

## Chapter 5

# Power in Coalition

that long lists of coalition partners make for powerful alliances, across the case studies it was easier to build strong coalition relationships when coalition membership was restricted and there were fewer organizations making decisions and sharing resources. All the coalitions traded "breadth" for "depth," with organizers choosing to engage a smaller number of organizations. In Ontario and Chicago this decision stemmed from negative experiences with come-one-come-all coalitions, where broad networks of organizations with uneven levels of commitment had left a few organizations carrying a disproportionate burden for the work of the coalition, seeding a destabilizing resentment. Open coalitions were also more likely to resort to lowest common denominator positions in order to find agreement on issues or strategies (Tattersall 2007c).

Reducing the number of organizations helped the coalitions collectively negotiate campaign priorities and commitments and build a unity of purpose. This was clearest in New South Wales, where the highly successful Vinson inquiry was organized by a coalition of only two organizations.

Less became more when organizations were obliged to make accountable commitments to their coalition partners in return for their participation. This developed in Chicago, where turnout and financial contributions were required as a condition of participation. Likewise in NSW, the P&C was obliged to make a financial contribution to the Vinson inquiry even though it had a substantially smaller financial base. In the same way, all the organizations on the OHC administrative committee made financial contributions to cover the costs of the OHC staff. Investments in shared resources, such as coalition coordinators, increased the stability of coalitions. In Ontario and Chicago, coordinators helped make meetings happen; they negotiated tension and mitigated organizational dominance. In NSW, without a coalition coordinator the public education coalition relationships were dominated by the NSWTF, whereas in Ontario the OHC coordinator moderated union influence.

Coalitions also did more with less. Once relationships were established, organizations invested in regular formal meetings and in building strong informal relationships. We saw personal connections foster strong organizational relationships through the collaborative's breakfast sessions and the OHC's regular monthly meetings. In contrast, the public education coalition's meetings were ad hoc and always initiated by the NSWTF.

The principle of less is more informed the kinds of organizations that coalitions sought as partners. Repeatedly, coalitions were stronger when they were strategic about bringing in powerful organizations. For instance,

Coalitions are a dynamic and potent strategy capable of achieving social change and expanding the power of the organizations that participate in them. In this chapter I identify some common principles of coalition success by comparing the effects of strategic choice and national context across the case studies. I also focus on unions and on how long-term, positive-sum coalitions can assist unions to win on issues and revitalize their power in the face of a political and economic environment that continues to be challenging. By drawing out these lessons, I build a picture of why coalitions are powerful but also what constrains them.

## Principles of Strong Coalitions

The case studies exposed some common themes about coalition strategic choice. My "most similar" methodology, which studied coalitions in three relatively similar liberal market economies, made it possible to compare how the strategic choices of coalition organizers influenced coalition success. Five coalition strategies repeatedly affected coalition success (or failure) across the case studies, suggesting that strong coalitions share some common characteristics.

### Less Is More

When it came to generating organizational participation in coalitions, "Less is more" was a consistent theme. Defying the popular conception



the Grassroots Collaborative in Chicago identified specific unions and religious organizations as partners because of their political relationships and social legitimacy. Across the studies unions were strategically important. They repeatedly provided coalitions with substantial financial and in-kind resources. In Ontario and Chicago, where the political context was particularly challenging, a large number of unions in the coalition helped increase the coalition's power.

#### *Individuals Matter*

Somewhat paradoxically, coalitions succeeded or failed depending on particular individuals and their capacity for effective leadership. Coalitions relied on organizational leaders, individuals who embraced coalitions inside of organizations and coalition coordinators. Coalition success was affected by these individuals' ability to act as bridge builders and broker relationships between organizations, as well as their skills as campaign strategists.

When organizational leaders directly participated in coalition decision making, the coalitions were strongest. In the public education coalition and the collaborative we saw that having leaders around the table made it easier for coalition decisions to attract organizational commitment. Conversely, in the OHC, where unions in particular were represented by staff rather than the leaders themselves, coalition decisions became highly contingent on internal union processes. This often resulted in the OHC's campaigns becoming more of a peripheral concern to many of its participating unions.

The talents and experiences of the leaders around the table enhanced coalition success. In Chicago, Madeline Talbott's skill in running living wage campaigns and her familiarity with unions was a critical resource for the living wage strategy. Similarly, in New South Wales, Maree O'Halloran's experience with the 1999 salaries campaign and her personal desire to do "something different" ensured that the Vinson inquiry was launched and sustained.

Leaders were encouraged by agitators in their ranks. Certainly Gary Zadkovich's report on social movement unionism, the western Sydney unionists' vision for public education campaigning, and Ross Sutherland's advocacy for a Medicare canvass all reinforced bold leadership.

Likewise, the coalition coordinators' distinct skills affected success. Natalie Mehra's experience in the Kingston Health Coalition informed

the OHC's decision to maintain the local health coalitions after the Medicare campaign, and her previous work with unions during the days of action helped the coalition navigate tensions. Similarly, Ken Snyder maintained campaign discipline during the long living wage campaign in Chicago.

Yet the fact that coalitions regularly relied on individuals showed their vulnerability, because when leaders or coordinators change, a coalition's capacity is affected. In Australia, the change of leadership at the P&C reduced that organization's commitment to the coalition. Similarly, OHC representatives feared the day when Mehra would leave. The Chicago coalition had a broader spread of engaged, strategically minded leaders, yet they too were reliant on Talbott's instincts and experience.

