

# **Public Sector Labor Relations Under Siege: Union Transformation or Retrenchment?**

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# Public Sector Labor Relations Under Siege: Legislative or Executive Actions

- Weaken or eliminate bargaining rights
- Limit subjects of bargaining
- Limit union political activity
- Restrict or eliminate dues deduction
- 'Right-to-Work' laws
- Targeted attacks on education/teachers
- Mandate cuts in pay/benefits/employment

# Public Sector Labor Relations

## Circa 2000

- Union density stable at 35%
- Budgetary pressures
- Reorganizing government
- Republican right attack
  - George W. Bush
  - Heritage Foundation

# Strategic Priorities of Public Sector Unions Circa 2000

- Intensify political action
- Fight privatization
- Expand organizing activity
- Pursue partnership with management
- Preserve bargaining effectiveness
- Support broad labor movement revitalization

**“The threats faced by public sector unions today are eerily similar to those ignored by private sector unions twenty years ago: Privatization, reinventing government, a changing public sector workforce, antigovernment forces on Capitol Hill and in state houses, union myopia, and member apathy. . .”**

**-Richard W Hurd  
August, 2002**

# Responding to the Public Sector Challenge: Complications

- Recession induced loss of jobs
- Reduced membership and dues revenue
- Increased personnel expenses
  - Generous pay, pensions and health insurance
  - Increasing pool of retirees
- Increased demands from members in context of prevailing political / economic environment

# **Private Sector Union Transformation Initiatives: 1990 - 2010**

- **The Organizing Model**
- **New Voice**
- **'Changing to Organize, Organizing for Change'**
- **Voice at Work**
- **Change to Win**
- **Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA)**

# Union Transformation Categories

- Strategic Rigidity
- Organizational Evolution
- Organizational Combustion
- Inclusive Unionism

# Barriers to Union Transformation

- The structural fix temptation
- Strategic rigidity/denial
- Lack of clarity
- Resistance from elected leaders, members and staff
- The servicing magnet
- Burnout, apathy
- Internal dissonance
- Conflicting values

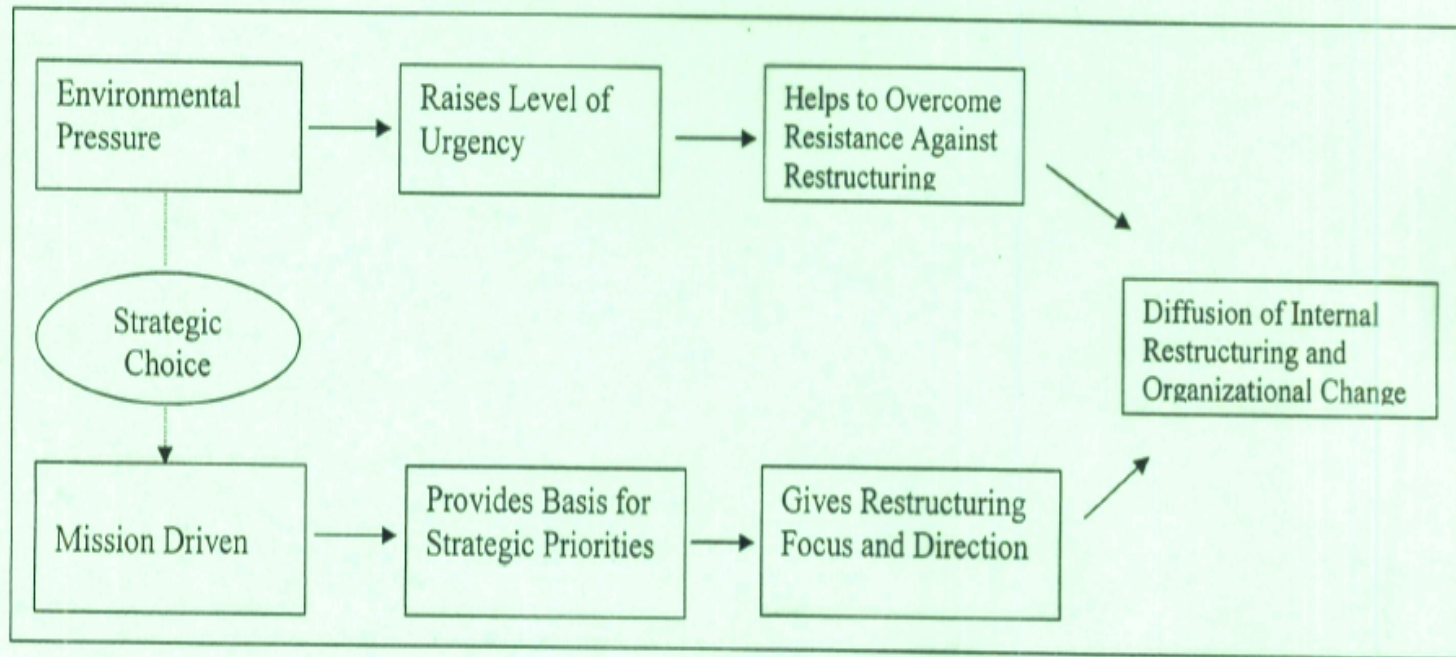
# Specific Components of Successful Union Transformation

