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Christian Lévesque and Gregor Murray

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# Understanding union power: resources and capabilities for renewing union capacity

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## Christian Lévesque

Professor, HEC Montréal and Co-Director, Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work (CRIMT)  
Email: Christian.Levesque@hec.ca

## Gregor Murray

Professor, École de relations industrielles, Université de Montréal, Canada Research Chair on Globalization and Work, Director, Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work (CRIMT)  
Email: Gregor.Murray@umontreal.ca

## Summary

Power is at the core of current debates over the future of trade unionism. This article provides a framework to assess the power resources and strategic capabilities central to union capacity building. We identify four key power resources: internal solidarity; network embeddedness; narrative resources that frame understandings and union actions; and infrastructural resources (material, human, processes, policies and programmes). Resources alone are not enough; unions must also be capable of using them. We identify four strategic capabilities: intermediating between contending interests to foster collaborative action and to activate networks; framing; articulating actions over time and space; and learning. Much experimentation and research on the interactions between these resources and capabilities in particular contexts is required to advance our understanding of the renewal of union power.

## Résumé

Le pouvoir est au cœur des débats actuels sur l'avenir du syndicalisme. Le présent article fournit un cadre d'évaluation des ressources de pouvoir et des aptitudes stratégiques pour le renforcement des capacités d'action syndicales. Les auteurs identifient quatre ressources fondamentales de pouvoir: la solidarité interne, l'ancrage dans des réseaux, les ressources discursives qui encadrent les approches et les actions des syndicats et les ressources d'infrastructure (matériel, ressources humaines, processus, politiques et programmes). Les ressources seules ne suffisent pas. Les syndicats doivent également être capables de les utiliser. Les auteurs identifient quatre aptitudes stratégiques: la médiation entre des intérêts en jeu afin de favoriser une action commune et d'activer les réseaux, l'encadrement, l'articulation d'actions dans le temps et dans l'espace, et

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## Corresponding author:

Gregor Murray, Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la mondialisation et le travail (CRIMT), École de Relations industrielles, Université de Montréal, C.P. 6128, succursale Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec, Canada H3C 3J7.  
Email: Gregor.Murray@umontreal.ca

l'apprentissage. Une expérimentation et une recherche accrues sur les interactions entre ces ressources et ces capacités dans des contextes particuliers sont nécessaires pour approfondir notre compréhension du renouveau du pouvoir syndical.

### Zusammenfassung

Bei den derzeitigen Debatten über die Zukunft der Gewerkschaftsbewegung spielt die Frage der Macht eine zentrale Rolle. Dieser Beitrag liefert einen Rahmen, um die Machtressourcen und strategischen Einsatzmöglichkeiten zu bewerten, die für den Kapazitätsaufbau der Gewerkschaften von entscheidender Bedeutung sind. Wir zeigen vier wichtige Machtressourcen auf: interne Solidarität; Vernetztheit; narrative Ressourcen, die Begriffen und gewerkschaftlichem Handeln einen Rahmen verleihen; und Infrastrukturre Ressourcen (materielle und Humanressourcen, Prozesse, Strategien und Programme). Aber Ressourcen allein reichen nicht aus. Die Gewerkschaften müssen auch in der Lage sein, sie zu nutzen. Wir zeigen vier strategische Einsatzmöglichkeiten auf: Vermittlung zwischen entgegengesetzten Interessen, um gemeinsames Handeln zu stärken und Netzwerke zu aktivieren; *Framing*; zeitliche und räumliche Verknüpfung von Handlungen; und Lernen. Um besser zu verstehen, wie sich eine Erneuerung der gewerkschaftlichen Macht erreichen lässt, sind viele Experimente und Untersuchungen zu den Wechselbeziehungen zwischen diesen Ressourcen und Einsatzmöglichkeiten in spezifischen Kontexten notwendig.

### Keywords

Union power, power resources, strategic capabilities, deliberative vitality, framing, learning, globalization, union renewal

Power is at the core of current debates over the future of trade unionism. The declining influence of unions is often equated with their diminished capacity to protect and improve the working conditions of their members and with decreased influence on economic and social policies that benefit workers. What explains this weakened power? A first plausible reading points to changes in external conditions that impact on unions. A second and equally plausible account suggests that union leaders and members have not adapted to changed circumstances. Our focus here is on this second explanation because it provides the keys for understanding the renewal of union capacity.

According to a simplified historical account, trade unions develop repertoires of collective action and construct a variety of organizational forms in response to the particular political economies in which they are located. Unions mobilize sets of resources that characterize their power in a given situation. Minor variations in such resources inflect outcomes. Significant variations, especially at critical junctures, can sometimes change the so-called rules of the game: either to the benefit of one actor or another (for example, labour or capital) or in some contradictory permutation that opens up possibilities for further contention (an evolving situation).

This long view of union power is especially relevant to current debates about union renewal. The historical foundations on which union power was constructed and is embedded are shifting. This raises questions about union efficacy and agency. Globalization, the reorganization of production and services within and across borders, changing professional and social identities, and weakening links with political parties and their projects are all part of a more encompassing explanation of important shifts in the foundations of prevailing union practice. From this perspective, debates on union renewal or revitalization concern how unions should address key issues of power related to these new conditions.

