alliance and its promise as an example of community unionism. Finally this paper briefly reflects on what this diverse union practice means for union renewal, and the role of community unionism.

Section One: A typography of union-community relationships

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Furthermore, reliance on a coalition structure limits in-depth participation by unions. Coalitions alone do not provide significant space for rank and file union member participation in decision making, as they limit decision making to officials. Without ownership or

involvement in decision making it is difficult to spark local organising amongst union members inside unions on community issues.

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

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

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

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

The internal organisational structure, strategy and vision of the participating union also plays a critical role in the overall effectiveness of the union-community coalition. The writers suggest that unions must move beyond centralised hierarchical unionism to effectively engage their membership in a union-community coalition (Moody 1997; Nissen 1999). The goal of this change process is to create unions who are effective participants in union-community coalitions. These writers argue that unions must shift from service unionism, and become 'community orientated' by broadening their vision to include issues beyond wages and

conditions, involve their membership in decision making, education and mobilisations around the issues supported by the coalition. Thus a community union is a union more open to rank and file participation, has a social vision and concern for the conditions of working people (beyond the confines of wages and conditions), and a structure that facilitates local organising capacity (Waterman 2001; Wills 2002; Clawson 2003).

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

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

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

Community unionism denotes the deepest form of union-community relationship, where a breath of activity between unions and community organisations is complemented by a depth

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

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

Figure 1: A typography of union-community relationships

	Instrumental Union-Community Rel'ship	Union-Community Coalitions	Community Unionism
Issues and Common interest	• Any Issue	• Any issue • Issue often selected by union	• Issues framed as a social vision for working people • Issues of mutual self-interest to participating organisations
Structure	• Single, one off requests • No formal or ongoing structure to the relationship	• Any structure • Union tendency to dominate	• Unions and community organisations involved in joint decision making structure • Relationship of trust and reciprocity within coalition • Capacity for individual / rank and file participation
Place	• Any level	• Relationships can be at any level: local, city-wide, state, national international	• Tends to be at a local level • Often more successful in industries where capital is fixed, eg services, mining, public sector
Union Participation	• Instrumental participation only	• Union officials participate • Instrumental participation • Campaign separate/distant from members	• Union buy-in to planning process • Union vision beyond wages and conditions • Union members active participants in coalition

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

These different categories can be explored and their strengths and weaknesses tested by examining some case studies of union-community relationships, which brings us to the Labor Council of NSW.

Section 2: Three Case studies involving the Labor Council of NSW

This section explores the above typography of union-community relationships by examining three different case studies involving the peak trade union council in NSW, Australia (Labor Council of NSW). These case studies look at the three frameworks in order, firstly looking at an instrumental union-community relationship through an examination of the weekly Labor Council meetings; secondly exploring a union-community coalition by examining the Labor Council's participation in the 2003 Walk against the War Coalition; and finally, considering an example of community unionism by considering the Labor Council's involvement in the NSW Transport Alliance.

However, before beginning these case studies, a brief background on the NSW Labor Council is necessary. The Labor Council is the oldest trade union central council in Australia, being formed in 1871. It has always had most (if not all) unions as affiliates, making it strong and influential amongst the labour movement. The Labor Council has a mixed history on the question of union-community relationships. During the heights of the cold war, the NSW Labor Movement was embroiled in the factional tensions between Communist and left-labor aligned unionism versus right-wing (Catholic) labor aligned unionism (Robinson 2000). These factional battles were intense, due to the close proximity between the union movement and the Australian Labor Party. Furthermore, because most social movements were connected to communist and left-labor activists, and because the Labor Council was a leading voice in the right-wing of the Labor Party, the Labor Council had a distant and often critical view of community organisations and social movements (Dodkin 2001).

