Another Look at Union Mergers

Abstract

The recent, sharp decline in union size and influence is described to show the context of union mergers. Will unions, now finding themselves in hard times, choose their merger options? The hard times that contemporary unions face is illustrated with five brief cases; the passage of strongly anti-union labor laws in Wisconsin; the deterioration of the city of Detroit (once a union stronghold); the collective bargaining settlement for production workers at Boeing; the union organizing defeat at a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee; and the passage of an anti-union right-to-work law in Michigan.

I make crucial distinctions between amalgamations and absorptions, and between what happens in the pre-merger and post-merger periods. Next, I show how the relative power of the motivation to merge and the barriers to merger shape the terms of the merger agreement, and how there can be high, low or moderate degrees of the post-merger integration of unions. The discussion also recognizes the inherent difficulty of appraising union merger outcomes; it might take several years before merged unions reach their final state and the merger can be evaluated. Mergers do not arrive instantaneously in their final form—joining unions together takes time. Mergers are complicated and messy, and usually difficult to consummate, because they need to be negotiated and endorsed by officers, and eventually approved by union members or their delegates at union conventions.

The form and frequency of union mergers are tabulated for each decade since 1900. It is found that union mergers are declining in number in the last decade. I therefore reject the assumed positive relationship between merger frequency and the decline in union size and influence. I attribute this to two factors; the personal stress of mergers for union members, officers and staff (which raises merger barriers) and the presence of a merger alternative: union alliances or coalitions for organizing, bargaining or political action (which lowers merger motivation).

This study will be published by Springer in 2016. It forms the last volume in a trilogy, as either my third book on union mergers, after When Unions Merge (Lexington Books, 1986) and Union Mergers in Hard Times; The View from Five Countries (Cornell, 1996) and my third book for Springer after The New Collective Bargaining (2012) and Unions and Globalization (2014). I have been writing about union mergers since 1973.