Our guiding argument in this article is twofold. First, we need to unpack power as it relates to union agency as strategies for union renewal must be focused on power and its constitutive elements. Without a clear focus on identifying these elements and how they are at play, it is virtually impossible to develop effective union renewal strategies. Second, this process entails daunting challenges to the ways that union leaders and activists think about and develop their resources and organizational routines. We believe that these processes, on which this article seeks to shed some light, are at the very heart of the renewal of union power and ultimately entail an ambitious project of self-transformation.

We first look at the concept of union power. We then focus successively on four power resources and four actor capabilities that appear critical to union capacity in this new context. Overall, we seek to enhance our understanding of the nature of union power, the levers that activate it and the strategies that might enhance it. It should be stressed that we deliberately set aside many of the external aspects of an overall account of union power in order to focus more clearly on the processes of transformation central to union renewal projects.

### Thinking union power

Power reflects and is the material basis of the complex relationship between actors. For many authors, it is the veritable elixir of organizational life. Some equate power with the exercise of 'power over', as in actor A influencing Actor B to do something that he or she might not otherwise do (Dahl, 1957); others see it in terms of the ability to set agendas or to shape beliefs about what is possible or not (Lukes, 1974; Fox, 1977; Gaventa, 1980); while others perceive domination in a less perceptible form (Foucault, 1980). These approaches to power focus on the 'power over' instead of on the 'power to', which puts emphasis on power as a dispositional concept, that is, the capacity of social agents. More precisely, the 'power to' refers to 'agents' abilities to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others, whether positively or negatively' (Lukes, 2005: 65).

This definition of power is particularly well suited for unions since even though they are engaged in 'power over' (see Hyman, 1975), they are primarily concerned with empowering workers, by increasing their resources and capabilities and thus their capacity to act. This 'power to' refers to the capacity of unions to represent workers' interests, to regulate work and to effect social change. On each of these aspects, the capacity of unions can have a variable extension depending on the scope of issues (single issue versus multiple issues), the contextual range (context bound versus context transcending), on the degree of non-intentionality (intended versus unintended consequences) and on the activity it involves (active exercise versus inactive enjoyment) (Lukes, 2005: 74–80).

Our argument is that 'capacity to' should be the starting point to understand union power. In previous studies of local unions (Lévesque and Murray, 2002, 2005), we have argued that particular resources (internal solidarity, external solidarity, and strategic and discursive capacity) appear to be of special importance to the capacity of local unions to influence the regulation of work in their increasingly globalized workplaces. In the light of ongoing innovations in the literature, our own field research and the need to adapt this framework to other levels of analysis, we want to suggest three innovations to this approach.

First, resources are here understood as fixed or path-dependent assets that an actor can normally access and mobilize. Our previous focus on a triangle of salient power resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2002) remains relevant but we now seek to integrate other types of resources in the heart of the triangle or what we will call infrastructural resources in order to facilitate a change in levels of analysis (levels other than the workplace) and to take account of what other authors have suggested (for example, Pocock, 2000) as well as the results of our own field research.

Second, power resources are a necessary but insufficient condition to contend with the rapidly changing conditions affecting unions. From our own observations and recent developments around institutional theory (for example, Crouch, 2005), actor capabilities also play a key role (Fligstein, 1997). Capabilities refer here to sets of aptitudes, competencies, abilities, social skills or know-how that can be developed, transmitted and learned. Fligstein (2001), for example, draws attention to the importance of social skills, or what we will label ‘capabilities’, in order to understand overall actor capacity. Similarly, so-called institutional entrepreneurs rely on a range of capabilities to take forward projects for institutional change. In other words, power resources are not enough; actor capabilities must be a central part of the equation of power in changing circumstances.

Third, there is not just a need for resources and capabilities, but for the right mix of the two so that organizational actors can mobilize their resources in appropriate ways and a timely manner. The changing requirements for both power resources and capabilities in unions offers immense potential for understanding the dynamic between them, but also calls for an ambitious programme of experimentation, research and pedagogy.

A full account of union power, necessarily contextually specific, requires that we look at a broader range of its constitutive elements: i) union capacity (power resources and actor capabilities); ii) the institutional arrangements in which the actors operate, which themselves reflect past power relations; iii) the particular opportunity structures in a given circumstance (be they economic, political, organizational, ecological); and iv) the capacity of other actors in these sets of relationships. In order to develop this analytical framework, we focus in this article only on union capacity, namely resources and capabilities. It is argued that the renewal of those resources and capabilities entails profound challenges for unions.