However a combination of social and industrial changes provoked the Council to reconsider its strategy over the last 10 years. The end of the cold war facilitated a process of thawing relations between 'left' and 'right within the NSW Labor Movement (Dodkin 2001). This thawing was symbolised by the desire to become a non-factional movement (Norrington 1999; Lane 2002; Christodoulou 2003; Robertson 2003; Bravo 2004). The attempt to build bridges between the left and the right reduced many of the obstacles to Labor Council reaching out to progressive groups such as community organisations. In addition, the rapid decline of the union movement from the lofty heights of 50% membership in 1972 to 23% in 2004 created

additional pressure to turn to community organisations as a strategy to build power to win disputes.

A critical factor influencing the change of strategy of the NSW Labour Movement was the 1998 MUA dispute. This ideological attack on unionised waterfront workers was a symbolic attempt by the Federal Liberal Government to break strong unionism in Australia (George 1998). One of the key strategies used by the Maritime Union was the establishment of militant community pickets (Trinca 2000). The community pickets were run and managed by community leaders in tandem with union officials (MUA 2002). Phone trees of thousands of activists brought students, unionists and community organisation members to the pickets on demand. The picket on Patricks was critical to the success of the MUA campaign. By blocking trucks in and out of Patricks, the business was frozen despite the use of non-union labour (MUA 2002).

This community outreach strategy contributed to a successful outcome in the MUA dispute. On its own, the MUA faced almost certain loss. They needed the support and assistance of unionists, community organisations and the public at large to run the pickets.[1] The pickets both created political pressure, generating assistance from the Labor State Government, and economic pressure by preventing business as usual. The successful community outreach strategy was a public demonstration to all unions that union power can be effectively supplemented by community support (Morey 2004). It was in this context that union-community relationships evolved within the NSW Labour Movement.

Case 1   *An Instrumental Relationship: Labor Council's Weekly Thursday Night Meetings*

The Labor Council's history at the centre of a dynamic and tension filled union movement has always ensured that its meetings were a centre point of union discussion. Since its formation in 1871, the Labor Council has hosted weekly Thursday night meetings of union leaders; described as the 'Parliament of the Union Movement' (NSW 2004). In particular, during the factionalised Cold War period, Labor Council meetings were always full, with left and right maximising participation to extend influence and control (Dodkin 2001). With the movement blooming after the WWII with over 50% of workers in unions, the central focus of the meetings was on internal union debate, with one cautious eye on the actions and trappings of Parliament.

However the 1990s brought significant challenges and changes to the union movement, which had ramifications for Labor Council. Union density fell sharply during the 1980s and 1990s

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[1] Particularly as the Australian Industrial Relations Commission ordered MUA officials to not play a role in organising the pickets: (MUA 2002)

under the Accord,[2] in part because the Accord's centralised relationship between the union movement and the party took resources away from the shop floor. With the defeat of the Keating Labor Government, this slow decline in density was matched by a massive, immediate decline in union power and influence. This dramatic shift, and the start of hostile anti-union legislative attacks, initially took significant power away from peak councils, requiring the Labor Council to engage in a period of regeneration (Dodkin 2001; Cooper 2003 10).

With the end of the Cold War and the loss of Federal Government, there was an easing of tensions between the factions. This process was assisted by the Labor Council, its secretaries Peter Sams, and then Michael Costa arguing for industrial unity over factional conflict (Dodkin 2001). Through major disputes, including the battle against electricity privatisation, the Labor Council was able to re-establish influence with the movement by acting as a central arbiter of industrial (not simply factional) needs.[3]

The easing of factional tensions slowly created an organisational crisis for the weekly meetings of the Labor Council. Attendance at these meetings had previously been fuelled by factional brawls between the left and the right. Yet, with an emerging factional consensus, and a growing tendency for the Labor Council leadership to guarantee support for both left and right motions at Executive meetings staged before the Council, meant attendance began to drop.

It was Michael Costa who began changing the orientation of the Labor Council meetings. Council meetings slowly became a site to discuss social issues, beyond the confines of internal union business. In 1999 Costa used Thursday night meetings to call for a social audit of Government services (Costa 1999). This discussion culminated in a one-off conference with the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW and the National Council of Social Services (Costa 1998). This social outreach was coupled by the active participation of unions in the Drug Summit, initiated through Council meetings.

