

Knowledge Workers: Trade Unionism's New Frontier

By Charles Kerchner

We are used to thinking about organizations as hierarchies, and our unions are built around this assumption, but other forms of organization such as webs and networks are becoming more common, and they issue a challenge to conventional unions.

My research concerns people who think for a living—knowledge workers—and the kinds of unions they need. Some of my thinking is contained in *United Mind Workers: Teachers and Unions in the Knowledge Society*. All educators are mindworkers, and, in some ways, unions of teachers and college professors represent the vanguard of unionization among highly educated employees.

Over the last several months, I have been investigating what I call the frontiers of unionism. What does it look like on the ground when people start to do things differently? What happens when unions start to behave in ways that

depart from the industrial union tradition?

As a part of this effort, I have spent some time tramping around some very interesting elementary and secondary schools in New York City, particularly in District 2, which covers the middle part of Manhattan. I've watched small children from deprived backgrounds learning to read. One of the things I found out was that these teachers created new work rules for themselves.

In the process of taking charge of quality at their schools—raising test scores, teaching to higher standards—teachers changed how and when they worked. And their union both supported and facilitated change.

Also, as a part of my investigation, colleagues and I have looked at how workers in other industries have organized themselves. Along with Christine Maitland and Jason Abbott, I've been looking at unionization in the entertainment indus-

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try, health care, and the service sector generally.

It's most interesting to realize how unions operate in situations where people don't work for large public bureaucracies. It's most interesting to understand how people are represented when their long careers are made up of short jobs.

Our investigation is preparing us to open up a forbidden box—the chest of labor law—and look inside to see what rules appear to be useful and what rules appear not to be useful to knowledge workers.

Then we will raise the question about what we as a society need to do to create a legal framework that allows people who think for a living to represent their interests and to represent the institutions in which they work.

I want to present two ideas that relate to web-like organizations and hierarchies. Think about the word *agency* and the word *capacity*. Agency is what unions represent, capacity how they do it. Rethinking agency and capacity is important when the institutions in which we work are in flux, as I believe they are currently.

Elementary and secondary education is on the on ramp to large-scale change. Higher education has already pulled onto the freeway. The institutions in which we work are undergoing significant changes:

The next generation of college professors will have significantly different jobs than we do now.

If we want to represent people who think for a living, people who teach for a living, people who invent for a living, we are going to have to think about representing people differently and gathering union strength from different sources. Agency and capacity.

Most of the unions you belong to and the organizations in which you work look like two ancient pyramids in the sand. And, like ancient pyramids, there are sometimes dead people inside.

We have created a union structure that mirrors the management structure. This is not accidental. History shows that the National Education Association and its contemporary structure were created at the same time—about 1910—and by the same people who created the template for modern public schools and colleges. The agency function of the NEA has changed a great deal since then, but most of the old structures are still in place.

The NEA was deliberately constructed to create a national institution of public education. It was both web and hierarchy. Internally, the NEA had a staff and leadership hierarchy, like most organizations. Under collective bargaining, the hierarchy represented teachers, professors, and other educational

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workers, and it was mirrored by management's hierarchy.

Externally, the leadership of the NEA was linked with a web of powerful deans and college presidents and superintendents from leading schools districts.

Together, they formed what scholars have called the National School Board. The late Ralph Flynn of the California Teachers Association called it a grand Chautauqua, a tent large enough for everyone to get under.

But as time went on and the matching hierarchies of management and labor grew stronger, the big tent collapsed. No single organization today represents and guides the institution of public elementary and secondary or higher education, and there is no interlocking directorate that protects it.

Under the mirrored hierarchy model, the union's ability to act as an agent is constrained to people who have jobs. That's how one gets to be a member of a bargaining unit. (There are some exceptions, of course. Unions provide services for retired members and for some workers who have been laid off.)

And, under the mirrored hierarchy model, the union represents those-employed-workers on a relatively narrow bundle of issues.

Limiting language from the

National Labor Relations Act phrase has been incorporated into almost all state labor laws: wages, hours, and conditions of employment.

While there is a big battle over what is included in conditions of employment, unions in higher education have basically ceded the job of defining work norms and values to the academic disciplines and the societies and associations that govern them. Unions in elementary and secondary education, where there isn't the same intellectual or disciplinary tradition, have started to claim some of this territory, but it's slow going.

The mirrored hierarchy model of union organization also has inherent capacity limitations. Over the last several months, I've examined elementary and secondary unions with cutting-edge programs such as peer review, intensive staff development that is embedded in teaching work, and the alignment of teaching with higher academic standards.

In each of these cases, the union staff and leadership are stretched thin. Even in a large city, it's not unusual to have a union with a permanent staff of three or four. The more the union starts joint ventures with a school district, the more it taxes its own staff.

One of the truths about public bureaucracies and their manage-

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ment is that they have more people to cooperate with the union than the union has to cooperate with them. Leaders become harried and burned out, staff becomes surly, and volunteer teachers often retreat to their classrooms.

The more you think about unions as hierarchies, matching management's hierarchy, the more you realize how difficult it is for the union to take on new representational roles. The union's ability to change as an agent is limited not only by its belief system about what a union should do but also by its organizational capacity.

Given the inherent limitations of hierarchies, let me open up the possibility that we start to think of unions as networks. Networks have some interesting properties. As the Internet phenomenon has taught us, networks are capable of rapid growth with very little central planning and direction. They grow fast because they are very easy to join and because many people bring resources to them.