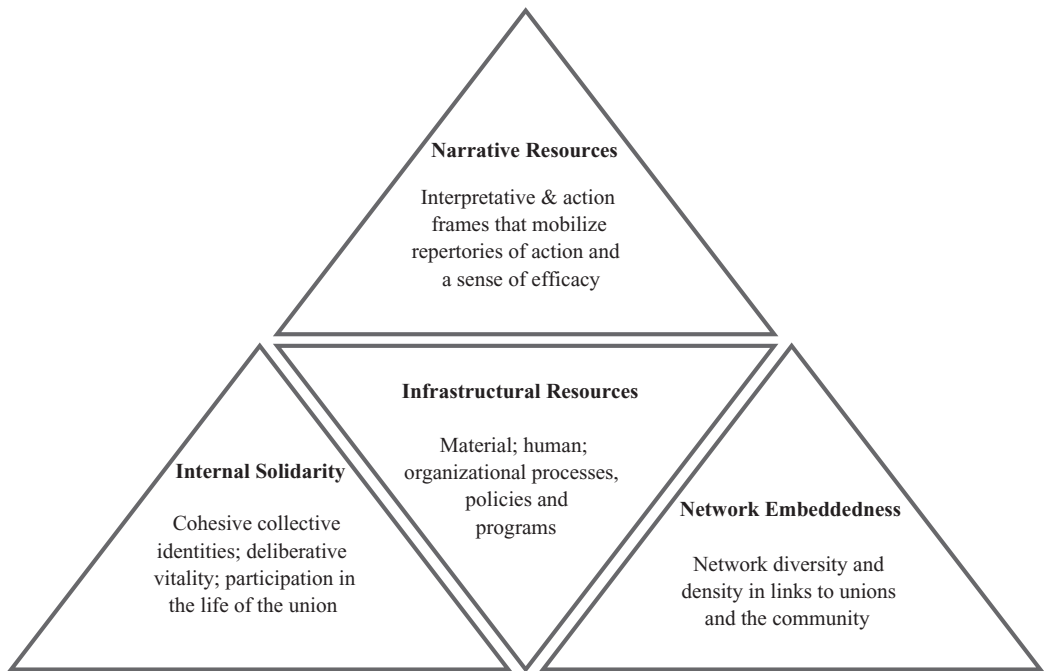
## Power resources

Multiple studies have highlighted the importance of the range and types of resources to variations observed in the capacity of unions to renew (Dufour and Hege, 2002; Frost, 2000; Hyman, 2005; Lévesque and Murray, 2002). It is therefore important to understand the nature of the resources available and to assess their relevance to changing contexts.

Four types of resources seem particularly important. First, *internal solidarity* relates to the mechanisms developed in the workplace to ensure collective cohesion and deliberative vitality. Second, *network embeddedness*, or external solidarity, refers to the degree to which unions have horizontal and vertical links with other unions and with community groups and social movements. Third, *narrative resources* refer to the existing stock of stories that frame understandings and union actions and inform a sense of efficacy and legitimacy. Finally, *infrastructural resources* cover the material and human resources and their allocation through processes, policies and programmes in more or less efficient ways.

### *Internal solidarity: cohesive identities and deliberative vitality*

As suggested by the popular refrain ‘solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong’, internal solidarity is at the very heart of union action. Unions rely on sufficiently cohesive identities to pursue their goals and employers typically seek to gauge the degree of membership support that underlies union positions. Unity of purpose enhances power, whether it flows from common collective identities or deliberative processes where members surrender their individuality in favour of a collectivity (Hyman, 1975).



**Figure 1.** Union power resources

When asked to explain the weakening of unionism, many observers point to a fragmentation of the apparently monolithic collective identities that characterized industrial unionism (Piore, 1995; Hyman, 2001; Lévesque et al., 2005). In their place emerge more complex manifestations of multiple identities, both collective and individual. This questions how unions define collective union identities and how and under what circumstances certain identities, such as that of semi-skilled male manufacturing workers, predominate over others (Yates, 2005; on womanhood, see Yates, 2010 in this issue). This is further exacerbated by a much greater variety of social identities in the workplace stemming from workers' multiple cross-cutting social locations in the labour market and in the community (gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc.); increasingly sharp demarcations in employment status (see Peetz, 2006 on strategies for individualizing the employment relationship); the possibility of greater employee involvement and participation in some workplaces, with less egalitarianism and more differentiated rewards; and, overall, an increased societal emphasis on individualism and differentiation through patterns of consumption (even if those patterns are often remarkably similar).

Two interrelated features characterize internal solidarity as a power resource: cohesive collective identities and deliberative vitality. They are strongly interrelated but it is possible to be strong on one dimension and not the other.

Union collective identities concern the degree of membership cohesion. According to Polletta and Jasper (2001: 285), collective identities refer to 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.' They entail a perception of a shared status or relation, either imagined or experienced directly. There are naturally multiple collective identities within any workplace or union. Key questions concern to what extent some prevail in providing operational definitions of commonality, which interests count for most

and what is the resilience of this collective cohesion over time and how new interests are expressed through existing or emerging organizational forms (Hyman, 2001: 170–173; Dufour and Hege, 2002; Haiven, 2006)

Deliberative vitality refers to the participation of members in the life of their union. A first aspect of deliberative vitality concerns the basic internal mechanics of union representation: the presence and density of a network of union delegates or stewards or representatives in the workplace; the existence and regularity of mechanisms and procedures that ensure links to members and to particular groups of members (for example, identity structures); the existence and relative effectiveness of different means of communication between members, stewards and local leaders and with other levels of the union; and the existence of policies and programmes to integrate new groups and new activists. A wide variety of studies, including our own research observations, suggest that the basic mechanics of deliberative vitality are critical to internal union solidarity (Bourque and Rioux, 2001; Lévesque and Murray, 2005; Peetz and Pocock, 2009). The second aspect of deliberative vitality concerns the extent of membership participation and the quality of engagement in these different deliberative structures. Is it passive or active? Are there different groups contending within these forums and is leadership accountable to them? Drawing on the classic union democracy literature (Lipset et al., 1956), Frost (2000) emphasizes the often observed importance of internal political practices such as contested elections, organized political groups and high levels of voter turnout. The study of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union by Levi et al. (2009: 206) points to the importance of ‘a union culture that emphasizes rank-and-file voice and rights’.

