Union Effectiveness: In Search of the Holy Grail

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Introduction

Union power and influence to protect and advance the interests of their members (and workers in general) continue to decline in most societies. The effect of this decline has ever more been keenly felt since the onset of an economic depression in the global north, and the practical issue of union effectiveness has become ever more pressing and salient. The outcome of this decline within and without the workplace has been that workers’ living standards have fallen or stagnated while workers have become ever more subject to the whims of employers and the unregulated market. By contrast, the rich have become richer and increasingly determine the nature of work and society in their own image and for their own benefit. Yet presently and for many years previous, the study of union effectiveness has been one bedevilled by deficiencies, making it much more difficult for unions and their members to obtain the Holy Grail of the praxis of union effectiveness.

The inadequacy of the contribution of academics to understanding union effectiveness takes a number of forms. First, there has been lack of attention per se, with it being surmised that a working assumption operates whereby definitions of measures and outcomes of union effectiveness are seen as being self-evident and unproblematic. Examples of those unspoken and implicit measures and outcomes are union density, bargaining coverage or wage settlements. And, although hundreds of union wage effects studies have been published, there are no more than twenty published studies we are aware of that explicitly study union effectiveness itself. Many of these studies are relatively recent, and are concerned with the sub-set of organising effectiveness. Second, where studies and research have been carried out on union effectiveness, they have often lacked rigour and completeness. This we attribute to their insufficient conceptualisation of (union) effectiveness. Consequently, scholars have typically concentrated narrowly on collective bargaining or organising effectiveness or (internal) organisational effectiveness. Measures have captured aspects of local or national union activity but seldom the totality of unions and union movements. 1 Third, where studies and research have been carried out on the processes by which unions can and do renew and revitalise themselves, union effectiveness has been an absent consideration and a surprising one at that. In other words, the aforementioned deficiencies are heightened when the voluminous prognoses for union revival, renewal and revitalisation (like social movement unionism and ‘organising model’ unionism) are also considered.

1 At the operational level, a narrower focus may be appropriate. Our objection here is mainly in regard to the conceptual level.
Collectively, the import of these deficiencies is that the ‘bigger picture’ of union effectiveness is not being viewed and studied. Put another way, the ‘wood’ cannot be seen but for the ‘trees’, for the means (like union density) and ends (like greater worker control or higher wages) have no obvious and rounded connection. We believe that a grounded conceptualisation of union effectiveness can provide the connection. In order to make it through the dialectic of agency and environment, the flow of intention, action, process and outcome is required to be identified and theorised. The thrust of this paper is then to identify the maladies and put forward a union effectiveness framework for addressing and resolving them based on union effectiveness. It is to be hoped that the value in this exercise is not merely academic, for unions as actors require clarity of thought to guide their actions and labour-orientated scholars have a role to play in helping that clarification of thought.

The paper begins by characterising unions in order to establish the flow of intention, action, process and outcome by starting with the ‘big picture’ of unions under capitalism. From here, we outline a brief multi-faceted conceptualisation of union effectiveness before assessing and critiquing the extant literature and then returning to more fully elaborate our conceptualisation and framework of union effectiveness.

**Unions as workers’ organisations**

Unions are of, by, and for workers.2 This defines their character, means, purpose and interests. These features are all linked together by the goals of defending and improving members’ living standards (primarily through their paid employment) and members’ control over their working lives and conditions (primarily centred on the experience of work in the workplace). Consequently, the first order of analysis for union effectiveness (UE) necessarily concerns outcomes, while the second order concerns the resources and processes by which to achieve outcomes. The resources comprise members’ activism, employed staff, and financial resources as well as members’ collective power in the workplace and in the street. The processes comprise collective bargaining, political action and mutual aid. In this logic, power is primarily a means to an end, and power itself neither specifies chosen outcomes nor guarantees effectiveness in gaining those outcomes. This is because the application and exercise of power – as we term it levers of power - must be specific to the situation and circumstance of the goal being sought and its context in time and space.

