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BEYOND THE BARGAINING TABLE: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS AND PRACTICAL ANALYSIS OF LABOR–COMMUNITY COALITIONS AND THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE FORMS IN THE UNITED STATES

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical background and practical dimensions of labor–community coalitions in the United States as an alternative institutional model of social dialogue. It addresses a pressing research problem—the decline in the effectiveness of traditional union mechanisms in post-industrial societies and the need to develop more flexible and inclusive forms of labor representation. The study argues that labor–community alliances, which merge the interests of workers and civil society actors, can significantly influence both public policy and corporate governance by establishing new, participatory formats for dialogue and collective action.

The article examines two emblematic case studies: the anti-sweatshop movement, which transformed localized labor conflicts into a global campaign for corporate accountability; and the California home-care worker organizing campaign, which united labor representatives and care recipients in a joint struggle for improved working conditions and service quality. The analysis focuses on practical strategies such as civic mobilization, ethical consumerism, university-based activism, engagement with human rights organizations, and local-level political advocacy. These coalitions are shown to empower workers in sectors marked by informality, precarity, and a lack of institutional protection, providing an avenue for democratic participation and social justice.

In addition, the article highlights the broader societal impact of such alliances, emphasizing their capacity to act as a bridge between marginalized labor groups and formal institutions of power. By channeling grassroots demands through institutional frameworks, labor–community coalitions foster new forms of solidarity, accountability, and collective agency. Their involvement in shaping economic, gender, and social equity agendas illustrates the adaptability of coalition-based models to contemporary challenges such as globalization, weakened state regulation, and labor market fragmentation. The findings are relevant not only for U.S. labor policy but also for transitional and developing countries seeking to modernize their systems of social dialogue and participatory governance.

Key words: Labor–community coalitions, social dialogue, industrial relations, home-care workers, anti-sweatshop movement, collective bargaining, democratic transition, corporate responsibility, civil society, ethical consumerism.

СОЦІАЛЬНИЙ ДІАЛОГ ЗА МЕЖАМИ КОЛЕКТИВНИХ ПЕРЕГОВОРІВ: СТАНОВЛЕННЯ КОАЛІЦІЙ ПРАЦІВНИКІВ І ГРОМАДСЬКОСТІ У СПОЛУЧЕНИХ ШТАТАХ

У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз історичних передумов і практичних аспектів

формування коаліцій між профспілками та громадськими організаціями у Сполучених Штатах Америки. Розглянуто актуальну наукову проблему – еволюцію форм соціального діалогу за межами класичних рамок колективних переговорів у контексті трансформації індустріальних відносин у постіндустріальному суспільстві. Обґрунтовано, що трудово-громадські коаліції є ефективною формою соціальної взаємодії, здатною впливати як на державну політику, так і на корпоративне управління, зокрема через створення альтернативних інституцій представництва трудових інтересів у секторах, де відсутні сталі профспілкові структури.

На прикладі кампанії проти експлуатації у швейній промисловості (anti-sweatshop movement) та кампанії з організації працівників сфери догляду в Каліфорнії (home-care workers) досліджено механізми побудови коаліцій, заснованих на взаємній довірі, моральній легітимності та інклюзивному представництві. Акцент зроблено на таких інструментах, як громадянська мобілізація, етичне споживання, університетський активізм, партнерство з правозахисними структурами та локальне політичне лобіювання. Стаття доводить, що подібні альянси не лише сприяють покращенню умов праці, а й створюють передумови для ширшої участі громадян у формуванні трудової політики. Наголошено на значенні коаліційного підходу для сучасних країн, що перебувають у стані демократичного транзиту або соціальних перетворень, зокрема з фрагментованою структурою зайнятості. Матеріал буде корисним для дослідників сфери трудових відносин, соціального діалогу, управління та публічної політики. Окрема увага приділяється здатності трудово-громадських коаліцій виступати як міст між маргіналізованими працівниками та політичними інституціями, формуючи нові практики солідарності, підзвітності та колективної дії. Через залучення громадських рухів до процесів соціального діалогу ці коаліції відкривають нові канали впливу на економічну справедливість, гендерну рівність і доступ до соціальних гарантій. У контексті глобалізації коаліційна модель репрезентації дозволяє адаптувати соціальне партнерство до викликів транснаціонального ринку праці та зростаючої інституційної гнучкості.

Ключові слова: коаліції працівників і громадськості, соціальний діалог, індустріальні відносини, працівники сфери догляду, антисвітшоп-рух, колективні переговори, демократичний транзит, корпоративна відповідальність, громадянське суспільство, етичне споживання.

Problem statement. Despite the growing interest in labor relations and social dialogue in international academic discourse, the role of labor-community coalitions as a distinct form of institutional interaction remains insufficiently explored. Contemporary public administration and labor sociology often overlook the theoretical grounding and practical mechanisms through which such alliances influence industrial relations and social policy development, especially in non-traditional labor environments.