Two clarifications are required here. First, interests are not a given. Individuals define their interests in interactions with other actors and these interactions affect the understanding of those interests (Fung and Olin Wright, 2003; Mansbridge, 1992). This processual nature of solidarity highlights the importance of participation in debates about union strategies. Internal solidarity is therefore a set of relationships, underpinned in important ways by the extent of deliberative vitality. Second, while a strong case can be made for compelling synergies between collective cohesion and deliberative vitality resulting in exemplary internal solidarity resources in a union, there is no necessary congruence. Deliberative vitality can certainly characterize a highly factionalized union driven by competing identities and their contending projects. Conversely, it is possible to imagine a union with strongly cohesive and even intergenerational collective identities but relatively weak deliberative vitality because of an absence of mechanisms and procedures within the union or weak levels of participation in the life of the union. The study by Lévesque et al. (2005) of union members in Canada highlights both the complexity of internal solidarity as a union power resource and the importance of deliberative vitality as one of the few methods to build bridges between contending identities.

### *Network embeddedness*

Structural change in labour and product markets creates new sources of division between the employed and the unemployed, between plants in the same companies, between workers with typical and atypical jobs, to name but a few. These new sources of divisions present a real challenge for trade unions because they reinforce differentiation and competition between workers and fragmentation within and between unions. Solidarity is built through horizontal and vertical links within and between unions and the community. The task of unions has always been to build broader spaces of solidarity (Hyman, 1997) but changes in the political economy have destabilized these traditional links.

Network embeddedness refers to the degree to which unions are linked to their own and other union organizations, community groups, social movements or other types of actor. Although some unions are caught in a spiral of isolation (Wells, 1998), others have strong horizontal links with unions in the same sector and among groups with the same employer. Yet, other unions create intense vertical links with regional, industry, national and international structures (Anner et al., 2006). Some unions develop community coalitions which do not simply seek support for unions but rather highlight the multidimensional life of workers on issues such as the protection of the environment and of public services (Tattersall, 2009).

Trade unions integrated into a larger network, whether horizontally or vertically, are also more likely to develop and promote their own agenda which, in turn, enables them to influence the change process (Dufour and Hege, 2002; Frost, 2000; Lévesque and Murray, 2005). There is mounting evidence of the importance for unions to be connected into vertical and horizontal networks and structures in order to achieve their objectives. In a context of globalization, the exchange of information, of expertise, of experience and of policy is of ever greater importance.

Two dimensions of network embeddedness appear relevant: the diversity and the density of the network. The first dimension refers to the types of networks to which a union is connected. For example, a relatively homogeneous network involves only unions whereas a heterogeneous network also includes NGO and community groups. This first dimension can be seen as a continuum: from, at one end, unions that are relatively isolated to unions that are integrated into vertical networks (homogeneous) to those which are involved in both horizontal and vertical networks (heterogeneous networks). The second dimension relates to the intensity, thickness and permanency of contacts within and between unions and other actors where unions can develop stronger or weaker ties. Drawing on previous findings (Lévesque and Murray, 2010), we might argue that unions embedded in thick networks with strong ties can potentially leverage greater power. However, such results require more detailed examination of context and opportunity; weak ties might be just as appropriate for some networks and some situations.

### *Narrative resources*

Narrative resources consist of the range of values, shared understandings, stories and ideologies that aggregate identities and interests and translate and inform motives. As opposed to the capability, to which we will return, they are resources because they constitute a body of interpretative and action frames that can be mobilized to explain new situations and new contexts and point to consecrated repertoires of action.

Any encounter with union activists releases a flood of stories that inform the way the actors think. They draw on a stock of narratives. New trade unionists are often socialized into these stories or must contest them. They can relate to real stories, as they were lived, and to quasi-mythical incidents that have been told and retold, often to the point that they no longer relate to any real event but can be just as effective. These stories reflect values, projects and repertoires of action, sometimes suggesting types of actions for particular situations. They are a living organizational heritage. In evoking feelings of efficacy about actions undertaken, they can exert a powerful positive or negative influence (Peetz, 2006; Lévesque and Murray, 2002; Martinez and Fiorito, 2009), providing a basis for actions in response to new situations.

As situations change and existing narrative resources appear to have less hold on the imagination of actors, they can translate into declining potential for power. Voss (1996: 253) highlights the importance of what she labels 'fortifying myths', namely 'an ideological element that allows activists to frame defeats so that they are understandable and so that belief in the efficacy of the



movement can be sustained until new political opportunities emerge'. Such narrative resources, which are more the tale itself than the ability to tell it, constitute a power resource.

### *Infrastructural resources*

Infrastructural resources refer to material and human resources and to organizational practices, policies and programmes. Unions differ greatly in relation to the extent and sophistication of these different types of infrastructural resources.

