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Reading rival union responses to the localization of technical work in the US telecommunications industry

Introduction

Between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, the market repercussions of state deregulation, combined with technological change, sparked profound changes for employees in the heretofore highly unionized US telecommunications sector. The wholesale restructuring of the AT&T Bell System and the growth of competitor firms' market share led to declines in union density, yawning wage disparities among people doing similar work, and increased casualization and insecurity for holders of both customer service and technical jobs in the industry. However, these trends have manifested themselves somewhat differently for customer service and technical workers. While employers have typically followed a strategy of consolidating and regionalizing customer service and clerical labor, a significant amount of technical work, specifically the installation and maintenance of telecommunications infrastructure on customers' premises, has grown more fragmented, structured by local labor market conditions and institutions (see Batt and Keefe 1999, Keefe and Batt 2002).

This paper examines the responses that this industry-wide restructuring of technical labor has prompted within two unions – the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) – with an historic interest in representing telecommunications workers. With some success, the CWA has "scaled up," employing innovative national bargaining and organizing tactics in the centralized workplaces of the companies once affiliated with the AT&T Bell System and developing trans-national relationships with other countries' telecommunications unions. However, these strategies have

not prevented the CWA from losing ground as non-union competitors undercut the former Bell System affiliates (where most unionized workers are employed), as the former Bell affiliates themselves adopt increasingly draconian labor relations policies, and as labor markets for telecommunications technical employees become more localized. In contrast, the IBEW's inherent capacity to represent workers at the scale of the local labor market, and thus to take advantage of the localization of technical work in the industry, has created new opportunities for that union and helped its construction division to reverse a decades-long trend of decline. More important, it has ensured high-paying jobs with benefits and training for a large number of telecommunications technical workers despite the fact that their jobs have been restructured out of the industry's "core" and into a local regulatory realm dominated by small contractor firms operating at the scale of metropolitan regions.

In comparing the outcomes of the CWA's and IBEW's strategies in the post-deregulation telecommunications sector, the paper seeks to contribute to an ongoing dialogue in the geography literature about trade unions' efficacy in shaping economic and political landscapes, and about the roles that scale and spatiality play in such struggles. While my case provides support for the argument of labor geographers such as Herod (2001), Savage (1998, 2004) and Walsh (2000) that beneficial "spatial fixes" for workers may emanate from strategies consciously pursued at the local level, I show that the pursuit of the geographic or "horizontal" approach does not align the IBEW with the progressive social movements that many labor geographers associate with localized activism. The IBEW, rather than deliberately constructing scale, has embraced an organizing opportunity presented by a shift in industrial structure; its success in the new environment has less to do with deliberate choices than with the occurrence of circumstances favorable to the union's strengths. In contrast, the Communications Workers

union is more closely allied than the IBEW with progressive labor organizing, and its leaders have thought carefully about how to manipulate scale to bring about favorable outcomes for workers in the context of restructuring. But legal and institutional constraints that prevent the centralized, nationally focused CWA from adapting effectively to industry change have overwhelmed its attempts to re-scale.

Labor at the local scale

Spatial strategies – not only the construction of uneven geographies of employment through the segmentation of production, but also the weakening of worker institutions *in situ* via the decentralization and localization of industrial relations – are recognized as fundamental to late capitalism (Clark 1989, Harvey 1982, 1988, Massey 1984). Only relatively recently, however, have geographers investigated workers as participants in the making of economic landscapes. According to Herod (2003: 112-113), workers, while constrained within a capitalist spatial system, "make their own geographies" much as they make their own histories. The relatively new project of labor geography is dedicated to exploring how this happens.

In labor geography, the strategies and actions of unions figure prominently in accounts of workers shaping the space economy. As demonstrated in the work of Herod (1997, 1998, 2001), Jonas (1995, 1998) and Savage (1998, 2004), labor unions both act strategically at the scales "given" them by capital and produce new geographic scales and terrains in their efforts to organize new workers, advocate for existing members and, on occasion, to secure resources for a more expansive (and spatially defined) community. But within this literature the efficacy and advisability for unions of local vs. national or global strategies is vigorously debated. Some scholars have expressed skepticism about the durability of local efforts, asserting that

engagement at "the level of the nation-state and above" (Peck 1996, 257) is a far surer route to lasting gains for unions as capital globalizes and consolidates its power under neo-liberal governments. Others maintain that local gains, in addition to being more achievable, "may give [workers] purchase upon global economic and political processes" (Herod 2001, 52). To present this dialogue as a pitched argument over whether unions should privilege local activism over national or global activity would be inaccurate; labor geographers acknowledge the need for strategies at multiple scales and for strategic changes of scale in response to different conditions. As Savage (2004) points out, however, labor unions must also make choices about where to concentrate limited resources. Moreover, union leaders face pressure from members to conceive of organizing and bargaining from a local perspective even when national or international strategies might better match the scale at which capital is operating (Clark 1989). Often, geographers have concluded, the local has of necessity become the level at which labor acts. In this context, as Herod's work on longshoremen's unions shows, unions actively delineate and defend local geographies in ways that preserve or enhance their power vis a vis capital (2001).

While Herod focuses on workers in a traditionally unionized sector who attempt to defend worker prerogatives in the face of structural and technical change, other studies explore the geographic dimensions of recent efforts to organize beyond labor's established strongholds. Recent accounts of successful labor organizing among low-paid employees in the service sector emphasize the efficacy of an approach that draws on the uniqueness of localities, builds on place-based social solidarity and counters capital's tendency to view communities merely as sites of production. In place-defined campaigns, labor leaders coalesce with progressive local organizations, linking issues of worker well-being to the quality and sustainability of a place and its entire population. Advocacy for workers becomes advocacy for place, and geography

assumes an explicit class dimension. Contemporary successes by unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Hotel and Restaurant Workers (HERE) and construction trades locals have spurred interest in the expressly geographic aspects of "community unionism" (Gray 2004, Savage 1998, 2004, Safford and Locke 2002, Waldinger et al 1998, Walsh 2000).