The important rider to this logic is that acquisition and generation of power (and allied resources) is often an implicit goal for unions given that it is the critical modus operandi. Within unions as collective organisations, the generation of the ‘power to’ – in regard of their members – is the best guarantor of generating the ‘power over’ (employers, government etc). Equally as important at this stage in establishing a framework for beginning to conceptualise and theorise UE is recognition that the exercise and application of power - in terms of strategy and tactics - heavily influences whether, how and to what extent goals are attained. It is easy to envisage how an un-powerful union is also an ineffective union. It is less easy to imagine a prima facie powerful union that is also ineffective but nevertheless quite possible. Moreover, there is a seemingly

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2 Many readers will recognize this phrasing as inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address. Fiorito et al. (1993:115) elaborated on its applicability to unions.
inescapable logic that particular levers of power are best suited for use in specific arenas to attain certain goals. For example, generally, economic levers of power are best exercised in the economic arena for the attainment of economic goals. Meanwhile, political levers of power are best suited to and exercised in the political arena for the attainment of political goals. Matters are not always so clear-cut, of course. As Sturmthal (1973) noted, unions may resort to political means for economic ends when the state or the economic situation blocks union exercise of economic leverage.

To this needs to be added the context and situation represented by the system of capitalism in and under which unions exist. Unions are a reflection of the imbalance in power between capital and labour as well as representing an attempt to redress this imbalance in regard of the prosecution of workers’ interests. The power imbalance is most easily understood in terms of what flows from capital owning and controlling the means of production, distribution and exchange, namely, a superiority of economic, political, ideological and organisational resources. This sense of being the weaker party is reified by unions being ‘secondary’ (Offe and Wisenthal 1985) and ‘intermediary’ (Muller-Jentsch 1985) organisations. Yet it is important not to ignore that unions are, nonetheless, active, conscious and independent collective agents which have special features by virtue of being voluntary and democratic organisations, based upon membership participation and whose primary resource is the collective activity of their members in the workplace (collective bargaining) and in public spaces (political protest).

As a result of the dependency upon voluntary membership participation (for legitimacy and mobilisation), it may be expected that unions will be less effective than other organisations like businesses. On the other hand, it may also be expected that with the legitimacy gained through democratic processes, unions may be more effective organisations than businesses. This understanding provides the foundation for our critique of the salient literature and the laying out of definitional framework of union effectiveness. But first we provide a rudimentary outline of union effectiveness in order to guide our critique of the literature.

**Union effectiveness**

Union effectiveness is not easily defined. It is a ‘highly complex, highly dynamic concept’ (Clark 2009: 5). With that caution noted, Clark (2009:5-8) proceeds to define union effectiveness (in mainly a North American context) in terms of: i) unions’ ability to organize new members; ii) collective bargaining outcomes and; iii) unions’ impacts on society. Clark (2009:8) quickly added: ‘the extent of democracy in a union’ as ‘an additional consideration that some believe is a measure of union effectiveness’. We define union effectiveness initially in broader terms, namely, of unions successfully applying appropriate levers of power to gain their purposeful goals. This is then an issue of performance set against desired objectives. By appropriate, we mean applying the salient amount and type of power in the apposite arena. Consequently, effectiveness in terms of both procedural and substantive outcomes involves creating deliberate and usable leverage with/over employers as well as state authorities in pursuit of objectives. Thus, this definition of union effectiveness is not merely about defining institutional effectiveness (i.e. a union as organisation) and neither does it merely concern itself with collective bargaining or the union operating as a political actor. Consequently, the constructs of effectiveness deployed in assessing the extant literature are:
• dimensions and criteria concerning the extent and nature of effectiveness;
• arenas and scales of organisation and operation – the spatial bounds in which effectiveness can be best achieved such as political, economic, legal, industrial and ideological arenas;
• levers – the tools and resources needed to achieve effectiveness, where a lever represents the generation of power in a particular circumstance;
• strategies and tactics and attendant windows of opportunity in terms of the how, when and where to act.

