



# The labour of learning: overcoming the obstacles facing union-worker centre collaborations

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## Abstract

In the USA, the UK and elsewhere, community unionism appears a potentially fruitful strategy for organizing the growing numbers of workers holding precarious employment. In the USA there is increasing interest in a form of community unionism that may gain traction in the UK: union-worker centre collaborations. Unions and worker centres have struggled to collaborate, however, because of their structural, cultural and ideological differences. This article examines a rare case of successful union-worker centre collaboration, asking why this collaboration emerged, what challenges it has faced, and why it has succeeded. Data show this collaboration emerged due to organizational crises, linked to broader economic changes, and individual learning following semi-successful organizing campaigns. The collaboration overcame challenges stemming from the differences between unions and worker centres through intra- and inter-organizational learning. Two conditions facilitated this outcome: bridge builders and state support for unionization. This case is used to explore broader questions about union revitalization.

## Keywords

community unionism, mobilization, organizing, social movement unionism, unions, worker centres

## Introduction

The decline of unions in countries worldwide has sparked a vibrant debate about union revitalization. This debate has increasingly focused on the necessity and challenge of organizing the ‘precarariat’, a term referring to the growing number of precarious workers

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who lack employment security and have few or none of the legal protections enjoyed by unionized workers (Kalleberg, 2011; Milkman, 2014; Standing, 2011). In the USA, an important strategy for organizing the precariat has been worker centres, multi-purpose organizations providing service, advocacy and organizing to primarily immigrant low-wage workers (Fine, 2006). The number of USA-based worker centres has expanded from a handful in the 1990s to 214 today (Milkman, 2014: 2). Worker centres are less common in the UK, which research suggests contributes to the challenge of organizing low-wage, low-skill workers (Holgate, 2005: 463; Martínez Lucio and Perrett, 2009: 700). This in turn suggests research on USA-based worker centres may interest scholars elsewhere.

Worker centres emerged in sectors unions had never targeted (e.g. day labour), or where union strength has eroded significantly (garment manufacturing, restaurants, retail). Unions and worker centres initially viewed each other with mutual suspicion and sometimes hostility. However, over time this has changed as unions and worker centres have attempted to work together (Milkman, 2010, 2014: 3). Research suggests, however, that these efforts have rarely succeeded due to the structural, cultural and ideological differences between unions and worker centres (Fine, 2007), issues that have also led to conflict between unions and civil society organizations in the UK (Heery et al., 2012). This raises important questions: why do union-worker centre collaborations emerge? What challenges do such alliances face? Most importantly, how can unions and worker centres successfully work together?

This article seeks to provide insight into these questions, which touch on broader issues about union revitalization, through a case study of the alliance between the Retail Wholesale Department Store Union (RWDSU) and Make the Road by Walking (MRBW), a rare example of successful union-worker centre collaboration. Data show this partnership emerged due to organizational crises, occasioned by broader economic shifts, and individual learning by RWDSU and MRBW leaders following partially successful organizing campaigns. The RWDSU-MRBW alliance faced challenges due to RWDSU and MRBW's structural, cultural and ideological differences. The alliance overcame these challenges and won impressive organizing victories because RWDSU and MRBW *learned* to work together. The analysis highlights the dynamic process through which this occurred. Like Heery et al. (2012: 146), the article also 'seek[s] to identify the conditions that allow cooperation, conflict or indifference [between unions and community-based organizations] to emerge'. Data show that two conditions facilitated RWDSU and MRBW's ability to make the intra- and inter-organizational changes needed to maintain their alliance: 'bridge-builders' (Rose, 2000) in both organizations and an unusual degree of state support for unionization.

## **Labour in transition: the challenge of reconciling 'old' and 'new' forms of organizing**

Devastated by a decades-long drop in union membership (Hirsch, 2008), the American labour movement is undergoing an uneven process of transition. As in the UK, where union membership has dropped precipitously in recent decades (Terry, 2003: 459), union power in the USA has been eroded by various factors, including the changing structure

of international capital (especially the rise of finance) and an anti-union managerial offensive (Terry, 2003). Many scholars see 'social movement unionism' (SMU) as a potential way to reverse labour's decline. There is lively debate about the meaning of SMU, centring on what Fairbrother and Webster (2008: 309) view as a 'universal' tension between the service-like and movement aspects of unions. Writing about Brazil and South Africa, Seidman (1994: 2) differentiates SMU, which entails labour and community struggles for the working class as a whole, from 'political unionism', wherein unions support parties and function 'to protect individually defined interests of union members'. In the USA, SMU has been distinguished from 'business unionism', which focuses on 'bread and butter' issues (wages, hours, benefits) affecting existing union members (Lopez, 2004). SMU has been connected to targeting workers marginalized by unions (Milkman, 2000; Tait, 2005), rank and file involvement in organizing (Nissen, 1998; Sharpe, 2004; Turner, 1998) and tactical innovation (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998; Lopez, 2004).

For many scholars, community unionism, a term referring primarily to organizing involving community-labour alliances, is central to SMU (Clawson, 2008: 212; Fletcher and Gapasin, 2008: 170–79; Holgate, 2005: 465). Clawson (2003: 13, 91) argues that unions should 'fuse' with community-based movements to reach new workers and circumvent increasingly ineffective legal tools. This resonates with Sullivan's (2010: 149) argument that for labour to become a *movement*, unions must pay greater attention to the efficacy of protest, a tactic embraced by social movements. The legal hindrances USA-based unions face (something Clawson and Sullivan both note) mean partnerships with community-based organizations, which face fewer legal restrictions, can enhance unions' tactical repertoires.