#### *To Wield Self-Interest with a Sword of Justice*

Coalition goals were most potent when they connected the mutual self-interests of participating organizations with a sword of justice. Rather than self-interest and social interest operating in conflict, a coalition's goals were most influential when the shared interests of organizations combined with the social legitimacy of public interest.

Organizational interest was necessary but not sufficient: it failed to generate enough public pressure for change. The NSWTF salaries campaign and the No-Wal-Mart campaign each had deep union interest, but in the media that organizational interest was demonized as a narrow vested interest. Conversely, coalitions with a social interest but limited organizational commitment struggled to engage organizational resources. The Save Medicare campaign delivered a noble message, but the OHC struggled to attract union participation as a priority over day-to-day union concerns.

We saw coalitions overcome this problem when vested interest was united with a sword of justice (Flanders 1970). Self-interest and a sword of justice intersected when organizational commitment was based on mutual interests—for instance, when the NSWTF salaries campaign turned into a campaign with the P&C for fully funding the education budget, or when the OHC's anti-P3 campaign overlapped with CUPE's concerns about the impact of P3s on workplace conditions. But it was most effective when shared organizational interests were connected to an underlying moral, value-based framework. For instance, the living wage message turned around the political isolation of the No-Wal-Mart campaign by em-



bracing religious and historical values, which also intimately connected to the collaborative's interest in changing politics in Chicago.

Common concern was dramatically more powerful when it was positively framed. Proactive demands like reduced class sizes or living wages consistently helped coalitions to change the political climate. Positive messages expressed a sword of justice more successfully than did negatively framed demands. The OHC's anti-P3 campaign and the collaborative's No-Wal-Mart campaign prevented these coalitions from putting forward a broad solution to the problems they identified (Snow and Benford 1992).

An important factor in effectively carrying the message of justice was who carried the message. Having spokespersons separate from the union was a source of strength: the OHC legitimized CUPE's anti-P3 campaign, Tony Vinson added credibility to the NSWTF, and ACORN spokespersons legitimized the UFCW's interest in a big-box living wage.

What's more, the alignment of social and self-interest also enhanced member commitment. Support for the Vinson inquiry arose out of an interest in stopping school closures and then spread because it appealed to teachers' professional identity and their classroom experience. The living wage campaign first engaged SEIU 880 because of its values and identity as a living wage organization. In order to successfully generate member commitment, however, the union connected its belief in living wages to members' specific interest in a new wage floor of \$10 in Chicago. To my mind, the alignment of social and self-interest was best balanced by the public education coalition because it was able to connect specific surface demands like reducing class sizes to the broad call for improved public education.

### *The Timely Exercise of Power through Conscious Planning*

While it may seem obvious, it is worth emphasizing that coalition campaigns were always more successful when rolled out as long-term plans that were mindful of electoral and legislative opportunities. Coalition actions consequently became strategically focused on building political pressure and informed how the coalition was able to deploy the power it derived from its collective organizational resources. We saw this in the Vinson inquiry, the living wage campaign, and the Save Medicare campaign, each of which had a disciplined approach to planning and securing political victory. Success relied on escalating the campaign in advance of elections

(or the royal commission). This sometimes required sustained activity across a broad geography, like the Vinson inquiry hearings or the collection of living wage postcards, or the simultaneous coordination of campaign activities in multiple locations, such as the Save Medicare canvass.

Planning made it easier for the coalition to be in charge of its political timetable. While the coalition could strategically react to its adversaries (like organizing a media stunt), these reactions did not take over the campaign. Coalitions could calculate how to deliver pressure depending on the various types of power at the table. Thus the living wage campaign divided up lobbying, field, and mobilization strategies; the Save Medicare campaign relied on local coalitions supported by the resource base of unions; and the Vinson inquiry evolved into a public alliance that combined mobilization, media, and lobbying work.

### *Generating Participation and Political Influence with Local Broker Organizations*

Local broker organizations were locally based groups of rank-and-file unionists and community organization members established by centrally organized coalitions. These organizations strengthened coalitions by providing an internal opportunity for developing organizational members as well as cultivating political influence. They stratified coalition decision making by opening the coalitions to the contributions of members, thereby providing a mechanism for bottom-up planning that could complement top-heavy strategizing among organizational leaders. In Canada and to a lesser extent in Australia, local broker organizations created a space for rank-and-file unionists and community volunteers to come together and develop a parallel campaign strategy at a local level. The local activity matched the provincial strategy, exposed partner organizations to a new range of issues, and increased member participation. Local broker organizations also provided a space for rank-and-filers to expand their campaigning skills. Members shifted from being passive participants to coalition strategists as they were brought into relationship with different organizations and were responsible for developing action plans. The lack of broker organizations in Chicago meant that the coalition had a limited developmental impact on its organizational members, and it also made it harder for the coalition to sustain its multiscaled work.

Local broker organizations made it possible for coalitions to stratify their activity, enabling them to sustain influence against individual political



ical representatives. In Sydney and Toronto, education lobbies and health coalitions generated political pressure through local forums, organizing residents to lobby political candidates and undertake media events. Likewise, the team of organizations brought together by the UFCW organizer in Chicago helped maintain aldermanic support for the living wage. Without a local broker organization on the West Side of Chicago, the No-Walmart coalition was accused of being interlopers without an understanding of local concerns.

