

1

WHY LEAD LABOR?

PROJECTS AND PATHWAYS IN CALIFORNIA UNIONS, 1984-2001

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This paper explores how union leadership has developed over the last 20 years. While other studies have focused on the careers of top leaders or new recruits, we examine the careers of rising leaders over time. Finding that demographics is not enough to account for their career paths, we attend to the ways these leaders articulate their motivations, goals, and means of achieving them—what we call their “projects.” Projects—and how they change over time—help us explain not only why they joined unions, but why some stayed and others left.

INTRODUCTION

John Sweeney's election to the presidency of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in 1996 sparked a major effort by American unions to "reinvent" themselves. Concurrent with the "Sweeney revolution," a dramatic generational turnover has occurred in the leadership of major unions, labor councils, and state federations. For example, Andrew Stern, 52, a graduate of and student activist at the University of Pennsylvania, rose to lead America's largest union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). John Wilhelm, 56, the new president of the Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), a graduate of Yale, also came to labor as a student activist. Doug McCarron, 51, neither a student activist nor college educated, has led the United Brotherhood of Carpenters through a major reorganization, including the union's severance of ties with the AFL-CIO. At the state and local level, Miguel Conteras, 50, the son of migrant farm workers and a former organizer for Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, has led the Los Angeles Federation of Labor since 1998. Josie Mooney, 48, a college educated, former community organizer leads the Bay Area public workers union and serves as president of the San Francisco Labor Council; she is the first woman to occupy those posts. Members of this generation are also responsible for new efforts to bring young people into the labor movement—college educated apprentices recruited by the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute and Union Summer and, to a lesser degree, new immigrants who have been mobilized through campaigns like "justice for janitors."

Where did this new generation of California union leaders come from? Who are they? Why did they join the union movement? Why did some leaders leave? Why did many more stay?

These questions are puzzling because this generation came to work for unions in the 1970s when organized labor was shrinking and offered few opportunities for advancement. Moreover, unions were no longer at the center of a social movement. In fact, in light of some unions' responses to the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, many political activists saw unions as "part of the problem, rather than part of the solution."

Existing scholarship on union leadership is of little help in answering these questions; it neither looks at this generation of union leaders nor grapples with questions of why people come to work for unions, why they stay in that work, and why they leave. One reason for this limitation is that earlier research focused only on high-level union leaders, thus obscuring the question of why these leaders remained committed while others chose to leave (Mills, 1948). Moreover, previous scholars have studied union leaders at only one moment in time—when they reached the top—making it impossible to observe the processes by which their commitment was sustained (Fink, 1984; Quagliari, 1988). That research is more descriptive than explanatory and provides little theoretical guidance for understanding how and why career paths develop over time. Recently, a few researchers have begun to investigate the retention of union staff, but they focus on brand new recruits rather than on those with long-term commitment to union work.

Our study is the first to focus on the generation of leaders currently heading the American labor movement, and it moves beyond the empirical and theoretical limitations of earlier research. Rather than learning only about those who have become top leaders, we study a broad range of union leaders at earlier stages in their careers. Instead of focusing on a single moment in their careers, our study takes a longitudinal approach that allows us to investigate change over time.

Although the demographic background of today's union leaders differs from that of previous generations, demographic variables alone are of limited use in explaining why people came to work for unions,

why some continued, and why others left. To answer these critical questions, we examine how people articulate their motivations and goals—what we term their “projects”—and how these motivations have influenced the development of their careers over time.

This research was possible because we had access to a unique database of 68 California men and women, first interviewed in 1984 when they were selected for study as rising young labor leaders. We interviewed them again in 2001 and 2002.

Studying California labor leaders is particularly useful for understanding attempts to revitalize unions. Not only do California unions represent 15% of all American union members today, but they were also especially active during the period of this study (BLS, 2002). Significant attempts at union renewal in California, for example, include SEIU’s “justice for janitors” campaigns, the Los Angeles Federation of Labor’s grassroots political program, and unionization of some 100,000 home health care providers.

PATHWAYS TO UNION LEADERSHIP

The explanatory purpose of our research requires that we delve into labor leaders’ intentions and draw on a body of theory that helps us make sense of the relationship between their intentions, where they are now, and why.

C. Wright Mills published the most comprehensive collective portrait of American union leaders in 1948, at a time when unions were growing and accumulating political power (Mills, 1948). Mills did a masterful job of researching the demographic background of union leaders and locating those leaders in the larger social and political context of American society in the immediate post-World War Two era. His point of departure was that these men were a newly empowered group of strategic actors in American society. Accordingly, understanding their social origins, education, party ties, and the like were of interest in and of themselves. Mills demonstrated that most union leaders were self-made men. He did not inquire in any depth about their motivation for joining the labor movement. Rather, he assumed that their incentive was self-evident: These men of humble social origins got involved in union work because unions were a source of power and upward mobility.

Mills set the agenda for most of the research on union leadership to date (Fink, 1984; Quaglieri, 1988). Scholars have investigated how the backgrounds of top union leaders have changed over time, and they have sometimes interpreted these changes in ways that touched on why people come to work for unions. For the most part, however, scholars have assumed unionists’ motivations, rather than asking about them. Furthermore, scholars have neither inquired into whether leaders’ motivations change over time, nor attempted to trace the shifting of careers as intentions and goals change. In short, scholars have paid scant attention to how the careers of union leaders develop over time.¹

Focusing on demographics rather than motives made sense at a time when unions were growing, gaining influence, and dominated by workers who came up from the ranks. Mills sounded a theme that many other studies echoed: Labor leaders were most often men who rose from within the movement, self-made men whose motivation for union work seemed self-evident and not worth probing further. Investigating motivation seemed unnecessary, and it was also out of step with the theoretical fashion of structuralism, which has dominated social science thinking in recent years. To the extent that students of leadership in the arenas of management (Hollander, 1978; Bass, 1990), political science, and social movement theory

(Oberschall, 1973; Wickham-Crowley, 1992) examine motivation at all, they do so primarily in terms of class background, education, and personality—and the relationship of those factors to function.

Today, however, it seems less self-evident that people, even rank-and-file workers, are attracted to union work as a means of gaining social power. This makes the question of motivation more pressing. Moreover, sociologists have recently become much more interested in the role that agency plays in social life, and how intentionality and purpose shape social action.

Paying attention to purpose, however, does not suggest that individuals end up where they do because of some random caprice. Rather, it suggests that individuals make choices about the present based in part on their recollections of the past and their images of the future (Bruner, 1990). Action is neither entirely spontaneous nor entirely predictable. Action is adaptive, a result of what Bandura (1989) calls “emergent interactive agency,” in contrast with “pure autonomous agency” or “mechanistic agency.”²

Conceptualizing people’s choices this way is rooted in a sociological tradition originating with Weber, Mead, and Schutz, and linked recently with narrative theory by Mische and others (Emirbeyer & Mische, 1998; Mische, 2002). In this view, a narrative process that situates motivation for present action within a context of past recollection and future projection shapes an individual’s choices. One’s “project” is, therefore, his account of where he hopes to go (his goals), why he wants to get there (his motivations), and how he thinks he can arrive at his destination (his means).³

Since projects are the outcome of a narrative process, they are not fixed. As Schutz & Mead argue, projects are constructed and reconstructed as circumstances change and actors “continually reassess future possibilities in the face of past experiences” (Mische, 2002). Sometimes our goals work out, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes we persist in finding new ways to pursue them, but other times we change them. Thus, career pathways can be viewed as devised rather than followed. In our work, however, we focus less on the sources of people’s projects—*i.e.*, how they came to have the stories they do—than on the influence of those projects on their actions.

We recognize, of course, that both actors’ projects and career pathways unfold in interaction with organizational settings (Barley, 1989; Gunz, 1989). To the extent that organizations pursue collective projects, an individual’s project may be more or less dissonant with that of his or her organization. Furthermore, intentions are influenced by organizational settings, “shifting with changing structures of interest and attention” (Mische, 2002). This study attends to the organizational settings in which people carry out their projects and probes both the projects unionists start out with and how those projects change over time. We would expect individual projects within particular organizations to converge through processes of selection and adaptation: People leaving, people changing or, occasionally, organizations changing.⁴

We can study projects systematically by analyzing what people say and how they say it, and comparing the results across individuals, organizations, and outcomes. From a psychological point-of-view, relying on verbal accounts to assess goals and motivations might be suspect. But in trying to understand social action, attending to what people say about what they want and why may actually bring us a more useful understanding (Mills, 1940).

HOW WE LEARNED ABOUT UNION LEADERSHIP

The initial data for this study comes from a set of interviews with 130 California union leaders, conducted in 1984 by Marshall Ganz and Scott Washburn. These interviews were designed to provide insight into the future direction of the California labor movement. With the support of California labor organizations and a number of small foundations, Ganz & Washburn targeted a set of younger, full-time union leaders. Most of these leaders had organizing experience, earned positions of responsibility in their unions, and built reputations among their colleagues for a commitment to union revitalization. The interviewees were broadly representative of the full range of California unions, industries, and regions. However, special emphasis was placed on organizers, women, people of color, those who were 30-45 years of age at the time, and those with records of success. Eighty-six people in the original sample were between the ages of 30-45. The unions they worked for included those active in the public sector, services, manufacturing, building trades, and transportation. Each two to three hour interview was extensive and focused on the respondent's family background, career to date, mentoring, views of organizing, beliefs about leadership, and expectations for the future. Ganz & Washburn completed protocols based on their interview notes, which they then coded. However, the findings were never published, except in presentations made to union leaders in 1985-6 and in a few article references (Kuttner, 1987). Instead, the notes sat in a trunk in a Salinas, California warehouse until 2001.

The present study builds on the data collected in 1984. We re-interviewed the original respondents to compare their positions in 1984 with their current positions, and to learn how they got there. We explored their successes and their failures, the opportunities they encountered, barriers they faced, and how they dealt with them. Our interviews focused particular attention on their "projects," how they have changed, and how they interacted with their career choices, organizational turning points, and leadership roles.

TABLE 1 UNION LEADERS INTERVIEWED IN 2001

Original Group	86
Deceased	2
<i>Percent of Original Group Still Living</i>	98%
Total Living	84
Found	75
<i>Percent Found</i>	89%
Working for Union	48
<i>Percent of Those Found Working for Union</i>	64%
Retired from Union	3
<i>Percent of Those Found Retired from Union</i>	4%
Left Union	24
<i>Percent of Those Found Who Left Union</i>	32%
Retired After Leaving	0
<i>Percent of Those Found Who Retired After Leaving Union</i>	0%
Interviewed	68
<i>Percent of Those Found Interviewed</i>	91%

“Traditionally, union leaders had working-class parents, had a high school (or, at most, college) education, and began their union careers as rank-and-file members of the unions they later represented.

This appears to be changing.”

were first interviewed in 1984. As Table One shows, 84 (98%) of these people were still living. We were able to contact 75 of them (89%). Of these 75, 48 (64%) were still working for unions, three (4%) had retired from a union, and 24 (32%) had left union work before retiring. Our study is based on those interviewed as of the writing of this paper—or, 68 (91%) of the total interviewees available to us.

Our first task was to locate the original cohort—a search that got underway in the spring of 2001. When we found most of them, we conducted a set of two to three hour semi-structured interviews, tape recorded and transcribed them, composed short “debriefs” after each interview, and met regularly as a research team of five to discuss and analyze the data. We analyzed responses, developed categories, coded where appropriate, and evaluated quantitatively where possible.

In this paper, we look only at the people in the original sample who were between 30 -45 years of age when they

WHERE THEY CAME FROM

Who were these 68 union leaders? Table Two gives the broad picture. Perhaps accurately reflecting the makeup of mid-level union leadership in 1984, only 14 (21%) were women. Ethnically, the vast majority were non-Hispanic Caucasians. Eleven (16%) were Hispanics, a significant group that played an important role in the recent revival of California unionism. Fifteen (22%) were immigrants or had at least one immigrant parent. Despite considerable efforts to find rising African American union leaders to interview, Ganz & Washburn found only two in the 45-and-under age group and were unable to interview either one again in 2001-02.

Regarding religion, half were raised Roman Catholic, one-quarter Protestant, one-fifth Jewish, and the remaining five percent claimed no religion. Only a minority had what might be called a devoutly religious upbringing, but a small and interesting proportion of these had attended a religious seminary or given serious thought to a religious career.

Traditionally, union leaders had working-class parents, had a high school (or, at most, college) education, and began their union careers as rank-and-file members of the unions they later represented. This appears to be changing—more so in some unions than others—with the nature of the change already dramatically apparent in the demographics of the leaders we interviewed. A bare majority came from working-class parents; indeed 47% were classified as having middle-class background. In considerable contrast to earlier generations of union leaders, only one-third of the entire group interviewed had union parents (Mills, 1948). Reflecting the dramatic expansion of higher education among working-class youth in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of our interviewees were college graduates, and a considerable number of those had done some graduate work. Far from incidentally, most of our college-graduate leaders were in college during the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Many reported being radicalized in college, and some even participated in anti-war activities in high school. A large majority (77%) were political or social activists in community or political organizations prior to their union employment. Again, in contrast to previous leadership generations, one-third (34%) were hired directly from “outside,” without having first been a member of the union for which they worked.

