

Labor's Third Moment: The Case of Union Economic Development Initiatives in Western

New York

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Abstract

Some labor scholars suggest that the U.S. labor movement has recently entered its third historical moment – an era in which social unionism has overshadowed the craft unionism and industrial unionism that dominated previous epochs. Social unionism is often associated with labor-community coalitions aimed at assisting immigrant workers, supporting multi-union organizing drives, and passing living-wage ordinances. Yet it also includes “other coalition-based innovations in areas such as economic development” (Lowell Turner, in the introduction to *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds*, ILR Press, 2007, p. 15). In the late-1990s, a number of union leaders in Western New York united to engage in economic development activities; today, their Economic Development Group (EDG) operates various initiatives to foster shared regional prosperity. Since the emergence of labor’s third moment is a major social development in light of the challenges that have confronted U.S. unions and working families in recent decades, this paper examines the case of the EDG. Part I lays the foundation for a functional analysis (in the tradition of labor historian Robert F. Hoxie) of the EDG by tracing the organization’s origins and early development. Part II highlights the EDG’s strategic direction and the way it shapes the group’s initiatives. Part III considers the organization’s successes and limitations. Although the EDG has so far had only a modest impact on Western New York, it bears watching as a distinctive and innovative part of contemporary social unionism.

The author is professor of economics at Utica College and visiting fellow at Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He has followed the development of Western New York’s Economic Development Group since its inception in the late 1990s.