Broker organizations required resources to sustain them. In Canada, we saw the OHC's broker organizations last longer than the public education coalition's because the volunteers were actively mentored by the OHC coordinator. The kind of support offered also mattered; member education was greatest when the coordinator helped the local group build its own campaign plan. By contrast, when strategies were centrally developed, local participation was more difficult to sustain.

### Strategies for Strong Coalitions

In summary, coalition strategic choices vary, and organizational objectives and context place limits on long-term coalition work. Sometimes a long-term coalition may not be the right strategy. By comparing these long-term coalitions we can see that if organizations want to establish successful, sustained relationships, then there are several choices that are likely to prove powerful.

Each of these lessons related to the coalition elements and measures that I introduced in chapter 1 and explored in the case studies. Organizational relationships and structure are more powerful when union and community organizers recognize that less is more and individuals matter. Common concern is stronger when it traverses organizational self-interest and a sword of justice. A coalition's scale, and therefore its ability to influence public decisions and build participation, is strengthened by conscious planning and local broker organizations that can generate popular influence across various scales of power. To underscore the relationship between these five lessons, the coalitions' elements, and the definition of coalition success, I have summarized the findings about coalition elements from the case studies in table 5.1 to show how they produce coalition success.

Note that the five lessons are common features of successful coalitions. The elements not only provide a mechanism for assessing how coalitions

TABLE 5.1  
Coalition elements and coalition success

| Winning outcomes                                                                                                      | Common concern                                                                                                                      | Organizational relationships and structure                                                                                                            | Scale                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Shared organizational interest drives commitment to the campaign; a sword-of-justice message builds community support | Relationships between strategic and strong organizations are facilitated by effective meetings and bridge building                  | Stratified coalitions operate at multiple scales to mobilize political pressure                                                                       |                                                                                                       |
| Supportive political climate                                                                                          | Organizational interest, values, and member ownership are aligned; sword-of-justice message and messenger can create public support | Diverse coalitions between unlikely, strategic partners help to shift the political climate                                                           | Multiscaled coalitions plan campaigns to win on issues as well as shape the broader political climate |
| Sustaining relationships                                                                                              | Organizational interest sustains relationships. This is assisted when it overlaps with member interest                              | Less is more: strong participating organizations who are accountable for their commitments<br>Individuals matter: bridge builders and coalition staff | Relationships at the same scale are strongest                                                         |
| Building the capacity of participating organizations                                                                  | Mutual interest agenda broadens organizational vision, engages new members, politicizes existing ones                               | Negotiating issues and bridge builders help organizations learn to reshape their agenda                                                               | Local broker organizations help organization members develop campaigning skills, and politicize       |

change over time but help us identify the kinds of strategic choices that support strong coalitions.

Moreover, it is implicit in my findings that coalition organizers can learn strategies across borders. Coalition strategy is not intrinsically nationally specific. The practice of organizations' building relationships and



identifying concerns upon which they agree is fairly universal. Moreover, the case studies themselves reveal that learning across borders is common. Zadkovich's trip to Canada and the United States helped inspire the NSWTF's coalition unionism. Tactics were also shared across borders when Mehra appropriated the idea of a plebiscite from Australia's La-Trobe Valley.

The suggestion that these findings can be generalized, however, comes with a qualification. These five principles operate at the level of strategic choice, not tactics. I argue that it is not that an independent inquiry or a statewide canvass will necessarily be successful in another context; rather, I distinguish methods of coalition building that may be usefully exchanged. The principles are transferable lessons about how to build relationships and improve coalition strategy. Indeed, in the conclusion I explore how some of these lessons can strengthen future coalition practice.

These five lessons are not the only findings that emerged from the case studies. While strategic choice is a vital ingredient for strong collaboration, we should not reify organizational strategy as a source of power out of its context. The national political setting sometimes limited and sometimes enhanced coalition power across the case studies, affecting their ultimate success.

### Coalition Differences across Borders

The three coalitions were differently affected by distinct opportunities and challenges that lay in their national political contexts. Of course, deciding to compare similar countries makes these findings suggestive rather than conclusive. While the cases uncovered important differences between these similar liberal market economies, I maintain that it is uncertain whether factors like state openness or union-party relationships will be as significant in Europe's coordinated markets or in different developing countries (cf. Frege, Heery, and Turner 2004; Turner 2007, 15; Greer 2008).

With that caveat in mind, the important national contextual features across these liberal market economies included the openness of the state, the types of relationships between unions and political parties, and the character of a country's civil society organizations. These contextual factors influenced the form coalition success took. They also led coalitions to emphasize particular ways of working in an attempt to overcome per-

ceived challenges faced in their political context. To summarize the discussion that follows, in table 5.2 I compare the kinds of success achieved in the different countries using the definition of success established in chapter 1. I list the four types of coalition success and then use shorthand descriptions to say whether this goal was achieved (yes) or not achieved (no) or whether the results were mixed (mixed).