Differences in union power at the local level

The labor movement in the United States is highly diverse, however, with some unions better positioned than others to exert influence at a local scale. Prior to the Taft-Hartley Labor Act of 1947, it was legal in the U.S. for unions to engage in multi-employer bargaining. Representing workers in many firms, spanning a local labor market, a single union local could negotiate market-wide wages and working conditions on behalf of unionized workers in a given occupation. Cobble, for example, documents local waitress unions which bargained with restaurant owners' associations in major metropolitan areas throughout the first half of the 20th century (1991b). Under this arrangement, workers joined unions first, on the basis of occupational identity ("waitress," "longshoreman," or "machinist") and then signed on with firms who belonged to employer associations which had signed a union contract. Unions and employer associations jointly funded training programs and health and retirement benefits funds that became available to all members in a given occupation within a labor market area. In this way, the terms of a union-management agreement were defined not at the level of a firm but at the level of a local labor market

The Taft-Hartley Act, however, proscribed multi-employer bargaining in most sectors, exempting only a few such as longshoring and the construction trades. Unions in industries

exempt from Taft-Hartley rules may recruit individual workers as members and organize employers across a local labor market, but most unions do not have this prerogative. Thus, while SEIU and HERE increasingly conceive of their organizing efforts as encompassing places as well as workplaces, they must organize and bargain with decontextualized, "non-placed" employers one by one. A cleaning contractor in Los Angeles is embedded within the political economy of that city, yet in the eyes of labor law it occupies a featureless landscape, sharing nothing in common with other cleaning contractors operating in the same labor market. That the janitors it employs may have much in common with other local janitors also goes unacknowledged in this worksite-bound model. In the construction trades, exemption from the Taft-Hartley bar on multi-employer bargaining enables both employer and worker interest groups to act as inhabitants of local places as well as on the basis of their connection to worksites.

At the time Taft-Hartley was enacted, many industries, including telecommunications, were nationally regulated bureaucracies consisting of monopoly or oligopoly employers. In this context, a union model based on worksite-based bargaining with reference to a centralized national pattern was functional. However, as American firms have become less vertically integrated and less subject to regulation, a union model predicated on the long-term stable attachment of workers to employers – and on employers' adherence to national norms and standards – has arguably become less applicable, and the proscription of a local multi-employer bargaining option for most workers more problematic. One strain of thought in the industrial relations literature maintains that where centralized norms and standards do not hold sway, and where employers are small and flexible with workers moving frequently among them, a form of representation that puts an employer association across the table from a bargaining agent that

represents workers across a labor market – also known as a "horizontal" or "geographic" approach – has many virtues over workplace-by-workplace bargaining (Cobble 1991 a & b, 1994, Herzenberg et al 1998, Wial 1993). In most instances, however, the geographic approach is not legal outside of the construction trades.

Workplace-based bargaining, scale and organizational culture

In addition to the legal factors that hamper unions from organizing at the local scale, there are cultural barriers. For many participants in an industrial relations system shaped by a New Deal-era vision of wall-to-wall organizing in factories or "plants," to organize workers locally by occupation would have been to extend an elitist legacy of craft unionism. The major industrial unions that developed during the New Deal period, under the guidelines established by the Wagner Act of 1934, identified "good jobs" and effective representation with the enforcement of national industry norms that applied to all workers across workplaces rather than local standards that applied to designated "craftspeople." Leaders of the industrial unions that emerged full force in the aftermath of Wagner aspired to uniformity across space through pattern bargaining with large, oligopolistic employers, often rejecting multi-employer contracts with small, locally owned firms as the arrangements of a fading era. The industrial unions of the New Deal era tended to be centrally controlled and bureaucratic; the contracts they negotiated were predicated not only on the existence of national standards but also on the long-term attachment of employees to firms, on full-time work, and on health and retirement benefits provided by employers, all aspects of a "New Deal Order" which also assumed an active managerial role for the federal government (see Lichtenstein 1989, 2002). Observing that both the organization of work and the character of the national state have changed in the late 20th century, many argue

that this model of unionism is at best unstable (Cobble 1994; Herzenberg et al 1998, Rogers 1995). The New Deal model, moreover, is not simply a legal system but also a set of shared cultural norms that shaped unions during that period.

From a theoretical perspective, the existence of distinct traditions in the American labor movement – a craft tradition linked to multi-employer bargaining at the local level and an industrial tradition linked with a strong focus on workplace-based bargaining, national norms and an active national state – has important implications for the understanding of how unions relate to scale. While labor organizations are indeed able to co-produce the space economy with those who control capital, their practices are informed and constrained (arguably more so than those of capital) by legal and cultural context. Geographers must understand variations in the scalar orientation of American unions as emanating not only from deliberate strategic choices but also from ingrained legal and historical tradition. The divergent approaches of the Communications Workers and the Electrical Workers to the representation of telecommunications technicians in the wake of deregulation illustrate this argument.

The geographic structure of representation and bargaining in telecommunications

In the course of the 20th century, the US telecommunications industry shifted from a competitive, fragmented and unregulated sector to a nationally regulated bureaucratic monopoly and, recently, part of the way back. As this section will show, the IBEW and CWA are products of their respective eras.

Labor organization in telecommunications began at the turn of the 20th century, during a relatively brief period between the expiration of Alexander Bell's patent on the telephone (which enabled hundreds of small local competitors to enter the industry) and the federal government's reconstitution of telecommunications as a private national monopoly. Between 1894 and 1913

outside linemen and inside wiremen working for the country's burgeoning population of independent telephone companies organized along craft lines under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor's International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. In organizing "telephone men," the IBEW, like most AF of L unions, emphasized craft specialization and skill as the primary source of workers' power. This power resided in local labor markets which IBEW controlled via the closed shop (Brooks 1977). As was typical of AFL unions at that time the IBEW excluded the non-native born, workers of color and women (Norwood 1990).