Literature review

We adopt a ‘Goal-System’ framework in critiquing previous work. In it, goal definition is the fundamental starting point for any study of assessing union effectiveness, no matter its particular aspects and sub-sets. Thus, ‘[e]ffectiveness [concerns] … the degree to which goals are attained’ (Fiorito et al. 1993:113). Goals – in terms of the constituency of interests they are intended to serve – are either sectional or class-based (albeit it should be acknowledged that intention and outcome may diverge). Unions goals are essentially of economic, social and political natures, and some can also be achieved by linked but, nonetheless, separate organisations of workers such as friendly or mutual aid societies, cooperatives, or parties of labour/labour parties (Fiorito et al. 1993:112-115). While this is uncontentious, what is far less so is identifying the specific measures by which to judge union effectiveness. In a study of union strategic choice in New Zealand, Boxall and Haynes (1997:571) suggest that:

Regardless whether or not workers are instrumentally and/or ideologically motivated, we take the view that unions are effective when they meet the expectations of their members in respect of equitable outcomes in these areas [better pay and conditions, increased influence of decisions regarding the organisation of work, and protection against arbitrary management decisions] … Meeting these ends … depends on effective management of the primary or critical means of a union: its mode of engagement with employers.

This is one of the few explicit definitions offered. But it is too workplace and economic–based (as Hammer and Wazeter (1993:302) would no doubt concur), albeit a caveat on the importance of the state was subsequently entered into (Boxall and Haynes 1997:572)). Equally unsatisfactory and incomplete are those offered by Hickey et al. (2010), whereby effectiveness in terms of outcomes is based upon membership participation, membership growth and union influence, by Rose and Chaison (1990), who in analysing organising effectiveness, focussed upon certification wins rate, number of workers covered and gaining a first contract (but not the quality of it) and by Bryson (2005) who stipulated union effectiveness comprises organisational (accountable to members) and bargaining (delivering improvements in work and working conditions) effectiveness.

3 This framework builds on earlier work by Fiorito et al. (1991 and 1993), which in turn draws heavily on previous work by Bok and Dunlop (1970) on unions and by organizational theorists on effectiveness (e.g., Cameron and Whetten 1983), among others. We recommend these sources to readers for guidance to earlier literature.
Despite some criticism (e.g., Frege (2002)), the Goal-System framework (Fiorito et al. (1993:119-122) concerning national union effectiveness remains the most developed one to date. This is because it sets out a coherent and comprehensive framework of core penultimate goal criteria for evaluating union effectiveness. They specified bargaining, politics, self-help, organising, member solidarity and resource acquisition, and that these were complementary. By contrast, Burchielli (2004:339-342), in research on Australian unions, outlined a typology of union effectiveness with three - representative, administrative and ideological – elements of effectiveness. However, it is not clear that these components are distinct as she claimed and they lacked adequate internal specification for they pertained overwhelmingly to themes rather than criteria or goals. Representative effectiveness comprised recruitment, responsiveness to members and achieving key union goals, administrative effectiveness comprised structure and strategy, innovative practices, goal clarity, leadership, and staff accountability, and ideological effectiveness comprised social values, ideological cohesion, developing active membership, union commitment and politicising the environment. Very few of the components in themselves lead to effectiveness other than, for example, achieving union goals, suggesting that parts and processes are missing. Moreover, there was no ordering of the components and no specification of their inter-relationship. Nonetheless, Burchielli’s conceptualisation was head-and-shoulders above most others. For example, Black et al.’s (1997) study of a single union did not offer a definition of effectiveness even though the term was included in the title of their article. In conclusion, they did, nonetheless, suggest that size was no guarantor of effectiveness and evaluated a small union as being effective for the reasons of maintaining membership and a financial surplus as well as meeting membership expectations and needs and fostering a sense of membership-union identity (see also Sayce et al. (2006) on high levels of women’s participation in this union).

