WHY DOES UNION DEMOCRACY MATTER?
EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATION IN THE NEW WORLD OF WORK
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Union Democracy on the Agenda

- SEIU battles with NUHW, UNITE HERE have moved debate over union democracy to center stage
Personalities or Principles?

- Most mainstream coverage focuses on personalities involved, frames it as a battle of egos
- Actors involved focus on principles:
  - “Growth” vs. “stagnation”
  - “Top-down” vs. “bottom-up” unionism
  - “Standards” vs. “growth at all costs”
- Messy truth on the ground, but battle has crystallized positions on purpose of unions, relation between leaders and members.
Central Questions for Presentation

- Look beyond trench warfare to examine questions underlying debate:
  - Why is union democracy a matter of debate?
  - Where do these different positions come from?
  - Why does union democracy matter?
Union democracy is a matter of debate because it is fundamentally a debate about two basic questions that unions face as specifically working class organizations:

- How do we define and evaluate our interests?
- How do we build power to advance those interests?

Today’s competing positions derive from different answers to these two questions.

Union democracy matters because it creates more effective mechanisms to meet unions’ central organizational challenges.

Case Study: NUHW vs. SEIU
Why is Union Democracy a Matter of Debate?—Defining Interests

- Class nature of unions as organizations of workers (Offe & Wiesenthal, Wright)

- Problem: workers inseparable from their labour power, both subject and object of transaction
  - Unions must organize the entire spectrum of needs that people have as wage workers
  - No market mechanism to value competing interests
    - $X$ wages = $Y$ safety = $Z$ job security?
  - Process of deliberation: unions must define interests before they can articulate and defend them

- Question: what is the best way to define interests?
Why is Union Democracy a Matter of Debate?—Exercising Power

- Problem: individuality of labour → workers’ structural power can only be exercised associationally
- Disparate & incommensurable interests impede association
- Problem of power + problem of interests = collective action problem
- Question: how to reconcile disparate interests and exercise associational power?
Two Answers to Two Basic Questions

- Current struggles embody two responses to two basic questions that unions face as organizations
- Two models: social unionism and corporate unionism
- Example: battle between SEIU and NUHW
Background

- NUHW: Founded in January 2009 after SEIU trusteed UHW
- Battle between UHW and SEIU over “template agreements” that traded organizing rights for political quiescence
- UHW protested template agreements, partnership collapsed
- SEIU tried to take UHW’s nursing home members out of that local and place them in another, more compliant local.
- UHW members fought move, International imposed trusteeship
- UHW’s 100-member Executive Board voted to form NUHW.
NUHW: Social Unionism in Practice

- **Defining interests: deliberative process**
  - Dense shop floor organization
  - Two-way communication
  - Room for discussion and debate

- **Exercising associational power: collective identity**
  - Collective identity through struggle: “We Are NUHW”
  - Struggles redefine both interests and calculus for weighing potential costs and benefits of participation.
  - Process of redefinition increases members’ willingness to engage in collective sacrifice for good of organization.
SEIU: Corporate Unionism in Practice

- **Defining interests: bureaucratic process**
  - Interests pre-determined by top leadership: growth
  - Top leadership positions itself as representatives of interests of majority of workers, union AND non-union
  - Redefines “off-message” members as minority interest

- **Exercising associational power: corporate model**
  - Centralize authority
  - Dismantle shop-floor organization
  - Consolidate administrative units
  - Substitute external allies for internal mobilization
SEIU: Corporate Unionism in Crisis?

- For 15 years, SEIU model seemed to work

- Current struggles expose weakness:
  - Growth slowing (-50%)
  - $121M in debt
  - Leadership fights

- A different way?
Union Democracy: A Better Way

- Union democracy creates mechanisms to overcome unions’ central organizational challenges: defining interests and exercising power.
- Union democracy beats corporate unionism head to head.

Examples:
Democracy = Higher Wages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UHW (old)</th>
<th>ULTCW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65,000 LTC members (NorCal)</td>
<td>130,000 LTC members (SoCal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied with UHW Kaiser members through shop floor networks, local activities</td>
<td>No alliances, no democratic structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$11.55/hr.</td>
<td>$9.83/hr. ($-1.72)</td>
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Democracy = More Political Action

UHW vs. SEIU CA Member Participation, 2006 Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>SEIU CA</th>
<th>UHW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worksite Voter IDs</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2M - Worksite IDs</td>
<td>150.00%</td>
<td>250.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone IDs</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>150.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer Participation</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>150.00%</td>
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Democracy beats Corporate Unionism

- Within 30 days of trusteeship, members collected signatures covering almost 100,000 members asking to join NUHW
- NUHW has beaten SEIU in 11 of 14 representation elections held so far, Kaiser next
- Impossible without shop floor organization, dense communication networks
The debate over union democracy is a debate about the fundamental questions that unions face as organizations:
- How to define interests?
- How to mobilize power to articulate and defend those interests?

Two models, social and corporate unionism, embody different sets of answers to these two questions.

While both are rational responses, the social unionist model comes out ahead.

Union democracy is not simply a nice add-on; it is a matter of survival.