While recognizing such benefits, scholars should avoid romanticizing community-labour alliances. Clawson has been criticized for failing to appreciate the complexity of union-community relations (Fairbrother and Webster, 2008: 311). The data presented below, which show the benefits and challenges of a union-community alliance, suggest this critique has some merit. The analysis also complicates the contrast found in Clawson's and others' work between community-labour alliances, which often appear in a positive light, and the state, which is portrayed more negatively. Clawson (2003: 99) argues, 'Employer resistance to the law *drove* unions to become more innovative and radical – which often meant community-oriented' (emphasis in original; see also Chun, 2005). Similarly, Fantasia and Voss (2004: 68) discuss the USA state's willingness, from the 1980s on, to 'shed any pretense of neutrality' and openly side with capital (e.g. in the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike). Like Martínez Lucio and Perrett (2009), this article highlights the ambiguity of both community-labour and labour-state relations – see also Holgate (2009) on tensions between unions and community organizations.

The article also speaks to the debate about the origins of SMU. Some scholars connect SMU to rapid industrialization under authoritarian regimes, which they argue explains its emergence in countries such as South Africa, Brazil, South Korea and the Philippines (Seidman, 1994: 11; Von Holdt, 2002: 284–5). To account for the emergence of SMU in countries like the USA, where arguments about late industrialization and authoritarianism fall short, other scholars link SMU to neoliberalism. Robinson (2002: 201–2) argues that neoliberalism favoured SMU in the USA because it severely reduced most workers'

living standards, led to a substantial decline in union membership and rendered traditional organizing methods and the overall strategy of business unionism ineffective. Similarly, Clawson (2008) argues that, by 'thinning the state', neoliberalism made it harder for unions to win recognition through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the main route to union recognition in the USA since the 1930s. Clawson argues that this drives unions to embrace a community-centric form of SMU. This article provides support for both Robinson's and Clawson's arguments. Yet whereas Clawson implies that there is an automatic relationship between neoliberalism and SMU, this article points to a more specific mechanism: organizational crises, brought on by neoliberalism, that spur innovation. The analysis provided herein thus accords with Voss and Sherman's (2000: 326–7) discussion linking organizational crises to innovation. Voss and Sherman argue that internal political crises (which they discuss but do not seek to explain or link to neoliberal restructuring) can precipitate innovation by fostering leadership transformation. This was important in one of the organizations discussed below (RWDSU). In both organizations (RWDSU and MRBW), internal crises were prompted by inadequate organizing strategies and led to the adoption of new strategies.

This article highlights two aspects of neoliberal economic restructuring in the USA retail sector that led to organizational crises within, and subsequently innovation by, RWDSU and MRBW. The first is the transformation of the USA retail sector, specifically the rise of non-union 'big-box' chains and specialty outlets, which undermined retail unions (Ikeler, 2014). The second is the increasingly footloose nature of manufacturing, and garment manufacturing in particular. Manufacturers' ability to relocate their operations to low-cost production sites overseas, or within the USA, has increased the difficulty of organizing manufacturing workers.

In addition to undermining unions and traditional organizing tools (and partially as a consequence of this), neoliberalism has made employment increasingly precarious. This process has affected high- and low-income and native and foreign-born workers, but low-wage immigrant workers, especially undocumented workers lacking English skills, are most vulnerable. Unions' inability or unwillingness to respond adequately to the growth of unauthorized immigrant workers in the 1980s and 1990s fuelled the spread of worker centres (Milkman, 2014: 7). A 2003 survey found just 14 per cent of 137 USA-based worker centres were directly connected to unions (Fine, 2007: 336). As the number of worker centres has risen, unions and worker centres have shown greater willingness to work together, as Milkman's (2010, 2014) research on Los Angeles and New York shows. Yet the process of bringing unions and worker centres together has been difficult.

Fine (2007: 342–7) argues that this is because of the structural, cultural and ideological differences between unions and worker centres, which she characterizes as follows. Structurally, unions and worker centres differ in focus, strategy, member relations and financing. Unions target specific employers – usually larger corporations – rely upon member dues, and use 'coercive' practices (e.g. mandatory dues). Worker centres organize around ethnicity and geography, initiate reactive 'hot shop' campaigns against small employers, represent workers from multiple employers, have looser membership rules and rely on funding from non-profit foundations. Operationally, unions are more hierarchical and bureaucratic, have more traditional gender relations and whiter leadership and are less sensitive to ethno-linguistic issues. Worker centres are more experimental and

more sensitive to issues of gender, ethnicity and language. Ideologically, unions have a 'pragmatic politics of production' focused on expanding/maintaining collective bargaining to improve specific workers' wages, benefits and working conditions. Worker centres have a 'politics of social reproduction' focused on multiple issues, including housing, health, education and immigration reform.

While Fine's argument is specific to union-worker centre collaborations in the USA, it resembles Heery et al.'s (2012) findings that conflict between unions and civil society organizations in the UK stems from differences in institutional interests, structure, culture and logic of action (see also Holgate, 2009). The appeal and challenges of community unionism in the USA and the UK raises various questions: what conditions favour community unionism and SMU more generally? What are the benefits of community-labour alliances? What are the challenges of such alliances and how can they be overcome?