Returning to the Goal-System framework, bargaining, politics, self-help, organising, member solidarity and resource acquisition were criteria of penultimate goals, with ultimate goals being far less well specified (see Fiorito et al. 1993:120), begging three key questions. First, what are the measures for evaluating the attainment of the penultimate goals? Second, what are the ultimate goals? Third, how is attaining penultimate goals related to attaining ultimate goals? In regard of the latter, is it a simple mechanical relationship of gaining all penultimate goals leads to the attaining of all ultimate goals? Are there intermediate mediators or moderators, primarily in terms of strategy and tactics? And finally, does the attaining of resources or innovation, for example, presuppose success in gaining an ultimate goal? Fiorito et al. (1997:6) only briefly addressed the issue of third question when they argued that the six aforementioned components ‘were considered to be individual strategic elements, which when combined, would encompass union performance as a whole’.

More generally, this initial discussion of the extant literature brings forth a number of wider issues. First and foremost, are these the measures (as per goals) to be specified by the unions themselves or by those sympathetic but external to unions? Are there then, in effect, subjective and objective measures? If measures are to be subjective, who are the subjects that give rise to them? Second, should it be assumed that all unions have the same overall purpose but this is

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4 Frege (2002) suggested that a focus on the process of influencing management needs to be added to these components.
expressed through different specific goals? The issues of sectionality and class again loom large here. Third, and while accepting that some form of organisational survival is vital (even if not in its current form as a result of merger or amalgamation), is there to be an ordering of goals and, if so, what should this be?

Specification and ordering of goals do vary within unions and along vertical and horizontal axes. The Goal-System framework deploys the concept of the ‘dominant coalition’ to seek to understand how the dominant group prevails and, thus, sets the goals. However, even if the goals are not directly contested by other groups, these other groups may prioritise and interpret the organisational goals leading to difference (Fiorito et al. 1993:118). Amongst these groups are grassroots members, activists, lay officials, officers (junior, senior), and political groupings of the left, centre and right. Their goals may vary, as unions’ goals may do, in the extent of the ambition embodied in the goals – for example, moderate versus militant, or reformist versus revolutionary. In regard of the ordering of goals, temporal and processual aspects can be thought of. The former concern short, medium and long-term goals (or immediate, gradual and distant) while the latter concern ultimate and penultimate goals and where some are operational (like efficiency, capacity building or resource acquisition) and have an instrumental use rather than being strategic and value-driven. The overall point here is that whatever the goals are decided upon, clarity is needed in whose goals are or are not being evaluated when assessing union effectiveness. Studies which were explicit on this score include Fiorito et al. (1997), focussing in this instance upon national union leader perception, Frege’s (2002) use of local leaders’ perceptions of influence, Burchielli’s (2004) respondents being union field officers and Bryson’s (2005) survey of workers and members.

Following from this, the issues of scale and unit of organisation are significant for smaller and larger components of union organisation should not necessarily be assumed to have the same goals, dynamics and interests – indeed, they may even diverge and conflict. National unions’ concerns are further away from the workplace so that their constituency of interest is normally the aggregation of workplaces (rather than the individual workplace as is the case of the workplace union) as well as the national union as an organisation. A national union-local union conflict in the American meatpacking industry famously illustrated this in the 1980s, becoming the centrepiece of a popular documentary film, American Dream (Kopple et al. 1990). Moreover, the preponderance of employed union officers is necessarily higher in national unions than in workplace unions so that it is guided, notwithstanding the democratic process, by the views of these officers. The same is true for geographical regions and branches of union organisation vis-à-vis workplace unions. Part of this difference speaks to the conflicting and complementary rationalities of unions as organisations (as per their administrative or bureaucratic function) and unions as members (as per their representative function). But whatever their derivation measures of union effectiveness must be situated on an appropriate size scale. Thus, it is legitimate to consider whether Hammer and Wazeter’s (1993) study of teachers’ locals in one state provides

