Union Capabilities and Path Departures: How do local unions transform themselves?

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Referential Unionisms: Exogeneity or endogeneity?

• Choices of workplace union leaders reflect past practices and norms.
• Previously internalized choices constitute key reference points – referential unionisms – for evaluation and evolution of current and future practices.
• Highlight a) path dependency of union actors & b) complexity of processes of adjustment (not just problematizing impact of external stimuli but how this entails a continuous reconstruction of the internal dynamics of workplace unions).
• Q: Are referential unionisms being transformed in the context of globalization?
• Q: How do union actors act upon their referential unionisms in order to orient the trajectories of their own transformations?
Figure 1. Component dimensions of referential unionisms

- **Representative capacity**: The nature of relationships between representatives and represented; the interests and identities favoured.

- **Strategic capacity**: Framing, trade-offs between actions, time and space; learning and the transmission of knowledge.

- **Collective identities**: Identities, conflicts between them and which ones prevail.

- **Action repertories**: The inventory of methods of collective action.

- **Resources**: Internal (deliberative vitality), external (network embeddedness), discursive (stock of stories).
Methodology

• Cross-national workplace union comparisons (n≈29): observation over time (where possible), diversity of actors (where possible), bi-national team present at all interviews, extensive face-to-face with multiple members of local union leadership teams

• Purposive selection (n=4): cases exhibiting a higher degree of self-transformation

• Four manufacturing sites: four different MNCs (4 sites); 2 different institutional contexts (Canada and US); Cantire, Amertire, Cantrans, Amermetal
State of Referential Unionisms

**Cantire**: pragmatic experimentation with partnership, led by local leadership & risk of opposition from members

**Amertire**: forced experimentation in the face of hostile management and drawing on external union models & resources, external/internal dynamic & risk of opposition from members

**Cantrans**: effort to codify new set of references, dynamic internal tensions & risks from deliberative processes

**Amermetal**: pragmatic experimentation with codification of new set of references, led by local leadership with strong external support, risks of mediating between external & possibly deviant allies and internal membership dissension
Nature of Change in Referential Unionisms

**Cantire**: reconstruction of role from claimer to manager & partner in job protection (change in importance of contract admin), enlarged def. of interests, but weakened alliances

**Amertil**: increased distance from management, leader & not lagger in external coordination, enlarged definition of interests

**Cantrans**: enlarged definition of interests & means to achieve them, new alliances, new claims, without partnership

**Amermetal**: enlarged role because union becomes co-manager of jobs with enhanced external alliances
Key Findings I: Work on Union Self or Self-Reflection

• Referential Unionisms and work on union self ("travail sur soi", "work on self")
  → each union lives in relation to referential unionism but volatile, contested & unstable reproduction
  → conscious work on self-definition or union self is at the heart of renewal processes = rethinking boundaries of referential unionisms and different dimensions of referential unionisms
Key Findings II: Common Traits in Four Cases

• **Context**: each site on the edge, facing dangerous opportunities because facts no longer fit referential; but opportunities not a given, union plays key role in the creation of the opportunity that is then woven into the self-narrative (referential)

• **Capacity**: importance of resources & capabilities (see Lévesque & Murray (2010) because each leadership has a capacity to act

• **Temporality**: the change in referential unionism takes time and change is constructed over time (leadership must be able to assume this temporality)
Key Findings III: Varieties of Path Departure

• **Cantire**: reconstruction of union in relation to management (↑ proximity); entails changes in relationship to externals (↓ larger union, ↑ community, ↑ public authorities) & to members

• **Amertire**: reconstruction of union in relation to management (↓ proximity); entails changes in relationship to externals (↑ larger union, ↑ community) & to members

• **Cantrans**: reconstruction of union with movement from job control to social movement (def. of interests); (↑ ↓ larger union, ↑ community) & to members

• **USmetal**: reconstruction of union in relation to management (↑ proximity); entails changes in relationship to externals (↑ larger union, ↑ community) & to members
Key Findings IV: Core Self-Reflection Processes

• **Practical dialectic** between work on union self and union repertoires, mediated by strategic and representative capacity; which comes first = varying sequences

• **Strategic capacity**: unions carve out strategic (critical) space relative to management; engage in boundary-spanning beyond institutionally prescribed roles (network embeddedness, articulation)

• **Representative capacity**: change in relationship with members; cohesive leadership group facing opposition from members = risk; seek to preserve precarious equilibrium between older and newer referential unionism; most likely successful if leadership can create strategic space relative to management
**Key Findings V: Take Aways**

→ **No magic recipes** for self-transformation ≠ universalistic

→ **Continuous tensions** between older & newer referential unionisms: conscious management of these tensions by the leadership group; legacies of older references, embryos of newer references?

→ Renewal of **key relationships**: to employer, to larger union, to community, to members

→ Shifts & enlargement of **repertoires of action**

→ **Representative capacity**: conscious reconstruction of leadership group; centrality of **deliberative processes** & willingness to take on membership on key issues

→ **Strategic capacity**: capability of leadership group to navigate and structure these changes; willingness to take on risk