During the First World War, the IBEW made further inroads in the telephone industry, but by this time the independent companies had been absorbed; via an agreement between the Interstate Commerce Commission and American Telephone and Telegraph, the sector had undergone consolidation in 1913 as the wide-reaching but closely regulated AT&T Bell monopoly. The IBEW represented over 20,000 telephone employees in the Bell System at the height of the war. However, when the federal government temporarily assumed control of the nation's telephone and telegraph systems in 1918, its wartime power was used to undermine collective bargaining and to reinstate the open shop (Brooks 1977, Norwood 1990, Palladino 1991). After a series of strikes that greatly weakened the IBEW, in the early 1920s Bell System executives capitalized on their position to supplant union locals with company-sponsored employee representation committees. This marked the end of the IBEW's early dominance in telecommunications.

After the militancy of the World War I period, AT&T dedicated great effort to promoting labor-management harmony and to staving off unions both through a "welfare work" program (pensions, paid vacations, insurance) and through a decentralized and carefully managed system of "employee representation plans," (Keefe and Boroff 1994). Company unions predominated in

telecommunications from the early 1920s through the late 1930s as the AT&T Bell System expanded rapidly into a massive bureaucratic enterprise connected at every level with the administrative state. But with the US Supreme Court's 1937 affirmation of the Wagner Act and its prohibition on company unions, the Bell companies were forced to sever their relationships with the employee associations. Bell employees, building from the base of the employee committees, then organized fledgling union locals. (Schacht 1985). In 1939 a group of these committees, which represented plant and traffic employees from around the country, established an informal national network, calling themselves the National Federation of Telephone Workers, the predecessor to the CWA. Members of the new union eventually agreed to centralize the union's structure and ultimately to affiliate with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1949 (Barbash 1952, Schacht 1985).

The Communications Workers of America was the colossus and pattern-setter in telecommunications from 1949 until the US Department of Justice forced the breakup of the AT&T Bell System in 1984. At deregulation, the CWA functioned as the collective bargaining and dispute resolution agent for over 500,000 telecommunications workers, spread across the United States but all working for the same employer. These workers included technicians, operators and workers who manufactured telecommunications equipment (where AT&T had also held a monopoly until the mid-1970s). Bargaining was highly centralized: while local union leadership bargained with the 50 state-based Bell operating companies over work administration and work rules, wages and benefits for all Bell employees were negotiated at a national bargaining table. Historian John N. Schacht argues that the union's organizational structure evolved to mirror the centralized, monopolistic structure of the telecommunications industry (1985: 2-4). Organizing in the telecommunications sector was all but unnecessary, since new

employees were automatically absorbed into the CWA when they went to work for "the phone company."

The CWA: adaptation in a transforming landscape

With the erosion of national and state-level regulation, CWA's strategic position in the telecommunications industry changed dramatically from the late 1970s onward. Dozens of large and mid-sized non-union employers entered the market, competing with the descendants of the still-unionized Bell companies (AT&T and the incumbent local exchange carriers - ILECs - or "Baby Bells") to offer consumers long distance service, internet service and, after 1996, local telephone service. The competitive strategies of the new market entrants battling the ILECs are predicated on the low compensation packages they offer workers relative to what union workers earn at the former Bell firms. In reaction, when Bell System-descended companies such as SBC Communications and BellSouth have entered new market segments such as the provision of internet services, they have attempted to form subsidiaries that are either non-union or that create two-tiered wage and benefit structures within the union membership (Keefe and Batt 1997, 2002).

Another factor in the disintegration of the sector's unionized core arises from changes in the definition of ownership of the nation's communications infrastructure. While premises telecommunications infrastructure (wiring and equipment located in commercial and residential buildings) was the legal property of "the phone company" until 1984, the Bell breakup transferred ownership of this infrastructure into the hands of end users who now are responsible for its installation and maintenance. These end users may hire the incumbent local phone company to perform this work if they choose, but they often rely on specialized contractors

known as customer premises equipment installation (CPE) contractors. With the growth of the Internet and data applications in the early 1990s, CPE contractors developed expertise in such areas as the installation of data cabling and the design and installation of computer-based local area networks and video-conferencing systems. Eighty percent of wiring inside of customers' buildings is now performed by these contractors – largely local firms unaffiliated with the ILECS and not subject to state or federal regulation as telecommunications providers (Batt and Keefe 1999, 124).

Amidst these interrelated factors, union density in telecommunications plunged from 55.5 percent in 1983 to 27.7 percent in 1998 (Keefe and Batt 2002). CWA's telecommunications industry membership has also declined in absolute terms, from just over 500,000 to about 308,000 (**Figure 1**). The union responded with a variety of adaptive strategies which, because of its centralized structure, have tended to be best articulated and most robust at the national level. While collective bargaining no longer takes place on a national, industry-wide basis, CWA national and local leaders have used their leverage in the traditional wireline units of the ILECs to preserve its remaining members' prerogatives – employment security, high compensation, and advancement based on seniority. The CWA has retained power at the ILECs for two main reasons: first, because the former Bell affiliates continue to dominate local telephone service despite the introduction of competition into local telephone markets, and second because the union has cannily insisted on favorable bargaining outcomes as a condition of its support of the ILECs' agendas before the state utility commissions that continue to regulate their activities (Keefe and Batt 2002). Though employment and union membership have declined at the "Baby Bells" and their descendants since divestiture, this has come about largely through attrition and reassignment rather than through layoffs, and jobs in the local wireline segment, particularly for

technicians, continue to offer the non-college-educated a high standard of living (see Batt et al. 2000).

CWA has also used leverage at the ILECs to keep regulated telecommunications work unionized. Language in CWA contracts with former Bell affiliates commits ILECs to reversing previously implemented subcontracting arrangements, to avoiding subcontracting in the future, and to providing members with access to the "telecommunications jobs of the future" (such as those involved with business data services and Voice Over Internet Protocol) rather than classifying them as management positions (DuRivage 2000). Further, it commits the companies to remain neutral in the face of CWA organizing drives at their new wireless and cable subsidiaries, and to allow organization to take place via "card check" rather than the more arduous National Labor Relations Board election process (Bahr 2000). "Bargaining to organize," as it is known, has led most notably to the representation of 10,000 employees at Cingular Wireless, a joint venture of SBC and BellSouth. CWA has used what is left of its national, industry-wide influence to expand its membership in growing occupational niches.