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5 For example, the goal of attaining ‘voice’ should not be seen as an ultimate goal – even if it is an important one for obtaining procedural justice – because it is more important what the outcomes of the speaking and being listened to are, namely, whether desired actions are then taken by the employer or state. Similarly, a health state of union democracy is viewed as being desirable in itself but it is held to be more significant as an instrumental resource of legitimacy for the purposes of collective mobilisation.
any lessons for national unions or which particular lessons are salient for national unions. The same is true for Frege’s (2002) study of workplace unionism in Hungary and Slovenia. By contrast, the Goal-System framework (e.g., Fiorito et al. 1993, 1995, 1997) on national unions and national leaderships is explicitly situated in the particular national context. Yet, even here, reflection on whether lessons are generalisable to others scales (inter- or trans-national, sub-national) is required. So, a clearer sense of what lessons (and conclusions) are general or particular to those scales of union organisation outside the research site is, therefore, important. Indeed, with the case of the conflicting and complementary rationalities, this should relate to the interaction of scale of units of unions over space and time. On a more practical level, the deepening process of capitalist globalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange requires that the issue of scale and the inter-relationship of its constituent parts (as per the slogans ‘Think global, act local’ and ‘Think local, act global’) requires more presence of thought in union effectiveness studies.

Quite understandably the study of union effectiveness in recent years has been dominated by studies assessing and explaining the effectiveness of the sub-set of union organising. Clark (2009:6) noted that as a result of dramatic US union decline ‘recruiting new members has become an almost life-or-death issue for American unions’. Over twenty years ago, Fiorito et al. (2001:263) pointedly argued: ‘The focus on organizing effectiveness is partly a product of the contemporary crisis in union membership and density, and partly a product of views of organizing as a ‘supra-’ or ‘meta-strategy’ given its necessity to achieve virtually all union goals.’ It may seem churlish to lambast studies of the effectiveness of union organising for what they do not do, especially as assessments must necessarily be made manageable by placing limits upon their scope. (This includes such criticism of our own past work on union organising such as Gall and Fiorito (2011, 2012)). However, given three points, such lambast is not unreasonable. First, as Fiorito et al. (2001:263) suggested, union organising has been viewed by many as a panacea for resolving many aspects of union weakness and well as union weakness and ineffectiveness overall. Second, union organising quintessentially represents a particular means towards gaining an ends, and a rather partial one at that. Third, the effectiveness of union organising cannot be properly assessed on its own without also assessing items such as effectiveness of unions in terms of organisational effectiveness. Consequently, many of the studies of union organising effectiveness like Charlwood (2004) are rendered less than complete for they assess the means of union organising with limited criteria. In the case of Charlwood, who examined the factors that influence ‘consolidatory organising and recruitment effectiveness’ in Britain, the criteria deployed are recruiting and retaining members without regard to the bargaining outcomes (especially material ones). The authority cited here for this was Fiorito et al. (1995:614) even though these writers stated on their next page ‘… a full evaluation of organizing effectiveness must consider how organizing efforts contribute to bargaining, political, and self-help objectives’ (but also failed to address those contributions for organising).

6 Moreover, the implications of teacher unionism, with elements of professional control, also query whether the research site can generate valuable lessons for other public sector unions. The same point can be made about the study on organizing effectiveness by Badigannavar and Kelly (2005). The wider point here is that unions goals may differ in that some may seek professional control as a form of job control while others with such ‘craftist’ mentality may seek legal regulation of their jobs instead.
Elsewhere, Simms and Holgate (2010) ask ‘what is organising for?’ but do not answer their own question, not least by not providing a framework for analysing data by which to provide an evaluation. Burchielli and Bartam (2009) examined what helps organising work without examining does organising work (in terms of union effectiveness). In contrast, Badigannavar and Kelly (2005) did examine bargaining outcomes and achieving representational rights of two organising campaigns in Britain (but without, alas, explicitly defining a concept of effectiveness).