- Priority attention to building internal political will and support for change
- Member, leader and staff reticence addressed directly
- Resource shift in the context of a strategic plan
- Simultaneous attention to traditional representation and new priorities
- Increased involvement of all those affected
- Re-discovery of the original spirit of the organizing model

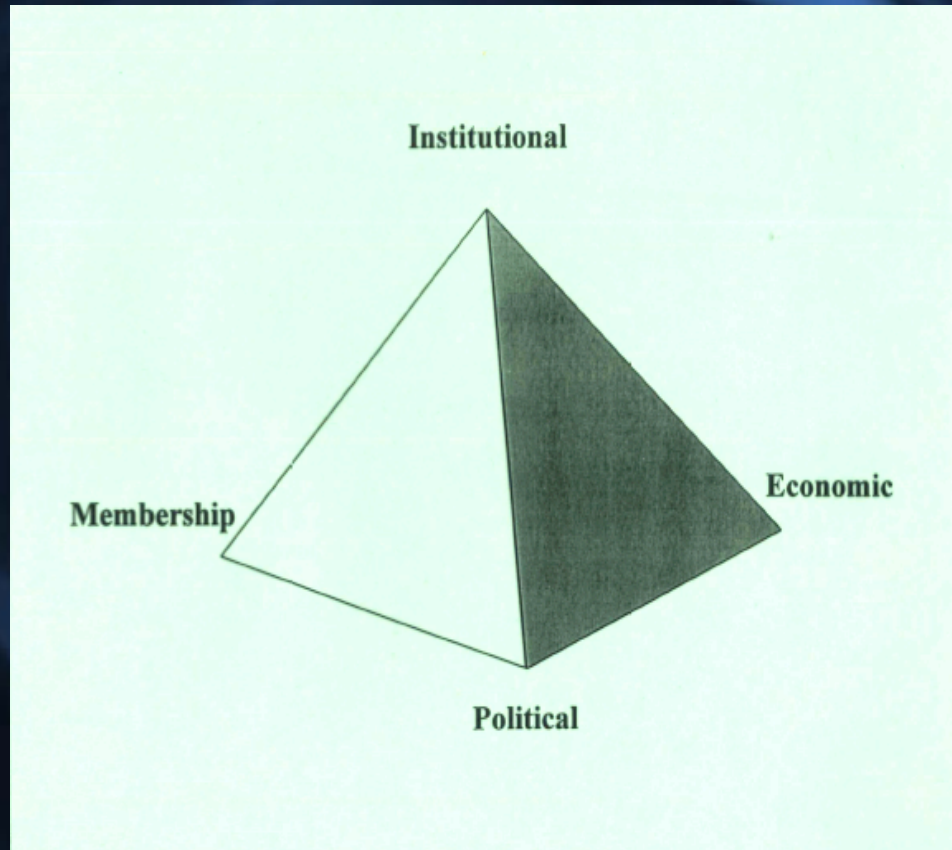
# Forces Driving Successful Union Transformation

- **Institutional support**
  - Strategic leadership from above
- **Network mobilization**
  - Local efforts to organize, build coalitions and expand scope of grassroots political action