As they have pioneered the strategy of "bargaining to organize" at the ILECs, CWA leaders have also thrown the union's support behind localized initiatives to upgrade the skills of incumbent technicians. Recognizing the growing importance of computer proficiency to productivity in telecommunications, national-level officials formed the National Education and Training Trust (CWA/NETT), which offers incumbent members instruction leading to advanced certifications (such as data cabling and Cisco Systems' A+ and Cisco Certified Network Associate or CCNA) at a favorable cost through their union locals. Placing high-tech learning labs in local union halls, national officials have hoped to build locality- and occupationally-based identity and solidarity that will remain with technicians even if they are bound for positions

outside the unionized core. At the same time, union leaders offer a kind of provisional union membership to non-CWA members (such as web designers, programmers and systems integrators, including independent contractors) through a program called Net-Pro that enables them to take CWA-sponsored on-line courses at a discount, with the hope that they will eventually become advocates for CWA representation in their workplaces. This initiative, while largely an internet-based endeavor that sees a "virtual" community as its constituency, has found a geographic expression in WashTech, a loose CWA-affiliated alliance of high-technology workers in the Puget Sound area.

Finally, CWA has "scaled up," developing ties with telecommunications unions in other countries through the Switzerland-based Union Network International (UNI). CWA executive vice president Larry Cohen is the president of UNI's Telecom Sector interest group. Beyond simply connecting union members globally to promote dialogue and cooperation, UNI Telecoms, as it is known, has developed model regulatory principles which its affiliates adopt and advocate at the nation-state level (UNI Telecoms 2004). UNI Telecoms' international regulatory agenda emphasizes the importance of continued national involvement in telecoms regulation not only to preserve jobs but also to further the goals of universal telephone service and access to broadband. Accordingly, the institution makes the case in published policy statements and press releases that the "narrow promotion of competition" under the deregulatory policies now unfolding in many countries takes place at the expense of investment, quality and, implicitly, employees' and customers' common well-being. This international strategy resonates with one described by labor geographers in local-scale research on unions: namely, the promotion of public regulation of collective consumption goods as a community issue (see Savage 2004).

Legacies of a national-scale approach

Despite CWA's innovation at several scales, however, an increasing proportion of telecommunications workers fall outside the union's ambit. While it successfully affiliated the 34,000 member Newspaper Guild in 1997, the union has not organized many "information workers" in firms other than Bell System descendants in the aftermath of deregulation. I argue that this failure to capture membership in new industry segments is attributable both to legal constraints that have limited its ability to organize geographically and to its continuing identity as the national union of "the Bell System" at a time when the organization of work in the industry has localized and flexibilized.

Recent conflicts within the union over local initiatives illustrate the potentially limiting features of the embedded "Bell System" legacy. In Northern California, Cleveland and Seattle, where some CWA locals represent employees of customer premises equipment (CPE) contractors, they have encountered opposition. "Many people believe we should be trying to push telecommunications work being done by contractors back into the core of the industry," said one interviewee, "and thus there has been tremendous resistance within CWA to what amounts to facilitating the disintegration of the industry into smaller shops." (Phillips interview 2000). Thus, attempts to adapt to the localization of telecommunications technical work have been overcome by resistance on the part of those who see it as conflicting with the union's national anti-subcontracting strategy. Similar resistance befell union attempts to pilot local "employment centers" in Ohio and Southern California whose purpose was to refer union members to CPE contractors on a temporary basis, thus giving the union a new role as a species of high-wage, benefits-providing temporary employment agency (Anderson 2000 interview, Philips 2000 interview, duRivage 2000). This experiment was discontinued in early 2000, again

in part because of resistance on the part of national leaders who opposed the union's tacit cooperation in the subcontracting of work from the core of the industry.

With respect to training, in contrast, CWA's national officials have been pioneers, but local leaders' and members' reluctance to retreat from national Bell System norms has proven problematic. Most local CWA members have not responded enthusiastically to training initiatives sponsored by the union. This is in part because they often are connected with a proposed switch from seniority-based to skill-based advancement: employees at the ILECs, accustomed to being covered under broad national contracts, have proven reluctant to let new local arrangements around training and advancement alter established bargaining and contract management practices. In addition, members have not flocked to local union halls for training, implying that they do not identify strongly with their locals as place-based institutions. Those who have participated in CWA/NETT courses have done so largely on-line. Another reason CWA locals have been slow to embrace training initiatives (not only training for members but also outreach efforts to non-members and to disadvantaged workers in the community) is that they make claims on resources many feel would be better spent on bread-and-butter issues. One interviewee suggested that this reflects a disconnect between what he views as the "Bell-centric" attitude of the majority of CWA's telecommunications sector membership and his ideal of a union local that identifies as part of its local community.

A perhaps equally significant factor in CWA's post-divestiture difficulties is the lack of a legal framework that would enable it to adapt structurally to the localization of technical work in an efficient way. In concert with the administrative framework jointly created in during the New Deal by government, business and union officials, the structures and processes of CWA are

centered on workplaces rather than labor markets, presuming members' "long-term, continuous, on-site and full-time commitment to a single employer" (Cobble 1994, 286), in this case AT&T. In the Northern California, Cleveland and Seattle cases discussed above, CWA locals can represent employees of CPE contractors but they cannot engage in multi-employer bargaining with contractor associations as their counterparts in the building trades can. CWA contractors in these places do pay into joint funds that are used to provide training to union members; but efforts to create joint funds for health care and retirement benefits have encountered legal and logistical difficulties. The ease of multi-employer organizing, bargaining and benefits provision has worked to the advantage of the IBEW, as described in the next section.

The IBEW: Re-entering the industry with a geographic model

Like many building trades unions, the local construction affiliates of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers have traditionally had a reputation both inside and outside the American labor movement for their exclusivity and conservatism. Dominated by white men of northern European extraction, they have routinely excluded women and minorities. They also have a reputation for protecting high wages and benefits for existing members at the expense of organizing new members; from the 1950s through the 70s, even as the economy prospered and construction work expanded, construction electricians' locals stubbornly restricted access to the trade. By the 1980s, these practices had contributed to steep declines in both the number of IBEW construction members and in the union's market share in electrical construction (Palladino 1991, Condit et al. 1998, Lewis and Mirand 1998).