### **Case study research design**

This article seeks to shed light on those questions by examining the alliance between RWDSU, a union representing retail workers in New York (and to a lesser extent nationwide) and MRBW, a Brooklyn-based worker centre. The RWDSU-MRBW partnership, which emerged in 2005, is unusual for two reasons: it has lasted nearly a decade and produced impressive organizing victories. These accomplishments are all the more impressive because this alliance faced many of the challenges that have plagued other union-worker centre collaborations. Why did this alliance emerge? What challenges has it faced? And why has it succeeded when similar efforts have not?

To answer these questions this study draws on nine months of participant observation conducted in 2006 and 2007 and interviews conducted between 2005 and 2012. The ethnographic component of this research took place during three periods: January-June 2006, January 2007 and June-August 2007. The first period coincided with the end of RWDSU-MRBW's first joint campaign, a successful effort to organize a footwear chain, Footco. The second and third periods occurred during the beginning of a semi-successful multi-year campaign to organize Associated, a local supermarket. During each period the author regularly attended MRBW's Workers in Action committee weekly meetings, involving MRBW's Workplace Justice coordinator and 50-70 workers, mostly Latino immigrants, both documented and undocumented, who came to MRBW for legal help with work-related issues, usually having been fired or denied pay. From March 2006 on, a newly hired RWDSU organizer began attending these meetings as well. Different MRBW members facilitated weekly meetings, which involved discussion of current events, member introductions, legal and organizing training and campaign planning, and ended with steaming pots of rice and beans. These meetings provided inside details about MRBW's structure, culture and ideology and a chance to informally interact with Workers in Action committee members, learning who they were, why they came to MRBW and their thoughts on MRBW, unions, RWDSU and the MRBW-RWDSU alliance.

The author regularly attended bi-weekly strategy meetings involving 4-5 MRBW and RWDSU staff and (initially) 3-4 MRBW members. These meetings provided insight into the RWDSU-MRBW alliance's strategy and allowed direct observation of conflict and cooperation between the two organizations. The author also attended weekly meetings

between MRBW's co-director and Workplace Justice coordinator, which provided additional insight into conflict within MRBW and between MRBW and RWDSU. During fieldwork, the author attended a half dozen campaign rallies and press conferences and in June–July 2007 accompanied MRBW members on a picket line outside Associated.

Fieldnotes were written following each meeting and event attended. These fieldnotes, together with interview notes and transcripts, were coded according to the research questions presented.

This article draws on 30 interviews with the director of RWDSU's Retail Organizing Project, two RWDSU organizers involved with joint campaigns with MRBW, MRBW's co-director, legal director and Workplace Justice coordinator, three MRBW members, a local priest involved with the Footco campaign and the head of the New York Attorney General's Labor Bureau. Each individual was interviewed between one and six times over the course of seven years, allowing monitoring of on-going campaigns and the evolution of the RWDSU-MRBW alliance over many years. The author had numerous informal conversations with MRBW members and spoke informally with several Footco workers, but did not conduct any formal interviews with them. This is because the research focused on the relationship between RWDSU and MRBW; and at the time few Footco workers were actively involved with MRBW, though this seemed to change as the fieldwork ended. The lack of interviews with Footco workers is a potential limitation of this study, but is mitigated by the fact that the author obtained information about Footco workers from interviews with an RWDSU organizer. The account also draws on newspapers, internal campaign documents and secondary sources.

## **Why the RWDSU-MRBW alliance emerged**

The RWDSU-MRBW alliance emerged because of organizational crises, caused by long-term shifts in the USA economy and by individual learning by RWDSU and MRBW leaders sparked by less than fully successful organizing efforts. The crisis that led RWDSU to embrace innovative organizing in the mid-2000s is rooted in the transformation of New York's retail sector. Due to 'the upsurge of industrial unionism in the 1930s and 1940s', by 1954, 30 per cent of the city's 300,000 retail workers were unionized, with RWDSU representing 54,000 retail workers (Ikeler, 2014: 117–19). In subsequent decades, retail unionism in New York declined due to suburbanization and, from the 1990s on, the growth of non-union 'big-box' chains and high-end boutiques. 'RWDSU, New York City's largest retail union, suffered especially dramatic erosion' (Ikeler, 2014). By the early 2000s, only 9 per cent of New York retail workers were unionized (Ikeler, 2014). This is the context that led RWDSU to hire Jeff Eichler in 2004 as director of retail organizing.

Eichler came to RWDSU from UNITE Local 169, where he was organizing director from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. One of Eichler's final campaigns with Local 169 targeted New York's greengrocer industry. This campaign taught Eichler two lessons, which he took to RWDSU: the challenge of winning NLRB elections and the difficulty of organizing outside the NLRB without a viable community partner. The campaign's first target was a 10-block stretch of 20 greengrocers in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. After 75 per cent of 500 workers signed pro-union cards, Local 169 held NLRB elections, but

lost when employers fired pro-union workers and temporarily raised other workers' wages. To campaign organizers this 'demonstrated the futility of holding NLRB elections when employers are able to intimidate workers' (Ness, 2005a: 64). Local 169 avoided NLRB elections for the campaign's next target, Manhattan's Lower East Side; according to Eichler, 'If we thought it would work we'd use it [Here] I wanted to avoid NLRB elections' (Interview, 16 February 2009).