In examining national political context, we are investigating variables that sit beyond the control of coalitions yet influence their behavior. State openness or strong relationships between unions and political parties provide opportunities for coalitions to more easily achieve social change; their absence may limit coalition success. Similarly, the history and character of unions and community organizations influence coalition practice and the constitution of coalitions. We have seen that national history affects unions in particular: the extent to which a country's unions are familiar with coalition practice may promote future coalition practice (Tattersall, 2009b). Yet unions can defy these traditions. Unions may turn to coalitions as a source of power in times of crisis where the perception of a threat prickles union self-interest and compels strategic innovation. The cumulative and dynamic effects of a country's social and political circumstances can lead to different patterns of coalition success.

In the case studies, we saw that structural opportunities, such as the relative openness of the state, centralized political cultures, and strong union relationships with political parties, were associated with coalitions' successful achievement of policy outcomes. A history of social democracy and state openness, most evident in Australia and less so in Canada, provided a political space more receptive to coalition advocacy. We saw the Australian coalition secure a new policy victory around class sizes and that the Canadian coalition was able to harness a canvassing campaign to save Medicare.

The specific attributes of the state also mattered. For instance, where progressive political parties were in power, they created opportunities for policy influence. It was not the existence of a specific relationship between the union and the party that was decisive, but rather how the presence of a progressive party opened the state to influence. Coalitions successfully influenced the ALP government in NSW and the Democratic-run council in Chicago, where representatives were open to lobbying and negotiation. In contrast, the OHC's potential for political influence in Canada was extremely limited without a political party open to it or its unions. Nevertheless, supportive union-party relationships still required



TABLE 5.2  
Coalition success across the case studies

|         | Social change    |                                |                         | Organizational strength                                |  |
|---------|------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--|
|         | Winning outcomes | Shifting the political climate | Sustained relationships | Increasing the capacity of participating organizations |  |
| NSW     | Yes              | Yes                            | No                      | Mixed                                                  |  |
| Chicago | Mixed            | Yes                            | Yes                     | No                                                     |  |
| Ontario | Mixed            | Mixed                          | Yes                     | Yes                                                    |  |

active public campaigns; for instance, the close relationships between the CFL and labor aldermen had to be coupled with a field campaign, and the Vinson inquiry was necessary to strengthen the public education coalition's access to government.

Coalition policy victories were assisted by a centralized political culture and disadvantaged by a decentralized one. In Australia, the public education coalition's adversaries were state-scaled and included the premier, minister for education, and the Department of Education and Training. Centralization allowed the public education coalition to focus on influencing those powerful individuals through cascading public and private events, having already built generalized awareness and momentum for its agenda through inquiry hearings across the state. A decentralized political culture in the United States, specifically the Chicago mayor's ability to veto a decision that had previously gained widespread council approval, presented significant advantages to the collaborative's adversaries. Paradoxically, the lack of a binding party caucus gave the aldermen the autonomy to decide how to vote, and this had its advantages for the coalition: by threatening the electoral viability of an alderman, the collaborative could directly influence his or her vote.

Conversely, we saw that the less open the state and the more difficult the coalition's structural environment, the more likely coalitions were to focus on successfully sustaining their organizational relationships. A hostile political context also tended to result in coalitions with more organizations, and particularly multiple unions. Structural pressures also affected the kind of decision making that emerged. The collaborative exemplified this, cultivating trusting relationships over years and then strategically expanding those relationships to bring in additional labor and religious partners to the living wage campaign. Likewise, the hostile con-

text influenced the collaborative's decision to require organizations to commit to member turnout, leading to an opt-in style of consensus decision making. The broad-based relationships of the OHC were designed to provide political influence that could shift both progressive and more conservative governments, and in turn the OHC sought to treat its diverse organizations equally, producing a type of equality-based consensus decision making. Each of these coalitions involved a large number of unions that provided political and financial resources. In contrast, the NSWTF did not focus on sustaining relationships and did not choose to draw in additional organizational supporters (say, from the wider union movement) because it was not necessary to win policy outcomes. The public education coalition's relatively open political context also correlated with decision-making processes that were dominated by the NSWTF, producing a dominated form of consensus decision making.

An open state did not determine whether policy victories were achieved or the political climate was changed. Rather, state openness became a potential obstruction that could be dynamically resisted through alternative strategies for building coalition strength. I believe this kind of dynamic strategy was exemplified by Canada's OHC. It responded to a particularly difficult political environment by prioritizing strong organizational relationships and building local broker organizations to magnify its political influence against hostile political parties. Consequently, even with a relatively unsupportive state, the OHC's broad relationships and deep participation through its local health coalitions helped it save Medicare.

When we turn to the question of civil society organizations, we see that in each context, the coalitions were driven by organizations with a strong membership base. In Australia and Canada, unions played a leadership role in turning out members to events and providing financial resources. In the United States, large membership-based community organizations were in a position to play a leadership role in the coalition in relation to turnout and political strategy.

In Australia and Canada, more modest community organization capacity did not constrain coalition success. Instead, coalitions dynamically responded to any lack of capacity by developing new mobilizing structures. Local broker organizations that relied on union or community activists countered a lack of centralized community organization power by creating a new space for activating members. Conversely, the fact that individual U.S. community organizations had their own membership development



capacity allowed the collaborative to strategically harness this resource rather than building member capacity itself. This contextual advantage allowed the collaborative to rely on strong organizational relationships as a substitute for building a multiscaled structure.