It might thus been seen as unlikely that IBEW construction locals would be able organize workers in the fast-paced telecommunications industry as it restructures. But in the past decade, increasing representation among customer premises telecommunications contractors has

contributed to a steady increase in the IBEW's construction industry membership (**Figure 2**). As of June 2000, between 11,000 and 12,000 telecommunications installers worked for member firms in the National Electrical Contractors Association (Borden 2000). This represents 16% of the membership growth in the union's construction division since 1995. Locals active in the telecommunications arena, typically located in metropolitan areas with strong union density, claim substantial telecommunications membership alongside their members who do traditional "high-voltage" electrical construction work (**Figure 3**).

A critical factor in the IBEW's success with small telecommunications contractors has been its ability to respond effectively to dynamics in local labor markets as the industry restructures. As noted above, an increasing proportion of technical work in telecommunications is now performed by single-proprietor contractors who relate directly to property owners with voice and data transmission infrastructure on their premises. Drawing on their experience in the construction trades, IBEW locals are able to focus on these new local labor market conditions. They negotiate a master contract covering an entire market with multiple employers (which are in turn organized into a contractors association, usually a chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association, or NECA) and they work with those employers to maximize local opportunities for union work. Contract arrangements, which are mediated through local hiring halls, are based on a labor-market-wide bargaining unit. This structure is better suited than worksite-based bargaining to the volatile and highly local nature of customer premises equipment installation, in which employees frequently move among employers and employers add and shed workers frequently according to the constantly fluctuating volume of their workload.

Multi-employer bargaining provides the organizational infrastructure for multi-employer careers. Through the hiring hall, members of an occupation are dispatched to employers, perhaps working many different "jobs" in a single year. But they carry benefits and privileges – such as a negotiated wage, health benefits, and pensions – from employer to employer within a local labor market. When demand for labor is high, as it was in premises telecommunications until recently, this produces not job security at a particular worksite but employment security across worksites. Employers benefit from the ability to vary the sizes of their workforces as competitive conditions demand it.

Within this paradigm, a second key aspect of the IBEW's local approach is the union's participation in the skill development of the local labor supply. In partnership with the National Association of Electrical Contractors (NECA), IBEW has developed training and apprenticeship resources specific to CPE firms. A Telecommunications Installer-Technician Apprenticeship Program, approved by the federal government in 1998, is now in use in over a hundred locations across the country. As of the summer of 2002, there were 8,000 apprentices enrolled in telecommunications training programs, out of a total of about 65,000 IBEW apprentices overall (Coleman interview 2002). The guarantee of a skilled workforce has increased the union's appeal among telecommunications contractors, whose job is to install increasingly sophisticated data systems on their customers' premises.

In addition to the portable training that IBEW members carry with them among employers within a local labor market, they carry health and pension benefits. Under the occupational model, benefits are organized through joint plans that cover all union members who work in a given locality. Employers reap the advantages of this as well, since it enables them to

hire workers on a flexible, “just-in-time” basis and still provide them with health and pension benefits and even paid vacations.

The ability to provide access to the collective goods of health and retirement insurance is thus a third factor in the success of local partnerships between unions and contractors and in the general perception that the union is serving a general public purpose as a local institution, a purpose that extends beyond the boundaries of an individual workplace. Safford and Locke (2002) have argued that social embeddedness, or a set of ties that enables unions to build trust and legitimacy among varied local stakeholders, is a defining factor differentiating unions that have “rebounded” in the 1990s from those that have continued to decline.

The IBEW’s success at representing technical workers in the unregulated telecommunications arena is accounted for in part by national-level union officials’ effort from the late 1980s forward to instigate a shift away from an insular, “country club” culture and toward a culture more open to organizing and welcoming new members. In 1990, officials at the union’s Washington, DC headquarters initiated the successful COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education and Training) program, geared toward changing members’ “outmoded and prejudicial thinking about organizing the non-union workforce” (Lewis and Mirand 1998: 299), and this program is credited with helping to boost the union’s construction industry membership in the following decade. Nevertheless, the IBEW’s capacity to take an adaptive, “geographic” approach to organizing and representing telecommunications workers has arguably been the decisive factor in the union’s expansion in that sector. After being supplanted by a centralized industrial union at mid-century, IBEW locals re-entered the industry in the 1980s and 90s, with a strategy based on fulfilling telecommunications employers’ and

telecommunications technical employees' needs at the local scale. In metropolitan areas with relatively high union densities, they have been able do this.

Community unionism?

IBEW locals' craft union heritage, with its emphasis on control of local labor markets, has enabled them to take a geographical approach to organizing in a transforming industry sector. IBEW's activities have ensured that technical workers who now fall outside the core of the telecommunications sector continue to have (though on far different terms) middle-class wages, benefits, and representation in the workplace. As labor market intermediaries for telecommunications technicians, as well as in their analogous roles with conventional electricians, IBEW locals have made some progress in recent years in reaching out to workers that the union has traditionally excluded. An example of increasing progressivism within IBEW is Local 164 in New Jersey. This statewide local has come to view its telecommunications technician apprentice program as an opportunity to offer training and high-wage work to people who would otherwise have limited means of securing them. Local 164 currently has a grant from the New Jersey Department of Education for a "Youth Transition to Work" initiative, which enrolls students at vocational high schools in a pre-apprenticeship program. The union helps teachers prepare their students for the IBEW apprenticeship, and also coordinates site visits and field trips to give the students an orientation to the industry and the union. As of 2001, fifty of the participants in the program had entered the telecommunications technician apprenticeship, which starts at $11.48/hour plus benefits and leads to progressively higher wages and, eventually, journeyman technician status. The program has helped to build greater trust between the union, local vocational schools and community-based institutions like alternative schools

with which the vocational schools frequently partner, and its existence makes it more likely that a union-sponsored career path will be available to a wider variety of high school graduates than has traditionally been the case.