This approach produced victories in several greengrocers, which Ness (2005b) attributes to Local 169's partnership with a community group (which Ness helped found), the Lower East Side Community Labor Coalition, which according to Ness led successful boycotts against several greengrocers. Eichler disputes this view, 'The Lower East Side boycott was run by the union with paid staff. Manny [Ness] wore rose-coloured glasses. The community coalition was very loose. One of my intentions was to find a tighter, more cohesive community organization' to partner with for future campaigns (Interview, 16 February 2009). Regardless of whether or not his interpretation of the Lower East Side campaign is correct, Eichler moved to carry out this intention after arriving at RWDSU.

In 1999, while the greengrocer campaign was under way, MRBW started its Workplace Justice project. According to Andrew Friedman, MRBW's (then) co-director, 'We were trying to do organizing work with workers who were marginal to the labor movement ... Unions weren't interested in organizing them, or at least they weren't organizing them, perhaps because it was seen as too expensive.' MRBW initially tried organizing garment workers, but 'moved away from garment ... when some of the factories moved away'. Instead, MRBW decided to focus on retail. Friedman recounts, 'A friend of mine from the United Farm Workers [UFW] happened to be visiting ... he started talking ... about the strategic advantages of retail ... that the stores were in a fixed location and couldn't just pack up and go somewhere else' (Interview, 6 April 2006). Beyond influencing MRBW's decision to organize in retail, Friedman's friendship with officials from UFW and SEIU (Service Employees International Union, where a former MRBW staffer, Steve Jenkins, whom Friedman is close to, went to work) is worth noting since it may explain Friedman's ability to be a bridge builder between worker centres and unions (see below).

In 2003, MRBW initiated its most successful (solo) campaign in retail against Minimax, a clothing store owing \$85,000 in back wages (MRBW, 2003). Through a months-long boycott, MRBW forced Minimax to pay \$65,000 in back wages and agree to pay minimum wage and overtime and provide paid sick leave and holidays (MRBW, 2004). Friedman commented, 'This was much less than a union contract ... the heart of [which] is the just cause provision, that you can't get fired without a procedure. This had nothing like that ... but it was ... a lot more than we'd been able to get anywhere else' (Interview, 6 April 2006).

The Minimax campaign convinced MRBW it could achieve success in retail, but demonstrated that this success might be limited if MRBW organized on its own. This realization, in conjunction with MRBW's earlier challenges organizing garment workers, constituted an intra-organizational crisis within MRBW's Workplace Justice project. This pushed Friedman to 'start shopping around for unions' MRBW could partner with. Friedman '[couldn't] remember if I called Jeff [Eichler] or if he called me' (Interview, 6

April 2006), but in 2005 the RWDSU-MRBW alliance commenced. Eichler was excited to work with MRBW, since the greengrocer campaign left him with 'a great desire to link up with a community group that was stronger and more cohesive than the Lower East Side Community Labor Coalition ... That's what MRBW offered' (Interview, 16 February 2009).

## Challenges faced by the RWDSU-MRBW alliance

In her brief discussion of the RWDSU-MRBW alliance, the only successful case of several union-worker centre collaborations she profiles, Fine (2007: 356) argues that the alliance succeeded because RWDSU and MRBW 'arrived at the ideological synchronicity that [...] made structural and cultural shifts possible'. While largely accurate, this obscures the fact that the RWDSU-MRBW alliance suffered from the structural, cultural and ideological differences that Fine and others (cf. Jenkins, 2002; Milkman, 2010) argue create difficulties for other union-worker centre collaborations, but which Fine's account suggests were less important in the RWDSU-MRBW alliance. The rest of this section examines these organizational differences, highlighting the challenges they led to.

### *Structural differences*

The fact that RWDSU, like other unions, collects monthly membership dues, elicited frequent criticism from MRBW members, who felt this showed that RWDSU was a 'business', driven by 'self-interest'. MRBW, by contrast, was referred to as a 'family' ruled by 'love', with Nieves Padilla, MRBW's Workplace Justice organizer, often called 'La Mama'. During a March 2006 Workers in Action meeting, a MRBW member said, 'Unions are businesses ... only interested in monthly dues' (Fieldnote, 28 March 2006). This comment was not directed at RWDSU specifically. Yet on multiple occasions several longstanding MRBW members, who held unpaid leadership positions within MRBW as 'captains', specifically criticized RWDSU using similar language.

In April 2006, a joint RWDSU-MRBW meeting was nearly derailed when three captains denounced RWDSU and argued that MRBW should stop working with RWDSU. One captain said, 'The union [i.e. RWDSU] clearly gets more out of ... the collaboration ... we, as members, don't get anything out of it' (Fieldnote, 24 April 2006). This comment referenced the fact that the Footco campaign's success (see below) provided RWDSU with new dues paying members. During this same meeting, another captain complained that Manuel Guerrero, the RWDSU organizer assigned to the Footco campaign, 'spread false rumors, saying ... MRBW is only working in the area ... because the union is financing them' (Fieldnote, 24 April 2006). (As discussed below, RWDSU was financing MRBW. MRBW, however, had been organizing locally for years before this.) Several times during the meeting the captains referred to RWDSU as 'selfishly interested', unlike MRBW volunteers, who were 'unpaid and ... come out of love'.

