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Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change

By Amanda Tattersall, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010, 209 +xii pp., ISBN 978-0-8014-4899-7 (cloth); 978-0-8014-7606-8 (pbk).

This new book elucidates the nature of social activism – the patient, usually grinding (but sometimes overnight) processes of achieving social change – and the role of coalitions in activism. In particular, the focus is on the type of activism labelled “community unionism,” a term often used in a fuzzy way to cover many kinds of relationships. Tattersall produces a satisfying and very readable book for both activists and academics. Her own dedicated activism and sustained scholarship contribute in equal measures to making it a significant work, and it cements the author’s role as a significant public intellectual. *Power in Coalition* culminates six years of scholarship (including a PhD at the University of Sydney), and a longer period of community activity in unions (which includes the past three years establishing the Sydney Alliance, a broad-based coalition of nearly 30 member organizations, launched in 2011 (see: <http://www.sydneyalliance.org.au/>).

The book goes beyond the creation of typologies of different kinds of labour movement coalitions, and avoids mere “thick description.” It asks a key question: what makes coalitions successful? Tattersall does this by an adroit use of social movement scholarship to examine three successful coalitions in which unions played a key role: a public education coalition in Sydney, Australia; a living wage campaign run by the Grassroots Collaborative in Chicago, and the Ontario Health Coalition’s fight in Toronto to save universal health care. Her descriptions of these campaigns are lively, engaging and inspiring. In themselves, they would have been sufficient for an interesting book for activists and those interested in social change. But Tattersall also makes key theoretical contributions to debates on mobilization, activism and unions, standing

on the shoulders of giants to do so, but in the process creating a key text in the field.

The three case studies form the centre-piece of the book. The scene is set by an introductory chapter which explains why, in “[t]he difficult decade bookended by September 11 and the global financial crisis,” unions – some of them at least – felt the need to rethink old strategies. This is followed by a chapter that locates the work within previous literature and introduces Tattersall’s framework. Following the case studies, two final chapters tie the book together. One identifies “common principles” of coalition success and explains how coalition formation is a component of union revitalization; and the other distils the study’s implications for union strategy, purpose and theory.

Tattersall’s theoretical contribution is that she clarifies some concepts with respect to “strategy” and “success” in coalitions, and then links them together, in ways that are informed by wide scholarship. She distills coalition strategy to three elements: *common concern*, *organizational relationships*, and *scale*. She defines four measures of coalition success: *winning a specific external outcome*; *shaping the broader political climate*; *creating sustainable relationships*; and *increasing the internal capacity of the coalition partners*. She links these two sets of ideas – strategies, and success factors – finding that the three “elements” of strategy do not need to be equally strong to lead to success. Tattersall also skilfully weaves in concepts from the social movement and other bodies of literature. For instance, she explains how alertness to “political opportunity structures” are part of the use of scale, so here politics and geography come together. She also describes how movement organizational culture and the role of bridge builders sustain organizational relationships. *Power in Coalition* displays keen awareness of both sociological and labour geography perspectives on activism, as well as showing a deep practical understanding of community development and union operation. Tattersall’s “take” on the contested aspects of the term

“community unionism” is to argue that the meaning of the term community is vague, or implicit, in scholarly work. She sees “community” referring to *organization*, *common identity/shared interest*, and *place*, but argues that scholarly work puts varying emphasis on one or other of these meanings. Sociologists, for instance, might emphasize either of the first two, geographers the third. Tattersall argues, however, that it is not an either/or; all three definitions can be “reinforcing and connected” in a particular campaign. So “community unionism” refers to a broad set of strategies – differently played out in different contexts – that emerge from the three meanings of “community.”

The lucidity of Tattersall’s prose will satisfy both the academic and the activist. The book has bounce and verve, with each case study commencing with a beautifully researched and succinct account of the political, legislative, economic and social context for that particular campaign. Tattersall has a great talent for creating word pictures that make activism come alive. The reader will be engaged by Tattersall’s tactic of immediately locating us within the milieu of the events: in NSW’s Parliament House at a press conference about an inquiry into public education which had had union, parent, teacher and school principal support; in a church with Latino and African American supporters in the case of the Chicago Collaborative; and at a vote count in Ontario’s Niagara-on-the-Lake of a plebiscite on public health care. The colours of the Chicago participants’ T-shirts, their chants, for instance, give a real feel for the place, the role of individuals and the particular texture of the campaign. Quotes from informants – some willing to be identified, some not – are used effectively to tell the stories of the campaigns.