National context helped shape the degree to which unions sought to engage in coalitions. The communist party's involvement in Australian unions and the rise of Canadian leftist nationalism and union resistance to neoliberalism meant that both of these labor movements were familiar with coalitions. We saw unions initiate the coalitions in Canada and Australia. In the United States, the dominance of business unionism provided a less fertile base for unions' initiating and leading coalitions. SEIU 880's community organizing credentials allowed it to buck the traditional role unions have taken in that country, playing a leading role in the collaborative.

Yet a history of coalition practice was not the only motivation for unions to participate in coalitions; crisis also encouraged coalition development. While a crisis in union power or density was likely to encourage unions to participate in a coalition (Tattersall, forthcoming a), the extent and perceptions of crisis varied between the countries. These different experiences of union crisis influenced the degree to which unions participated in coalition. Perceptions of crisis operated at two levels, in specific unions as well as across the movement (Cooper 2001). For individual unions in the United States, the crisis was about union density and bargaining: the UFCW feared that Wal-Mart would force union stores to close and drive down the ability to bargain in those stores. In Australia the crisis was about bargaining power in a salaries campaign against the state government. In Canada the crisis was more an ideological resistance to neoliberal transformations in health care policies, which later became connected to workplace conditions with P3s. Specific experiences of crisis dovetailed with national debates about union revitalization, which were most advanced in the United States, where there was 12 percent union density. Discussion about the need for union revitalization was more developed in Australia than in Canada. Union density in Australia had fallen more sharply over the 1990s, and the ACTU had begun pushing for union reform through union education programs and conferences as early as 1994 (Cooper 2003; Fairbrother and Yates 2003).

The combination of national and local crisis influenced the degree to which unions participated in the coalitions. Crisis provoked business unions to collaborate. In Chicago, the UFCW initially played a leader-

ship role in the coalition despite limited experience. Crisis also provoked unions that had previously relied on political relationships to join coalitions. The straining of the CFL's relationship with the mayor created an interest in coalition work. Conversely, in Canada, less intense perceptions of crisis correlated with less intensive union engagement, which shifted once health care campaigning became linked to workplace conditions. In Australia, strong debate about union crisis combined with the turmoil of the 1999 salaries campaign helped inspire a culture of union reform that initiated the public education coalition (Zadkovich 1999).

Overall, national context played a role in influencing coalition success and coalition strategies. In particular, it shaped the ability to achieve policy victories and the kind of organizational relationships and participation that developed in particular coalitions. Yet it is important to note that political context did not determine the fate of coalition success (Turner 2007, 11). The decision to form local broker organizations or strategically build coalition structures showed us how context provides a dynamic point of resistance against which coalition innovation can take place.

### The Possibilities and Limits of Coalition Success

Throughout the case studies, I found that different types of coalition success existed in tension with each other. The ultimate coalition would achieve policy victories, shift the political climate, sustain relationships, and build the capacity of organizations. But we did not see a coalition like this emerge. Indeed, my case studies unearthed how some coalition goals were repeatedly achieved at the expense of others—for instance, in situations where organizers had to trade off building organizational strength in order to achieve social change. None of the case studies achieved all the four benchmarks of coalition success (outcomes, political climate, sustaining relationships, organizational capacity) because none of the coalitions were able to maintain strength across all of the three elements (common concern, organizational relationships, scale).

By demonstrating similar coalition strengths and weaknesses over time, the case studies show us how difficult coalition success is to attain. The coalition elements usefully describe some of these limitations. For instance, the public education coalition was driven by common concern and had weak organizational relationships. Yet the NSWTF's domination of



these relationships was not a problem that needed to be overcome because it produced the resource base for the coalition. Without NSWTF dominance it is unlikely that the Vinson inquiry would have been funded. Similarly, the OHC's negatively framed common concern allowed a wide variety of organizations to strike common agreement. Its weak common concern was a vehicle for its diverse organizational participation. Likewise, the collaborative's singularly scaled relationships facilitated collective strategizing that might not have been as rapid or as intense but for the long relationships between those leaders. While there might be possibilities for dynamically improving coalition practice, there are also limits to coalition success.

Moreover, I believe that, rather than seeing each of these three case studies as one of a kind, we can observe distinct parallels between the type of coalition practice seen in the case studies and the work of other coalitions found in secondary literature. I argued that coalitions can be defined by a particular coalition element. This finding can enhance our understanding of the possibilities and limits of coalitions more broadly across different places with different organizations.

Take the public education coalition with its strong common concern and its tendency toward union dominance. It shared striking similarities with many of the coalitions that have been developed by the Justice for Janitors campaigns organized by the SEIU in the United States (and parallel campaigns for cleaners run in the United Kingdom and Australia). Justice for Janitors campaigns are primarily designed to organize new union members through pressuring the owners of building companies. The goal is to get building owners to consent to unionization as well as minimum workplace standards for cleaning contractors that operate in their premises (Savage 1998; Rudy 2001; Clawson 2003). Coalitions have been used to build public legitimacy for the campaign and social pressure against the building owners, with alliances frequently formed by the SEIU with immigrant organizations, faith groups, and community organizations like ACORN. Like the public education coalition, the Justice for Janitors campaign is defined by strong common concern that uses language like living wages to bring public attention to the plight of low-wage workers. Workers are often organized off-site, through meetings connected with these community organizations, providing a multiscaled capacity not unlike the public education lobbies used by the public education coalition (Savage 1998). Justice for Janitors campaigns have also successfully improved the political climate for winning immigrant rights and in Los An-

geles, for instance, have been credited for spreading awareness about immigration that led to the AFL-CIO's Immigrant Freedom Rides and the 2006 immigrant mobilizations (Frank and Wong 2004; Moody 2009). In these campaigns, however, unions have often struggled to build sustainable relationships with community partners beyond the organizing drives because they tended to dominate decisions about campaign strategy (Tait 2005). The pattern of coalition behavior identified by the coalition elements in the public education coalition can be paralleled with other major coalitions, like the Justice for Janitors campaign.