The attitudes of captains and other MRBW members towards unions were not totally hostile, but ambivalent. One of the captains at the meeting just described was Antonio Lopez, a Latino immigrant who came to MRBW (eventually joining its Board of Directors) after developing kidney problems in a factory (that later fired him). Lopez

vocally criticized unions and RWDSU; like other captains, he felt MRBW should not work with RWDSU (Fieldnote, 24 April 2006). Of unions, Lopez said, 'It's all about the money [unions] get \$24/month from each member, so multiply that by a hundred members and you'll see how much the union gets every month'. Lopez's overall view of unions was nonetheless nuanced: 'Unions are unjust *but necessary* ... *they do help their workers out* ... without a union you can't have a contract or raises or benefits' (Interview, 16 May 2006, emphasis added). This ambivalence, which was not particular to Lopez, probably helps explain why MRBW members eventually became less hostile to RWDSU.

### Cultural differences

During a 2007 public forum on the 'unregulated economy' in New York City, Jeff Eichler discussed the unexpected difficulties RWDSU faced in working with MRBW, highlighting the different organizational cultures:

This is at times a difficult relationship ... I met Andrew [Friedman] and we said, this is a ... great idea, let's do it. I don't think we ... thought through all the problems that we would encounter. You have to understand the different cultures and political situations within another organization. Unions ... when you want to do something ... you tell ... your staff, let's go do it ... You can't do that with a community organization [where] you have to ensure that there's a buy-in. It's a very democratic process, perhaps a little slower, but you have to ... accept that ... The union has to be humble, it can't be the all-powerful organization.<sup>1</sup>

A persistent source of tension was MRBW captains' (and some staff's) perception that Manuel Guerrero did not share Eichler's view that 'the union has to be humble'. On multiple occasions, captains accused Guerrero of bossing them around. For instance, during a joint RWDSU-MRBW meeting in January 2006, a captain commented:

We're captains and we have responsibility ... I'm not used to working like this and I don't like it. We've had a system for deciding things and getting things done, but unfortunately we've changed it ... *Many people are unhappy with these changes*. We want responsibility ... I'm not comfortable with how we're doing things, *with other people coming and telling us how to do things*. (Fieldnote, 30 January 2006, emphasis added)

The reference in 'other people coming and telling us how to do things' was specifically to RWDSU's Manuel Guerrero. The comment also indicates the captains' perception that other MRBW members shared their negative view of RWDSU. Later in this meeting, Nieves Padilla, MRBW's Workplace Justice coordinator, made a similar comment:

It's very important, more than just [resolving] the conflict we've had, to know what the responsibility of MRBW as an organization is. What's our role? What's the responsibility of each one? It's the union's responsibility to unionize and our responsibility to organize. *I'm not comfortable in terms of planning and carrying things out that we're just given orders and told what to do*. For things to go more smoothly we need to clarify [the roles of each organization]. (Fieldnote, 30 January 2006, emphasis added)

## Ideological differences

Like many worker centres, MRBW espoused a commitment to ‘member power’. This idea was frequently communicated to MRBW members, who took the notion that they should have a say in how decisions within MRBW were made quite seriously. McAlevey’s (2014) research shows MRBW members had significant power in organizational decision making; e.g. members participated in hiring new staff – for a contrasting view see Jenkins (2002). RWDSU was more results-oriented and had a more top-down model of decision making, as the quote from Eichler above shows.

This difference led to a significant conflict when, following the success of the Footco campaign (see below), RWDSU and MRBW were negotiating a contract with Footco’s owner in November 2005. In line with their understanding of MRBW’s commitment to member power, MRBW members insisted on sitting at the bargaining table during negotiations. This upset Footco’s owner, who asked that MRBW members be excluded from negotiations. Eichler, who was anxious to secure a contract, agreed to this demand, as did MRBW’s Friedman. MRBW members, however, were very upset.

Another important ideological difference between MRBW and RWDSU, which probably contributed to the conflict between Guerrero and MRBW members, concerned the relationship between union and ‘non-union’ issues. In contrast to the organizer who later took his place (and whose views are discussed below), Guerrero drew a clear distinction between union and ‘non-union’ issues. Guerrero, a Mexican immigrant, supported immigrant rights but felt, ‘I can support immigrant rights, but *I work for the union and so I don’t march under the banner of immigrant rights*, just like I can support gay rights but as the union I don’t march under the banner of gay rights’ (Interview, 22 May 2006, emphasis added). This distinction between workers’ rights and immigrants’ rights was not present in MRBW’s Workers in Action committee, where immigrants’ rights were constantly discussed and seen as integrally connected to workers’ rights. This connection between workers’ and immigrants’ rights was probably one of the reasons MRBW members, despite their (initial) hostility towards RWDSU, supported organizing Footco, which, according to Guerrero, had an 85 per cent immigrant workforce from Mexico, the Dominican Republic and other Latin American and African countries.

## Why the RWDSU-MRBW alliance has succeeded

In addition to nearly derailing contract negotiations with Footco, the differences discussed above threatened the RWDSU-MRBW alliance, which MRBW members repeatedly pushed to end throughout mid-2006. However, the alliance secured a contract with Footco and survived. This outcome was due to intra- and inter-organizational learning, processes facilitated by bridge builders in both organizations and by the New York Attorney General’s support for unionization. To situate these processes, the Footco victory, which highlights the potential of union-worker centre collaborations, is briefly recounted.