TABLE 2 UNION LEADERS INTERVIEWED IN 1984 (30-45)

INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS		NUMBER	PERCENT
Positions	CEOs	31	46%
	Other Elected Full Time Officers	0	0%
	Organizers & Organizing Directors	12	18%
	Other Appointed Directors	3	4%
	Business Agents	11	16%
	Business Agent-Organizers	8	12%
	Others	2	3%
How Selected?	Elected	26	38%
	Appointed	42	62%
Directing Staff?	Yes	38	56%
	No	30	44%
Organizing Experience	Some Organizing Before 1984	51	75%
	Organizing Responsibility in 1984	20	29%
Union Sector	Federation	8	12%
	Public	15	22%
	Service	16	24%
	Craft	13	19%
	Industrial	16	24%
Region	Los Angeles County	24	35%
	Orange County	4	6%
	San Diego County	4	6%
	Bay Area	26	38%
	San Jose	5	7%
	Central Valley	5	6%
	Inland Empire	0	0%
Gender	Male	54	79%
	Female	14	21%
Ethnicity	White	57	84%
	Hispanic	11	16%
Class	Working Class	36	53%
	Middle Class	32	47%
Religion	Roman Catholic	34	50%
	Protestant	18	26%
	Jewish	13	19%
	None	3	3%
Family Background	Union Family	23	34%
	Immigrant / Immigrant Family	15	22%
Education	College Completed When Went to Work for Union	38	56%
	College Not Completed When Went to Work for Union	30	44%
Marital Status in 2001	Ever Married by 2001	64	94%
	Married Only Once by 2001	29	43%

RECRUITMENT		NUMBER	PERCENT
Experience Prior to Recruitment	Activism	36	53%
	Military	10	15%
Source of Recruitment	From Inside the Workplace	46	68%
	From Outside the Workplace	22	32%

WHY THEY CAME TO WORK FOR UNIONS

In our interviews, we asked people about how they came to do union work, *why* they kept doing it, and, when relevant, why they left to do something else. We used a semi-structured approach so that we could probe people's own accounts of their choices and why they made them. We looked carefully at the specific answers people gave to our questions about why they made the decisions they did, but we also attended to the larger narratives in which their answers were embedded—*i.e.*, the words and metaphors they used in describing their work and the affect with which they responded.

Our respondents typically gave us detailed accounts of their initial involvements. From these accounts, we coded the projects people had when they began working in the labor movement. We distinguished four broad projects: Social reform, community leadership, personal advancement, and union building.

Social Reform: These people were drawn into union work as a means of initiating social reform. Motivated by their commitment to social justice, they generally believed political work was the best way to make the world a better place. For them, union work provided an opportunity to achieve goals that were even broader than those of the union.

Community Leadership: Community leaders hoped to improve the lives of the members of their community through union work. These leaders defined their communities based on ethnicity, kinship, or work place—often in combination. They were motivated by identification with their communities and believed they could best serve those communities by representing their interests and acting on their behalf. They often indicated willingness to assert community interests over union interests.

Personal Advancement: A number of interviewees got involved with union work with the objective of improving their individual lives. For some, union work offered the prospect of upward mobility; for others, a more interesting job; and for still others, a way to achieve influence and power. They looked for work based on the opportunity it offered, expressed themselves in non-ideological terms, and typically considered union work as one option among others.

Union Builders: Union builders viewed union work as an end in itself. Often having had direct experience with the difference a union can make in one's life, they were motivated by the desire to improve the lives of others in the same way. They articulated that the best way of achieving that goal was to negotiate good contracts, win grievances, organize, and service members.

Table Three shows the number of labor leaders who came into the movement with each project. The largest single group, some 53%, had social reform projects when they first began working in the labor movement. The remaining 47% of those interviewed were divided among community leaders (15%), personal advancement seekers (16%), and union builders (16%).

Who were the people who joined unions to pursue each of these projects, and how did they come to do union work?

Social Reform

Chart One presents the class background, education, source of recruitment, and activist experience of the 36 people who came to the labor movement with a social reform project. (Note that all names have been changed, though we have selected aliases that correlate to the gender and ethnic background of each labor

TABLE 3 FIRST UNION PROJECTS

PROJECT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Social Reform	36	53%
Community Leadership	10	15%
Personal Advancement	11	16%
Union Building	11	16%
Total	68	100%

leader.) The chart shows that nearly half of the social reformers came from middle-class backgrounds and were college educated. Almost another third were college graduates from working-class homes. About one-fifth of the interviewees, some with middle-class backgrounds and some with working-class backgrounds, did not have college degrees; however, many attended college for a year or two. Regarding recruitment, the social reform group is split evenly between those who were hired from outside of the union and those who were promoted from within. The group includes both men and women.

As column four indicates, prior activism is the common thread connecting those interested in social reform. Regardless of class background, education, gender, or recruitment method, every social reformer save one had been actively involved in social movements before coming to work for a union.

In our interviews, we explored people's early activism and tried to understand how it led to union work. We discovered three types of activism that brought social reformers into the labor movement; each type of activism was associated with a different pathway into union work. One type, which we label "unaffiliated," involved participation in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s without membership in a vanguard political group. A second type of activism, "faith-motivated" activism, was rooted in religious commitments. A third variety, "vanguard" activism, entailed membership in a vanguard political group. No path to social reform was the exclusive route of any one class; people from both the working class and middle class traveled all three paths.

Unaffiliated Social Reformers

Those with an unaffiliated social reform project, the largest group, typically became activists in high school or college. Most were spurred to action by the anti-war movement, but some were drawn in by the civil rights movement or community activism instead. Colin Gordon's story of anti-war activism, which began in high school, is characteristic.

There was a feeling in the air in those times, and the draft, really, [was] the single biggest motivating factor in my developing of my thinking....I was reading about the war in Vietnam. But I was also reading about everything else. I remember reading about—was it in the summer of '67?—the riots in Newark and numerous other places and in New Haven, Connecticut, actually. But in Newark [there]...was one of the most vicious ones. And, I remember a *Life* magazine cover with the guy; I think his name was Billy Fur. He was from Philadelphia, and he was visiting Newark. And, he was killed by the National Guard for carrying a case of beer out of a liquor store that was being looted. And [they] had his bloody corpse on the cover of *Life* magazine. And the

CHART 1 SOCIAL REFORM AS FIRST PROJECT BY CLASS, EDUCATION, SOURCE OF RECRUITMENT, AND ACTIVIST EXPERIENCE

NAME	CLASS	EDUCATION	RECRUITED?	ACTIVIST?	1ST PROJECT
Sam Hoffman	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Karen Emory	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Neil Rosen	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
George Kaufman	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Sam Rosenberg	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Eli Altman	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Clem Donlevy	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Nancy Masterson	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Tom Nussbaum	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Laura Feirman	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Ulrich Darden	MC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Nick Martin	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Kevin Rogers	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Rob Harrington	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Tom Weinberg	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Charles Keaton	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Vic Robinson	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Ralph Reeves	MC	C+	In	Y	SR
Liam O'Reilly	MC	LC	Out	Y	SR
Dianne Burton	MC	LC	In	Y	SR
Norm Dunn	MC	LC	In	N	SR
Henry Carl	MC	LC	In	Y	SR
Ellen Atwood	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Nydia Elizondo	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Colin Gordon	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Karl Stephens	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Neil Eaton	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Carol Lewin	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Lloyd Callahan	WC	C+	Out	Y	SR
Henry Podack	WC	C+	In	Y	SR
Eric Marcovich	WC	C+	In	Y	SR
Kathrine McCarthy	WC	C+	In	Y	SR
Charles Harris	WC	C+	In	Y	SR
Linda Davis	WC	LC	Out	Y	SR
Rudy Del Castillo	WC	LC	In	Y	SR
Rom Giannini	WC	LC	In	Y	SR

KEY MC = Middle Class
 WC = Working Class
 C+ = College degree or more
 LC = Less than college degree

OUT = Hired from outside the union
 IN = Promoted from within the union
 Y = Activist before joining union
 N = Not activist before joining union
 SR = Social Reform

street was a typical suburban street. I mean, it was a greasy, dirty street, and there he was. And, I remember arguing with my father saying, “You can’t kill people for a case of beer.” And my father took the other view, as lots of people did.

Gordon soon began to mobilize other students for anti-draft and anti-war activities. He continued this work when he went to college and joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). When approached by more sectarian groups, however, he “didn’t opt to engage.”

I went to some of the meetings, some of the study groups, and I read the books. And it seemed odd. I remember thinking, “This is such a great idea that these people have, if everybody would just work together and cooperate and share, this is like such a brilliant idea. But their approach is, like, they’re never going to reach the people in the U.S. that it’s aimed at. They’re not gonna come close.” So I was going to one or two, and then I would just walk away.

Instead, Gordon’s college involvement with social movements centered on non-sectarian, anti-war mobilization. He was also caught up in the larger activist milieu, which included “symbolic support for black activists who were being attacked by the government in ’69 and ’70 and ’71.” In his senior year, he supported a wildcat walkout of the cafeteria workers in the student center. However, that support ended when, “some guys in suits came up and told [the workers] to go back to work.”

The “guys in suits”—union representatives—did not leave a favorable impression. When he graduated from college, Gordon had a social reform project, but unions were not the obvious place to look to pursue that project. He was typical of the unaffiliated social reformers with whom we spoke. Like most in the New Left, unaffiliated social reformers tended to view unions as undemocratic upholders of the *status quo* and the war effort. Making union work even more unlikely was the fact that most unions were opposed to hiring “outsiders”—people who did not come up from the workplace. How then did social reformers like Gordon come to do union work?

Here, too, Gordon’s path is similar to that of many other unaffiliated activists: He came to union work only through involvement in a “bridge” organization, one that linked movement groups and labor unions. In his case, it was the United Farm Workers (UFW), which Gordon got involved with not because it was a labor organization but because it was part of a larger movement for social justice and civil rights.

So I was intrigued by the fact...It would have been, like, June of ’73, in *Time* magazine. There had been a little article, and it was on the [modern-day] *Grapes of Wrath*. It was about the fights between the Teamsters and the farm workers in Coachella. And, it said, “We’re in the same place that Steinbeck used to write about. In the dusty fields, farm workers are being subjected to this violence.” And, I remember reading that without thinking much...I had never been involved too much in the boycotts ’68-72, although there was a guy I remember from [college], and I was like, “What’s wrong with that guy? He’s boycotting grapes? We’ve got a war to stop or to win or whatever we were trying to do with it.” But,..I read that article, and that was the first time that I really thought about the farm workers when I read that article that summer. And, then after that, I ended up in the [San Francisco] area. And then when I met them [again] I said, “God this is an amazing struggle.” And I was talking to my friends from Fordham about it, and they’re saying, “Look, they need people. They’re trying to get people to work fulltime with them and support them. You were always Mr. Protest and making

us go to demonstrations and everything. Why don't you go work with them?" I don't know if they were trying to get me out of the apartment or what! They were like, "Why don't you go work with them?"

Gordon began by volunteering with UFW to help with the boycott of Gallo wine and went on to become a field representative, and later an assistant field office director. He stayed for six years. When he left, he "knew that [he] was going to continue in the labor movement," largely because he realized that he could carry out his social reform project by doing union work. He eventually ran into an "old farm worker contact" who had gone to work for the HERE local in San Francisco. Gordon asked if there were any jobs, and he was hired to run a picket line. He has done union work ever since, because, "if everybody did a better job organizing their co-people, we could make the working people and the poor people have a lot better share of what there is."

Another organization that bridged the world of activism with that of labor movement was the Citizens Action League (CAL), a membership advocacy group battling the public utilities in California for reforms like lifeline rates for poor people. CAL's founders, Mike Miller and Tim Sampson, were profoundly influenced by Saul Alinsky and worked with unions like SEIU on community organizing. Some of the social reformers, particularly those whose activism involved community organizing, came to the labor movement following involvement with CAL.

Clem Donlevy, for instance, became committed to a social reform project as a result of his experiences in the Peace Corps in Tanzania. After he left the Peace Corps, he spent a few years getting his master's degree in urban planning and then working as a well-paid urban planner for the city of Boston, which he hated. Donlevy came to the Bay Area and began working for CAL, doing community organizing for a subsistence wage of \$60 per week. During these years, he never thought about working for a union. However, by the time he was ready to leave community organizing—because he "had learned what he was going to learn from [community organizing]"—his thinking had changed. Union work "was just sort of a natural progression," after working with people in labor while at CAL.

A few of the unaffiliated social reformers began working for unions without previous involvement with a bridging organization like the UFW or CAL. Some in this group came from working-class backgrounds and became more radical in college because of contact with radical professors. Carol Lewin told us:

I really got radicalized in college. There was this history professor who taught Marxism and [explained] my whole life....My dad was a salesman, and he worked really hard. He would leave at 6:30 or 7 in the morning, and what he did was go to poor neighborhoods and sold household items that he had in the back seat of his car, like everything from toasters and irons to blankets and pots and pans. And people would buy it on a payment plan. And so then he would go back every week and collect \$5 towards the toaster or whatever, and that was his job. But, there were some people in my family who had, now I sort of realize they were, like, doing well. Not rich, but they were doing well. And so there was...I just saw the difference, and mainly I saw how my Dad felt about himself, because about, like, his own sense of himself and dignity. And so then when I went to college and learned about Marxism and the alienation of labor and how people get their sense of themselves through work, it just, like, totally...I just felt this amazing [sense of belonging]....It was like my family.

Another interviewee, Lloyd Callahan, came from a similar working class background and talked about two of his professors—one a Marxist and the other an “anti-communist Socialist.” Their teachings “made sense” of his father’s life, and offered him some pride of class and a “philosopher’s stone” to understand the world.

Once they had been radicalized, Lewin and Callahan’s entries into union work were less problematic than those of Gordon and Donlevy. For Lewin and Callahan, all it took was exposure to an organizing campaign or a job lead. Lewin, for example, had a summer internship in Washington, D.C., while she was still in college. While there, she roomed with someone who was working on an organizing campaign at the AFL-CIO.

I went there originally to work in the Health and Human Services because I thought I wanted to go into public health. But I went there and it was during the Reagan years, and I can still remember this little cubicle I had at that office. And it was really boring. But I lived in this house with all these women who had all different jobs. And one of them had a job working for the AFL-CIO for the Food and Allied Service Trades (FAST). And so I remember she came home one night and said, “Tonight I have to go out at 2 in the morning to meet these waitresses at the Watergate Hotel. And, then I have to be up at 6 in the morning to leaflet a cleaners.” And I went, “Oh my God! That’s what I want to do.” So I just quit. I got the internship also with AFL-CIO. I mean, they didn’t pay us anything, so I had also gotten that. But I thought I wanted to go into public health, so I took that public health one. And then I called Jeff...and said, “Hi, can I come work for you instead?” And, of course, I could because they paid \$50/week.