Setting aside these points for the moment and accepting the limited parameters of assessments of union organising effectiveness, their worth is generally limited because they find associations and correlations between outcomes and factors/facilitators but less clearly establish the direction of causation. For example, in examining the relationship between union density and union effectiveness, Rose and Chaison (1996), showed that there were associations where union effectiveness was defined in terms of organising, bargaining and political outcomes (labour law, distribution of wealth) but they did not set out the dynamic, osmotic nature of relationship of cause and consequence between the two. The same criticism can be levelled at Hammer and Wazeter (1993) over union mentality, participation and leadership. This type of deficiency is particularly important because some may regard the gaining of legitimacy, bargaining rights, new and additional members and resources for union action as goals (operational, penultimate etc) while others may regard them merely as facilitators and not goals as such. The latter have a strong point to make because while legitimacy and resources are, inter alia, necessary for union effectiveness, they are far from being sufficient to achieve it. Moreover, even when all the necessary and sufficient parts of the equation are put together, the whole cannot become greater than the sum of the parts until the issue of the appropriate application and exercise of power in terms of strategy and tactics is addressed in practice and analysed subsequently. The study by Fiorito et al. (2002), which stressed developments in innovation and use of information technology in relation to union and organising effectiveness, should be seen in this light. This remains true even when it is recognised that there are many factors which have been studied (like social identity, framing etc) with regard to sub-sets of union effectiveness and which influence the ability to mobilise members.

The issue of the causes or determinants of union effectiveness has been studied on a number of occasions. Sometimes this study has overlapped with the study of components of union effectiveness (see Hammer and Wazeter (1993)). Fiorito et al.’s (1993) set of determinants revolved around the degree of innovation; bureaucratic structuring and the locus of decision making (i.e., centralization); union democracy; union strategies; and environmental influences (consisting of employment growth and employer opposition to unions). Frege (2002) categorised her casual factors in terms of economic, institutional, organisational resources while Lévesque and Murray (2010) offer a more (union) internalised framework of four power resources and four strategic capabilities (see above). And, given our emphasis on the significance of strategy to apply (and generate) power, Boxall and Haynes’ (1997) examination of union strategic choice is significant for the study of union effectiveness. They argue that effectiveness is not synonymous with strategic planning but rather with the enactment of strategy albeit in a rather circular

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7 See also this absence in their related article on union effectiveness and union revitalisation through organising and partnership approaches (Badigannavar and Kelly 2011).
manner: ‘Unions become effective only if they conceive and enact more effective strategies’ (Boxall and Haynes 1997:569). However, they did not then go on to study strategy and tactics per se in their examination of union behaviour approximating to their four models. Although complex, union strategy can be understood and operationalised (see Gall 2011).

Even in the case of Lévesque and Murray (2010), who delivered one of the most highly developed and specified of many recent treatises on union renewal, the same absence of union effectiveness is notable. They provide a conceptual and theoretical-based analysis of the resources and strategic capabilities that comprise union renewal. Yet they proffered no definition of union effectiveness (and, thus, nor obviously the criteria and measures by which to judge it). Union effectiveness was the elephant in their room for the purpose of union renewal must, surely, be union effectiveness, however defined. As argued before, union renewal is primarily a means to an end, and not an end in itself. It is a penultimate, not an ultimate, goal. The omission is all the more stark because Lévesque and Murray (2010) take their starting point as union power and cite its loss as being at the core of union decline. In doing so, they distinguish between ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ and between abilities and capabilities. Indeed, it is maybe because of this starting point and power being primarily a penultimate, rather than, ultimate goal that leads to the omission. However, the omission of union effectiveness is also predicated on the absence of a consideration of the terms of the application of power in regard of place and space, on the one hand, and strategy, tactics and organisational intelligence on the other (cf. Lévesque and Murray 2010:334,336,345). The ‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ of the application of power are left unaddressed. Appropriate and sufficient application of power - in quantitative and qualitative terms as effective leverage - over external bodies to gain goals and objectives is fundamental to understanding not only successful union renewal strategies but, therefore, also union effectiveness. As a result, the analytical framework of Lévesque and Murray (2010) is partial and incomplete. What they lay out can be considered to be necessary but not sufficient (cf. Lévesque and Murray 2010:336,341). Given that union power is pretty much always about collective mobilisation of members and supporters, this is a fundamental omission.