Chapter 3, on the Grassroots Collaborative in Chicago, explores a campaign that ran from 2003 to 2006, aimed at achieving a municipal living wage ordinance. The background was a long relationship within the collaborative that had campaigned on a variety of issues prior

to the living wage campaign, one of which was an unsuccessful campaign to prevent the establishment of a Wal-Mart megastore. Out of that grew the idea that, if the community could not lock Wal-Mart out, they could “drag it up to the higher road.” Tattersall identifies the most important success factors in the living wage campaign as being strong organizational relationships, and a deepening understanding of how organizational capacity could be increased from merely “turning out people” to affecting political relationships and providing other kinds of resources from, in most cases, a relatively small membership base. The coalition focused the power of the various groups with a track record in progressive activity – churches, unions, other organizations such as ACORN – and relied on the critical role of bridge builders between organizations. Campaigners worked the political cycle effectively; the wages campaign was more steadily built than the early No-Wal-Mart campaign, and effectively used scale by concentrating paid staff’s efforts in areas such as mobilizing signatures by door knocking. The campaign was less effective in increasing membership numbers and capacity, and in building “multiscaled power,” because of the tightly held nature of its strategy development, based on strong personal relationships amongst a limited number of individuals. Participating unions, however, gained significant resources and enhanced political power from the coalition, and thus had far more influence in coalition than they would have had otherwise. And their agendas were broadened, as the ordinance covered non-union, as well as union, labour.

Ultimately, the issue was lost. In this roller-coaster of a campaign against powerful corporate interests and a split council, the council initially passed the ordinance, only to have Mayor Daly veto it and garner, by a small majority of one, protection for his veto, thus overturning the ordinance. Issues of common concern were exploited by Daly, who attacked the living wage as “racially unjust,” thus splintering public support for the ordinance. The

loss “was a win of sorts,” however, as it was the first time the mayor had used the veto in 17 years in his position, aldermen hostile to the issues subsequently, lost their seats, and a campaign to raise the minimum wage in Illinois was successful. So while the campaign did not achieve its immediate objective, the political climate was shifted and a strong coalition was further strengthened.

In this and the other case studies, Tattersall vigorously explores the complexities of success –and failure – and the nature of strategic choice for unions in the twentieth century. Unions are not – and cannot be – discrete actors, she argues; in a context of a more hostile or indifferent climate, building coalitions will increase union power and build social legitimacy. But it is mutual power enhancement – between unions and other organizations – that is the most lasting and successful strategy; paradoxically, to gain power, unions must share it.

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Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy

Edited by Ruth Milkman, Joshua Bloom and Victor Narro, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010, 296 pp., ISBN 978-0-8014-4858-4.

This book consists of case studies of worker/immigrant organizing efforts (with organizing defined very broadly) in the Los Angeles area. Some of the efforts documented are by worker centers, others by ethnic or occupation based associations, others by established trade unions. The general object of the campaigns is to improve the lot of low-wage workers through some combination of tactics. The editors of the book argue that the interaction and learning that has taken place between organizations beginning from different perspectives has produced a more or less “distinctive L.A. model of economic justice organizing and advocacy.”

The book’s senior editor (although she would probably deny it) is Ruth Milkman, who at the time when most of the research was

being carried out was a professor of sociology at UCLA and now holds a similar position at the City University of New York. Her co-editors are Joshua Bloom, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at UCLA at the time the book was being prepared who before returning to graduate school had spent nearly a decade as an organizer, and Victor Narro, a lawyer who has made a career of working in various capacities for a variety of community organizations. Several of the chapter authors are graduate students, others are activists/scholars.

The methodology chosen to produce the book was deliberately collaborative and interactive between the authors, the editors and members of the groups being studied. Bloom refers to it as “organic public sociology.” In addition to the frequent feedback and interchange between those centrally involved, a miniconference was held at UCLA in 2008 and three prominent experts were invited to provide their input: Dan Clawson from the University of Massachusetts, Janice Fine (author of the seminal book on Workers’ Centers) from Rutgers University and Nik Theodore from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

According to Milkman what is distinction about the “L.A. model of organizing and advocacy” is that it is a product of “mimetic isomorphism,” or “the process through which organizations facing similar environmental challenges and uncertainties imitate other successful organizations.” What has come out of the process, it is argued, is that both workers’ centers and unions doing low wage and/or immigrant organizing in the L.A. area typically make use of some combination of the following elements:

- strategic research on organizing targets to identify vulnerabilities and to extract politically valuable information;
- grassroots organizing focused on low-wage workers and leadership development efforts to empower those workers;
- legal initiatives, including filing claims with government regulatory agencies as well as lawsuits on behalf of low-wage