When I was at Berkeley, I was in the New American Movement, and I definitely knew that capitalism sucked. And so, but I didn’t know what you could do about it. Like, I didn’t know that unions were an answer because no one really talked about unions. But I studied all about gigantic corporations screwing over Third World countries. And then I knew that some people made all the money in the world but never spend it, and other people couldn’t afford anything. And I felt like that about my family. So, I mean, I felt like that but didn’t know what to do. I didn’t think these were the answers. So then when I went to Washington, and I saw that people were doing that. I went, “God that’s what I should do.” And I remember thinking, “I can’t believe that I could actually do this and have it be a job! That this is a job!” And so then when I left there and went back to [San Francisco], I looked up Local 2. And that was the job I got.

Similarly, Callahan submitted in a resume when he heard that the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) was looking for organizers. In both cases, Lewin and Callahan seemed more predisposed than other unaffiliated social reformers to think of unions as vehicles for social change. Thus, their union involvement was a more direct process: All it took was contact with a union hiring from the outside and doing organizing. These opportunities were also necessary for other unaffiliated social reformers—but so was participation in a bridging organization where they learned that unions could be vehicles for social change.

Another path by which some unaffiliated social reformers entered the labor movement was social work, which in the early 1970s was a target of aggressive organizing campaigns by the SEIU and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Social work was a rapidly expanding occupation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It attracted large numbers of social reformers because it

“We create opportunities for people to be leaders among their co-workers.”

seemed to deal directly with the problem of poverty in American society. Before 1968, California public sector workers had no legally protected right to unionize. The situation changed with the 1968 passage of the Meyers Millias Brown Act, a law that guaranteed public employees the right to unionize and bargain collectively. A few of our interviewees entered union work as a result of organizing drives in their units; some determined that joining the union because it was a good way to protect themselves from managers who objected to their activist agendas.

One example is Rudy Del Castillo, who went to work as a welfare eligibility worker in southern California after being involved in anti-war and Chicano groups at a University of California campus. He discovered that Hispanic welfare applicants were disadvantaged because the Spanish translation of their applications was so inept that deserving people did not get public support. He helped organize social workers, clients, community people, and Chicano activists from the local university to agitate for better translations. They won, but managers soon retaliated against the social workers, who in turn organized a union that affiliated with SEIU. When Del Castillo was fired for his activities, he took a staff job with SEIU.

Faith-Motivated Social Reformers

Some social reformers found their way into the labor movement through their religious convictions. All of these activists were Roman Catholic, and all but one trained to be a nun or a priest before becoming involved in the labor movement. Their belief in social reform was profoundly shaped by faith. Liam

O'Reilly, for example, joined the UFW boycott with other seminarians. They picketed a local liquor store, “talking to the drunks at midnight and 1:00 AM on Friday and Saturday nights.” He soon took a year off from the seminary to work for the UFW. One of his schoolmates asked, “Why are you doing that?” O'Reilly responded, “Building the union is like building the church without the crutch of religion.”

After a year, O'Reilly left the UFW but found his way to HERE, where he met Colin Gordon, the New Left social reformer discussed above. Gordon had just begun his job running picket lines for the HERE local and was looking for help. When we asked O'Reilly how he sees his union work today, he echoed his earlier views that the union “gives people hope, gives people a way to be heard, gives a chance for there to be justice, or something resembling justice. Something resembling fairness, and a way for people not to be powerless....We create opportunities for people to be leaders among their co-workers. I mean, the exciting thing is how the union changes people’s lives.”

Just as it was for many of the unaffiliated social reformers, the UFW was a common point of entry into the labor movement for those who arrived at their social reform project through religion. For the unaffiliated social reformers, the UFW bridged the divide between the social movements of the 1960s and unions because it was a way to fight for civil rights. However, for the social reformers motivated by faith, the UFW was a bridge between a religious vocation and the secular world. For example, one woman in this group, Linda Davis, remembered her father telling her that Cesar Chavez was “a modern day saint.” Faith-motivated social reformers joined the UFW because of the union’s profound religious content. After becoming active, they came to view union work as a means of carrying out their commitment to social justice.

Vanguard Social Reformers

The third way social reformers entered the labor movement was through activism linked with membership in a vanguard political group, such as the International Socialist Organization. For these people,

union work was a very different undertaking than it was for either the unaffiliated or the faith-based activists. Political activists took jobs in factories and offices as “colonists,” as a way to remake unions. For example, when we asked Ralph Reeves why he came to work for a union, he told us:

I had decided that I wanted to try to apply my politics in the labor movement. That was sort of a place you could go to foment social change, and that’s what I wanted to do. So, why the Post Office in particular? I just sort of fell into that. But, I wanted to get into a blue collar, industrial setting of some sort, and that was what I landed.

Asked if he was affiliated with any group that shaped his politics, he replied, “For a while, I was a member of something called The New American Movement and, after that, International Socialists.” He went to work for the Post Office after graduating from Swarthmore. His goal, he said, was to “reform the unions...The view was that the unions were terrible; they were corrupt; they were bureaucratic. We were going to transform the unions and remake them so that they would be workers’ unions.”

In his interview, Reeves went on to say:

I helped form a rank-and-file caucus in the American Postal Workers Union in Philadelphia. And I did a lot of work for it. And one of my earlier lessons in humility was I helped build this caucus and then I was thrown out of it because I was too Left. And they went on to challenge for political office in the union local and won. So they used me to help build the caucus, and then they threw me out. So I had to lick my wounds and rethink what I was doing at that point.

He soon moved to California where he got a job as a mailman. Once on the job, Reeves bided his time until the end of his 90-day probation period. Then, he recalls:

I volunteered to be shop steward, and I started from there. I walked into the union office one day and [asked] the president who was sitting there, “What can I do to help?” I thought he was going to fall off his chair and die...[No one] had ever done that before! Actually come in and say, “What can I do to help?”

A year later, Reeves ran for recording secretary of the local American Postal Workers Union and took an active part in a movement to merge several branches. A few years later, he successfully ran for the presidency of the merged local.

Other vanguard activists took a similar “colonist” path to union work. This helps explain the large number of social reformers who entered union work from the workplace. Of the 16 social reformers who were recruited from within the workplace in Chart One, seven had gone to the shop floor with a radical political agenda.

Social reformers were a diverse group, and their pathways into the labor movement led in different directions depending on the specific nature of their activist backgrounds. However, they all shared a commitment to broad social and political change, and they all saw their union work as a way to advance this larger project rather than as an end in and of itself.

CHART 2 COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AS FIRST PROJECT BY CLASS, EDUCATION, SOURCE OF RECRUITMENT, AND ACTIVIST EXPERIENCE

NAME	CLASS	EDUCATION	RECRUITED?	ACTIVIST?	1ST PROJECT
Linda Donatello	MC	C+	In	N	CL
Don Bertlesman	MC	LC	In	N	CL
Nicolas Manriquez	WC	LC	In	N	CL
Rick Borjas	WC	LC	In	N	CL
Dick Lara	WC	LC	In	N	CL
Karl Norman	WC	LC	In	N	CL
Carlos Sanchez	WC	LC	In	Y	CL
Bob Alcalá	WC	LC	In	Y	CL
Cal Lopez	WC	LC	In	Y	CL
Oscar Herrera	WC	LC	In	Y	CL

KEY MC = Middle Class
 WC = Working Class
 C+ = College degree or more
 LC = Less than college degree
 OUT = Hired from outside the union
 IN = Promoted from within the union
 Y = Activist before joining union
 N = Not activist before joining union
 CL = Community Leadership

Community Leadership

Who were the people who entered union work as community leaders? As Chart Two shows, we interviewed ten people whose initial project was community leadership. All but two of them were from working class backgrounds, and only one finished college. Seven of the ten (70%) were Latinos whose work for the union was an extension of prior, ethnic community leadership.

Bob Alcalá, a Chicano community leader, joined the Laborers’ union after his uncles helped him find work in the trade. Before becoming active in the union, Alcalá had taken part in Chicano community fights over police brutality and public parks. He gained visibility in the union as a critic of the established union leadership and acquired a following through his position as a union foreman. After Alcalá helped the bargaining committee with a particularly tough set of negotiations, the incumbent leaders invited him to serve as a business agent. Alcalá made his decision about whether or not to accept the offer very carefully.

So...when the negotiations were finalized, the business manager, told me, “I want you to come to work for me.” So I said, “Let me think about that.” I mean, I had people; I was building a political base. And I’m thinking, “What are they going to think? That I sold out?” So I told them, “This is what we want, and this is the way I see it. I can go to work for them and try to do some good from the inside, or stay out here and fight them from the outside. You guys make the decision.” So that’s how I ended up working for them as business agent.

Before going to work for the union, Alcalá had built a political base among the membership whose views he had to take into consideration when deciding his next move. Later, he led his own slate to victory. What he liked about union work was helping people like himself. He said that he enjoyed “just dealing with

people that had the same common problems and the same things that I went through in my work. Being able to help them with these problems.”

A second community leader, although white, came from a world similar to that of Alcala—a building trades world in which family, work, and union were closely linked. Karl Norman grew up in a union family, finished high school, and, after a variety of union jobs, married into an iron worker family (his wife’s brother, uncles, and cousins were all iron workers). He entered an iron workers’ apprenticeship program at the age of 18, “got his shot” at work on a new long-term job building the University of California at Santa Cruz, and was quickly drawn into a union leadership role:

[T]hey were just starting [the job] at that time....I was trying to go to apprenticeship school and starting to raise kids. Then, they had a group of guys. Five ironworkers were trying to unseat the established leadership of the local, so they drafted me to run with them, which made six. I wanted to see some things changed. We needed an agent for this area, a sub local. So, I was running for the Executive Board. On election day, I was the only one that made it out of the six. This was rank-and-file ironworkers that were running against the established executive board....For some reason, I was the only one that made it.

Norman entered union leadership as an insurgent leader of his co-workers, ready to challenge the established leadership on their—and his own—behalf.

Although his new leadership role required sacrifice, he was motivated by the challenge of holding the incumbent leadership accountable.

It was a lot—going up there [to San Francisco] two times a month and trying to raise a family. It was a good hour and twenty minutes. I actually went up to resign. Me and a guy named RF kind of got into it. So I told him I was going to stick around for three years just to haunt his ass. He was the business manager.

By the time he himself was elected business agent, Norman had also become an active Christian; the union had become his “congregation.”

I decided that the union would be my way of ministering: Health and welfare pension, workers rights, safety, and all the things that go along with the union movement....It’s more than going to church and praying. It’s actually getting involved and helping people.

Two of the seven Latino community leaders were new immigrants from Mexico. One, Carlos Sanchez, had become active in the new immigrant community and later found work in a unionized bakery. Sanchez said:

I think that the main thing is that you want to help the people. When I came here, I helped a lot of people in Mexico to get an ambulance. I went to the Consul and asked for help. And they gave me two ambulances. I form a social club for people from Acambaro, Guanajuato. I started meeting people from there and said, “You know somebody else?” “Yes, yes, yes.” So, I get all together, and we make a social club to help the people there. It was before [I got involved with the union work]....Probably a couple of hundred [people were involved]. We had parties. Saturdays, we had all to collect the money to buy things, to send the money to the Red Cross.

Sanchez became active in the union after the union “defended” him, and he began “defending” other workers as an extension of his “community.”

They told me that I was going to be demoted to part-time. And, I say, “Wait a minute.” Why didn’t you tell me? You didn’t give me any notice, any warnings.” They have a preference, because somebody was a friend of somebody. So, I went to the shop steward, and I told him. He said, “No, no, no. Call the union.” I said, “OK.” So, I called the union. They were there. They had a meeting. They said, “No, you cannot demote him.” So, they leave me there. From there, I decide these guys are really something, and I start defending people. I called the union and tell them this is happening here, and this is not fair. I was translating to the people and helping the people. At that time, JB [the business agent] says, “What is this guy? He’s good.” I was keeping helping the people, and the people talked to the shop steward there to make me another shop steward for them. So they made me shop steward because I help everybody—Anglos, Blacks,... Latinos, everybody.

Sanchez later worked for the union full-time as a business agent and organizer.

As the excerpts above demonstrate, community leaders—most of whom came from working class backgrounds, did not finish college, and are linked to their co-workers by ethnic, kinship, or other ties—saw their project as one of advancing the interests of this community.

Personal Advancement

Despite the weakened state of unions in the 1970s, 11 of the people we interviewed entered union work as a vehicle for personal advancement. As shown in Chart Three, six came from middle-class backgrounds, and five came from working-class backgrounds. Both groups had nearly equal numbers of college graduates and non-college graduates. Except for two of the college graduates, all were recruited from within the work place. Almost half of this group benefited from family connections that facilitated their election to or hiring into a union position, a fact that distinguishes them from the social reformers and union builders.

Dave Mills, for example, grew up in a middle-class family, married while still in college, and joined a union local with help from his father-in-law, a union officer. After finishing college, he was not sure what to do. He had a family to support, so he continued driving a truck. By then, however, his co-workers had begun to turn to him for help with their grievances. When they elected him a steward, he began considering union work as a career option.

I had been going to some meetings too now—listening to the debate that went on,...talking to my father-in-law who had his own view of things, and watching what went on on the job, talking amongst my co-workers on the job. And so I had an idea of what I felt a steward should do and how they should do it and what they should do in terms of representing the worker, listening to their story, and defending them against management. I mean, I kind of viewed the job as being like an attorney. I got interested in running for office by attending membership meetings on a regular basis now because I was a steward.