### The Footco victory

On 8 February 2006, the workers of Footco, a footwear chain with 10 stores in lower-income New York neighbourhoods, celebrated a union contract providing job security,

increased wages and employer-covered healthcare, vacation and sick leave. For a predominantly immigrant workforce accustomed to toiling 50–70 hours/week at sub-minimum wages, these were significant gains. Nine months earlier, the RWDSU-MRBW alliance chose Footco as the first target of its joint Despierta Bushwick (Wake-Up Bushwick, in reference to the Bushwick neighbourhood of Brooklyn) campaign because Footco owed several million dollars in back wages, making it a good site to test the three-pronged campaign: a community boycott led by MRBW, RWDSU outreach to Footco's workforce and a \$2m back wage lawsuit brought by the New York Attorney General.

In August 2005, the Attorney General notified Footco of its lawsuit. The same day, MRBW threatened a boycott unless Footco signed a neutrality agreement pledging 'to allow [...] workers in all ten stores [...] join a union of their choice and [...] to negotiate a contract in good faith with the workers and their union' (MRBW, 2006). This agreement stipulated that a 'Community Labor Relations Board' would oversee contract negotiations. Set up as an alternative to the NLRB, the CLRB included local religious and community leaders and was chaired by a local priest. Confronted from multiple sides, Footco quickly signed the neutrality agreement. Contract negotiations started thereafter but hit two snags in November 2005 when Footco started dragging its feet and complained about the presence of MRBW workers in bargaining sessions. MRBW's threat of a boycott, intervention from the head of the CLRB and Eichler and Friedman's agreement to exclude MRBW members from bargaining brought Footco back to the table. In December 2005, Footco signed a contract worth \$2m with RWDSU and paid a \$400,000 back wage settlement, with the Attorney General agreeing to a reduced settlement amount because Footco had signed a union contract.

The Footco victory demonstrated the RWDSU-MRBW alliance's power but did not end the challenges the partnership faced, as MRBW members continued to demand ending the alliance throughout mid-2006. In addition to the issues discussed above, MRBW members expressed frustration that few Footco workers joined MRBW. Antonio Lopez commented, 'Footco has 10 stores but only 10 or 15 workers have joined MRBW' (Interview, 16 May 2006). Manuel Guerrero acknowledged this issue but said it was slowly changing, commenting that: 'Initially the workers didn't want to participate in MRBW, but ... as they've gotten to know the organization and the space better ... they've become more comfortable coming to the organization and the space' (Interview, 22 May 2006).

Between mid-2006 and mid-2007 relations between MRBW and RWDSU noticeably improved as the two organizations learned to work together, a process involving changes within and between the two organizations.

### *Intra-organizational learning*

MRBW took two steps to deal with MRBW members' negative feelings towards RWDSU and unions in general and the tensions this created in joint RWDSU-MRBW meetings. First, joint RWDSU-MRBW meetings were held without MRBW members present. Second, workshops on the history and structure of unions were held during Workers in Action meetings. RWDSU also took an important step to improve its relationship with MRBW's members. As noted, MRBW members' displeasure with RWDSU was frequently directed at Manuel Guerrero, whom MRBW members felt ordered them around and showed disrespect. Guerrero, for his part, thought MRBW members were jealous

that 'I get public credit in the press for the Despierta Bushwick campaign, when they feel as though it's *their* campaign'. This upset Guerrero, who said, 'I'm just the face of the campaign ... and I'm the only one actually doing campaign work on the street' (Interview, 22 May 2006).

In March 2006, Jeff Eichler transferred Guerrero to another campaign and hired another organizer, Laura Tapia, for the Despierta Bushwick campaign. This action was notable because Eichler and Guerrero worked together on Local 169's Greengrocer campaign and Eichler hired Guerrero to come to RWDSU. Eichler held Guerrero in high esteem but felt he had to be moved to improve RWDSU's relationship with MRBW. Guerrero resented this, saying, 'I spent a year working up and down Knickerbocker Avenue [Bushwick's main retail strip] and she [i.e. Tapia] doesn't have the same experience I do on the avenue. The campaign will be set back because we'll have to redo a lot of the work that I did' (Interview, 6 April 2006).

### *Inter-organizational learning*

Tapia lacked Guerrero's experience in Bushwick but brought something Guerrero did not have: an appreciation of the benefits of working with a community organization. Several weeks after joining RWDSU, Tapia shared her view of why unions should work with 'the community': 'I think that the community can be an intermediary between the union and the workers. A lot of workers, for a variety of reasons, don't trust unions, but if a community [organization] is involved they will be more willing to trust the union and to work with it' (Interview, 21 March 2006). Tapia's view of the relationship between workers' and immigrants' rights was also much closer to MRBW's: 'the labor movement and the struggle for immigrant rights ... [it's] the same struggle ... the workers we're [organizing] are immigrants ... they need better pay, benefits, respect ... and they also need legalization' (Interview, 17 May 2006). Tapia worked hard to get to know MRBW members and gain their trust by attending Workers in Action meetings and working in a small office in MRBW.