# Figure 1: Organizational Change in Unions



# Figure 2: Four Dimensions of Union Revitalization

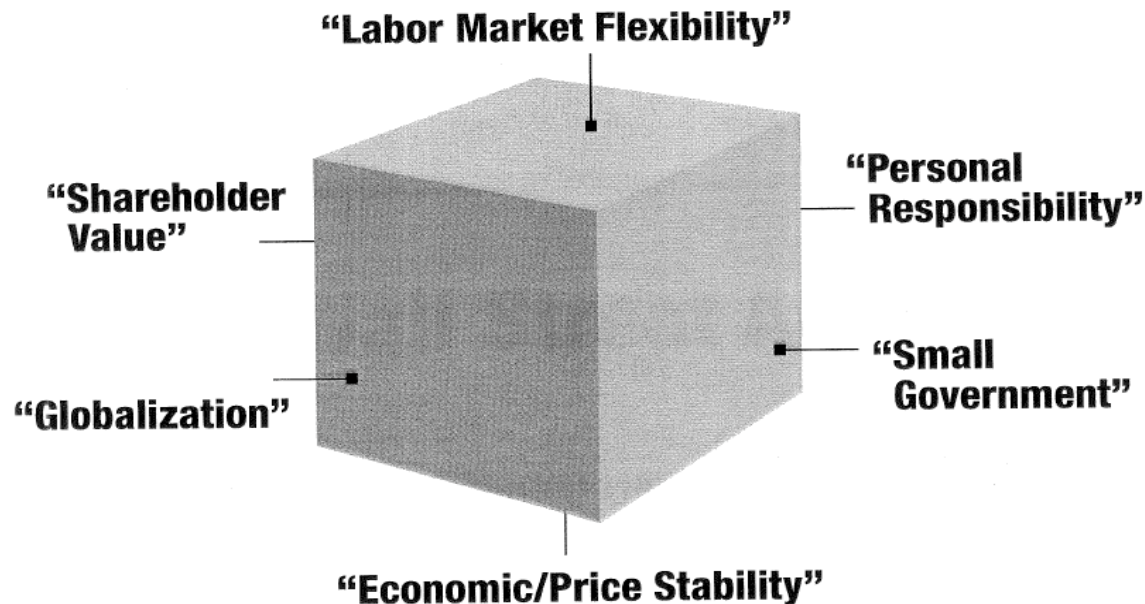


# Political Action and Union Revitalization

- U.S. union political action
  - Links to Democrats, voter mobilization, lobbying
- Limits of reliance on Democrats
  - Weak party discipline, embrace of neoliberal policies
- Returns for electoral success:
  - Increasingly meager
- Impact of lobbying:
  - Context dependent, limited potential
- Decentralized unions and declining density contribute to loss of influence in U.S.
- Globally union political power associated with general strikes and social pacts

# The Neoliberal Box

## The Wall Street Agenda



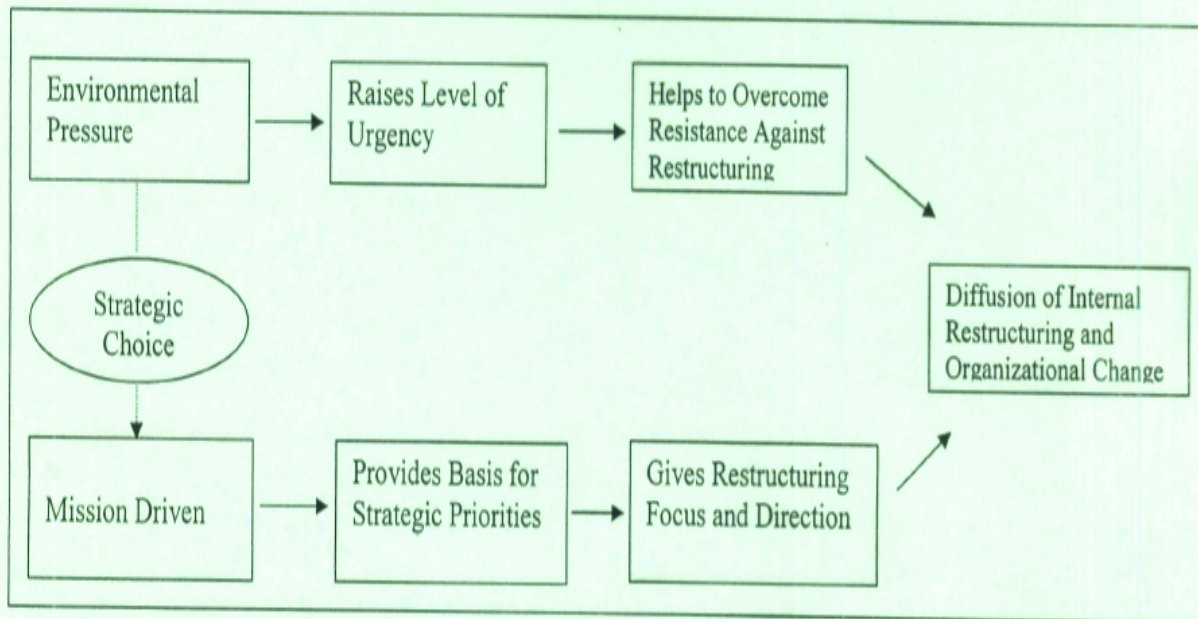
# Labor Movement Perspectives on Neoliberalism

- **Agreement and support:**
  - viewing neoliberal globalization as benign and progressive, and following a mutual gains agenda
- **Conditional support:**
  - advocating for protection for members and the industries that employ them
- **Social democratic opposition:**
  - advocating policies to mitigate negative outcomes and promote some semblance of equity
- **Socialist opposition:**
  - resistance to globalization and national neoliberal policies, and advocating socialism as the only acceptable alternative

# Social Justice Unionism

- Aggressive opposition to neoliberalism
- Promotion of social democratic alternatives
- Advocacy for an inclusive society
  - Equal rights for women, minorities, gays and immigrants
- Grassroots mobilization around social justice ideals
- Coalitions to promote a just society
- Alternative structures where necessary
- Focus on democracy, voice, fairness
  - Avoid anti-rich rhetoric

# Figure 1: Organizational Change in Unions



# Union Transformation Categories

- **Strategic Rigidity**
  - Focus on traditional representation, retrench as dictated by budget realities
- **Organizational Evolution**
  - Striving for stability while pursuing modest adjustments
- **Organizational Combustion**
  - Non-starter for public sector unions
- **Inclusive Unionism**
  - Most promising path to revitalization