



Building Powerful Coalitions

By Amanda Tattersall, Australian union/community organizer and author of [Power in Coalition](#) prepared for the CUPE Building Community Conference, 16-18 February 2011.

Not all coalitions between labor unions and community organizations are made equal. Their power and success varies greatly depending on the strategic choices of those involved.

The most successful coalitions are ones that seek to achieve social change goals at the same time as they strengthen the organizations that participate in them. Yet these goals can be somewhat illusive.

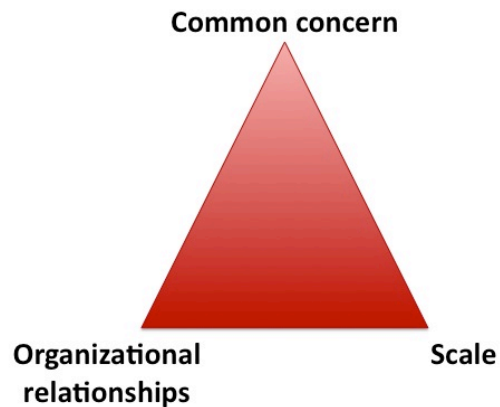
[Power in Coalition](#) is a new book that documents the trials and triumphs of three long-term coalitions from Canada, the United States and Australia: the [Ontario Health Coalition](#) from Canada that campaigned for Medicare and against public-private-partnerships, the [Grassroots Collaborative](#) from Chicago that campaigned for living wages for retail workers, and the public education coalition from [Sydney](#) that won a reduction in class sizes for young schools children. The book identifies three elements of coalitions, that explain how coalitions work, and five principles of strong coalitions.

Elements of Coalitions

All coalitions, whether short-term or long-term, have three characteristics. Coalitions develop when:

1. Two or more organizations come together (organizational relationships)
2. To do something in common (common concern)
3. To make an impact on these concerns (scale)

These are the three elements of coalitions (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Elements of Coalitions

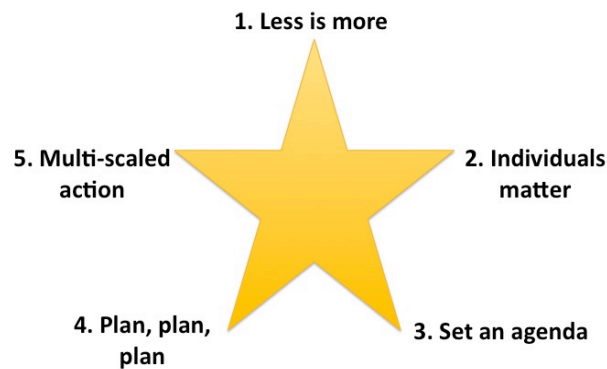
These elements are important, because coalitions may be strong or weak depending on how they work. They help identify questions about how coalitions operate, for instance:

- How do the organizations work together, do they share decision making or does one organizations dominate?
- What kinds of issues are being worked on – is it a long term agenda or short term concern? Are their shared values too?
- Where are the organizations trying to make an impact? Locally? Nationally?

Through exploring three long term coalitions, Power in Coalition identified five lessons about when coalitions were likely to be successful.

Five principles of strong coalitions

Figure 2: Principles of strong coalitions



1. Less is more

Coalitions are more successful when organizational membership is restricted and there are fewer groups making decisions and sharing resources. Bigger is not always better. A narrower agenda makes it easier to more deeply engage the commitment of union members and leaders.

A “less is more” approach helps avoid lowest common denominator positions where coalitions end up a “mile wide and an inch deep” and tend to only be able to agree on what they are against rather than what they are for.

This strategy runs counter to typical coalition practice where letterhead coalitions are popular. In the coalitions from Toronto and Chicago, it was only when the coalitions restricted membership that they built sufficient trust to keep organizations working together.

Similarly in Sydney, it was a coalition of only two organizations (the teachers union and parents federation) that built an unprecedented independent public education inquiry, staging hearings across the state, mobilizing parents and teachers in dozens of local communities, then winning \$250 million reforms to public education through a reduction in class sizes for young children.