Several years ago, in *The New Unionism*, Charles Heckscher coined the phrase "associational unionism," and applied it to organizations that distinguished themselves by agency that extended beyond collective bargaining.

The NEA, with its history of professional development, was one of his examples. Some of Heckscher's

thinking is also reflected in our book, *United Mind Workers*. We asked: How would a union represent people whose jobs were different from those in conventional public bureaucracies? Or what would we do if colleges and universities changed the way they structured teaching?

Now here's a question screaming for an answer! The latest research on college faculty shows that nearly half the faculty hired in the last decade doesn't work under tenure-based contracts. The labor market for new doctorates looks decidedly grim in most disciplines. All the while, universities are increasing the numbers of Ph.D graduates.

This situation shouts out that the employment situation for new doctorates will be far different than it was for the generation that preceded them, the generation that controls most of the academic unions. It may well be that a good union for a 60-year-old is not so hot for someone who is not yet 30.

Parenthetically, it can be noted that colleges and universities are not alone as objects of institutional change in education. School districts are under unprecedented attack.

There is not a big city mayor in the country who is not considering how to gain control of the school

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system from the now-autonomous school district, thus reversing the pattern of school governance that has been in place for nearly a century.

At the same time there are strong forces afoot to bring vouchers to public education and to substitute forms of private management for existing bureaucracies. The existing labor contract is often an explicit or implicit target of these challenges.

Most people who go into higher education will have a career that moves from college to college and a career that is highly varied in its duties and intensity. People will work part-time, then full-time, then back. Almost all future faculty will have periods of trying to string together sometimes difficult and perilous economic lives in the contingent work force.

The unions we have now are not well situated to represent the career aspirations of these parapathetic teachers of the future or to open up new careers for them. We don't have a good union solution for people who move around a lot.

Union culture and our understanding of compensation is tied to this thing called a job. Until unions expand their agency to deal well with the emergent work force of new doctorates, and until the

unions recognize that a career is several jobs, they will limit themselves to a small part of a large occupation.

A union as a network would help people move from place to place, would create direct connections between individuals, would allow people to help each other. In the process it would recreate a feeling of belonging and an attachment to one another. Solidarity reborn!

Networks can insure and create quality teaching. Earlier, when I mentioned the role of the disciplines in higher education, I noted that we draw most of our standards and norms about quality from the disciplines. Building around academic disciplines has been one of the great organizational changes in this century.

We created journals, mentors, research protocols. The disciplines are powerful in this regard because they extend beyond a single employer. Through an academic discipline, a group of professors can bring great leverage on a university president. Anyone who has participated in a law or medical school accreditation has experienced this.

But academic disciplines don't help advance or enforce good teaching very well. Most academics teach most of the time. Relatively few of us spend substantial parts of our work lives doing research and writing. Yet relatively little attention is

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paid by either the disciplinary associations or the academic unions to the quality of college teaching.

This element of organizing around quality has been a mainstay of traditional craft unionism. For a craft worker, unionizing meant protecting the craft as well as protecting the job.

A network type of union organization could create strong models of quality teaching. Associations of academic colleagues could work on cutting-edge question such as ascertaining the effects of distance education and Internet-based courses.

The union could offer the "seal of approval" for quality Internet-based courses. Teaching reviews and certifications could be created in the same way that we now undertake disciplinary-based reviews of university departments.

While I am not suggesting we throw infants out with effluent, I think it is past time that we actively think about how a future union might be organize. We need to ask what parts of the existing hierarchy we would want to keep, and to what extent the union might also become a self-forming network.

So let me describe a couple organizational models. The first is an organization called Working Together, headquartered in New York. Working Together is orga-

nized as a kind of producers cooperative for those who work as "free agents," consultants, artists, and others who work on contract or by collecting fees.

Obviously, conventional collective bargaining for wages and salaries is of little benefit to these people. They do different kinds of work for different people and under different circumstances. However, this does not mean that they have no common interests. They all need elements of social security and protection—from legal help to medical insurance. They all need assistance in their work.

The second model is an organization that works for people who don't: AARP, the group that used to also be known as the American Association of Retired Persons. Now I have always thought of the AARP as the haven for old foggyism. My wife tortures me annually on my birthday by presenting me with a membership card, which I decline vigorously.

But, as an organizational form, AARP has some interesting qualities. It is very easy to join. Send back the card and \$5 and you're in. A member can use it for different purposes: everything from socialized buying (reduced price prescription services) to meeting people with similar interests.

Of course, the AARP doesn't collectively bargain, but it is a fierce

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advocate and weighs heavily in Presidential and Congressional politics.

These two organizations differ from unions that mirror the employer hierarchy. Each organization uses different degrees of agency for each member, because people join wanting different things. And the organizations gain capacity because people attach themselves to them in ways different from what the organizations themselves anticipated. Scholars call this form of organization organic; it just grows.

I believe there are interesting forms of unionism that step outside the mirrored hierarchy of industrial-unionism, and I think that there are real possibilities for the NEA in thinking anew about how it connects with its members and who its members are, especially in higher education.

And I believe that if we don't open up possibilities of new and different organizational structures we will be out-massed on the playing field of educational change because the institutions and bureaucracies will always have a bigger hierarchy than we do. ■

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