But Local 164 is the exception. In many ways, the IBEW remains a conservative and exclusive institution. Evidence from two other IBEW locals examined for this research (in Los Angeles and the Bay Area respectively) suggests that programs like Local 164's are exceptional. While they cite efforts to build relationships with educational institutions, community groups and "non-traditional employment for women" initiatives, representatives of the Los Angeles and Northern California locals do not view recruitment into their training programs as a strategy to build new social and institutional ties in their regions. Nor are any of the locals connected with community work to promote social and economic justice or to encourage solidarity outside of the employment context. Ultimately, the very "localness" of IBEW's locals makes it unlikely that the union will become a powerhouse of social activism. National-level leaders have broken ground in the last decade with the COMET initiative and with a standardized national approach to telecommunications training (which they have undertaken in collaboration with the industry association NECA) but according to one international union representative, "[Locals] answer to the international office but they still get to do what they want." Embedded in traditions and decades-old political alliances, any remain steeped in the insular practices that characterized the union through the 1980s, and their power is derived from this entrenchment.

Furthermore, the ethos of many IBEW locals is grounded in hidebound and arguably counter-productive attachment to a craft identity. While representatives of the international argue that a separate occupational classification and separate skill-specific training for telecommunications technicians are crucial to the successful organization of new firms in

telecommunications, many assert that communications work should be done by journeyman electricians, and thus resist the formation of both distinct training programs and distinct organizing programs for telecommunications. They want to maintain the new work as the province of their craft as they defined it at the turn of the century. Interviewees associated with Local 11 in Los Angeles argue that even now, telecommunications remains a low priority in the local because of an "inside wiring mentality" that persists among union officials and leading contractors alike. IBEW locals in several cities have also devoted time and resources to fomenting ongoing jurisdictional conflict with the CWA over telecommunications work, attempting to keep firms whose workers are represented by CWA out of the CPE market altogether using such tactics as intimidation and, reportedly, sabotage of infrastructure installed by CWA technicians.

Conclusion

Struggles to define and control the geographic scale at which workers and firms negotiate have occurred in almost every industry in the context of post-Fordist globalization and deregulation. What is exceptional about the U.S. telecommunications sector is the existence of two rival unions – the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the Communications Workers of America (CWA) – which present divergent models of organizing and representation. While the Communications Workers union dominated in telecommunications for most of the 20th century, the restructuring of the industry, which entailed the decentralization and localization (or re-localization) of many technical jobs away from the "core" of the sector, presented the institution with many challenges. As a union which traditionally negotiated for telecommunications workers with a single regulated employer at a national bargaining table,

CWA has used its power with Bell-descended employers to counter, as best it can, the industry trends that have followed deregulation. The CWA's structure and culture have biased the union toward national strategies, and additionally its work over the past decade has increasingly focused on the development of an international solidarity movement with telecommunications unions in Europe and Central and South America. But despite this effort to both adapt at the national level and to "scale up," CWA's telecommunications membership has declined. For nearly half a century, the union was concerned with creating standard, uniform national wages and working conditions across the industry and employed organizing and bargaining strategies that strove for uniformity across space. Particularities of and distinctions among local labor markets did not figure into this strategy. Union officials are now committed to recapturing the "wall-to-wall" organization across the entire communications industry that they once had in the Bell System (Keefe and Boroff 1994, Keefe and Batt 1997, Bahr 1998); their challenge is that the industry's walls have become much less clearly defined as work has become more flexible and employers, on the technical side at least, have become smaller, more numerous and more subject to the dynamics of local labor markets.

In contrast, telecommunications restructuring has created opportunities for the IBEW, the craft union originally responsible for organizing the industry in the late 19th century. Changes that have taken place since deregulation – in particular the contracting out of work – have positioned the IBEW as a viable representative of telecommunications employees. IBEW construction locals, with a structure and culture forged predominantly in local construction markets at the turn of the century, have used a multi-employer, labor-market-wide approach to gain new members. As a result, deregulation and devolution of the employment relationship to the local level has not led to the weakening of organized labor's influence on wages and working

conditions or to the transformation of "primary labor market" jobs to poorly paying, "dead-end" work.

However, it cannot be argued that the IBEW has deliberately "constructed scale" in this environment. Rather, the union has embraced a new organizing opportunity presented by a shift in industrial structure which favors its traditional strengths. Thus, the pursuit of the geographic or "horizontal" approach does not align the IBEW with the progressive social movements that many labor geographers associate with localized activism. National leaders have made some progress by encouraging locals to be less exclusive and more open to viewing telecommunications technology as a "craft" distinct from that of a conventional journeyman electrician. However, the culture of turn-of-the-century craft unionism remains very much alive within the institution. As Cobble notes in her work on waitress unions, craft solidarity, an approach which "emphasize[s] the occupational identity of the worker and tie[s] union power to….the occupation" (1991b, 9) can be a source of self-esteem and power for union members. It may also give rise to jurisdictional conflict, limit workplace flexibility and become an arena in which to act on racial or ethnic bias. In this case, it has by many accounts led IBEW members to use destructive tactics against members of a rival union.

The case described in this paper suggests that it labor geographers analyzing unions' efforts to "construct scale" must consider that notions of scale inscribed in law and custom have strong pull. The differences between CWA's and IBEW's status under the Taft-Hartley Act, as well as their different relationships to the "New Deal Order," create the fundamentally distinct legal, administrative and cultural environments in which they work. The strategies and practices of each institution – the CWA's national focus and reluctance to give up "Bell System" norms for example – are a result of their immersion over decades in these environments. Union

protagonists construct scale deliberately, to be sure, but their efforts are circumscribed by the parallel scale-constructing strategies of state actors as well as corporate ones.