Along with the intra-organizational measures described above, Tapia's efforts seemed to generate significant improvement in the relationship between RWDSU and MRBW. As noted, during the first period of fieldwork for this research (January-June 2006, when Guerrero was still on the Despierta Bushwick campaign and prior to the union history workshops discussed above), MRBW members openly criticized RWDSU and unions and pushed to end MRBW's partnership with RWDSU, leading to tensions in joint RWDSU-MRBW meetings. During the final period of fieldwork (June-August 2007) there was a noticeable lack of animosity expressed by MRBW members towards RWDSU in Workers in Action meetings attended by the author. MRBW members also seemed to get along well with Tapia, a notable contrast from their relationship with Guerrero. It should be noted that this assessment is based on direct observations and interviews with RWDSU and MRBW staff as the author did not interview MRBW members during the final period of fieldwork.

### *Bridge builders*

The processes just discussed were possible because of the presence of bridge builders in both organizations who were convinced of the value of working with another

organization, which differed in important ways from their own (as discussed above), and were willing to ruffle feathers within their own organization to continue working with the other organization. One example of this is Jeff Eichler's decision to transfer Guerrero to a different campaign to assuage MRBW members' anger and hurt feelings. Eichler's willingness to do this, against Guerrero's will, underscores the value he placed on working with a 'cohesive community organization' like MRBW. Laura Tapia, who spent considerable time earning MRBW members' trust, was also a bridge builder. MRBW's main bridge builder was Andrew Friedman, who frequently defended RWDSU and MRBW's decision to work with RWDSU. For example, during a February 2006 staff meeting, Nieves Padilla made a proposal to restructure the relationship between MRBW and RWDSU. Friedman perceived this as something that would be unfair to RWDSU and said, 'I don't think it's reasonable. It's a bit too much that we [i.e. MRBW] have all the power'. Friedman also noted that RWDSU was providing critical funding for the Workers in Action committee: 'RWDSU is the only group giving money right now to the workers' project. No foundations are. So we have to keep that in mind' (Fieldnote, 13 February 2006). Several examples discussed above – e.g. Friedman's willingness to hold joint meetings with RWDSU without MRBW members being present and to exclude MRBW members from bargaining sessions with Footco – demonstrate the value Friedman placed on working with RWDSU and his willingness to incur MRBW members' and staff members' wrath to ensure the continuation and success of the RWDSU-MRBW alliance.

### *The ambiguous role of the state*

State institutions played an important, albeit ambiguous, role in facilitating the success of the RWDSU-MRBW alliance. On the one hand, the alliance may never have occurred were it not for the difficulty unions faced winning NLRB elections. As discussed above, this difficulty is one of the factors that convinced Jeff Eichler of the need to find a 'cohesive community organization' to partner with in order to successfully win union recognition outside of the NLRB framework. RWDSU's alliance with MRBW allowed this to occur. The Footco victory would not have happened, however, were it not for the New York Attorney General's support. The RWDSU-MRBW alliance used the Attorney General's \$2m lawsuit as a crucial piece of leverage to get Footco to agree to allow its workers to unionize and then to negotiate a contract with RWDSU. The Attorney General's office knew about and tacitly supported RWDSU's intent to use its lawsuit in this manner. Patricia Smith, the (then) head of the Attorney General's Labor Bureau, said her office did not officially support unionization but informed employers, including Footco, that 'we take workers' future earning potential into account' when finalizing back wage settlements (Interview, 25 May 2006). Smith said she viewed union contracts as a legitimate and highly effective way to guarantee workers' future earning potential.

In addition to helping secure the Footco victory, the Attorney General's support of unionization probably shaped the RWDSU-MRBW alliance in an indirect way as well. By increasing the alliance's ability to achieve concrete victories (e.g. Footco), this support increased the benefits of the alliance itself. This likely made Eichler and Friedman more willing to take actions they knew would ruffle feathers within their own organization but which they saw as necessary to maintain the alliance, compared to what they

may have been willing to do if the alliance's likelihood of achieving victories were less (which, for instance, would have been the case without the Attorney General's support).

### *Additional campaigns*

Since the Footco victory, the RWDSU-MRBW alliance has waged several additional campaigns. The first was a semi-successful effort to organize Associated, a supermarket that, like Footco, owed over a million dollars in back wages. The campaign won a \$1.1m back wage settlement but could not force Associated's owners to sign a union contract for two reasons. First, Associated's owners fiercely resisted RWDSU-MRBW's organizing campaign. According to Eichler, 'They're willing to face the loss of their business rather than settling with the union' (Interview, 16 February 2009). Second, the Attorney General acted much more slowly than it had in the Footco campaign, probably because it changed hands from Eliot Spitzer, a more pro-labour 'populist' Democratic Party politician, to Andrew Cuomo, a more centrist, pro-business Democrat. In 2012, the RWDSU-MRBW alliance succeeded in unionizing a carwash in Queens (Semple, 2012). The success of this campaign may be related to the increased involvement of the Attorney General, which in 2011 again changed hands, from Cuomo to Eric Schneiderman, who seems to have followed more in Spitzer's footsteps.

## **Discussion**

One of the most pressing questions for scholars interested in union revitalization is how to organize the growing number of precarious workers, many of them immigrants, holding low-wage jobs lacking employment security, healthcare, pensions and other benefits. This article has examined a relatively novel strategy for organizing the precariat, a strategy that has been increasingly used in the USA, albeit with mixed results: union-worker centre collaborations. Through a case study of a rare example of a successful union-worker centre alliance in New York's retail sector, this article has examined three questions: why do union-worker centre collaborations emerge? What challenges do they face? And how can they succeed?