CHART 3 PERSONAL ADVANCEMENT SEEKING AS FIRST PROJECT BY CLASS, EDUCATION, SOURCE OF RECRUITMENT, AND ACTIVIST EXPERIENCE

NAME	CLASS	EDUCATION	RECRUITED?	ACTIVIST?	1ST PROJECT
Nathan Berman	MC	C+	Out	Y	PA
Eliot Rudnick	MC	C+	In	N	PA
Dave Mills	MC	LC	In	N	PA
Len Thomas	MC	LC	In	N	PA
Dan Landers	MC	LC	In	N	PA
Walter Brown	MC	LC	In	N	PA
Ken Brown	WC	C+	Out	N	PA
Debra Brown	WC	C+	In	N	PA
Sam Alioto	WC	C+	In	N	PA
Lionel Rivera	WC	LC	In	N	PA
Arnold Stokowski	WC	LC	In	N	PA

KEY MC = Middle Class
 WC = Working Class
 C+ = College degree or more
 LC = Less than college degree
 OUT = Hired from outside the union
 IN = Promoted from within the union
 Y = Activist before joining union
 N = Not activist before joining union
 PA = Personal Advancement

Like many other union leaders, Mills described his decision to run for union office as the result of urging by others. But it was one option among many.

People had suggested that I run—the election was coming up: Guys I was working with, co-workers,...and my brother-in-law who was also working there....The idea appealed to me, but I didn't know if I wanted to do that because the local was chaotic. [But]...I had to make a choice of what I wanted to do. I'd been going to school, back to the University of California. So I was kind of looking around, and I started looking into the union, and I started thinking, "Maybe I could do this. Maybe I could make some kind of a difference." But the local was such chaos, and the BAs [Business Agents] were all elected. But I thought, "Well...you know, it's [a] pretty heady thing when your co-workers say, 'You ought to do this' and start pushing." Anyway, I ran, and I came in, I think, third or fourth out of 12 people that ran for BA....I put on *very* aggressive campaigns, much more aggressive than anything the local had seen before. So, anyway, I got elected. I couldn't believe it. The election ends, and geez, I got elected.

Mills carefully considered the options before taking the risk of running for union office. Once he decided to take the risk, with his future at stake, he was very committed to winning—which he did.

For others, union work offered the opportunity to find more meaningful work. Ken Brown, for example, came from a working-class family, finished college, got married, and began teaching high school. However, he was unhappy in this work. Brown's father-in-law, a local union leader, recommended him to his union's organizing director, who needed organizers to take advantage of the new state collective bargaining law. Brown saw an opportunity. He was already sympathetic to unions:

When I was at San Diego State, I started really to understand the working class. I actually wrote a poem about how people are treated. It was called something like...“Back Door.” And it said something like this: “Joe worked his whole life, and he gave them 40 and 6. And, when he got old, as he began to stagger and fall, he reached out his hand, and they showed him the back door.” I had [also] worked in the retail clerks’ union, the laborers’ union,...the carpenters’ union. I could clearly see the difference between wages and benefits that I was receiving and my wife was receiving, who had no union and was working in retail.

The promise of more satisfying work made the union attractive to Brown.

And so they said they were interested in hiring, like, 20 organizers statewide to do some work in the school districts. So I thought, “I’d like to try that for a while....” I just thought it was exciting. It was challenging. [The organizing director was an] exciting guy. He just had a lot of energy. He was very tuned in to how to do things.

The search for opportunities for personal advancement is part of many people’s professional decisions. For those whose project was personal advancement, it was their primary consideration. Although they had links to the union world, it had no claims on them until they saw that it offered them a way to pursue their own career goals.

Union Building

For eleven of the labor leaders we interviewed, their project was “building the union.” As shown in Chart Four, nine came from working-class backgrounds, and eight lacked college degrees. They entered union work from the inside, began as volunteer leaders (stewards, organizers, etc.), and most won election to their first full-time positions. Both union builders and social reformers had served as volunteer activists prior to union employment—union builders inside the union, and social reformers outside it. Union builders, however, described “awakenings” to the union in terms of personal experiences in which the union played an important role. Their stories more often began with a successful stand against an injustice, usually in the form of a grievance, than with an account of values commitments, community responsibility, or job opportunity.

Wendy Martinez, for example, grew up in an immigrant, working-class, union family. When she finished high school, she took a job at the phone company and began to move up. She later married and left the phone company to begin her own family, returning to work some time later. Although she belonged to the Communications Workers of America (CWA) from the time she began to work for the phone company, an incident in which she was personally involved turned her into a union activist.

I had this supervisor [who] is the reason I got active in the union. [S]he was a very controlling type....She wanted to know what everybody was thinking and what they were doing. I was a little worker bee. [S]he observed me for a whole day, and then she says to me, “You’ve got the highest production in the group. You’ve got the highest quality in the group. You’re going places. I’m going to recommend you to get into...management. Oh, I’m just so pleased.” She really just couldn’t say enough about what good job I was doing.

A person who cared deeply about respect for her work, Martinez hoped this would earn her the opportunity to become a manager.

CHART 4 UNION BUILDING AS FIRST PROJECT BY CLASS, EDUCATION, SOURCE OF RECRUITMENT, AND ACTIVIST EXPERIENCE

NAME	CLASS	EDUCATION	RECRUITED?	ACTIVIST?	1ST PROJECT
Van Sanders	MC	LC	In	N	UB
Ken McHenry	MC	LC	In	N	UB
Sam Hendricks	WC	C+	In	N	UB
Ellen Gardner	WC	C+	In	N	UB
Sean Reardon	WC	C+	In	N	UB
Sid Lang	WC	LC	In	N	UB
Wendy Martinez	WC	LC	In	N	UB
Karen Williams	WC	LC	In	N	UB
Ernie Fredricks	WC	LC	In	N	UB
Edward Schneider	WC	LC	In	N	UB
Dick Gonsalves	WC	LC	In	Y	UB

KEY MC = Middle Class
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 C+ = College degree or more
 LC = Less than college degree
 OUT = Hired from outside the union
 IN = Promoted from within the union
 Y = Activist before joining union
 N = Not activist before joining union
 UB = Union Building

It was not to be. When she challenged her supervisor, her supervisor turned on her, and the union became her line of defense. The union contract provided that workers could be required to work an extra 30 minutes in an emergency. If one worker in the unit had to work, all had to work until the job was completed. But the day that Martinez’s supervisor took two of her co-workers to lunch, she applied the rule in an arbitrary way.

Well, it’s a two-hour lunch or a three-hour lunch, and I didn’t really care. I’m not going to do a good job just because this person is doing a good job. I’m not going to do a bad job just because of somebody else. I’m doing what I’m supposed to do without thinking about what other people are doing. So I’m still working away.

But after they were gone for two to three hours, the supervisor...comes back...and says, “You have to work your half-hour....” We had to work a half-hour to make up for their three-hour lunch. So I say, “OK. I’m working my half-hour, but I’m sure everybody has to work their half hour.” But the minute the first [worker] got up to leave...I went to the supervisor’s desk, and I said, “Excuse me....” Now this took a lot...because I was very [shy]. But it was not right....It motivated me out of my shyness. I went to her and said, “Excuse me, I have a question. It’s my understanding that the union says that if one of us has to work a half-hour, we *all* have to work a half hour.”...She was very good at turning people against each other. So she turns to the other [worker] who hadn’t quite made it out the door and says “Oh, you’re going to have to stay and work your half hour because of Wendy Martinez.” Now, mind you, I’m the new kid, and these two women are going to be mad....And I thought “You know what? I don’t care. Because if it’s right, it’s right.” So I go back and do my job.

Martinez felt taken advantage of and protested. But the supervisor who had told her she was a candidate for management now reprimanded her in a way she considered disrespectful of her work.

Well, the next thing, the supervisor summons me to the conference room. She's got all these binders in front of her which were all my job evaluations. She's kind of leafing through them, and she looks me right in the eye, and she says, "You know, Wendy, you've always been a very good employee. I *hope* that's not going to change." Very intimidating. She says, "I know you want to get into management." And I really had aspirations, because it was more money. She says, "But you know, one of the most important management attributes is flexibility." And I am seething inside. I am, like, so horrified. Nobody has ever questioned my work. She says, "You've always been an outstanding employee." Well, obviously. I always got promoted by the supervisors. And I was always the top. She goes, "I *hope* that's not going to change." Like, in other words, she was the one that was going to write the next evaluation is what I'm thinking. And she blabs a little bit more, and then she stops, and she looks at me and says, "Now what do you think of that?"

...I looked at her, and now I'm crying. But she didn't know I was crying from rage. I was so indignant that she had done this, and I'm crying, and I looked at her, and I said, "You know, I thought that we were adults, and I thought that if I had a question I could come and ask you. But it's obvious that that isn't what's happening. You're trying to intimidate me because I'm a union member. And you know what? The next time that I have a question, my union steward will be in to talk to you." I didn't even know who that was! [As] soon as I used the magic words "union steward," [as] soon as I said that, she closed up all her books, and she said, "Oh! I certainly wouldn't want you to get *that* impression. That's not what I'm doing. And, by the way, you don't have to work your half-hour any more" [laughing]. She left the room. I had to compose myself because I was like a blubbering idiot.

Martinez then took her first steps along a pathway to union leadership.

As soon as she walked out the door, I left that office....There was a union steward down in the basement....And I'm asking people,..."Where's the union steward?" So I go down there, and I find myself standing in front of this woman,...the elected secretary of the local....And I'm standing in front of her, and I said, "Hi, my name is Wendy Martinez, and I want to be a union steward. Because if I'm going to stand up for my rights, I should at least know what they are!" I thought, "God I'm going to get fired!"....And she says, "OK. Well, now you need to fill out this form, and you're going to need to go to stewards training." And then I told her what had happened, and she says, "Oh that's not acceptable."

So the next day, when 3:30 came,...I stood up and I packed up my shit....I could have walked out the door, and this other person says, "Hey, how come you don't have to work your half-hour?" I said, "Because I belong to the union, and if you don't want to work your half-hour, then you better join the union, too." And I had gotten some membership applications. So I signed everybody up in the union, and I went to steward training, and they used to give you these big purple and yellow buttons. Those were our union colors—purple and yellow. And, it said, "CWA Union Steward" on it. This was

a big button. The day that [my supervisor] came back from vacation,...I'd already gone to the training. And I was a *bona fide* union representative, and I had signed up everybody in the unit. There was only one non-member....But, so now [my supervisor] drives up, and...I had [on] my big union pin that you could not miss! It was yellow. I get out of the car, and she gets out of the car. And I'm the first thing she sees. And she lifts [my union button] and she says, "Oh my. You're a union steward." I said, "Yep. I figured if I was going to stand up for my rights, I might as well find out what they are."

The disrespect she experienced on the job, her own gumption, and access to the union turned Wendy Martinez into a union builder; she saw the union as a means of turning her anger into action and of becoming the person she wanted to be.

Sam Hendricks also grew up in a working-class, union family. While still in high school, he joined the Retail Clerks on his first job and married at 16. Unlike most union builders, he finished college and moved to California to do graduate work at the University of California. The union helped him find work. While he was getting his feet on the ground, however, he got involved in a strike that turned him into a union activist.

Well, I'd always been involved with the union. Gone to meetings first day on the job back in KC. But, my heavy involvement began with the strike. And one of the reasons for that was the business agent we had at that time who was elected...didn't show up between elections very often. Nice guy, but he just—and he lost his next election. But, there was just nobody in the store....When the company tried to get people to cross the picket line, a couple of us sort of stepped forward and started fighting the company over it. And the secretary/treasurer showed up the night before the strike, and I read him the riot act, and he got me involved. And we were able to keep most of the people out of the store....I was on several committees after that. And my assistant manager was in the union, and he crossed the picket line, and I charged him. We fined him \$500. That was a lot of money in those days. So I had to stay involved after that because they had their sights on me!

Hendricks had pro-union sympathies and found himself catapulted into an activist role as a result of the leadership he demonstrated in a strike.

While Hendricks pursued plans to enter graduate school and study urban history, a union organizer took note of his role in the strike and tried to recruit him as an organizer.

In the midst of all this, the secretary/treasurer of the local asked me to fill out an application for the international....Some time in early July they called me and asked me to go for an interview, but said they'd lost my application. I said, "Look, I'm not interested any more. I'm going to be leaving in about a month to go to New York."...Then I got a call about a week later saying, "We found your application, come on up." So I interviewed, and they offered me the job, and I told them I couldn't take it until I talked to [my academic sponsor]. But I was interested in it....Since I had his blessing,...I took the job, and I wrote a letter...asking if I could delay entrance for a year....They sent me a letter saying, "No problem. Contact us in a year, and you can come to school." And so I did this job for about six months and realized it was something I wanted to do....I thought it was going exactly where I wanted to go, which was organizing workers.

“ The disrespect she experienced on the job, her own gumption, and access to the union turned Wendy Martinez into a union builder.”

Thus, Hendricks’s project was one of “organizing workers” to build a strong union—a valuable project in its own right.

For many union builders, an important moment is one in which they come to see what they once had perceived as an individual problem to be a collective one. Ellen Gardner grew up in a working-class family, finished college, and became a social worker. She joined the union, became active during a strike, and was elected a steward. She came to see union work as an extension of what brought her to social work in the first place.

I saw my job to be an advocate for the client. But that was more on a one-by-one basis....I saw the role of being involved in the union as being an advocate for my co-workers as a collective group. And, at the same time, my clients as a collective group....Eventually, I was in the job long enough to come to the conclusion that, as an individual social worker, I could certainly have an impact on the individuals that I ran into. But I came to believe that I could have a much larger and more comprehensive impact on what it was like for me to be a social worker and what it was like for me to be in this system trying to achieve something. I could have a bigger impact if I came at it from a collective perspective. And I don’t know. I believe that this is true in any labor situation.

Unlike social reformers, community leaders, and those seeking personal advancement—all of whom saw the union as a means to a greater end—union builders saw building a strong union as worthy in its own right. Like Wendy Martinez, they could become the kind of people they wanted to be by helping to make it happen.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM?