In a corresponding way, the collaborative's coalition practice, driven by strong organizational relationships, closely resembles the types of union-to-union coalitions seen in central labor councils, like the Canadian Labour Congress, Unions NSW, or the Los Angeles County Federation. Central labor councils have strong organizational relationships—with unions working together based on a broad strategic commitment to furthering their institutional needs, collective political power, and common industrial interests (Ellem and Shields 2004). Their agenda is necessarily broad, with internal decision-making processes allowing them to renegotiate issue priorities while sustaining relationships. Like the collaborative, central labor councils tend to have singularly scaled relationships, with a more limited capacity to develop the rank and file. Their contact with the rank and file comes through individual union affiliates rather than through local cross-union membership structures (like a broker organization).

And finally, the multiscaled coalition work of the OHC, while remarkable, was also not exceptional. The possibilities and limitations of its coalition practice paralleled, for instance, the work of the Walk against the War Coalition in Australia in 2002–3 (Tattersall 2007b, 2007c). The Walk against the War Coalition developed a multiscaled structure, with up to twenty-five local peace groups inside Sydney and around New South Wales between January and April 2003. It also had a strong but broad set of organizational relationships with up to sixty organizations participating. Like the OHC, its common concern was framed as a negative demand: "Stop the war and bring the troops home." These demands activated an immediate popular engagement in the campaign, comparable to the engagement in the Save Medicare canvass. In spite of this, however, deep and sustained rank-and-file union participation did not emerge. Organizational diversity hampered coalition decision making by creating difficulties in building consensus between the organizational partners and led to the use



of a narrow range of tactics. This coalition was not sustained over the long term, lasting only six months. Yet it was successful in other ways, organizing the largest demonstration in Australia's history on February 16, 2003.

For me, some questions remain. Is a stronger coalition practice possible? Can coalitions work in ways that powerfully embody all the coalition elements and achieve all the four kinds of success? To what extent can the limits of coalitions be overcome? Certainly the contextual pressures that we saw narrowing strategic choice in the case studies show that simply suggesting that coalitions try harder is not helpful. Yet the fact that coalitions were able to creatively construct new strength over time indicates that there are avenues for change.

We can see possibilities for stronger coalition practice in the dynamism of the coalitions in the case studies. These coalitions exercised strategic choice, overcoming (even briefly) some of their weaknesses. Thus the OHC built a direct interest connection with CUPE and a positive slogan about "building hospitals right" even though it tended to have a weak common concern. Likewise, the public education coalition enlisted Tony Vinson as a kind of coalition coordinator who helped balance the coalition's uneven organizational relationships, even though the NSWTF tended to dominate. Similarly, the collaborative's scale benefited from the emergence of the South Side broker organization even though it tended to be singularly scaled. The coalitions also dynamically responded to their contextual environment by creating new possibilities, like the local broker organizations in Australia and Canada and the collaborative's golden rules about coalition building.

We also saw the coalitions trying to overcome some of the tension between "campaigning versus capacity-building" by investing in capacity building outside specific campaigns. After all, if social-change campaigning tends to narrow the kinds of organizational strength that a coalition achieves, then a break from campaigning can help rebuild a coalition's capacity. The collaborative spent several years building relationships before it launched a campaign, and the Vinson inquiry slowly built an agenda around public education before it focused on winning specific united demands from the state government. Patient relationship building underpinned the coalitions' later success. Similarly, we saw that union education and leadership development aimed at building the skills and capacity of union leaders and members supported capacity building. For instance, in the year after the living wage campaign, the Grassroots Collaborative spent considerable energy on internal training and

development, and likewise the NSWTF's school representatives were such capable campaigners because of that union's comprehensive internal training program. It is possible that additional capacity-building strategies might have been feasible in these coalitions. For instance, what if the public education coalition had invested in building the capacity of the P&C? Could that have made its organizational relationships more balanced? Or what if the collaborative had built local ward-based broker organizations?

In a similar vein, the community organizing cum coalition-building practice developed by Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) argues that strong broad-based coalitions require approximately three years of capacity-building before they engage in social-change campaigning. The IAF calls this "power building," in which organizers work with religious, union, and community organizations to cultivate relationships, identify leaders, and engage organizational leaders and members in joint training and planning before an agenda is developed and the organization is publicly launched (Alinsky 1971; Gecan 2002).

There are, however, limits to coalition capacity building. As the collaborative found, eventually you have to "break bread" and test the relationships that have been cultivated. You can't just build capacity forever. In this process, tensions between capacity building and campaigning are likely to reemerge. Conversely, coalitions sometimes build organizational strength most effectively in the context of a campaign rather than in a dedicated period of capacity building. The OHC's health coalitions were built through the Medicare and P3 campaigns, and it is unlikely that they would have been as successful but for its health care fight.