The data presented in this article point to two factors that appear to facilitate the emergence of union-worker centre alliances: organizational crises, linked to broader economic shifts, specifically neoliberal restructuring of the USA and the global economy; and individual learning occasioned by semi-successful organizing campaigns. Two findings – that the transformation of New York's retail sector spurred RWDSU to embrace community-based organizing and that garment manufacturers' ability to relocate to areas with lower labour costs pushed MRBW to organize in retail instead of garment manufacturing – speak to debates about the origins of social movement unionism, providing support for the argument that there is a link between neoliberalism and social movement unionism. In contrast to Clawson's (2008) view that 'neoliberalism guarantees social movement unionism', data provided herein suggest the connection between neoliberalism and strategic innovation is indirect, with organizational crises providing the link between the two. This finding resonates with Voss and Sherman's (2000) argument that organizational crises can lead to union innovation.

This research also speaks to the argument that the transformation of the state in the neoliberal era has pushed unions to embrace community-based organizing. The success of the Footco campaign, in which the RWDSU-MRBW alliance avoided the National Labor Relations Board and instead mobilized community support and utilized social movement tactics (e.g. a community boycott) to win a union contract, provides support for Clawson's (2003) and Sullivan's (2010) arguments regarding the difficulty unions in the USA face trying to win recognition through legal channels (and specifically the NLRB) and the efficacy of community-based protest. The data presented also support the argument that the most effective way for unions to use direct-action tactics may be through alliances with community organizations, which face fewer legal restrictions. These data complicate the view, found in some work, that community-labour alliances are (generally) positive and the state is an implacable foe of labour (cf. Fantasia and Voss, 2004: 68). Like Martínez Lucio and Perrett (2009), the data presented highlight the contradictory nature of both community-labour and labour-state relations. The ambiguous character of the state is particularly clear in the Footco campaign, in which MRBW and RWDSU avoided the NLRB but received important support from the New York Attorney General. The contrasting results of the two additional campaigns undertaken by the RWDSU-MRBW alliance underscore how helpful state support for unionization can be.

This article directly speaks to debates about union-worker centre partnerships, providing support for Fine's (2007) argument that union-worker centre collaborations experience difficulties due to the structural, cultural and ideological differences between unions and worker centres. The data show this to be the case even in the RWDSU-MRBW alliance, considered a particularly successful union-worker centre collaboration. This finding contrasts with the image of the RWDSU-MRBW alliance provided by Fine, who appears to suggest that the RWDSU-MRBW alliance did not face the types of difficulties that plagued the other examples of union-worker centre alliances she discusses. This article shows that the RWDSU-MRBW partnership succeeded not because it did not experience challenges, but because it was able to overcome these challenges.

This occurred through learning, specifically the intra- and inter-organizational changes RWDSU and MRBW made to preserve and strengthen their partnership. Learning can occur in multiple ways. This analysis highlights three specific mechanisms, which may be of interest to other scholars studying community-labour alliances: popular education workshops on the history and structure of unions, addressed to worker centre members; changes in organizational practices (i.e. MRBW's decision to hold joint meetings with RWDSU without having members present); and personnel changes (i.e. Eichler's decision to replace an organizer who experienced many difficulties working with a community organization with an organizer more willing and able to do so).

The article highlights two conditions that seem to facilitate intra- and inter-organizational learning. The first is the presence of bridge builders, which seems an essential ingredient for working through inter-organizational tensions among not only unions and community-based organizations but probably any organizations experiencing conflict. The second condition, the unusual degree of state support for unionization, is more specific to this case. As noted, this support most likely increased bridge builders' willingness to ruffle feathers in their organizations. Abstracting from the particular details of this case suggests that what matters – in terms of unions and community organizations'

ability to learn to work together – is not state support for unionization per se. Rather, any ‘external’ factors that enhance the value of an alliance (by, for instance, making it more likely that the alliance will achieve its goals), seems likely to have a similar effect, namely convincing bridge builders that the risks they take to support a partnership with another organization are worth taking.

Since this article focuses on a particular strategy for union revitalization, union-worker centre collaborations, that is most common in the USA, readers may wonder whether and how the conclusions drawn herein are applicable in other countries. Three points are worth making with respect to this issue. First, worker centres (and thus union-worker centre collaborations) remain rare in the UK, but community-labour alliances do exist in the UK (Holgate, 2005, 2009). Second, while some of the issues discussed in this article may be particular to union-worker centre alliances and/or to the USA (e.g. the NLRB), research on the conditions facilitating cooperation and conflict among unions and civil society organizations in the UK (cf. Heery et al., 2012) focuses on many of the same issues discussed in this article. Third, scholars studying community-labour initiatives in the UK have explicitly argued that the absence of community-based worker centres has harmed certain organizing efforts. For instance, in their study of ‘a community based minimum wage campaign in the Midlands’, Martínez Lucio and Perrett (2009: 698) argue that the ‘absence of community worker centres with a legitimacy, presence and transparency within local areas and communities meant that the strategy was akin to roaming sales representatives, who were alone and having to depend on personal resources and networks’ (2000: 700). This observation suggests that the lessons of the present study may be useful for scholars in the UK and elsewhere interested in union revitalization and in the potential of various types of community-labour initiatives, including union-worker centre collaborations.

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### Note

1. Eichler made these comments during a forum, Underneath the Radar: The Unregulated Economy in New York City, held on 8 November 2007. A video of the event is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NSCgxxh34sc>

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