Less is more requires coalition organizers to be strategic with “the less.” There is a need to identify partners that have the right mix of power, diversity, interest and potentially, unpredictability.

With less people around the table there is then an incentive to do “more” together – like building strong public relationships that understand personal and organizational

interests. In Chicago, this took the form of informal breakfast meetings where people got to know each other over several years before they started campaigning together.

2. Individuals matter

Despite coalitions being defined as an alignment of organizations, alliances live or die based on effective leadership from organizational leaders, champions inside of organizations and coalition coordinators and staff.

Their most important qualities are the ability to build bridges across different kinds of organizations and to act as campaign strategists.

Coalitions are more effective when leaders directly participate in coalition decision-making. In Sydney, the public education coalition had strong commitment and effective decision making because it was a table of leaders. In Toronto, the table of staff struggled at times to engage the unions. Strong leaders were supported by champions inside their ranks who helped develop and implement coalition strategy. Coalition coordinators held together organizational relationships. Coordinators smoothed over differences between organizations, and sought to mitigate union dominance when it arose.

3. Set an agenda

Coalitions are most successful at generating an agenda for social change when they work on issues that feed the direct strategic needs of their organizational partners and simultaneously connect to the public interest or common good.

Organizational self-interest is necessary but not sufficient to build a strong coalition.

In Canada, the health coalition struggled to connect with union self-interest.

Medicare, abstractly framed as a national icon, struggled to get attention above the noise of bargaining contracts.

At the same time, self-interest alone has a limited political impact. In Sydney a contract campaign by the teachers was dismissed by the media and politicians as unions just acting for themselves.

Self-interest opens up to public interest when a coalition can negotiate a shared set of demands that connect to diverse organizations. The public education alliance found a mutual self-interest in the issue of reduced class sizes. Teachers wanted smaller classes because it made their workload more manageable, and parents cared about smaller class sizes because they improved educational outcomes for their children.

Mutual self-interest can be very creative, where new agendas and demands can be developed. For instance, in Chicago, an anti-Wal-Mart site fight was translated into a campaign for a living wage ordinance for retail workers that covered union and non-union workers, helping the union and the coalition win massive public support. Coalitions are also most able to shift the political climate when their issues are positively framed demands (like a new demand for new class sizes or living wages), rather than negatively framed as “no campaigns” (like to no hospital privatization).

4. Plan, plan, plan

Sustained coalitions have long-term plans about how they will build and exercise their strengths. The Sydney public education coalition had a two year plan that included an independent inquiry, with reports released periodically in the lead up to a state election. Similarly the Chicago living wage campaign was timed to move its ordinance six months out from aldermanic elections. Disciplined planning ensures coalitions can deliver political pressure rather than just reacting to the media cycle.

5. Take multi-scaled action

Most issues cannot be solved at a single scale. Political and economic power is multi-scaled – traversing the local, regional, state, national and international, and to be most effective coalitions frequently need to act at multiple scales.

Coalitions were most effective at acting at multiple scales when they supported the establishment of local city or neighborhood coalitions. These local coalitions helped enhance their organizational strength and their political influence.

The Ontario Health Coalition established 40 coalitions around the province so it could run a campaign that collected hundreds of thousands of petitions and then move issues in a coordinated way across the province. Town based coalitions were led by union members, retired teachers and community activists, providing a space for organizational members to build their skills and capacity to campaign.

But multi-scaled coalitions need to be well managed. There is a need for a feedback loop between the different scales. It is not just about setting people up locally to run a state or national agenda, there needs to be local control. Second, there is a need for local coalitions to have some relative autonomy – to pursue local demands in conjunction with national/state demands.

This is a brief overview of some of the lessons about what it takes to build strong coalitions. These ideas are elaborated in much more detail in *[Power in Coalition: strategies for strong unions and social change](#)*, particularly in Chapter Five.