We can see another possibility for stronger coalitions when organizers learn from their peers. The principles I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, such as the importance of restricting the organizations that join coalitions and employing coalition coordinators, are a useful starting point. Sometimes coalition organizers do not experiment with particular strategies because they have not thought of them. For instance, the idea of a public education coalition coordinator never emerged during the public education campaign (interview 11 with NSWTF officer, May 2, 2005). Learning from other coalitions and organizers, as Zadkovich learned about social movement unionism, is another way to enhance the possibilities of coalition success.

Yet coalitions cannot throw off the shackles of history or context, and there are limits to the outcomes that they can achieve. Most clearly, national and local political environments limit coalition success. As we saw



in the U.S. and Canadian case studies in particular, a hostile context constrained the kind of social change achievable. A hostile context may also require coalitions to substitute campaigning for capacity building in order to achieve social-change victories. Second, the strategic objectives of individual organizations may permanently limit coalitions. This was more obvious in Australia, where the close connection between the public education coalition and the internal union strategies and resources of the NSWTF meant that the union had a desire to control the coalition. The union's strategic objective placed a limit on how the public education coalition could produce different forms of coalition success, particularly sustainable organizational relationships. Indeed, the way in which unions approach coalitions can restrict their scope. For instance, success will be constrained if coalitions are built in a zero-sum way, by which community organizations are used to serve the interests of unions rather than to develop a more mutual partnership. The challenges of positive-sum coalitions versus zero-sum coalitions can make a qualitative difference in the kind of power that unions can build from working in coalition.

### Coalitions and Powerful Unions

Coalitions have a particularly important impact on unions. This is especially clear in light of the challenges unions face with falling density, organizational sclerosis, declining control over work practices, increasing social isolation, and reduced political influence. I found that long-term coalitions across different political contexts achieved social change by generating political pressure and built organizational strength. This strength came from increased member participation; for instance, in Australia the public education coalition engaged a new layer of union members that had lain dormant through previous industrial campaigns by inviting them to participate in a coalition-run inquiry. Strength also came from learning new ways to influence decision makers, as we saw in Chicago, where the UFCW borrowed from the strategic capacity of the collaborative to translate a defensive strategy against Wal-Mart into a popular movement for living wages in all large retail stores.

That coalitions may strengthen organizations holds particular promise for unions. Coalitions may provide a means for reestablishing unions' ability to exercise political influence and control over work practices. Likewise, civil society relationships may reverse unions' social isolation and re-

shape their organizational capacity. In these ways, coalitions may be a source of union revitalization.

It is critical to note that we saw unions win social change and enhance their organizational strength by working in coalitions that were long-term and remarkably mutual in the way in which they planned and executed their goals. Across the case studies, unions gained more power from working in coalition when they had less direct control over the coalition. Thus for the public education coalition it was the Vinson inquiry and not the salaries campaign that had the greater political impact on government; similarly it was the Living Wage Coalition and not the No-Wal-Mart campaign that most aggressively challenged Chicago's retailers.

This finding runs counter to much of the common wisdom about coalitions. Popular union conceptions are that coalitions are a means to supplement union goals, that community organizations are an add-on to union power and strategy. This approach sees relationships with community organizations in a zero-sum framework, where the purpose of a coalition is to enable "power for" unions through a transfer of resources from community organizations to unions.

We did see examples of this kind of instrumental power in the case studies. Community organizations helped unions mobilize people to attend rallies in Chicago, run media events and lobby in Sydney, and build public awareness in Toronto. These kinds of instrumental support, however, paled in comparison with the deeper exchange of power that occurred when the relationships and campaign goals were more mutually constructed.

I would argue that a more powerful way for unions to organize in coalition is to work to build positive-sum relationships. This is where community organizations build "power with" unions (Kreiserberg 1992; Chambers 2003). In contrast with the way community organizations provide support for union goals, positive-sum coalitions enable unions and community organizations to jointly craft issues and campaigns that work to build each other while also meeting each other's direct interests. We have seen that when coalitions operate in a way that generates reciprocity of decision making and a mutuality of interest, organizations are much more likely to share power, resources, and skills for the long haul.

Transactional "power for" coalitions, or what Frege, Heery, and Turner (2004) describe as "vanguard coalitions," are easily severable. They may allow a union to obtain short-term support from a community organization, but the assistance is not likely to last because there is little motiva-



tion to sustain the relationship. Organizations do not have to share power; they need a reason to do so. The reason can be based on an interest in an issue, as in Sydney and Toronto, or it may be based on a broader organizational interest, say, to rebuild political influence, as in Chicago. When a union cultivates a relationship with a community organization based on the organization's self-interest, that community organization is likely to strengthen its commitment to joint work. We saw the impact of mutual interest in Chicago, where unions went from asking community organizations to participate in union rallies to instead jointly planning a living wage ordinance.

Positive-sum coalitions of unions and community organizations provide several sources of power for unions. Across the case studies, unions benefited from their coalition relationships in quite different ways. Not only were the case studies different because each embodied distinctive combinations of the coalition elements, but this variation also corresponded to the specific kinds of union power that the coalition elements produced. In my analysis, unions gain power from working in coalition in three different ways, each of which correlates to the strong presence of one of the coalition elements (Tattersall forthcoming a).