The decline in power of the peak body saw a shift in the operation of Labor Council meetings. Once easily consumed by the topic of internal union action, these meetings became a staging point for union-community relationships. The relationships tended to be brief and episodic, issue based and not requiring a joint structure. Most often the relationships were forged by the Labor Council and focused on single events.

The decline in power for the Labor Council saw it transform its meetings into a forum for instrumental union-community relationships. This trend, initiated by Michael Costa continued and deepened under the leadership of John Robertson. A reoccurring feature of Council business became social and political issues (Robertson 2003), with regular reports and guest

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[2] The Accord was a negotiated agreement between the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Council of Trade Unions negotiating centralised wage fixing and a social wage.
[3] This culminated in the vote on electricity privitisation at ALP State Conference where a united union movement, led by the Labor Council voted against the Government's plans.

speakers from external organisations, used to initiate support and facilitate relationships with external community organisations (Robertson 2002; Robertson 2003). The relationships are generally instrumental; the Council is rarely used to call for an ongoing relationship with these external organisations. The meetings are a conduit for solidarity practice, allowing community organisations to enter the 'belly of the (union) beast' and directly address the senior officers of most NSW unions.

This practice is not transformatory. Indeed, the relationships forged are relatively limited. A motion at the Labor Council is almost a rite of passage for preliminary 'community' engagement with unions rather than a method of forging a deep connection with community organisations. However the space is important, because it creates the possibility for stronger links. For instance, the National Union of Students used opportunities created by speaking at Labor Council in 1999 to forge a series of deeper relationships with unions (Heath 1999).

The decline in power and importance of the Thursday night meetings of the NSW Labor Council caused it, over time, to be transformed into a space for episodic engagement with community organisations. This change created a useful space for solidarity, which has at points led to deeper engagement between organisations. At the same time, this form of union-community relationship is not transformatory. The simply connection of two movements without a strategic purpose for joint engagement in each others issues, and without a structure for decision making or an ongoing commitment to campaigning, limits the connection between unions and community organisations to one of information rather than action.

Case 2   A Union-Community Coalition: the Peace Campaign

Parallel to the shift in the operation of Labor Council meetings has been a rapid expansion in the number of structured relationships that the Labor Council has pursued with community organisations. Since 2001 and the accession of John Robertson to the position of Secretary, the Council has become a hub of union-community coalition practice. These coalitions include the campaign for refugee rights, peace, education, health and trade (NSW 2003). This case study explores the largest of these coalitions, the Walk against the War Coalition and the union peace campaign, which briefly but deeply engaged the Labor Council in late 2002 and early 2003.

The Walk against the War Coalition underpinned one of the most objectively successful social movement mobilisations in Australian history. Undoubtedly the success of this mobilisation was mostly due to the geopolitical situation, and the location of this national struggle inside a global social movement. Yet it is also important to recognise that this particular Coalition had a local dimension gaining experience and strength from the capacities of successful local movements, including the 'anti-globalisation' movement, the refugee movement and even struggles such as the MUA dispute.

The Walk against the War Coalition was formed in September 2003, and brought together a series of previously autonomous anti-war groupings. Importantly, the Labor Council and a large number of unions played an active role in the coalition's formation and its subsequent weekly meetings. There were over 90 groups who participated in the coalition, with around 15 unions at its peak (Network 2004). Meetings were large, with over 120 people drawn together when debates were contentious.[4] The Coalition was responsible for organising the major rallies during the anti-war movement, in particular the 300 000 march on Feb 14, the 30 000 rally the day war was declared, the 50 000 march several days later, and the 20 000 Palm Sunday March. Given the population size of Sydney these rallies were very large by international standards, which suggests that the Coalition made a successful contribution to sustaining participation in the movement. The Coalition also supported the formation of a series of local peace groups – around 20 in total, hosted an organising conference for the peace movement and managed a series of large email lists to facilitie communication.[5]