Towards an integrated conceptual framework

We now return to the task of laying out a framework for defining and measuring union effectiveness. Given our contextualisation of unions as of, by and for workers, our starting point remains a simple but broad definition of effectiveness concerning the successful application of the appropriate levers of power to gain purposeful goals. The advancement and defence of members’ economic, political and social interests is the definition of what unions are ‘about’ and ‘for’. The place of ideology and law are taken to be contained within these three categories of interest. Effectiveness pertains to an evaluation of the how, when and where - and if - of unions achieving this ultimate goal, and relates to both procedural (of ‘voice’ and ‘justice’) and substantive (of remuneration etc) outcomes (and their inter-relationship). This then allows for different unions to act in different ways as their circumstances and strategies suggest (recall Boxall and Haynes’ (1997) four-fold schema) but without losing sight of an overarching means of evaluating any or all union organisations’ achievements or failures in regard of effectiveness.

By levers, we mean the collective tools and resources needed to achieve effectiveness, where a lever represents the generation and application of power in a particular circumstance. By
‘appropriate’ levers of power, we mean applying the salient amount and type of power in the apposite arena so that deliberate and usable leverage is created. Thus, unions need to align the extent of their ambition with the degree of the right kind of power so that they do not take a sledgehammer to crack a nut and vice-versa. Specifically, this means understanding that, for example, some strikes are primarily of an economic or political nature (but seldom both) because of the employer concerned (capitalist, state), that the behaviour of capitalists is still influenced by the state so that the state may be targeted to effect change amongst capitalists, and states must be targeted to advance and protect social wages. But whatever levers are concerned, they are always necessarily collective\(^8\) levers based upon the mobilisation of the members, their supporters and their resources. It is from these actors that the forcefulness of a union’s ideological, political, organisational and financial resources is derived.

Our conception of arenas of operation for unions comprises product, labour and capital markets in terms of the economic arena and the various organs and processes of public policy decision making and legal enactment of the political arena. Consequently, the primary levers in the aforementioned markets comprise, \textit{inter alia}, disruption to the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services through the withdrawal of labour, restriction of output etc., and damage to brand, reputation and investment opportunities. At the foundation of all of these is the infringement of the ability of employer and capital to create profit by imposing different kinds of costs upon employers and capital. That said leverage is greater in the industrial rather than economic arena because directly creating disruption to employer interest within product and capital markets is harder – disruption to the labour market is easier and has a spillover effect into product markets. But there is no necessary Chinese Wall between the spatial bounds of the arenas for sufficient economic leverage can also create political leverage when a government feels compelled to intervene in a dispute. The case of a (private sector) transport rail strike is one such example. Similarly, the ideological arena heavily colours what is permissible and achievable within the political arena. Nonetheless, there are also some distinct separations whereby, for example, public sector workers have little in the way of economic leverage but much more in the way of political leverage. Thus, a strike or protest by public sector workers is an attempt to exercise political rather than economic leverage.

In discussing economic or industrial leverage, Clark’s (2009:5) point about the ‘highly dynamic’ nature of the union effectiveness concept is salient, and so too implicitly is the dynamism of associated concepts such as leverage. This dynamism is brought forcefully into focus in the case of strike leverage. We have frequently referred to strikes as a source of leverage, but as Freeman (2007: 128-140) noted, the ‘Great Doubling’ of effective labour supply resulting from rapid Chinese, Indian, and former Soviet Union integration into an increasingly global labour market was arguably a ‘game changer’. While strikes already may have been declining sources of leverage for other reasons such as technological change, rapid and dramatic labour market integration since the 1980s, and as part of wider neo-liberal globalisation, has arguably transformed the strike option for workers from an often reliable source of leverage to one that is rarely practical for many workers in advanced industrial societies.