This case also resonates with a current debate in the U.S. labor movement over jurisdictional conflict among unions. With union membership at a low ebb, many are criticizing inter-organizational rivalries within the movement, maintaining that they preoccupy leaders and cause fragmentation of organizing and bargaining power. Some labor leaders have suggested mergers or mandatory collaboration among unions representing workers in similar industries, or of similar occupations; one restructuring proposal would merge the AFL-CIO's 58 international unions into 15-20 "mega-unions" responsible for particular economic sectors such as health care, construction and airlines (see Bai 2005, Bernstein 2004, Moberg 2005) This case suggests that the CWA and IBEW each bring valuable strengths to the project of representing technical workers in a restructured telecommunications sector, and that if the rivals were to collaborate, a combined effort might surpass the separate and competing efforts now being waged. It remains to be seen, however, whether the "mega-unions" advocated by reformers would have flexibility to navigate at multiple scales, negotiating multi-employer agreements locally in some cases while pursuing national or international strategies where employers operate as national or multi-national entities. This study thus concludes with a theme that recurs frequently in the industrial relations literature: the need for a national labor law framework in the United States that better reflects the nature of 21st century workplaces.

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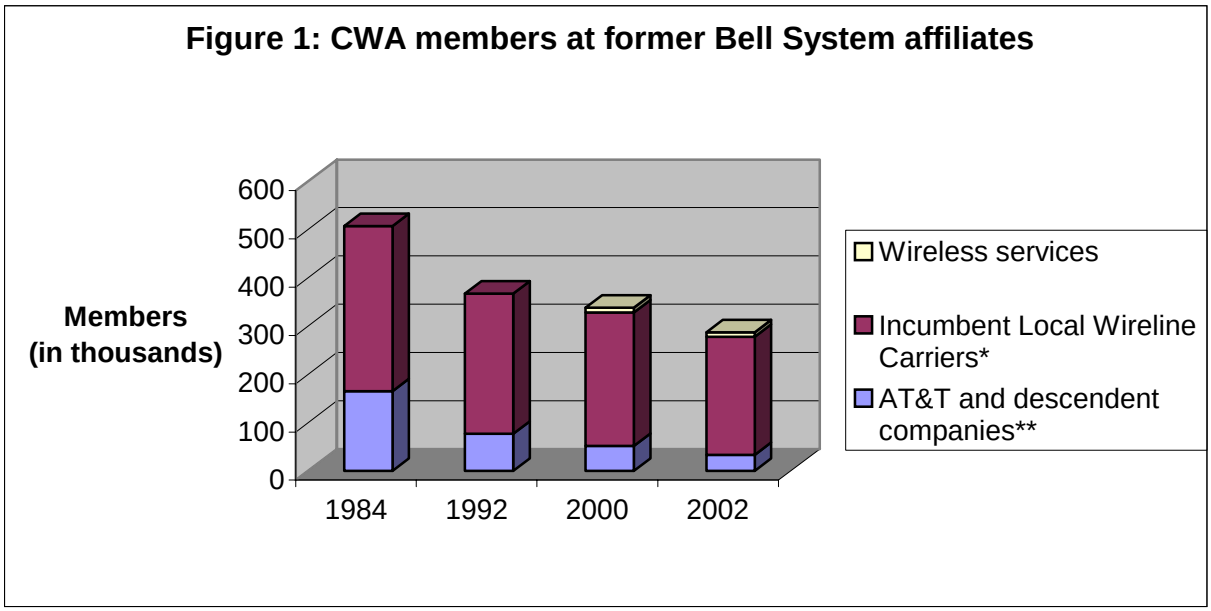
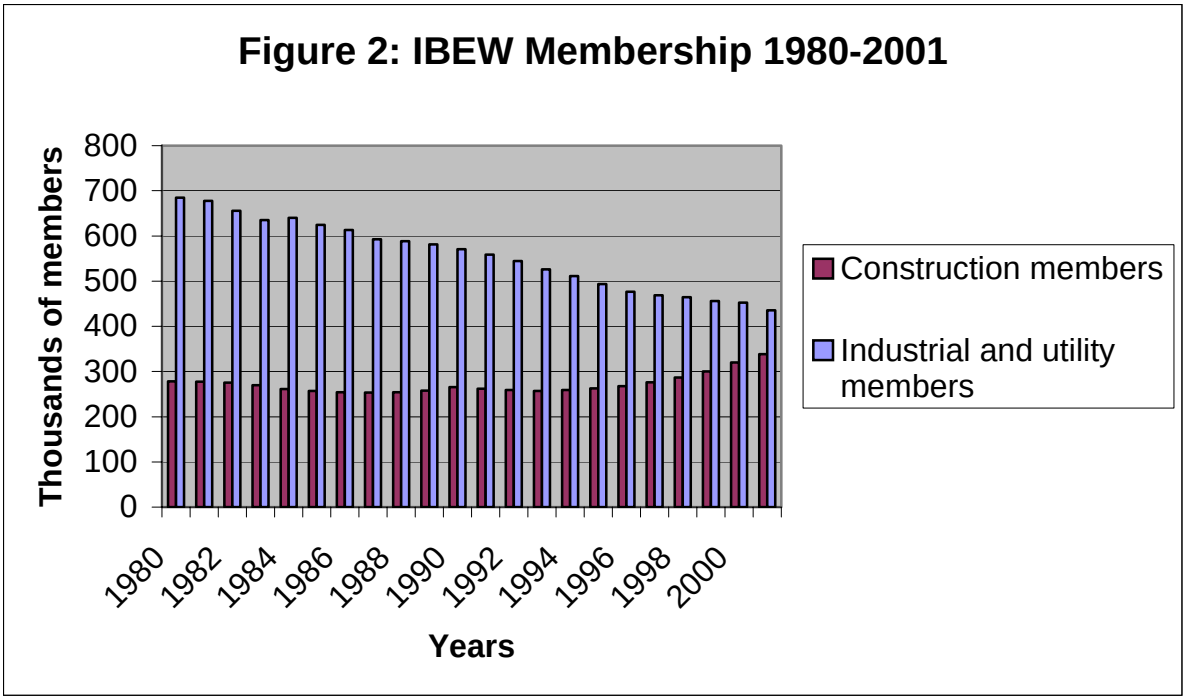
FIGURES



*** At divestiture, the seven Regional Bell Operating Companies. Today, SBC, Verizon, BellSouth and Qwest (see Chapter 3). As shown in the yellow band at the top of the columns for 2000 and 2002, CWA now represents about 10,000 employees of Cingular wireless, a collaboration between SBC and BellSouth.**

**** In 1996, Lucent Technologies spun off from AT&T; in 2000, Avaya Communications spun off from Lucent. 2000 figures include AT&T and Lucent. 2002 figures include AT&T, Lucent and Avaya.**

Source: Author's estimates based on data from Communications Workers of America, Keefe and Boroff 1994, and Keefe, personal communication, 2002.