The union movement, while an active participant in the broad coalition did not limit its role to this. In contrast to many coalitions in the past, the union movement also sought to deepen trade union member involvement in the campaign. There was significant 'buy-in' from the Labor Council, with it providing financial resources (such as photocopying facilities, an office to organise out of, money for advertisements to publicise rallies), human resources (dedicating several staff to organise for the campaign full time) and political influence to assist the organisation of rallies and negotiations with council, police and the Government.

In particular, the Labor Council sought to target and mobilise union members on the question of peace and war. The Labor Council organised a 'unionist' march to the large February 14 rally, with over 10 000 unionists meeting in Town Hall Square. There was a public "Unions work for Peace Campaign" with union sites declaring themselves peace sites at stop work meetings and wearing badges for peace (Lewis 2003).

The alignment of Labor Council with the community coalition Walk against the War, can be described as a union-community coalition. The union-community coalition critically strengthened the power and capacity of the peace movement by allowing a large number of community organisations and unions to collectively plan the direction of the peace campaign. The decision of Labor Council to publicly campaign on this issue gave it greater capacity, legitimacy and success. Yet the relationship between these community organisations and social movements had an element of distance. Labor Council and other NSW unions participated in these coalitions via officials and representatives. Although several unions sought to mobilise their membership to attend rallies, there was only limited union member

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[4] Contentious here both refers to important points of struggle in the movement (such as the impending upsurge before February 14, but also when fractures appeared in the coalition between traditional church and union groups and more radical, 'socialist' or Trotskyist organizations. It was this tension that ended up diving the group, as the group dissolved and split into two organizations after the formal war had ended in May 2003.
[5] These email lists had over 5000 subscribers in total.

participation. Although posters and leaflets educating union members about events were distributed to unions, many of these materials were kept in union offices and not distributed to workplaces. It was uncommon for unions to ask organisers to distribute materials about peace rallies and events to members. Support for the peace campaign may have seen Councils of Management or Delegates committees pass motions against the war, but it didn't involve unions organising on the issue of peace or using their economic industrial power to influence the Government. While the Labor Council supported the campaign by organising the 'unions work for peace campaign,' greatest attention was given to organising in partnership with community organisations rather than organising union rank and file support within the union movement. Indeed, as Clawson notes, community alliances often substitute at times for organising work within the rank and file of the union movement (Clawson 2003) In addition, even though the Labor Council embraced a vision 'beyond wages and conditions' in campaigning for peace there was still a sense in the unions that such issues were 'peripheral' to the 'real business' of enterprise bargaining and campaigning.

The above framework of union-community relationships usefully demonstrates the strengths and limitations of the Labor Council's participation in the Walk against the War Coalition. The term union-community coalition describes the practice of seeking out partnerships on issues of concern. However, according to the above typography, it was not an example of community unionism. It did not generate the active and autonomous participation of union members nor did it facilitate structures for rank and file participation, even though it demonstrated a shift in leadership vision and strategy.

Fundamentally, this coalition had limited union membership engagement. One of the major reasons for this limited engagement was the issue that lay at the base of the coalition. Peace, though important, appears abstract compared with the direct material concerns of working people. While not wanting to subscribe to an economistic view of trade unionism, it is true to say that the issue of peace, won or lost, doesn't immediately affect the day to day lives of working people. In this sense, this issue can be distinguished from other social issues such as education funding, transport, childcare or health, which genuinely and directly impacts on the daily lives of union members. The issue of peace, and a victory in this campaign is not directly in the self-interest of union members. This limits its capacity, as an issue to engage, mobilise and expand the political conscious of union members. The issue at the heart of this campaign helped limit the campaign to a union-community coalition rather than community unionism.