We have observed how people’s projects influenced their decisions to go to work for unions. We turn now to learn how those projects unfolded over time and how this influenced who stayed in the labor movement and who left it. Chart Five includes people whose projects were social reform (SR), community leadership (CL), personal advancement (PA), and union building (UB); we have grouped interviewees according to their first union projects. The second column shows whether or not each person’s project changed over the course of his or her work with a union. If it did, the second column indicates the new project. The third column shows each person’s final union project. If an interviewee still works for a union, the column indicates his or her current project; if the interviewee has left the union, the project he or she was pursuing at the time of departure is indicated. Finally, the fourth column indicates whether the interviewee remains engaged in union work. If the interviewee is still associated with a union, a project is indicated; if the interviewee is no longer associated with a union, the space is blank.

Chart Five shows two important ways in which people’s projects interacted with their union leadership careers over time. Some projects facilitated organizational continuity, while others contributed to organizational change.

First, most of our interviewees became union builders, and most union builders continued working for unions. Although only 11 people began as union builders, 38 developed a union building project at some point in their union career. The tendency to become a union builder existed regardless of the nature of one’s initial project. Among the 36 social reformers, 13 became union builders; of 11 project organizers, ten became union builders; of ten community leaders, five became union builders.

This suggests an isomorphic process through which an individual's project conformed to that of his or her organization. Again as Chart Five shows, most interviewees either adapted their projects or left their organizations altogether. Five of the social reformers remained committed to their original projects and ultimately left the labor movement. Four out of five of the community leaders left the labor movement.

Second, some interviewees did not become union builders but continued working for unions; almost all were social reformers who either found ways to change their organizations or found "free spaces" within their unions in which to continue working on their projects. In both cases, sustained ties to other social reformers were important elements in upholding their project commitments.

Of the original social reformers, 18 remained committed to their original projects, and 13 are still doing union work today. Of the 13 who continue to do union work, six are involved in changing their organizations, and seven found "free spaces" in which to work. Of the community leaders, five retained their dedication to community leadership; but only one found a way to stay in union work.

Finally, Chart Five indicates that some people developed entirely new projects in the course of their union work, some placed family concerns first (FAM), and some became entrepreneurs (ENT). Of the seven who followed this path, all but two left the labor movement.

Becoming Union Builders

How and why did so many people become union builders? For some, union work proved to be an effective way of translating their social reform impulses into practical outcomes. For others, union work provided an effective way to serve their constituencies. Others, particularly those who began union work to advance their careers, made commitments when they realized they could excel at and draw meaning from union work and could make a difference in the world.

From Social Reform to Union Building

For Charles Keaton, one of the 13 social reformers who became union builders, the transformation of his broad social reform project into one of union building occurred around his decision to seek full time union work. A faith-based social reformer, Keaton found his way to the Carpenters Union via the UFW. After getting married in 1973 and taking time off to travel around the world, he thought about returning to the UFW.

Money wasn't a big issue as much as wanting to stay involved in the movement. And so I thought, "Well, I'll go back to the UFW. That was where a lot of things were happening." [But] it didn't work....The money became another issue, too, because I really began at that time to realize that I needed a career. And I must have had some inkling that I could do that through the Carpenters. I mean, I wasn't unaware of the fact that if I stayed active in the Carpenters I could find a career.

Keaton decided that he could blend his social reform agenda with a career as a carpenter. His choice was facilitated by his ability to "work with tools"—a skill he learned growing up—and the fact that he could use those skills with others.

I think I realized at the time, too, that a lot of activities could take place through rank-and-file carpenters....People could still be involved in movement issues without necessarily working full-time....So I did a little shift in consciousness....I became a journeyman....We

CHART 5 FIRST PROJECT, TRANSITION, AND FINAL UNION PROJECT
WITH WHO STAYED AND WHO LEFT

NAME	FIRST PROJECT	SECOND PROJECT	LAST PROJECT	IN OR OUT
Henry Carl	SR	CL	CL	
Linda Davis	SR	FAM	FAM	
George Kaufman	SR	FAM	FAM	
Tom Nussbaum	SR	FAM	FAM	
Ralph Reeves	SR	PA	PA	
Nick Martin	SR	UB	ENT	
Sam Hoffman	SR	UB	UB	
Eli Altman	SR	UB	UB	
Rom Giannini	SR	UB	UB	
Sam Rosenberg	SR	SR	SR	
Lloyd Callahan	SR	SR	SR	
Rudy Del Castillo	SR	SR	SR	
Norm Dunn	SR	SR	SR	
Laura Feirman	SR	SR	SR	
Ellen Atwood	SR	SR	SR	SR
Nydia Elizondo	SR	SR	SR	SR
Karen Emory	SR	SR	SR	SR
Carol Lewin	SR	SR	SR	SR
Nancy Masterson	SR	SR	SR	SR
Colin Gordon	SR	SR	SR	SR
Eric Marcovich	SR	SR	SR	SR
Liam O'Reilly	SR	SR	SR	SR
Neil Rosen	SR	SR	SR	SR
Kevin Rogers	SR	SR	SR	SR
Karl Stephens	SR	SR	SR	SR
Dianne Burton	SR	SR	SR	SR
Tom Weinberg	SR	SR	SR	SR
Ulrich Darden	SR	UB	ENT	ENT
Neil Eaton	SR	UB	UB	UB
Rob Harrington	SR	UB	UB	UB
Henry Podack	SR	UB	UB	UB
Kathrine McCarthy	SR	UB	UB	UB
Clem Donlevy	SR	UB	UB	UB
Charles Harris	SR	UB	UB	UB
Charles Keaton	SR	UB	UB	UB
Vic Robinson	SR	UB	UB	UB

NAME	FIRST PROJECT	SECOND PROJECT	LAST PROJECT	IN OR OUT
Karen Williams	UB	UB	UB	UB
Ernie Fredricks	UB	UB	UB	UB
Dick Gonsalves	UB	UB	UB	UB
Sam Hendricks	UB	UB	UB	UB
Van Sanders	UB	UB	UB	UB
Edward Schneider	UB	UB	UB	UB
Wendy Martinez	UB	UB	UB	UB
Sid Lang	UB	UB	UB	UB
Sean Reardon	UB	FAM	UB	UB
Ellen Gardner	UB	UB	UB	
Ken McHenry	UB	UB	UB	
Debra Brown	PA	UB	UB	UB
Sam Alioto	PA	UB	UB	UB
Ken Brown	PA	UB	UB	UB
Nathan Berman	PA	UB	UB	UB
Eliot Rudnick	PA	UB	UB	UB
Lionel Rivera	PA	UB	UB	UB
Arnold Stokowski	PA	UB	UB	UB
Dave Mills	PA	UB	UB	UB
Dan Landers	PA	UB	UB	UB
Len Thomas	PA	UB	ENT	
Walter Brown	PA	PA	PA	
Linda Donatello	CL	UB	UB	UB
Don Bertlesman	CL	UB	UB	UB
Carlos Sanchez	CL	UB	UB	UB
Cal Lopez	CL	UB	UB	UB
Karl Norman	CL	UB	ENT	ENT
Rick Borjas	CL	CL	CL	CL
Bob Alcalá	CL	CL	CL	
Oscar Herrera	CL	CL	CL	
Dick Lara	CL	CL	CL	
Nicolas Manriquez	CL	CL	CL	

KEY SR = Social Reform
CL = Community Leadership
PA = Personal Advancement

UB = Union Building
FAM = Family Interests
ENT = Entrepreneurship

also had a group called the “Concerned Carpenters.”...Some people that were much more politically-oriented—RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party] people and stuff like that—were involved....They sort of pulled away. They got bored with the thing, but I kept it going. Well, we had meetings and mailing lists and put out a newsletter every so often. There [was] probably a core group of six or seven of us [in different locals].

After becoming a journeyman, Keaton began to take part in union struggles as a participant more than a leader.

Well, there was a strike, I think, in '73 or '74, and I was involved in picketing in that strike. I was involved in Local 1400....It wasn't a long strike, but we were involved in that....I was just one of many people walking off the job and just talking on the job....Not much more than that.

He continued his internal organizing:

At that point, we were agitating for responsible leadership in the locals...: The right to vote on the contract. We kept hammering away on that issue. So, by 1977, we had actually won that right....[W]e attended all the meetings, and we kept putting newsletters out on that issue.

When he moved to Orange County so that his wife could attend medical school, he decided to seek full-time union work and plunged right into local union politics. “I had been active in the local,” he said, “and by that time, I was very clear [as to] what I wanted to do. I knew...probably by, like, 1980. It was very clear that I wanted to work full-time for the union.”

As Keaton decided to seek full-time union work, he began redefining his project from one of broad social reform to that of union building. In 1982, he launched an “insurgent” campaign for local business agent and won. Although he found that the “day-to-day work of the union” took more time than he had expected, he led an effort to organize new residential construction. He continued to organize, won re-election in 1985 and 1988, and became active in municipal politics, particularly promoting initiatives to build affordable housing. Although Keaton narrowly lost re-election in 1991, the council executive secretary appointed him a full-time organizer. He continues in that role and draws his greatest satisfaction from “redirecting union resources into organizing.”

When asked how his politics had changed since he began his career, Keaton articulated this vision of union building in this way: “I have found that what’s good for labor is usually good for the country. Abraham Lincoln said, ‘Any man that tells you that he loves America, yet hates labor, is a liar.’”

Henry Podack is another social reformer who found his way into a union as a social worker. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, he joined the AFSCME when it began organizing in the welfare department where he found work. He became active in the union almost casually. “I forget what,” he said. “...There was an issue that came up that I ended up representing our side of the building there...and just continued on....I think I got lucky on my first grievance and decided I had talent.” Podack was elected steward and later chief steward; he began to get a “fever” for union work when he began organizing and competing successfully with other public sector unions. “That was a very exciting organizing campaign,” he recalled, “one of those where if you win your first one, you kind of get the fever.”

After going to work for the union as a full-time organizer in another city, Podack returned home to establish a base. He built a regional council and was elected to lead it. Despite backing a losing candidate for international president, he won election to the national executive board of his union.

When asked about the satisfaction he had in his work, Podack described his excitement about what a union can do for people:

It's working directly with our members in some struggle. One was in Eureka in '96. We had a county strike there. And it's when you see the troops really get a sense that they have some power. I mean, even the grievance wins when they realize that if you fight about it and you persist, and you fight smart, you can win some of these things. It's watching them feel empowered, I think, [that] is the greatest thing for me....Well, I love to get involved in this. I'd rather do this than sit in the office and shuffle papers. I'm not a good administrator. My title is director, and that to me is hilarious. I love to mix it up in the field.

For Podack, the union offered a pathway to a successful career; it provided him with opportunities to do work he loved and to act on his social reform impulse. When asked to compare his politics today with those of his "Berkeley years," he described his move toward pragmatism, particularly at the local level:

I will have to admit that I have fallen victim to the concept of pragmatism on many occasions where I just did not see a viable alternative. Nor did I feel that maintaining a real radical position [was prudent], outside of making myself feel good and allowing me to say I'm a radical....I still think I'm closer to the radical than the conservative....And I've been to and worked for this union [in] Africa and [in] Asia and places. And so I come back thinking, "You know, we don't worry about dysentery every day. And we don't worry about some of the things."...I think my politics have been influenced by just my appreciation for how things work....Now, on a more big-picture level, I don't know that I've changed that much from Berkeley. This is both with Clinton and Bush as far as their foreign policy and the atrocities that we continue to create and perpetrate. I don't know that I'm any more comfortable with the U.S. government today than I ever was. A lot of the shift for me has been to more local politics than national.

Neil Eaton, our last example of a social reformer turned union builder, made the transition not as a result of election to local office, but in the course of his work as one of a growing number of "professionals" who work for several unions during their careers. Eaton was a faith-motivated activist who entered union work through the UFW; his social reform project turned into a union building project when he decided to "get a regular union job." The organizational content of his work was at the heart of his project.

But as an organizer, my whole job, or my whole approach, was to be able to set up an organization and get it going and then walk away and have it still running....Creating opportunities for people to do that is also part of what I see my role as [being]....One

"As an organizer, my whole job... was to be able to set up an organization and get it going and then walk away and have it still running."

of the phrases we use is, “Try to help workers get the boss to do what we want him to do and not to do what we don’t want him to do.” While being simple, I think there’s a lot to that. You can dress it up in a variety of ways, but to the degree that we can give our members power to have some say and control over their own working lives, I think that’s what our union does....Most satisfying to me—and this is true of several jobs—is if people feel stronger and better about their control over their work life and their job, and...they understand the value of organization,...[they] will then go out and say, “What do I need to do to make this happen?” That’s a source of satisfaction to me.

Eaton also drew satisfaction from becoming increasingly effective in union building, although in different organizations.

Every job I’ve had, I’ve...been able to...expand an area of skills that I lacked previously. For example, the way I look at the UFW....I learned a lot of basic kinds of things in terms of organizing and dealing with workers and that sort of thing—community organizing....Moving on to NABET [the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians]...I began to do a little bit more organizing towards getting contracts and recruiting workers to identify the union as providing—when they worked together and operated together—a collective benefit, *i.e.*, health insurance and that sort of thing. CFA offered me the opportunity to do more grievance work. [I] did lots of arbitrations with them, lots of basic chapter building and organizational kinds of things in making structures more permanent. CNA was an opportunity to do some supervision and actually more hands on bargaining myself, with much larger contracts. I negotiated for Kaiser...and I think we represented about...6,000 RNs. And then coordinating the bargaining in the East Bay was about another 3,000 [or] 3,500....And I enjoyed that very much. It was a different activity. Obviously, going back to school was to go off in a completely different direction, but look at it as a sabbatical or what have you. But ultimately, [I] came back to doing this kind of work because I like it, and I’ve been able to do a little bit of everything with Local 250. They’re very much oriented towards organizing and using the organizing model in approaching problems in the workplace.

From Community Leadership to Union Building

Linda Donatello exemplifies the five community leaders who became union builders and continued to do union work. She became active in the union as leader of a small group of teachers who organized to protest changes introduced by a new principal. She then became more involved in the union, developed her own capacities as a result, but still did not turn to a union building project.