Strong common concern helps broaden a union's vision and thereby builds the political agency of unions. This develops when a coalition assists a union to set out a public agenda by articulating its vested interests as a social interest (a sword of justice) or where participation in a coalition helps a union to politicize union members. We saw the power of the NSWTF enhanced by the public education coalition and in particular the Inquiry into Public Education. The coalition generated political influence for union issues such as class sizes and salaries. It activated union members who had not previously been engaged by industrial work but who were committed to taking action around their professional identity. This broader understanding of union purpose made it easier for the NSWTF to build relationships with parents and principals. The coalition expanded the union's political influence and member politicization because the coalition's common concern went beyond the sectional interests of the union and connected to the interests of parents and the broader public. Yet as the common concern changed, so did this political power, with the agenda-setting capacity falling away during the salaries campaign.

When a coalition has strong organizational relationships and structure, unions gain public legitimacy and enhanced power from the shared resources. We saw this most clearly in Chicago, where the collaborative's

strong relationships allowed its living wage campaign to harness the lobbying relationships of labor, the field campaign of ACORN, and the strategic planning work of the coalition as a whole. This coalition's open and trusting relationships produced a climate where organizations were prepared to share power. This collective resource benefited the union specifically because the work of the collaborative was in its strategic interests. The UFCW was directly affected by the issue of living wages, and the SEIU was directly interested in building political influence in the city.

A coalition's scale can provide unions with opportunities to increase the campaigning skills of union leaders and members. For instance, the OHC engaged unions like CUPE in unfamiliar campaign strategies, such as a canvass, provincial tours, and plebiscites. These campaigns were successful because they broke the mold of the traditional union response to political threats, which was to organize rallies. The coalition's local broker organizations provided a resource base for catalyzing new forms of member participation that left lasting skills among the union stewards and members who participated. The union was able to take advantage of this multiscalaed campaign opportunity because it was a multiscalaed organization, with locals that matched the local scale of the health coalition across the province.

I argue that these three types of union power represent three ways in which unions can take up the challenge posed by Flanders (1970) and wield a sword of justice. In arguing this I revisit Flanders's understanding of union power. He implied that there was a "choice" for unions, between acting in their vested interest *or* acting with a sword of justice. My argument moves beyond this dichotomy. My findings suggest that coalitions are most powerful when these two factors are combined, when vested interest coincides *or* is expressed as a sword of justice.

I found that powerful unionism, through a connection between vested interest and a sword of justice, can develop in three distinct ways. First, mutual relationships create space for social legitimacy by offering an antidote to union domination. By connecting union self-interest with other organizations' interests, unions can align their own vested interest with a broader public interest. Intense collaboration opens up vested-interest decision making by exposing it to the rigor of debate and negotiation. Second, a shared agenda connects vested interest to social interest by opening up campaign goals to broader constituencies and bringing in nonunion advocates to promote these concerns. Third, innovative campaign strategies become an antidote to predictable repertoires of contention, adding new activities that can surprise opponents and wield new



types of influence. In these three ways, as Turner (2001) argues, coalitions play a central role in union revitalization.

Coalition participants, and in particular union organizers, will make decisions about the kinds of union power they build. They are strategic choices. Across the case studies, we saw how context and objectives shaped the way coalitions prioritized and achieved different kinds of power. But the central principle was that more mutual, reciprocal, and creative relationships qualitatively enhanced the kind of power unions gained from coalitions. When unions simultaneously enhanced the strength of their community organization partners, there was a cumulative expansion of resources across the coalition, as well as an increase in power for unions. This builds on the work of Voss and Sherman (2000), who suggest that union leaders with social movement experience are likely to advance union reform. I argue that union participation in coalitions, under certain circumstances, can also be a trigger for union revitalization.

Beyond the internal renewal of unions, we can see that coalitions also produced political power in the interests of unions. This kind of political power was unlike the insider influence associated with union affiliation with labor parties. The coalitions generated a potentially more short-term and temporary exercise of political pressure that was limited to moving specific issues and agendas, as opposed to a sustained institutionalized influence over the broad policies of a political party. Nonetheless, that pressure had a qualitatively different effect on the state than did labor strategies, as the coalitions were able to shift the decisions of a broader class of politicians. Thus in Canada, the Save Medicare campaign shifted the Liberal Party, and in Australia the public education coalition enlisted the support of the conservative opposition as well as the ALP. Beyond the traditional strategy of union-party relationships and labor parties, coalitions potentially provide a supplementary (or in the case of the NSWTF, an alternative) source of political power for unions. Moreover, when coalition strategies are used in concert with union-party relationships, they can strengthen those relationships. For instance, in Chicago traditional lobbying was coupled with direct action in individual aldermanic wards, with the result that Democratic aldermen were more likely to support the coalition's policy reforms.

Coalition success is far-reaching but complex. While I identify several core principles that produced powerful long-term relationships, the constraints of political and national context often force coalition organizers to trade their desire for stronger organizations to pursue social change.

Yet coalitions mitigated some of these tensions. The dynamism of cross-coalition learning and the frequency with which the coalitions in my case studies produced new strategies in response to hostile contexts showed that coalitions have the potential to build new social agendas and help regenerate civil society. For unions, I argue that the different coalition elements work to produce positive-sum resources that reinvigorate their relationships, agenda, and campaign capacity while rebuilding their political power.



# **Power in Coalition**

## **Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change**

**Amanda Tattersall**

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Dedicated to my two boys,  
Charles and Hartley