Source: International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

Figure 3: IBEW construction locals' participation in the premises telecommunications market

	COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY MEMBERS	TELECOMMUNICATIONS HOURS WORKED, YEAR 2000	CIRCUMSTANCES OF ENTRY INTO TELECOMMUNICATIONS WORK	COMMUNITY OUTREACH
LOCAL 11, PASADENA, CA	300	300 K	Local originally had "sound and communications" employers under contract – did alarm systems, nurse call, closed-circuit television. Then, "many of our big electrical contractors got into teledata." But this was not until the mid-1990s, so the local "missed the ball" to some extent. Difficult in local anti-union environment to organize contractors who were not previously NECA electrical contractors; difficult to convince inside wiremen in the local that telecom is a separate occupation.	Recruit from occupational centers run by the school district and from trade-oriented community colleges.
LOCAL 164, PARAMUS, NJ	1250	2.5 million	Early entrant - began organizing telephone interconnect companies in the late 1970s because they recognized opportunity presented by Carterfone decision. Began conducting industry-specific training in the 1980s. For the first 10-12 years, bottom-up organizing, "but now contractors are asking for appointments."	State-funded youth transition to work program has institutionalized a connection between the local, vocational high schools and their community-based partners.
NINE BAY AREA LOCALS	2550	4 million	Began in 1992 with some electrical contractors starting low-voltage divisions. Built apprenticeship program and were ready to organize purely VDV contractors when the market picked up in the mid-1990s (went from 30-135 contractors in nine years)	Some outreach to regional occupational centers and school districts – internship programs for high school students; on-site ESL classes

APPENDIX: Interviews with CWA and IBEW Representatives

Communications Workers of America (CWA)	
INTERVIEWEE AND LOCATION	DATE/S
Paul Anderson, Director of Training, Washington, DC	August 20, 1999 (phone) November 19, 1999 (in person)
Nancy Biagini, District Representative, San Jose, CA	February 9, 2001 (in person)
Scotty Cairney, Next Step Program Director, District 1, New York, NY	September 6, 2001 (in person)
Kevin Celata, Director of Training, Washington, DC	September 6, 2001 (phone) July 15, 2002 (phone)
Jack Eichinger, Cisco Mini-Lab Proctor, District 1	March 6, 2002 (in person)
Karin Hart, Northern California Telecommunications Apprenticeship Coordinator	December 8, 2000 (phone) February 2, 2001 (in person) October 30, 2001 (phone)
Luther Jackson, Newspaper Guild CWA Local 39098, San Jose, CA	February 8, 2001 (in person) September 4, 2001 (phone)
Jim Landers, Northern California Education and Training Center	December 8, 2000 (phone) January, 31, 2001 (phone)
Rick Mastropolo, Consultant, District 1, New York, NY	July 11, 2002 (phone)
Yelena Melikian, Director, Business and Industry Training Center, New York City Technical College (collaborator on Next Step program)	September 7, 2001 (in person)
Judy Medcalf, Cisco Mini-lab Proctor, Local 9400, Paramount, CA	September 19, 2001 (phone) October 12, 2001 (in person)
Ed Phillips, President, Local 4340, Cleveland, OH	April 24, 1999 (phone)
Reed Roberts, District Representative, Seattle, WA	July 29, 2002 (phone)
Louis Rocha, President, Local 9423	October 31, 2001 (phone)
Bob Shamas, Vice President, Local 9400, Paramount, CA	February 15, 2001 (in person)
Julie Short, Administrator, Communications Apprenticeship and Training Committee Training Center, North Olmstead, OH	July 2, 2002 (phone)
Jimmy Tarlau, Director of High-Tech Organizing, CWA – Washington, DC	July 15, 2002 (phone)
Ellen West, District Representative, Los Angeles, CA	February 27, 2001 (in person)

INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF ELECTICAL WORKERS (IBEW)	
INTERVIEWEE AND LOCATION	DATE/S
Gus Alfaro and Darrell Brown, Sound and Communications Organizers	February 27, 2001 (in person) October 10, 2001 (in person)
Mark Ayers, Director, Construction Trades Department, IBEW, Washington, DC	July 10, 2002 (phone)
Ron Burke, Director of Organizing, , Construction Trades Department, IBEW, Washington, DC	July 17, 2002 (phone)
Terry Coleman, IBEW-NECA National Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee Alcoa, Tennesee	July 2, 2002 (phone)
Robert Corona, Organizing Director, Local 11, Pasadena, CA	July 2, 2002 (phone)
Vince Cosentino, Director, Northern California Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee, San Jose, CA	February 8, 2001 (in person) October 23, 2001 (phone)
Mary Germershausen, Director of Systems Technology, National Association of Electrical Contractors (NECA)	December 1, 2000 (e-mail) December 5, 2000 (by phone)
Alfredo Lopez, People-Link, New York, NY	July 15, 2002 (phone)
Michael Merrill, Director of Education, NJ State AFL-CIO	September 20, 2001 (phone)
Keith Misciagna, Grant Coordinator, Local 164 Youth Transition To Work program, Paramus, NJ	September 27, 2001 (phone)
Tom Misciagna, Assistant Business Manager, Local 164, Paramus, NJ	August, 18, 1998 (in person) June 14, 2000 (in person)
AJ Pearson, Director, IBEW-NECA National Joint Apprenticeship Training Commission	April 27, 2001 (phone)
Brooks Powell, President National Electrical Contractors Association Southern California Chapter, Pasadena, CA	10/11/01 (in person)
Kevin Tumminia, Field Representative and Organizer, Local 6, San Francisco, CA	July 16, 2002 (phone)