I was finding myself kind of fascinated by doing some of the background work for this particular grievance. And so I did it. And I clearly became the lead person....Number one, it interested me. Two, I had the time to do it, and I was willing to do it. I did not see myself as taking that on for any other reason but that. I did not see the beginning of a new career [or] anything along that line.

When she and the teachers won their grievance, Donatello became more and more active in the union, and she became more skillful.

So anyway, I started becoming *extremely* active in the Grievance Committee, to the point that I began going to represent teachers at level one, which was the site level of the grievance hearing. [I] started out having the staff person with me...[and] graduated, so to speak, to doing it on my own....So I began then being involved in helping prepare the cases to go to binding arbitration. [I made] sure we covered all the contractual issues to helping prepare the person who was going to be the chief witness, even putting the exhibits together because it is very much like a court case—Exhibit One, Two, Three, whatever. And I became almost like an assistant to the staff person. Just clearly I was spending more and more and more of my time involved in doing that kind of thing, doing some other things within the organization, and maybe helping to write newsletters or articles for the newsletter. Then people found out I could write and make stuff clear.

Gradually, as Donatello devoted more of her energy to persuading others to join the union, the union came to occupy a more central role in her life. Her project became one of union building.

Being involved in trying to get people to join the organization....I'd tell my story about why I became a member [and] how I became a member—trying to get people to put their fair share in, too. So while the core was still around a lot of the grievance issues and the confidence issues, I [also] had feelers going out in other areas of the organization....If you're there at the union office every day, virtually, after school, and you walk in and there's not a grievance to be looking at today, [you ask yourself], "What else is there for me to do? Is there anything else that needs doing?" Or, "Yeah, we've got a grievance that we're looking at, but really right now what we need to talk about is [this]. Could you help out here?"

The "clincher" came when the state union representative, looking for new leadership to revitalize a local that had been in an ongoing jurisdictional fight with another union, asked her to run for local president.

So, quite frankly, I was approached by people within the state organization, asking if I would be interested—willing to run [for] President of the organization....There had been organizing projects that had gone on where we had gone out and tried to attract new members. And so there were always state people around—in and out and trying to see the health of the local. So I knew a lot of them, and they knew me because I'd been involved, and I'd been quite active. And so they basically approached me and said, "Would you be interested in running as President?" And I'm like, "Uhhhhhh." Frankly, they cut a deal that allowed me to run unopposed.

Donatello served as president of her local, which eventually included the entire city, for ten years. As is the case with many union builders, her greatest satisfaction comes from bargaining and representation.

All through my time being involved in the organization, I had continued to be involved in grievance handling,...preparing for arbitration, [and] working with lawyers when we took cases to arbitration. And that always was my life....But it was something I really liked and enjoyed, and I did it....There's always the challenge...[For instance,] is a teacher/leader negotiating a good contract for teachers? [Or] coming up with a document that you can be proud of that does good things for teachers—that strengthens their rights. I used to say that we'd know when we'd gone as far as we could go in bar-

gaining when all that was left to negotiate was the quality of the toilet paper that was in the teacher's restrooms....Obviously, when you go to the bargaining table, you don't go as an individual; you go as a team....[But] there are sections of the contract that I can [point to and] say, "I did that. That was mine."...[There are] things in there that I know I helped make teachers' lives better....So *that* I'm very proud of....The whole idea of teacher self-esteem, self-respect—that's going to be a forever battle.

Donatello began her union work as leader of a workplace-based community. As she gained more experience, however, she earned more responsibility and became increasingly competent at her work. She came to redefine her project in institutional terms—building a union to make a difference in the lives of its members.

From Personal Advancement to Union Building

Dave Mills, the seeker of personal advancement described above, was typical of the ten others, all of whom became union builders save one. Mills decided to "move up" by running for local union business agent. Once there, he put the same kind of energy into keeping the job that he had invested in getting it. He also found that the job itself began to take on new meaning.

My wife got pregnant actually right after I got elected in '66—the summer of '66....Our second daughter was born in March of '67....In '69, I ran and got re-elected with the highest vote total anybody ever got in the history of the local....During that three-year period, I worked like a dog. I was all over. Probably, the fear of failure [was driving me]....I mean [it was] a very practical part of this thing. I'm married, I got two children, I'm a very young guy, and I've got a long way to go. And I wanted to make sure I could survive. But then...I also really got into the shop and [did] what I thought needed to be done and how it needed to be done.

He earned a reputation for competence, as "the business agent who could win any grievance."

I became known as the drunk's best friend and the crook's best friend....Man, I became like an attorney. And if I could nail the employers on anything—a technicality or whatever—I would. I would nail them on it....But the one thing [that]... going to college gave me [was] an idea of how to prepare some things—prepare cases and stuff like that. Oftentimes, I was dealing with terminal managers [who had] never gone to college, or supervisors who never had the experience. [These were people who] just came off a truck and became a supervisor. And the BAs didn't have much formal education. So I think that helped a lot. I had some very good decisions in cases I had. I organized workers. I mean, I did a lot of things. And so I got a pretty good vote. And my father-in-law became a little more controversial during that term of office, and I got more votes than [he].

After Mills won re-election to a second term, a regional union leader who had taken a liking to him asked him to become a full-time lobbyist for the union in Sacramento, the state capitol. Mills had an interest in politics and took the job, even though he had to resign his elected position in the local. Although he learned a lot from the union's chief lobbyist, he became restive at having to follow someone else's orders.

I realized that I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life...mainly because I was following a policy that someone else had set, and a lot of times I didn't like it....There was

no way that I was going to change his mind, and there was no way I was going to replace him because he was an institution.

He began to consider options that could give him more authority in the union and, at the same time, rebuild his base.

In fact, [I] frequently told my wife, “Hey, I just don’t like this. I can’t see myself doing this for the rest of my life. I want to have more direct contact with the members. I want to have more direct influence on policy.” So, I said I probably should go back to [the local] and run for secretary/treasurer.

At the end of that year, Mills quit his lobbying job, went back to driving a truck, and began his campaign for secretary/treasurer of his local.

I went back to driving, working as a truck driver during that five-month period of time—from the first of the year to nominations in April. And I worked a number of different places, different jobs in the local, and then got nominated for secretary/treasurer. And in the meantime, while I was down here, [I] was building up my political machine....And [I] got nominated in April and ran against the incumbent recording secretary at the time....And, anyway, I ran and I won. In fact, I got more votes than they [did] all put together. So I became the secretary/treasurer.

Mills recommitted himself to union work, took a risk, and was rewarded for it. He won a key position of local leadership and developed his union building project more fully.

Yeah, one of the things I wanted to do was to get the collective bargaining straightened out....I don’t care who you were in the local union. We didn’t like the outcome of the 1970 negotiations, and we wanted to change it in ’73. So, that was one thing. Health care, getting the best health care program we could for members, and a retiree health care program—[we] wanted to do that. I emphasized and argued for more money and better pension program....I wanted to get collective bargaining agreements for members,...reviving stewards meetings, getting members involved in the process,... establishing some kind of solid and secure financial position. We were broke....That was another challenge, just bringing back the finances, because it’s pretty hard to look at anything else if you can’t pay your bills and you can’t meet your payroll. So over the years we dealt with them, and it was a struggle.

Mills went to work for a union because it offered him an opportunity for personal advancement. As with other personal advancement seekers, however, Mills’s project became one of union building, as he grew more successful, experienced the rewards that went with success, and relished the opportunity to make a difference.

Thus, many union leaders—whose projects had been social reform, community leadership, or personal advancement—became union builders. They gave different emphasis to acting on their values, serving their constituency, or developing as effective leaders. However, their concerns came together in the “larger” project of building the union.

Not everyone became a union builder. Some found they could pursue another project within their unions and others found that doing so required that they move on.

Staying the Course and Staying In (Social Reformers)

Those who found ways to pursue their initial projects, within unions but without becoming union builders, were almost all social reformers. Six of them took part in efforts to change their unions, and seven found ways to “negotiate” free spaces within their unions in which to pursue their projects. In both cases, maintaining ties with other social reformers seemed to be very important to sustaining their commitment to their project.

The most striking evidence of union transformation is signaled by the fact that four of the 13 social reformers who stayed the course went to work for HERE and remain there today. Moreover, no one in our sample who went to work for HERE ever changed his or her project. This pattern suggests that, rather than HERE changing the social reformers, the social reformers helped to change HERE. Indeed, each interviewee who went to work for HERE took part in efforts to transform that union from an old-time business union into a social movement union.

Interestingly, the stories HERE leaders tell about their careers in the union have certain common elements. They took part in a formative political struggle soon after going to work for HERE. In that struggle, they formed relationships with allies that continue to sustain their union work today.

For instance, Liam O’Reilly, the faith-motivated social reformer discussed above, got involved in a bitter election campaign a few years after he went to work for a HERE local. That election, he told us, was fundamentally a fight “about the future of the union.” He supported “the only person who understood organizing” or who was committed to making wholesale changes in the way the local was run. His candidate won the election. However, the power struggle continued because some of the staff had been on the losing side of the election, and they fought tooth and nail against efforts to reorganize the union. O’Reilly was part of the small group of staff and rank-and-file union members who began to meet in the evenings and after work—he called it the “night shift”—to “talk about where [they] needed to take the union.” This small group organized others and eventually won broad support for transforming the local union. Today, O’Reilly is still in touch with people from this “leadership group” who helped to convert the local into the kind of organization that fights for “justice” and “fairness.”

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While O’Reilly’s story offers insight into how social reformers contributed to the transformation of a single local, Colin Gordon’s experiences illuminate ways in which they contributed to changing the national union. O’Reilly was hired by Gordon, the unaffiliated social reformer whose journey to HERE via the UFW is recounted above. Gordon’s first job was as strike coordinator for the local, a job that brought him into contact with Vincent Sirabella, HERE’s legendary organizing director, and John Wilhelm, HERE’s current president.⁵ After directing a large and successful hotel strike, Gordon became organizing director of the local and formed an organizing team that included O’Reilly. Two years after coming to work for the local, Gordon was recruited to join the international staff and eventually became part of Sirabella’s national organizing team. As a member of this team, he helped to reorganize several locals that had been trusted by the international union. Today, he is president of a New York local, a position to which he was

elected after helping to revitalize the local while in trusteeship. When we asked him what he had done to turn around the local, he emphasized his tools for bringing about organizational change: Team development, membership involvement, and organizing. “The plan,” he said, “was to build a team of people so that we could, first of all, involve the members in the union and put the union into their hands. And then figure out how to approach organizing.” Gordon remains a social reformer, having helped to transform HERE into the kind of union where one can pursue a social reform project.

Other social reformers who “stayed the course” told us about their efforts to change their organizations. Although they tended to suffer more political reverses than HERE leaders, they continued to do union work because they found “free spaces” that allowed them to sustain their projects. They also were often tied to a social reform network through which they could sustain their commitment.

One example is Tom Weinberg, a vanguard social reformer who led a successful insurgency in his local union. About a year and a half after joining, he ran successfully for steward and then the executive board. Frustrated with how little he was able to accomplish in those positions and looking for another way to have more influence, he started an underground newspaper. Targeting “workers, families, and customers,” it afforded him a way to conduct “propaganda campaigns” to solve problems he could not solve under the contract. Two years later, he ran against the incumbent president of the local, using the newspaper to articulate his broader view of unionism. That campaign proved to be a formative political battle. On the slate with him were two women, one of whom was a black Latina; a “young Latino guy” who would become his closest ally in the union; and a Japanese man. Weinberg won the presidency, but the old guard, with support from the international, Red-baited him and got the election thrown out. So he ran a second campaign and won again.

Consolidating power took a while, however, because many of the people on the executive board still opposed Weinberg. He built support by doing a good job at union work, focusing on race and gender issues, and reaching out to women and minorities in the union and in the community. Although these priorities fit with the politics of his vanguard group, he turned them into practical successes. He won a breakthrough, private-industry pay equity agreement, ran a campaign to keep local pay offices open (“Save Our Services”), and mobilized community support to win Martin Luther King’s birthday as a paid holiday. Success encouraged the international president to make peace with him, so after eight years as local president, he accepted an offer to work for the international as a regional director. His early ally, the “young Latino guy,” became the new local president. Three years later, the international president asked him to become the national research director, with the understanding he was being groomed to be his successor.

The international president did not survive the next election; the fact that Weinberg’s political prospects depended on this relationship ended his rise in the union. Although he still serves as national research director, Weinberg has little power to continue his efforts to transform the union. However, he remains a social reformer and, looking back on his career, describes himself as “an agitator” who continually “adapts to the situation in which he finds himself.” His current project is fighting to get the labor movement to live up to its “responsibility to workers and working families,” a responsibility he sees as extending far beyond “those people who are unionized.” While serving on the international staff, Weinberg has organized a coalition to fight deregulation, a fight he considers crucial because “it is part and parcel of the privatization, World Bank stuff that’s going on internationally.”

Weinberg, then, is a social reformer who stayed the course, even in the face of setbacks and disappointments. His early successes as a local president enabled him to align his social reform project and his

union work. Remaining in close contact with members of the vanguard group with whom he originally traveled to southern California has supported that effort. Although his efforts to transform his union appear to be stymied, Weinberg has found a “free space” from which he continues to pursue his project.

Similarly, Nancy Masterson was able to negotiate a “free space” quite explicitly, as a result of her success as a top organizer of a desirable new constituency. An unaffiliated social reformer influenced by the UFW, Masterson found her way into a clerical job in a legal services agency. After becoming a community worker, she helped organize other community workers, paralegals, and clerical staff into an independent union backed by the Women’s Labor Project of the National Lawyers Guild. Problems of race and gender—as well as economics—spurred the organizing.

And there was a very difficult split,...as you might imagine, between the white attorneys who primarily comprised the legal force and [the] largely Latino and Mexican former farm-worker community workers, paralegals, and secretaries. So there were a few of us who were Anglo support staff, but primarily there was a pretty sharp racial division at the time. And it created tensions and working conditions and racial tensions at the work place. Racism, sexism—all the things you might imagine.