A first dimension concerns the different ways that a union can generate the material resources it requires. These include dues, union time release (both paid and unpaid), offices and meeting space for its activities, and any other kind of material resource that permits it to pursue its mission. Some unions are able to leverage legislatively-mandated forums (such as works' councils) to ensure a high level of infrastructural support. Some unions prove to be particularly adept at generating new sources of revenue to undertake their activities: drawing on state research and training funds, negotiating provisions in collective agreements that provide paid access to different kinds of training, founding specialist funds (such as social justice and humanity funds in the case of a number of Canadian unions), founding union-organized pension and investment funds, etc.

People or human resources are a second dimension of infrastructural resources. To what degree are union organizations able to draw on specialist and technological resources giving them access to expertise, knowledge about industry and community environments? A number of unions have sought to innovate in the recruitment of their staff, drawing on a greater range of personal biographies, social locations, ethnic and linguistic origins. This can entail seeking out different types of expertise from different organizational forms (corporations, social movements, etc.), often through what Ganz et al. (2004: 191) label 'bridging organizations'. There is also the question of the way that the talents of activists and staff are mobilized to pursue union objectives (Kelly and Heery, 1994).

A third dimension of infrastructural resources concerns organizational practices, procedures, policies and programmes. Kumar and Murray (2006: 88–96) identified a range of innovations in the way that unions sought to enhance their infrastructural resources. These included programmes and processes for membership engagement (communications, education and training, methods of servicing), use of new technologies (websites, computer networks, polling, staff and activist training, development of videos, etc.) and new methods of recruitment (training, dedicated allocation of resources, etc.). They found that unions pursuing innovations in the way that they organize their infrastructural resources were influenced by narrative frames seeking to enlarge labour market solidarities for all workers (Kumar and Murray, 2006: 99–100).

There are negative and positive examples of the impact of infrastructural resources. In the US union movement, a continuing debate about 'cultural resistance' to change is really a euphemism for new methods of mobilizing staff and activists within unions that run up against existing ways of doing things (Fletcher and Hurd, 2001). Pocock (2000) amusingly explores how the allocation of union-provided automobiles to full-time staff can be a barrier to change in union organizations. The 2008 Democratic presidential election campaign in the United States provides a counter-example. The Obama campaign highlighted the importance of both persons with special technical skills and the sophisticated technologies to which they had access in order to convey information rapidly to a wide network of supporters as significant new power resources (Talbot, 2008). This is of course also linked to deliberative vitality but the material resources, the people involved and the organizational processes that underlie them, are key infrastructural resources contributing to overall union capacity.

## Strategic capabilities

The notion of capabilities suggests that resources are not sufficient. As argued by Ganz (2000), union leadership requires both resources and resourcefulness. Social actors need to be able to use their resources in different situations. Fligstein (2001) highlights how social skill is pivotal to the construction and reproduction of local social orders. We believe that it is essential to focus not just on the development of union resources but also on the capability of union leaders and activists to develop, use and transform those resources as required by the circumstances they face.

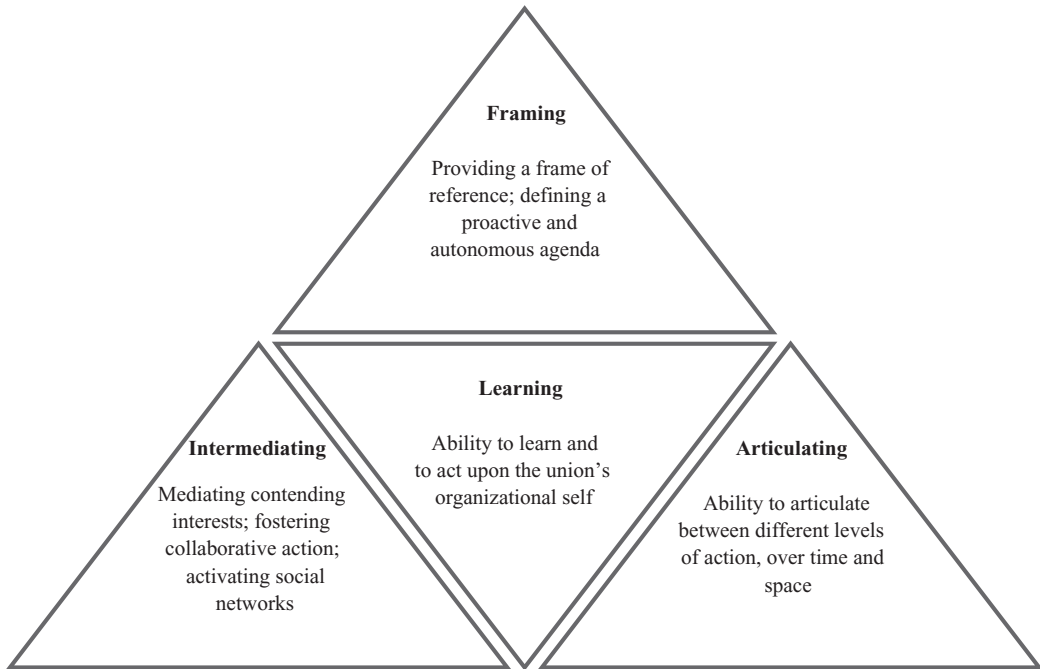
Our earlier work tended to conflate resources and capabilities (Lévesque and Murray, 2002). Unions can have power resources (or attributes) but not be particularly skilled at using them. This can be seen in a variety of studies of the foundations of micro-power in local unions. In a case study of a local union, Wells (2001) highlighted its strong external links (what we labelled above as its network embeddedness or external solidarity) but also how this local did not necessarily make much use of those links. Lévesque and Murray (2010) similarly point to cases where local unions are embedded in international networks but do not really leverage this resource. One plausible explanation is related to the weakness of other resources, for example deliberative vitality. However, in neither of these two studies were the local unions under investigation entirely bereft of deliberative resources. A re-reading of these cases suggests that these unions had considerable resources at their disposition but they were lacking in strategic capabilities.