\(^8\) Even a lawsuit is an example of the deployment of a collective resource (as well as likely having implications for other members and workers).
Leverage can also be exercised in direct and indirect ways and on vertical and horizontal planes within a single arena. Industrial leverage (i.e. some form of collective mobilisation like industrial action) is exerted more directly upon the employer (as per a bilateral relationship and in the workplace or at the enterprise level) while political leverage may see pressure applied directly upon the government over its policy as well as on the government as a third party to act in a downward manner upon the targeted employer. Leverage with one organisation can be used against another (a buyer or supplier). The utility of developing leverage – through public protests and brand damage - against the clients that determine the contracts and not the contractors themselves was starkly highlighted in the ‘Cleanstart’ campaign to ratchet up wages and conditions in contract cleaning in Australia and New Zealand (Crosby 2009). Industrial leverage – in terms of its immediacy and magnitude of impact - is influenced by a range of factors like perishability as well as susceptibility of production of good/service to disruption (like ‘just-in-time’ (JIT) systems) and availabilities of stock and alternative suppliers. The ability of a union to use these to create leverage depends upon other factors of social relations like union density and consciousness in terms of mobilising capacity. However, what is of note in recent times is that despite the prevalence of lean production regimes and the use of JIT, workers in manufacturing seldom use the opportunity presented by this situation to press their case for resolving grievances. This may be explained by the use of ‘no-strike’ deals and the job insecurity experienced in a sector which has seen contraction and offshoring (see Gall 2013). Indeed, the more effective tool of workplace occupation, rather than striking, against redundancy and closure – by raising their costs through sequestrating employer assets and control from inside the workplace – has been seldom used in the current recession (Gall 2010). This suggests that the choice of the tactics to resist can be crucial – assuming a union has the ability to mobilise in the first place.

We have been at particular pains to state that the issue of strategies and tactics, thus choosing attendant windows of opportunity in terms of the how, when and where to act (i.e. apply levers of power), is vital to understanding whether unions are effective. This is because the conception of the particular circumstances when power is generated and applied as a lever has been sorely missing from consideration of union effectiveness. We believe the issue of strategy and tactics goes a long way to explaining why some unions are successful and others are not as well as how successful they are. Issues of resource generation or securing penultimate goals were, thus, held to be necessary but not sufficient to explain success (or otherwise).

In broadly setting out the dimensions (aspects or features) of union effectiveness, as well at the criteria (standards) by which to judge achievement in each, we have avoided providing an excessively tight definition because we want to establish the first principles (which can then be operationalised in the research setting). Nonetheless, we proffer that this should be able to be carried out in a largely quantitative way so that something akin to a universal score card can be created for each unit of union organisation and that this is transferable across and between unions and union movements. An essential part of this is to measure the extent of effectiveness as well

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9 Legal frameworks vary regarding restrictions on such ‘secondary’ activity, for example, largely banning certain forms in the United States.
as the efficiency in gaining effectiveness such that some robust statistical analysis can be developed.

**Conclusion**

Although proffered some twenty years ago, the observations by Fiorito *et al.* (1993:113) and Hammer and Wazeter (1993:303) that union effectiveness remains underdeveloped as a concept remain still broadly correct. Deploying a broader conceptualisation of effectiveness – underpinned by that of leverage and then supplemented by exercise of that leverage in terms of strategy and tactics – then gets to heart of the matter of theorising the building of successful unions in an environment of asymmetrical power within a zero-sum or mixed game where interests between capital and labour are not wholly compatible. This involves something of a critical synergy of two relatively disconnected literatures on union effectiveness and union power in order to provide the necessary springboard for constructing this more robust and rigorous theorisation. Thus, in the paper, we worked through our critique of the existing literatures in order to construct the basis for providing a totality for theorising union effectiveness. The product of this is then a schematisation of union effectiveness that is broad and deep, dynamic and more internally specified in terms of its sub-components and their relationship to each other. This does not provide for any ‘roadmaps’ or ‘best practice’ for unions or activists but it does signal that praxis – a priori *theoretically* informed practice – is essential for unions to be able to counter the power of capital and the state. This marks out the paper’s contribution.**10**

Our keenness to rectify the identified maladies results from recognition of not only the power imbalance between capital and labour but also acknowledgment that goal setting and goal achievement are influenced by an external environment which represents the power, ideology and interests of capital.

**References**


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**10** For the time being, we ignore the thorny issues of how to operationalise our framework in terms schedules of interview questions, quantifiable measures and research access *(cf. Fiorito *et al.* 1995:615)*