When the union won both recognition from the agency and a long strike, it became a “hot item,” attractive to various internationals trying to offset declining membership by moving into new jurisdictions through affiliation.

And we were on strike, I think, for 14 weeks for our second contract as an independent. And we won the strike; we were successful and got a lot of publicity in the media throughout the state. At that point, every union wanted us because they felt we had done something as an independent that—you know, small workforce, separated geographically,...plus, the number of people were clerical workers—a lot of unions were beginning to be interested in.

One such union was the “Distributive, Processing and Office Workers of America, District 65,” a product of the highly politicized New York labor movement, formerly part of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU).⁶ Known for representing white collar workers—including those employed by New York Legal Aid, women, and people of color—the union had a very “progressive” reputation but few members on the West Coast. In return for affiliation, District 65 agreed to fund a full-time organizer, the position to which Masterson was elected. In 1980, however, just after Masterson’s group had affiliated, District 65 affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), who hoped to establish a base among white-collar workers. It continued as a “national local” within the UAW. As a full-time field representative, Masterson was elected every three years and served on the board of the national union. She became a very successful organizer, winning white-collar units ranging from the Sierra Club to Revlon. She earned a reputation for winning every National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election in which she ran, save one. By the mid-1980s, Masterson had become her union’s Western Regional Director. District 65, however, had begun to have serious financial problems, and board meetings required constant travel between the East and West Coasts. As a result, Masterson renegotiated her status within the UAW in 1988.

So in addition to what I was doing on the West Coast, I was flying to New York every Sunday night on the red eye and coming home on the Monday night red eye—just so I could be at the board meeting—and then starting my week on Tuesday. And that was

primarily why I decided to accept the job on the UAW International staff. I was how old then? I was 40. And so by my late 30s, the two red eyes back-to-back was starting to wear thin. Although I remained the rep. for District 65 for some years after I went on the UAW International staff, I left my elected position to take an appointed position through the UAW....[I had] a negotiated understanding with the UAW Regional Director that I would be able to retain much of what I was doing.

Masterson's position was unique in the UAW, a union deeply committed to hiring only from the "shop floor." Typically, representatives either did "servicing" or "organizing." To carry out her project, Masterson wanted to do both.

What was most important to me was retaining the ability to organize. And so I kept the UC [University of California] assignment because, by '88, we had started drives at San Diego, and we had the lead at Santa Cruz, in addition to Berkeley. So I wanted to continue the UC drive, and I wanted to continue to have some oversight over the other work.

She "cut a deal" with the Regional Director of the UAW.

Most reps. in the UAW would either have only servicing or have only organizing. And I asked to have either all organizing or both. And, while that was unusual, that request was accommodated because the Regional Director of the UAW board didn't want to lose someone from organizing who wanted to organize. Most people, at the time when I came on staff, were trying to get out of organizing. So the best job in the UAW was considered to be the service rep. job because it was stable geographically and, while your assignment might change, your life was somewhat more stable. You had a servicing assignment, as opposed to an organizing assignment. But, while I liked servicing, I didn't like it as well as organizing.

The strength of her position also enabled Masterson to negotiate an unusual degree of stability in her family life.

I had had an offer for a number of years from the UAW to be an international rep., and I had turned it down for probably seven or eight years in the '80s because I wanted some geographic stability in terms of northern California. My family is here. My husband is here. His job is here. I like it here....I was able to negotiate the job I wanted. Not completely—I mean I couldn't just say, "I won't take that assignment or I won't do this." But I had pretty good arrangement geographically that, while I would travel, I would be still in northern California....I would continue to have organizing as a priority, but I would still have servicing assignments as well.

Masterson was also able to negotiate the autonomy to do her work as she saw it, one of the main reasons she thinks she has avoided "burnout."

A lot of the reason I haven't felt burnt out is that I took a job at a point where I was able to negotiate options. So I think that really makes a big difference—to have control over your working life. I mean, nobody has complete control. I mean, it's not like I say, "Oh no, I won't do that." And I have done assignments that I would not have selected

myself. But I've always also been able to do something that I felt was really interesting and vital and something I wanted to do. And I haven't had a difficulty in any significant way negotiating resources and getting additional help.

That she has been able to keep organizing, follow through on her plans for leadership development, and ensure continuity in her work has helped her to sustain her commitment to her social reform project.

“I love seeing people gain skills, not just in their workplace about organizing, but also kind of adopting the attitude that you can actually change things in your life and other people’s lives.”

I really like the process. I like working with people in an organizing capacity. I like to see that process develop. I love seeing people gain skills, not just in their workplace about organizing, but also kind of adopting the attitude that you can actually change things in your life and other people's lives. So it's a real dynamic, exciting lifestyle. I really do regard it as something that goes through your whole life. It's not just about union organizing. But it's about being active in your community, just feeling like you have the power to do something. And so I like that myself. But I also really love working with people who learn that through the process of organizing.

I think the thing I'm proudest of is leadership and staff development. I think we've done a good job that will benefit the labor movement for a long time to come....A lot of people who have come out of our campaigns [or] out of the locals where we've organized have either become international reps. or they've gone to other unions or they've gone into—in the case of UC, this isn't just UC...—the academy and have maintained their interest and link to labor or some other type of community organizing. So that the organizing message, I think, has successfully been picked up and carried broadly in a way that, I think, has major significance.

Masterson remains a social reformer, one who negotiates “free space” because she built a base within a constituency the UAW had hoped to organize, earned a reputation for excellence, and could not be easily replaced. Her organizing successes have also put her in a good position for the future. She organized the “second biggest UAW local in the country. So that has power. It's the biggest local on the West Coast, biggest local west of the Mississippi. So people look to the...leadership in that local and say, ‘OK, what are they going to do?’”

Although these social reformers found ways to pursue their projects while staying in union work, others left. It is to them we now turn.

Leaving the Union

Some of the labor leaders we interviewed left union work. Why did they leave while most stayed? Although it is interesting to know who left and who stayed, it may be more valuable to explore why they left and where they went. Research on the careers of union leaders of an earlier generation shows that many built management careers on their union experience. In this generation, however, most of those who left unions continued to do work broadly related to labor's mission. Why didn't they pursue this work within their unions?

CHART 6 LAST PROJECT, REASON FOR LEAVING, AND WHAT THEY DO NOW

NAME	LAST PROJECT	WHY LEFT	WHERE NOW
Rudy Del Castillo	Soc Ref	can't do project	NGO
Laura Feirman	Soc Ref	can't do project	NGO
Norm Dunn	Soc Ref	politics	Back to Work
Sam Rosenberg	Soc Ref	can't do project	Journalist
Lloyd Callahan	Soc Ref	can't do project	Politics/Journalist
Ken McHenry	U. Builder	politics	Business
Rom Giannini	U. Builder	politics	Politics
Eli Altman	U. Builder	politics	Government
Sam Hoffman	U. Builder	politics	Politics
Ellen Gardner	U. Builder	venue changes	Politics
Bob Alcala	Comm Ldr	politics	Business
Dick Lara	Comm Ldr	politics	Business
Nicolas Manriquez	Comm Ldr	politics	Business
Oscar Herrera	Comm Ldr	politics	Education
Henry Carl	Comm Ldr	politics	NGO
Walter Brown	Personal Advancement	can't do project	Business
Ralph Reeves	Personal Advancement	project change	Government
George Kaufman	Family	project change	Education
Tom Nussbaum	Family	project change	Government
Linda Davis	Family	project change	Social Service
Nick Martin	Entrepreneur	project change	Business
Len Thomas	Entrepreneur	project change	Business

We looked at several factors to see whether they were associated with staying and leaving—including gender, ethnicity, religion, class, education, family background, marital status, recruitment, first union job, and mentors and sponsors. We concluded that people’s projects had the strongest impact on their decision to stay in or leave their unions. As has been illustrated, people who became union builders stayed with the labor movement. With the exception of a portion of the social reformers, those who did not become union builders often left the movement. And most who adopted new projects, like prioritizing family first or pursuing of entrepreneurial careers, also departed.

For those who left union work, Chart Six displays their projects just before they left, how they came to leave, and the kind of places to which they went. The chart indicates that, of the 22 people who left union work, four were social reformers who found they could not pursue their projects by working for unions, and nine were community leaders or union builders (and one social reformer) who left after losing political fights.

Keeping One’s Project and Leaving the Union

All but one of the social reformers who left union work did so not after losing an election but after concluding that pursuing their projects required exiting the labor movement. They reached this conclusion after many years of doing union work. Like almost all social reformers, they had experience as activists before coming to the labor movement. Moreover, all those who left had been recruited from the outside. This may be one reason why they found that they could leave of their own volition.

For example, Laura Feirman was a middle-class, college-educated, unaffiliated social reformer who entered union work after being a community and antiwar activist. She left the labor movement after 18 years of trying to find a place where she could “create the kinds of changes that really need to happen.” During those 18 years, she worked for some of the more progressive unions in the labor movement—SEIU, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and the National Writers Union (NWU). In 1991, Feirman finally decided to find other work.

A bunch of things happened....National health care goes down the tubes, in part because the labor movement can’t get itself behind some real reform. NAFTA gets passed, in part because the labor movement has killed off all the left wing people in Central America who could have helped them defeat it. A number of things happened that really changed my feelings about the labor movement relative to the rest of the progressive world. And that needed to be bridged. That whatever happened next was not going to happen either exclusively in the labor movement or exclusively in the community sector and that we had to reconstruct the way the movement looked if we were ever going to win any of the things we needed to win again.

And the other thing that happened to me [was] I went back to something that had been a lot more important to me earlier and realized that I never again wanted to work in an organization that was basically white....Race was my preeminent passion, and...I was really tired of working with people who were there by privilege. And I just was not interested any more in that, and I no longer wanted to work in a situation where white people were in charge by fiat.

So those two things [came together]....I didn’t like the culture of the labor movement. And I thought I had sort of run out of spaces where I could fix it from inside....Each

job I had was slightly closer to the edge of the labor movement than the job that preceded it. And I finally fell over the edge.

A year and a half after leaving her union job, Feirman created a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with the mission of “advancing progressive organizing and supporting the people who do it.” She is currently the full-time director, overseeing programs that support organizers from a range of progressive groups, including some unions.

The other three social reformers who left the labor movement told similar stories of years invested pursuing their projects in the labor movement and eventually concluding that, to do what they wanted to do, they had to leave. One of these, like Feirman, started an NGO that supports the organizing of low-wage workers, often in collaboration with unions. Another became a journalist, political consultant, and public official who works closely with unions. The third became a journalist who played a leading role in national debates on public policy.

Losing a Political Fight and Leaving the Union

Ten of the labor leaders we interviewed left the union movement after losing political battles. Five of them were community leaders, four were union builders, and only one was a social reformer. But regardless of project type, all those who left after losing political fights had been recruited from inside the work place, perhaps making them more reluctant to leave on their own accord. After leaving, the paths of union builders and community leaders diverged, with most of the union builders making their way into state politics and most of the community leaders repositioning themselves in a local business or other local enterprise.

The number of community leaders who left is notable because it is such a large proportion of all those who stuck with this project: Five out of six people. Four of the five are Latinos who had articulated their project in terms of ethnicity rather than workplace. None had completed college when they entered union work, and all but one came from a working-class background. This suggests that community leaders who did not make the transition into union building found themselves ill-equipped—in terms of organizational relationships beyond their local communities, shared projects, or alliances—to survive political reverses. This might also help to explain why they turned to local enterprises rather than state or local politics.

By contrast, three of the four union builders who left after losing political fights had middle-class backgrounds; two had finished college before starting union careers. They also represent a much smaller proportion of union builders than is the case with community leaders. This suggests that union builders were usually able to regroup after suffering political losses rather than leaving, as the community leaders did. It is likely that union builders were able to develop a broader set of relationships, shared projects, and alliances than could community leaders. This might also help to explain why they made their way into state politics rather than into local businesses.

Rom Giannini, for example, was a union builder who began union work as a social reformer. He was recruited by a growing SEIU local that represented the municipal workers of a city in which he had found work painting street lines. With good sponsorship in a growing union, he rose quickly and became a dedicated union builder. When he came to the attention of the national union leadership, which was looking for people with whom to beef up its local unions, he was appointed trustee of major locals in southern and northern California and eventually earned election to the national executive board. But when he ran

for president of his local, he lost. Deeply shaken by his defeat, Giannini began to reconsider his project. The national union offered him a variety of positions, carrying him until he decided what to do. They supported him in his decision to go to work for the speaker of the Assembly and, later, as a political consultant.

Dick Lara, on the other hand, was a community leader who was a Chicano activist long before he entered union work. As an activist, he became active in AFSCME by organizing his work place, winning election as steward and, eventually, as vice-president of his local. He then accepted a full-time union representative position, a post in which he served for seven years. During this period, however, Lara devoted much of his energy to organizing and leading a city-wide, “Alinsky style” community organization, which was linked more to his experience as a Chicano activist than as a union official. When his AFSCME unit was decertified, he moved to SEIU to work as a business agent for a local branch of one of its statewide locals. He supported the formation of a separate local—part of the national union agenda—but had conflicts with the national staff who fired him for insubordination. Although he pursued his project by remaining active in local community organizing, he was out of a job and got a license to sell insurance as a way to make a living.

For Giannini, like other union builders, recovering from a political loss was personally difficult but made easier by his ties to the union he had been building. For Lara, on the other hand, when he fell out of favor with the union leadership, he found himself out of a job and without a union base on which to depend. But like other community leaders, Lara found that he could draw upon his ties in the local community to find work in which those ties could be of real value.

Changing One’s Project and Leaving the Union

Eleven of the people we interviewed left their unions after they changed projects and did not find ways to pursue them within the labor movement. Five left while in pursuit of projects with which we are already familiar. One social reformer, Henry Carl, who became a community leader, left under the same circumstance as other community leaders: Political loss. Three social reformers—Altman, Giannini, and Hoffman—who had become union builders also left after political losses. The one social reformer, Ralph Reeves, prioritized personal advancement and left to pursue his career.