By capability, we refer to sets of aptitudes, competencies, abilities, social skills and know-how that can be developed, transmitted and learned. This is not to be confused with loftier and more philosophical treatments of the notion of capability in relation to economic development and human freedoms (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Rather, there is a more pragmatic notion in the organizational and institutional literature that actors engage in learned and fairly stable patterns of collective activity through which they seek, in interaction with others, to achieve their goals and improve their effectiveness (Zollo and Winter, 2002; Sassen, 2006: 8). In assessing both our own research work and that of others, we identify four strategic capabilities that are of particular significance in the mobilization of union power resources: intermediating, framing, articulating and learning capabilities.

## Intermediation

Unions are increasingly acting at different levels, dealing with multiple actors, crossing boundaries, and engaging in issues that transcend workplace labour and employment relations issues. The multiplication of levels, actors and types of issue compels union leaders to arbitrate between conflicting demands and to manage contradictory expectations. The need to balance conflict and cooperation (Frost, 2000) or to manage conflicting demands (Hyman, 2001) is not new but it takes a more complex shape in the context of a multiplication of identities at work and the accentuation of pressures on workers associated with globalization.

The multiple identities within and outside the workplace exert considerable pressure on union leaders. They must arbitrate between different identities and organize them into a hierarchy. This is a key problem for union leaders since identities are not stable but dynamic (Dufour and Hege, 2002). According to Kelly (1998), collective mobilization is linked to the capacity of leaders to arbitrate between conflicting demands and to favour the emergence of collective interest. This process is not uni-directional but bi-directional since workers have agency and also shape how collective interests emerge and change (Darlington, 2002).



**Figure 2.** Union strategic capabilities

Union embeddedness in different types of networks, particularly heterogeneous ones, also requires new sets of intermediating capabilities. This is particularly noticeable in coalitions involving NGOs and trade unions (Compa, 2004; Frege et al., 2004). Not only are they relying on different kinds of repertoires of action but the actions undertaken by one actor may jeopardize other actors. Such tensions are highlighted in studies of different types of coalitions (for example, the Clean Clothes Campaign, see Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006). Perhaps most importantly, they show that the success of these campaigns rests on the capacity to mediate between the often contrasting repertoires of action of these different types of actors and to span the boundaries that might separate them. Union involvement in cross-border alliances also requires the development of intermediating capabilities. A growing body of research (Hege and Dufour, 2007; Lévesque and Dufour-Poirier, 2005; Turnbull, 2006) points to tensions that arise in coordinating actions. Not only are the interests of workers from different countries far from being convergent, they rely on contrasting repertoires of action and mobilization strategies (Bronfenbrenner, 2007).

Intermediating capabilities are therefore critical for the construction of union power. Three dimensions appear relevant: first, the ability of the union to mediate between contending interests; second, the ability to foster collaborative action (for example, through an ongoing dialogue on the relationship between union objectives and means, and consensus building in leadership style and accountability); third, the ability to access, create and activate salient social networks by managing the interface between intra- and inter-union channels, by fostering social relationships between networks of individuals or groups (or organizations) and by giving them a human face (Hyman, 2007; Peetz, 2006; Jarley, 2005). It is our contention that unions with these capabilities are more likely to cope with globalization and to effect change.

## Framing

One core argument underlying our approach is that actors, particularly trade unionists, can devise strategies that enable them to shape regimes within and beyond the workplace. They are not passive agents who simply adapt to globalization and implement policies laid down from the top. They formulate strategies on the basis of their own view on how best to shape and implement these policies. These framing capabilities characterize a union's ability to define a proactive and autonomous agenda.

Framing refers to the ability to put forward an agenda that can be more or less inclusive and can be part of a broader social project. It involves how the union defines the alter (them) and the ego (us). Narrative framings play an important role in the representation and discussion of these interests. They would appear to be an essential ingredient in enlarging repertoires of union action and contention (Ganz, 2004; Fox Piven and Cloward, 2000; Tarrow, 2005). Garud et al. (2007: 962) describe how framing is used strategically by institutional entrepreneurs to justify new practices, mobilize coalitions and generate collective action necessary for institutional change. Yet, change can also be problematical. As suggested by Fox-Piven (2008: 8), the 'strategy scripts that solved problems in the past have staying power . . . because they are imprinted on memory and habit, reinforced by the recollection of past victories, and reiterated by the organizations and leaders thrown up in past conflicts'. Framing supposes an ability to alter the script and replenish the stock of narrative resources.