Union involvement in coalitions significantly increases union power and capacity. The shift from a 'community organisation coalition' to a 'union-community relationship' increases the resources, capacity and likelihood of victory for these campaigns. However there are still limitations in capacity that come from a coalition structure. Coalitions on their own do not provide significant space for rank and file union member participation in decision making as they limit decision making to officials. Without ownership or involvement in decision making

it is difficult to spark local organising amongst union members inside unions on community issues.

Coalition practice epitomises and parallels the weaknesses that many organising writers have identified with 'servicing unionism.' Coalitions function as a centralised engine room for campaigning, that limit the capacity for organisational development. For this reasons coalitions alone have a limited capacity to change unions or engage and assist in creating union power. Coalitions constrain union involvement to participation in the coalition rather than supplementing coalition involvement with union activism within the membership. Without membership engagement, coalitions do not effectively activate the depth of power that unions have. Unions are limited to acting like another community organisation, albeit one with a large number of resources. The lack of membership engagement that categorises union-community coalitions demonstrates their central weakness. Coalitions may enhance community campaigns, but they do not radically and directly engage or enhance union power. Finally, we can turn to a campaign that shows a more radical engagement of union members, and a potential foundation for community unionism.

Case Study 3   The Transport Alliance: Towards Community Unionism

In the wake of community campaigns such as the peace campaign, and in an environment where peak councils play a pivotal role in the shift to organising (Cooper 2003), the Labor Council of NSW is also revisiting and adapting how it engages with its industry groups, such as rail. The Labor Council of NSW has had a long history of working closely with the rail unions (Morey 2004). Yet this relationship has until recently been unremarkable, providing industrial support to unions working in essential services, rather than facilitating a broader goal.

The two key unions in the Transport Industry have engaged in a process of recent change. The Rail, Bus and Tram Union (RTBU) is traditionally a strong right-wing union and the Australian Services Union (ASU) is a smaller left wing union. Although the industry has a demarcation, up until recently it was categorised by poaching and disagreement. In 2001 this tension was diffused through a solidarity pact signed between the two leaders, committing the unions to working together (Carruthers 2004).

Within each union there has been significant organisational change. In 2001 the NSW Branch of the RTBU hired an experienced delegate educator, charged with assisting the union to shift to organising (Carruthers 2004). This generated success, with a bargaining campaign in the Rail Infrastructure Corporation rapidly expanding union density and the number of delegates in the sector. This campaign now stands as a model workplace with a one to ten ratio of activists to members (Carruthers 2004). Similarly, the ASU also shifted to embrace organising. Within the Transport Division, there has been an internal restructure, creating a series of new branches,

members and delegates. The Division, which was formerly a centre for grievance handling, now has a group of young, vibrant, experienced, trained organisers.

These organisational shifts in the two major transport unions were timely. After the State Election in April 2003, the former Secretary of the NSW Labor Council Michael Costa, now a Member of Parliament, was given the Transport Portfolio. Always a radical reformist, Costa set about creating a series of inquiries into transport. Although transport had faced two major restructures in the previous 6 years, it was set to face another. Rumours were that Costa's plans were to restructure with plenty of redundancies. His aim was to make public transport self-sufficient and cost effective (Campbell 2003; Morey 2004). Fares were to increase, rural services were to be cut – the sector was to be transformed.

In response to these inquiries, the Labor Council, in conjunction with the transport unions, initiated a policy discussion. The first step was to commission an alternative report into transport. In response to the Government's Parry Report, the Labor Council and the unions invited organisations that had made submissions to the Inquiry to contribute to a broader community response to develop an alternative Report (Campbell 2003 viii; Morey 2004). Submissions were received from over 39 organisations, including unions, councils, peak environmental and community advocacy groups (Campbell 2003 App D).

The Report, entitled *Our Public Transport: A Community View* focused on the fundamental role of public transport as an essential service. It argued that an effective public transport system would be based on dual aims – the provision of high quality, accessible services, delivered by a highly trained workforce. The report continually linked the needs and interests of those who catch public transport and those who work in public transport.