Six others left to pursue new projects, developed in the course of their union work. Three social reformers—Nussbaum, Davis, and Kaufman—left to prioritize their family lives. Four of the people we interviewed developed projects as entrepreneurs: Darden, Norman, Martin, and Thomas. And two of them, Martin and Thomas, left the labor movement. All four “entrepreneurs” passed through a “union builder” transition from initial projects of social reform (two), community leadership (one), and personal advancement (one).

Family First Projects

Three of our interviewees left their unions because their projects became less important than the quality of their family life.

Family First: These people decided to sacrifice work with the union for family interests. They articulate this change in their project as an explicit decision associated with having small children, having to make choices about parenting, and so on.

Our interviews show that union leadership work often creates serious tensions between work and family. In three cases, these tensions were resolved (though often at serious costs to family life) with project

changes which were in turn followed shortly thereafter by leaving the labor movement. Contrary to what some might expect, although all three of those who made this transition were former social reformers, only one was a woman. The two men came from middle-class families and had finished college. The woman came from a working-class, union family but had not yet finished college when she began her union work.

Tom Nussbaum is a middle-class college graduate and social reformer who went to work for SEIU through a community organization with ties to the labor movement. He became the chief political operative of a major public sector local, a position of influence inside and outside of the labor movement. His wife was pursuing her doctorate, they had two small children, and he became increasingly aware of his role as a parent.

And it was, I'd say, late '80s. [The question on my mind] was, "How does my family fit into this picture? How does being a father fit into this picture?" ...I think I became aware that my marriage and being the kind of parent I wanted to be...was not at all the kind of parent I had. My father was a classic '50s dad—not around, not in the picture. And I think I knew that I like kids too much. It's too fun. And...I wasn't going to miss that. It wasn't really a conscious decision.

He had begun to consider other options, including politics.

I think some of the other things that happened were [that] I started doing more campaigns. I think I got interested in things outside of the labor movement, like public policy questions, and appreciated a broader view than simply the view in organized labor....So, like '90-'91, I worked for [the mayor] as his liaison with the Board of Supervisors—basically, his lobbyist with the board....I did that for a year. He lost. I then was contemplating doing consulting,...but [I] ended up sort of in the consulting feeling [as if there] was no home, no family. It was like being an outsider. And I didn't like that feeling, having come from 10 years in SEIU where you feel like you belong. You know the players. You've got institutional memory. You're not a hired gun.

Finding himself between the world of the union and the world of politics, Nussbaum's family concerns loomed particularly large.

By then, I was fully involved in parenting, probably really just in terms of the joy of raising kids. Everyone who has kids has their certain periods that they get off on, and, I guess, I think I really got off on when they were very little—sort of the one to six or seven year-old set. It seems to be my particular passion....I think it was just clear to me: I'm not somebody who's going to work....I did a bunch of psychotherapy, which I found very powerful. I think I came to some understanding of what my relationship was to union work, sort of on a personal level, not just on a social change level. But, why as an individual would I want to do this work? What's it about? What does it do for me? What does being in fights mean? I think my conclusion, after all is said and done, was that my family was first and foremost. Which isn't an unusual conclusion. But [I realized] that, on a personal level, I wasn't going to work 60 hours a week again—that I needed to find a different path.

He found a way to spend most of a year at home, doing part time work and focusing on parenting. He then returned to work part-time as community liaison for a major university.

Two other former social reformers, George Kaufman and Linda Davis, also left union work to put their families first. One continued to work with unions, but as an educator attached to a university rather than as an active union leader. Davis found her life “transformed” by motherhood, returned to school, and became a child therapist. Thus, although these three social reformers found they could not reconcile the priority they wanted to give to family life with a career in the labor movement, they did find ways to pursue public service careers.

Entrepreneurial Projects

Four interviewees—two of whom left union work—developed entrepreneurial projects.

Entrepreneurship: These people turned their energies to initiating and developing their own enterprises—including, but not limited to, private businesses. For them, union work created the opportunity for new pursuits outside the union.

When compared with studies of earlier generations of union leaders who left unions, it is remarkable that so few in this generation turned to entrepreneurship. Although two had begun as social reformers, one as a community leader and one seeking personal advancement, all of those who developed entrepreneurial projects passed through a union building period. They had been successful in their union building, but it seems to have left them dissatisfied.

They also seem to have been well equipped to pursue new projects of their own. Three had come from middle-class families, and two had finished college. In the course of their union work, they all had acquired new skills, relationships, or resources that served them well in their new ventures.

Len Thomas’s project trajectory went from personal advancement to union building to entrepreneurship. Growing up in a troubled, middle-class family, he dropped out of high school and earned his high school equivalency degree in the Army, where he learned rocketry. Upon discharge, he found work in an aerospace plant represented by the UAW. The union steward recruited him, and the union offered him a way up by “getting people together to make things work better.” As a “union builder,” Thomas organized a new local when he changed jobs, was elected president, and joined the UAW regional staff as an international representative. His “union building” project was shaken, however, when he was laid off because of industry cutbacks. He then tried his hand at politics. His candidate lost but asked him to join him in a business venture in Taiwan. The venture did not succeed, so he returned the UAW when recalled. When he was assigned to Nummi, the joint General Motors/Toyota enterprise in Fremont, California, Thomas developed a deep interest in the Toyota system, “interdependent industrial enterprise.” This became his new “entrepreneurial” project. He briefly headed a joint labor-management training program. Thomas then pursued it as a Vice President with McDonnell-Douglas, and was responsible for training in the new system. While there, he earned his MBA, despite having never attended college. When he parted ways with management, he continued his project by joining a consulting firm as a passionate advocate of the Toyota system.

For Thomas, then, the union offered him an avenue for personal advancement and a union building career during which he could acquire new skills, relationships, and commitments. These enabled him to

become a dedicated advocate of a new industrial design system—his “entrepreneurial” project—which opened new opportunities outside the union.

CONCLUSION

We began this paper by asking where the current generation of California union leaders came from. Who are they? Why did they come to work for unions at a time when unions seemed neither a way up nor at the heart of a social movement? Why did most of these leaders stay? Why did some leave?

Although the people we interviewed are not a “random” sample, they are nonetheless representative of the “rising leaders” of this generation in the California labor movement.⁷ We have a great deal to learn from their experience—not only about what happened to their generation, but to the leaders among them.

We discovered that many of the demographic variables often used to explain social action—and the career choices of earlier generations of union leadership—did not, in and of themselves, explain much about this generation of labor leaders. Class, education, gender, ethnicity, and source of recruitment made little difference in who came to work for unions, who stayed, and who left. Instead, what mattered were their projects; that is, how they conceived what they were trying to do. Projects help us understand the diversity of reasons why people came to work for unions, how those reasons evolved, and why, in some cases, they became reasons to leave.

“ We discovered that many of the demographic variables often used to explain social action... did not...explain much about this generation of labor leaders.”

Why Did They Come?

Some came on a mission of social reform, motivated by commitments to their faith, to vanguard politics, or to broad social change goals articulated via the movements of 1960s and 1970s. However, except for those from working-class families who were radicalized in college, few social reformers found their way directly into the labor movement. Most passed through “bridging organizations,” such as the United Farm Workers or the Citizen’s Action League. Their goals, organizational alliances, and the networks they had forged ensured that these organizations bridged the world of “the movement” to that of organized labor. Without them, it is unlikely that most of the social reformers would have found their way to unions.

Others came to unions for more traditional reasons. Some were leaders of communities—usually working-class and, in most cases, Latino communities. Unions provided opportunities to serve those communities effectively. Others came seeking personal advancement, a “way up.” Still others came because the union had made a big difference in their lives, and they believed that “building” the union was a goal worthy of their commitment.

Why Did They Stay?

One of the most interesting findings in our study is the process by which people’s projects changed, as they turned to union building as the project most consonant with that of their organizations. We observed a process of adaptation; 90% of those who began seeking personal advancement, 50% of those who started as community leaders, and 36% of those who started as social reformers became union builders. However, we also observed a process of selection, as many of those who did not adopt a union building

project left the labor movement—*viz.*, the one personal advancement seeker who did not “convert,” 50% of those who started as community leaders, and 38% of those who started as social reformers.

We also found an exception to this pattern of convergence: 13 social reformers, or 36% of those who were included in this study back in 1984, remained committed to social reform and found ways to stay in the labor movement. Some became part of a concerted and successful effort to change their unions. Others found organizational “free spaces” in which they could trade pursuit of their projects for work the organization required.

It is also interesting to note that although the social reformers—both those who became union builders and those who did not—made valuable contributions to the unions, the unions did not make any social reformers.

Why Did They Leave?

What is perhaps most surprising is that relatively few people in our study actually left the labor movement: 22 out of 68 (32%). Those who did leave rarely did so because of “burn out.” About half of those who left lost political fights and either could not or did not regroup. The other half left because they could not pursue their projects while working for a union. (For some, it was their original projects—as with the social reformers and community leaders who left—that pulled them away. For others, it was a new project—as with those who decided to prioritize their family lives or pursue entrepreneurial endeavors.) Regardless of the reason, most who left did not turn on the labor movement but went on to do work broadly consistent with its goals. In reflecting on this finding, however, it is important to note that the people interviewed in this study were not neophytes in their unions. Rather, they had enough tenure of service behind them that they were emerging as leaders within their organizations.

For scholars of the labor movement, social movements, organizations, and leadership, our findings demonstrate the value of studying agency systematically. Although data drawn from interviews, especially when retrospective, has its limitations, it nonetheless offers valuable insights into how people’s intentions influence their actions, how these intentions change over time, and how intentions interact with the organizations within which people work. It can never be enough to assume undefined “interests” as a theory of motivation; this is particularly important when considering organizations like unions, which are rooted in noneconomic values. It is important to note that this approach makes visible the relationship—and the tensions—between individual and organizational change. Finally, given the work of leaders in the lives of organizations, learning how agency works is essential for understanding how leaders develop.

We also hope that our study is valuable for union leaders. It will, no doubt, be interesting for members of the generation we write about to engage with our findings—to challenge them, learn from them, or respond to them—because, after all, they are the very people whom we are analyzing. More importantly, however, we hope they will contribute some valuable insights as to why people come to work for unions, why some stay, and why others leave. Indeed, our study suggests that it may be more fruitful to focus on why people stay in the labor movement than on why they leave it.

Perhaps reflecting on their own experiences, many of today’s top union leaders have reduced their reliance on “bridge organizations.” They have committed themselves to direct outreach to today’s generation of social reformers through the Organizing Institute, Union Summer, Living Wage campaigns, and the like. But it takes more than social reformers to build a union. It takes union builders, too. Our study underscores the fact that these union leaders often came from the workplace. They are people whose

direct experience persuaded them of the difference a union can make in one's life. Those who came to work for "personal advancement" reasons also became union builders—as their skills, relationships, and commitment to their organizations developed. In fact, for almost everyone, the union building project was related not only to his or her initial union experiences but also to the extent to which the union offered opportunities for ongoing professional development.

Our paramount concern is the high proportion of community leaders who could not find a place within the labor movement, particularly because of their roles in the Latino community. This may no longer be true. It may simply have been a consequence of the particular time period that our study covers. But it should give us pause.

If people leave their unions in order to pursue other goals, they are likely to continue their support of the labor movement. Union leaders would be wise to wish them well. If they leave after suffering political losses, this too may be an unavoidable cost of contested elections. However imperfect, those costs remain part of a critical accountability mechanism in America's largest—and most egalitarian—representative organizations.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Union leaders do not begin at the top, but instead work their way up organizational ladders. A focus on top national leaders reveals little about the careers of the thousands of other elected and appointed local, state, and national leaders who do the work of the union. Moreover, a focus on national leaders reveals little about *why* some rise to the top and others do not. Although scholars have examined unpaid rank-and-file leaders (Strauss & Sayles, 1952, 1953; Peck, 1963; Chaison & Andiappan, 1987), few studies of the full-time people responsible for day to day union leadership have been conducted since the 1950s (Strauss, 1956, 1957). Yet in California alone, in 1984, some 2,000,000 union members supported 5,000 full-time business agents, elected leaders, and organizers who coordinated the work of an estimated 26,500 volunteers.
- 2 This cognitive distinction is quite similar to the relational distinction Granovetter makes between “undersocialized” and “oversocialized” agency—actors as entirely autonomous individuals or as mere extensions of social groups, classes, or other collectivities. In sociology, a number of scholars make distinctions quite similar to that of Bandura (*cf.*, Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Banaszak, 1996; Zerubavel, 1997; and DiMaggio, 1997).
- 3 Mische describes projects as “evolving, imaginatively constructed configurations of desired social possibility, accompanied by an implicit or explicit theorization of personal and/or collective capacity to act to achieve that possibility” (Emirbeyer & Mische, 1998: 46-47; Mische, 2002: 14).
- 4 Mische writes that collective projects can be defined as public narratives of proposed interventions by groups or collectivities (Mische & Pattison, 2000; Mische, 1996). Such narratives clearly have a projective dimension, in that they “embed identities in time and place” (Somers, 1992); they give a sense of where a society and an organization have come from, while also delimiting where actors think, hope, or fear they may be going. Sometimes those collective projects encompass the youths’ own “projects-in-formation”; sometimes they expand or challenge them; and sometimes they conflict with or cause internal dissension in an activist’s perceived sense of direction and possibility.
- 5 Although we did not interview him, Sirabella’s “project” may have been one of union building, recognizing that “social reformers” can make a valuable contribution to organizing. Other labor leaders have from time to time understood this—as in the legendary account of John L. Lewis’s response to criticism for hiring Communists for the CIO organizing drive in the 1930s: “We’ll see who winds up with the bird—the hunter or the dog.”
- 6 The other well known activist independent union to have originated as part of the New York RWDSU is Local 1199, now part of SEIU.
- 7 Of the 46 people whom we interviewed who were still working for unions, 11 were no longer working in California. Five of those 11 were in Washington, D.C., four were in New York City, and two were elsewhere. However, it should also be noted that some important current California union leaders were not working there at the time of the original study, either.

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