The ability to provide overarching narratives as a frame of reference for union action is increasingly seen as a key factor in union renewal. Yates (2010, in this issue) explains how a union was able to develop new campaigning initiatives by reframing the conception of the women members that it represents and the social role they play in the early childhood education and care sector. Snell and Fairbrother (2010, also in this issue) explore how climate change can be framed in ways that open up new possibilities for union action. Active union involvement in international alliances clearly requires and leads to a broadening of the conception of worker interests. Lévesque and Murray (2010) identify framing as an important discriminating factor between defensive isolation, risk reduction and proactive solidarity in cross-border alliances. This points to the need to engage in and better understand discursive capacity building. When workers' interests collide (both within and across borders), framing capabilities can help to achieve trade-offs in the search for and promotion of common interests. Moreover, and consistent with earlier findings, this strategic capability must be grounded in and interact with other local resources, notably deliberative vitality and network embeddedness.

## Articulation

There is a growing body of literature on the importance of articulating different levels of action in unions and social movements (Tarrow, 2005; Turnbull, 2006; Wills, 2002). In a context where substantial rescaling is occurring, both in the organization and integration of worksites in global production networks and in the construction of and relationship between different forms of worker solidarity, it is the combination of these levels over time that seems important. Articulating entails constant arbitration between actions as regards time and space. It is the globalized context that modifies the geography of unionism. The temporal dimension distinguishes between the short and the long term. The spatial dimension focuses on articulations between different levels and locations of action.

As suggested by a variety of studies (Herod, 2002; Wills, 2002), trade unionists have to think about the multiple levels at which they seek to exert an influence and how they develop the interactions between these levels. Many observers point to the need to develop 'glocal' actions that are simultaneously both global and local. Tarrow (2005: 61–64) places particular emphasis on the importance for social actors in the context of globalization to transpose local issues to a larger context (up scaling) and, conversely, to translate larger issues to the local level (down scaling). This involves integrating different levels of action in new ways, breaking the institutional scripts (Fox-Piven, 2008) and balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches (Voss and Sherman, 2000). Wills (2002) highlights how transnational agreements can be effectively mobilized at regional (European) and local levels. Turnbull's study of European port workers suggests how through articulation and organizing across space trade union leaders 'could draw on a much wider set of social resources to defend their members' interests' (2006: 321). In a study of local unions in Canada and Mexico, Lévesque and Murray (2010) similarly highlight that it is the ability to make the links between the resources of local unions in interaction (top-down and bottom-up) with their national unions and in interaction with the opportunities, resources and forms of brokerage provided by the relative thickness of international regulation that distinguishes local unions engaged in more substantive forms of transnational solidarity.

### *Learning*

Our fourth capability concerns the ability within the union to learn and to diffuse that learning within the union. Learning suggests an ability to foster, reflect on and learn from past and current change in contexts and organizational practices and routines in order to anticipate and act upon change. In his insightful study of contending unions among agricultural workers in California, Ganz (2000: 1012) highlights the critical importance of this capability: 'When faced with novel problems – often the case for leaders of organizations operating within new or changing environments – heuristic processes permit actors to use salient knowledge to devise novel solutions by imaginatively recontextualizing their understanding of the data.' Similarly, drawing on Levitt and March (1988), Jackson (2010) emphasizes how 'ongoing processes of experimentation, learning and emulation within and across institutional boundaries may lead to new organizational and individual capacities . . .' In other words, learning is an essential component of strategic capabilities.

Learning is a reflexive and imaginative process that entails thinking about the past in order to draw out lessons that can be applied to the present and projected into the future. In a penetrating study of his own union experience, Martin (1995: 1) cites his own daughter's description of what he did as a union official. Then a primary school student, when asked by her teacher to say what was her father's job, his daughter said that 'He teaches workers how to talk back'. This description points to learning and teaching as critical capabilities in the construction of union capacity.

In an overview of the literature on union learning, Hyman (2007) emphasizes that learning is an essential element of adaptation and innovation. Otherwise, union leaders are more likely to tend familiar ground, mobilizing well-worn tactics and actions that flow from existing repertoires of action, even when these approaches are not necessarily suited to changing circumstances.

Learning is therefore essential to the renewal of union actions and practices. Drawing on Martin and Ross (1999), we might suggest that if a local union does not have this learning capacity, it will remain a prisoner of its own history, caught in a path dependency of its repertoires and identities: it is likely to follow a trajectory that will not challenge its projects, values and traditions. The challenge, as highlighted by Frege and Kelly (2003: 14–15) is to understand why unions continue to follow patterns of behaviour that do not respond to the new challenges of collective representation