The Community Report exposed the poor planning processes that underpinned the NSW Government's Transport Strategy. It pitted the choices for our community - between a 'car' driven system and a public transport driven transport system. It argued that an effective, accessible transport system is critical to employment growth, social equality and community participation.

The report was launched in a major media event at Parliament House in early December 2003 (Morey 2004), presenting an alternative union/community vision for the system. The report was in many senses a first step in a long campaign. It provided an initial 'splash' with a whole range of interest groups (Morey 2004), even through it was somewhat narrowly focused on the Government inquiry. Yet importantly it placed the union movement at the centre of an alternative community vision for transport, focusing on the important place that unionised, active transport workers have in the provision of high quality transport services (Campbell 2003 ix).

Over the summer months the issue of Transport unwittingly became a dominant public issue (Grimm 2004). Factors such as growing anger about the restructure, health testing, safety problems, rank and file unrest and aggressive managerialism combined to bring on a 'rail crisis' (Grimm 2004). Poor management was highlighted by a driver shortage which caused major rail delays. Transport was repeatedly front page news. Train delays were the norm. Public anger was growing, and Costa, the former unionist, began attacking the union. The RTBU sought cross union support for a defensive campaign against these attacks. The Labor Council helped the RTBU coordinate the distribution of over 80 000 postcards defending the workers in February (NSW 2004).

However, most importantly Labor Council used this crisis to call together the parties involved in the Community Report to establish a Transport Alliance (Morey 2004). This body aimed to bring the coalition partners together for a long term relationship. The aim was to establish the Alliance as the peak public transport lobby group in NSW, charged with coordinating organisational participation in a three year Transport campaign focused on the next State Election (Morey 2003; Morey 2004).

The first meeting of the Alliance was on 12 February, in the midst of the "rail crisis." The Alliance called for an urgent Summit to deal with the state's transport needs. The Alliance used the research principles established in the community report to demand an overhaul of public transport policy and action. As Banks notes, research was used by the Alliance to create common ground between the community organisations and unions (Banks 1992)

By March a preliminary settlement over driver shortages was reached, and the unions and Labor Council moved into negotiations around the next Enterprise Bargaining agreement. For the first time in memory, the rail unions were using organising principles to take on Rail Corp and the Government over conditions in the industry (Hayden 2004). Labor Council helped coordinate a series of combined Union Delegate Conferences and formed a single bargaining unit of all rail unions to prepare a log of claims (Morey 2004). Between May and October the unions escalated activity, solidifying a commitment from members through workplace meetings, badge days, stop works and finally a rally (Morey 2004). Furthermore, in regional centres such as Murwillumbar on the North Coast and on the South Coast, there were repeated local union-community groups publicly campaigning against threatened cuts to rail services (Carruthers 2004; Morey 2004). In October, the unions voted to take industrial action if necessary. If this industrial action occurs, it will be the first time in 20 years that such deep collective action has happened in rail (Hayden 2004).

While all this activity signifies a significant breadth and depth of campaigning on Transport, a word of caution should be noted. The Transport Alliance while established has met infrequently since its formation. There is some hesitation amongst the unions about how to most effectively engage in the alliance (Morey 2004). There are difficulties in establishing a common agenda, with different community groups having radically different aims. Even the

unions do not have a consensus position on the future for transport, which may be a necessary preliminary step before the Transport Alliance can more fully develop a collective vision (Hayden 2004). Furthermore, in the midst of an enterprise bargaining campaign, it has been difficult for the unions to justify providing resources to developing a vision, while their focus should be on the future conditions of employees within the rail industry (Morey 2004). At this stage the enterprise bargaining campaign and the Transport Alliance are seen as separate and unconnected activities. While there is consensus that the future activities of rail unions require an increased role in setting the agenda for public transport (Carruthers 2004; Hayden 2004; Morey 2004), there is a sense that this task is something to be done in the future and is not yet the focus of activity.