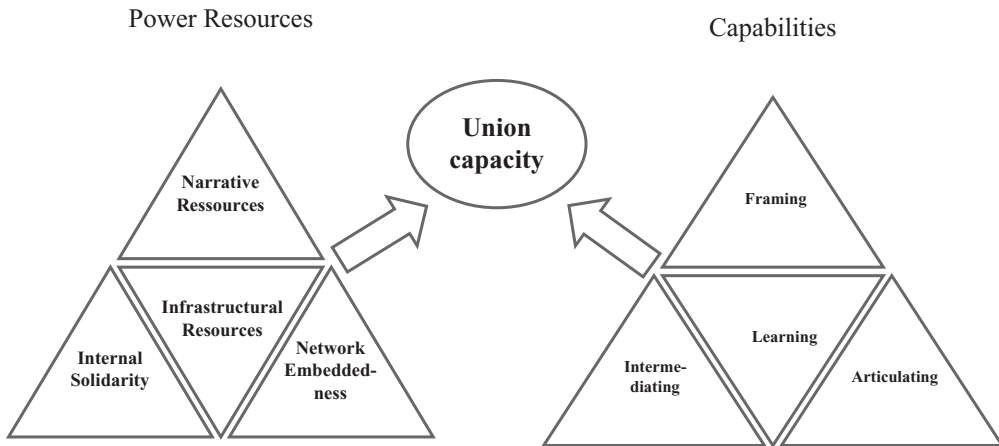
and, under what circumstances, they succeed in innovating, charting new courses of action in collective representation. Learning is thus a critical capability in the renewal process. In a study of two local unions in France and Canada that seem to be stuck in a path dependency that limits their capacity to respond to the challenges of their increasingly globalized workplaces, Dufour et al. (2009) point both to the appropriation of 'an organizational self' as central in the process of local union renewal, but their results also highlight the tremendous obstacles in doing so. Learning capabilities are central to such an appropriation.

## Conclusion

An exclusive focus on union capacity is necessarily incomplete. The consideration of power resources and actor capabilities in this article is neither located in specific relationships (with workers, with employers, with communities, with social and political movements, with the state) or in particular contexts (workplaces, industries, countries and regions and their varying institutional configurations). Although this narrow focus limits a full account of power relations, it is a distinct advantage for understanding the processes of union renewal because it is these dimensions of union power, over which unions themselves have some degree of control. That is why we believe that the framework advanced in this article has much wider applicability. The key factors currently challenging union power clearly cut across the different national institutional arrangements in which unions are embedded and place unions on the defensive.

Unions in a wide variety of contexts are clearly grappling with power resource issues. The multiplication of social identities and employment status, particularly as regards the expansion of both precarious and migrant workers, poses a huge challenge of melding collective identities and deliberative mechanisms to yield internal solidarity. Union members are too easily portrayed as insiders, a privileged segment of the workforce more likely to benefit from superior working conditions and from which many groups are or feel excluded. The enhanced integration and intensified competition between production and service units within global supply and production chains also raise huge challenges. The consequent decentralization of bargaining structures, the disarticulation of pattern bargaining (within and across borders) and the weakening of links to political parties and policy processes mean that the external solidarity resources derived from previous patterns of network embeddedness are not providing the leverage on which past patterns of union action relied. There also appears to be a depleted stock of stories of contention. Indeed, there are so many more stories of negotiating concessions and securing 'more work for less pay'. Moreover, many repertoires of contention appear to offer diminishing returns in terms of their efficacy. Valuable infrastructural resources can also be so deeply engrained that they become impediments to change.

The stresses are perhaps even more acute in the case of strategic capabilities. Although the evidence is still emergent and sometimes mixed, we believe that strategic capabilities make a difference. Capabilities for intermediation, for example, entail building solidarities across different types of union structure (see Briskin, 2008) and imagining new types of leadership (Dufour and Hege, 2010). In the view of various contributors to this special issue (for example, Yates, 2010; Snell and Fairbrother, 2010), framing is an integral part of the union renewal process. In reordering the relationship between different spatial locations, globalization makes huge demands on union capacity to articulate in both time and space. We have similarly argued that learning is one of the most critical capabilities to script-breaking in organizational routines. Union capacity building therefore entails a veritable self-pedagogy (the pedagogy of renewal) in which unions as organizations place a strong emphasis on opportunities for diffusing and exchanging information and



**Figure 3.** Resources and capabilities for enhanced union capacity

learning from those exchanges. Moreover, the capacity for unions to ‘work on themselves’ is perhaps the most intriguing and difficult challenge (Dufour et al., 2009).

There are moments in organizational and institutional history when things are just up for grabs. As previous arrangements come unstuck, and union capacity weakens, union resources and capabilities come increasingly under the microscope. Some of the old resources need to be reconfigured or invigorated; the capabilities do not seem to be calibrated to the new context (see Figure 3). There have been such generational shifts in the past when resources appeared sufficient as union actors, clearly skilled in the capabilities required, mobilized their resources in contexts where the rules of the game and the organizational routines were widely recognized, readily accepted and easily interpreted.

The concept of power is at the very heart of this process because the internal components of union capacity (the resources and capabilities that shape union capacity) are found to be wanting. An understanding of union resources and capabilities is critical to an understanding of efforts to enhance union power because they provide keys to detect emergent patterns which, once integrated, might alter path dependencies. Much experimentation, analysis, learning and research will be required, from both unionists and researchers, in order to elucidate the development of and interactions between these different union resources and capabilities and to match them to particular contexts and opportunities. It is from this process that the renewal of union power will emerge.

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