The ground work that has been established through the Transport Alliance has many points in common with the criteria discussed earlier for Community Unionism. Most importantly the existence of the Alliance sits along side a deeply organised workplace, with delegates and the rank and file actively involved in decision making, mobilisation and activity around the enterprise bargaining campaign. Furthermore, the alliance itself is in the mutual self-interest of participating organisations (Clawson 2003; Fine 2003). The rail unions recognise that the future of quality employment requires a commitment to rebuild the general public's commitment to rail and public transport. Similarly, environmental groups and community advocacy groups have a direct interest in the sustainability or equity issues raised by the increased provision of public transport. The Alliance has established a formal structure backed up by a research capacity and long term campaign (Banks 1992). There is a commitment by the parties that the alliance will underwrite a basic vision for transport which is common amongst the parties, and operates as an umbrella group to forge this common agenda (Morey 2004). Furthermore, Mark Morey, the Labor Council Official in charge of the campaign, has personal experience in both the community sector and the union movement and is able to act as a bridge builder between these two cultures to help bridge consensus (Estabrook 2000). Issues of place are also important, as it has been easier to forge community alliances in local, regional areas where the rail needs are immediate and commonly shared. The unions have gained their greatest community support and power by uniting with the local communities, in particular on the South Coast (Hayden 2004; Morey 2004). On all the criteria, the Transport Alliance echoes the foundation concepts of community unionism.

Yet it is probably better described as a campaign that, at this stage, has the capacity for community unionism rather than demonstrates the practice of it. According to the officials I interviewed, there has not been a significant connection between the union delegates and the vision of public transport. At this stage, the vision and framing of union demands as community issues is understood by the leadership, but is not an issue debated amongst the membership (Carruthers 2004; Hayden 2004; Morey 2004). The politicisation and political mobilisation of the membership has been confined to issues focused on the status of employees in the industry. Importantly, this has been a radicalising step. The workers have not only been mobilised around their wages and conditions, but their status in the industry.

The workers have been politicised to see their future as tied into the future of rail (Carruthers 2004), which may be an intermediary step between simple 'wages and conditions' consciousness, and a community focus. The focus of the unions is on developing and organising its members to act as a union, as several RTBU officials commented, "we are teaching them to be union" (Carruthers 2004; Hayden 2004). This commitment to collective action is a prerequisite to more radical action around public transport more broadly. As Linda Carruthers said, "we have to organise ourselves before we can organise anyone else" (Carruthers 2004). The focus is first on the workers in the industry, and will later be on connecting that to the Transport Alliance. For this reason, the Transport Alliance is an example of potential community unionism rather than an example that is currently operational.

Importantly, the potential is real. The Labor Council, and the RTBU in particular, see that political education and political action will be a crucial feature of future Transport Union action. The RTBU at their September Council made a financial commitment to change how it 'does politics' and to redirect much of its political donations away from the Labor Party to an internal political action fund (Carruthers 2004; Hayden 2004). This fund would be dedicated to political education and mobilisation focused on the 2007 State Election. It would enable union members to play an active role in the campaign around public transport. In addition there is a commitment to increasing the resources and work with local community groups, particularly in regional areas. As the President Bob Hayden acknowledged, the union is demonstrating a preparedness to resource local community action, as local transport groups acting with the unions create far more pressure and influence against the Government and with the general public than the union acting alone (Hayden 2004).

The Transport Alliance usefully demonstrates the possibilities and foundations for a more transformational form of union-community action. The issue that underpins this Alliance is in the direct material interests of union members and has the potential to engage them and transform them. This example demonstrates the rich possibilities for future community unionism. It highlights how union power can be enfranchised both through the operation and participation of the union in an alliance in the direct interests of its membership, but also how union power can be increased through engaging its membership in a process of politicisation and education. This example highlights the promise of community unionism, and what it can do for increasing union power.

Discussion and Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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