In the context of fragmented employment, declining union density, and the rise of precarious labor, the lack of clear analytical frameworks for evaluating the strategic potential of labor-community coalitions hinders the understanding of new

models of social negotiation. This gap is particularly noticeable in discussions surrounding informal sectors, care work, and community-driven advocacy.

The evolution of coalition-based social dialogue in the United States – exemplified by anti-sweatshop movements and home-care worker campaigns – calls for a rethinking of classical notions of collective bargaining, representation, and labor power. These shifts demand comprehensive research that integrates historical, political, and institutional perspectives to assess the broader implications of these alliances for governance, public procurement, and corporate accountability.

Moreover, the growing complexity of labor relations in globalized economies (characterized by dispersed production chains and weakened regulatory capacity) requires renewed attention to alternative forms of worker representation and civic solidarity. Without such analysis, public policy risks remaining reactive, fragmented, and disconnected from the realities of marginalized worker populations.

Analysis or recent research and publications. The phenomenon of labor-community coalitions and their impact on the evolution of social dialogue has been addressed in various international academic works, particularly in the fields of labor sociology, industrial relations, and public policy. Significant contributions to the theoretical and empirical understanding of labor organizing, social movement unionism, and corporate accountability have been made by scholars such as R. Freeman, J. Esbenshade, E. Bonacich, R. Appelbaum, L. Delp, and K. Quan. Their studies examine new modes of worker representation, the limitations of traditional union frameworks, and the potential of grassroots alliances in shaping labor standards in a globalized economy.

Particular attention has been paid to the transformation of collective bargaining mechanisms, the influence of ethical consumerism, and the role of civil society in labor governance. Case-based analyses of the anti-sweatshop movement and public care systems, especially in the United States, serve as key reference points for understanding how labor–community partnerships challenge institutional

norms and create alternative governance models.

The purpose of this research. The purpose of this research is to provide a scientific justification for the theoretical and practical foundations of labor–community coalitions as emerging instruments of social dialogue, and to analyze their potential to transform industrial relations and public policy in the United States.

Presentation of the main material. In the United States, the conventional model of social dialogue as a formalized tripartite engagement among government, employers, and workers has not gained significant institutional presence. Structures designed to mediate interests among these actors for the sake of social cohesion are largely absent from the American labor landscape. However, alternative forms of social dialogue have emerged, particularly through alliances between labor unions and community-based organizations [1]. These coalitions mirror traditional tripartite mechanisms in that they facilitate cooperation between actors who might not otherwise interact.

Such labor-community partnerships can be short-lived, addressing specific challenges, or evolve into enduring collaborations aimed at achieving broader socio-economic objectives. Notable instances include the alliance between labor unions and African-American community groups advocating for fair labor standards in the construction of facilities for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics [2], as well as the long-term collaboration between the United Farm Workers Union and the Chicano civil rights movement [3].

Despite these promising examples, labor-community alliances remain relatively rare. Mutual mistrust persists—many community organizations are wary of labor’s motivations, while some unions underestimate the strategic value of community engagement. Nonetheless, recent initiatives by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) signal a shift in priorities. With its 1998 Union Cities program, the AFL-CIO elevated the development of local labor-community coalitions to a central objective and issued formal guidance to union leaders on building such partnerships.

Among the more impactful labor-community alliances there is a select number of initiatives that have not only fostered collaboration and achieved tangible objectives but have also contributed to a strategic transformation in the dynamics between employers and employees. These cases go beyond short-term advocacy: they actively seek to empower workers and expand their capacity for collective organization. This article explores two such transformative examples: the anti-sweatshop movement's campaign for greater corporate accountability, and the collaborative effort between workers and care recipients that led to the successful unionization of nearly 100,000 home care workers in California.

Corporate Responsibility and the Anti-Sweatshop Movement: A New Model of Social Advocacy. The anti-sweatshop movement's campaign for corporate responsibility stands as a notable example of an effective labor-community alliance that galvanized a broad civic mobilization. This coalition strategically targeted high-profile multinational corporations, demanding accountability for labor rights violations throughout their global supply chains.

Throughout the 1990s, a series of widely publicized investigations exposed severe exploitation in the garment industry, sparking widespread public outrage. Reports of inhumane working conditions – such as Vietnamese workers at NIKE factories being forced to run under the scorching sun until collapsing [4], or Thai immigrants held behind razor-wire fences under armed surveillance in suburban Los Angeles [5] – ignited calls for ethical responsibility. These revelations provoked a broader societal reckoning with corporate complicity in labor abuse. By 1996, the controversy surrounding television personality Kathie Lee Gifford, whose clothing brand was linked to sweatshops in Latin America, highlighted the growing influence of the movement. Faced with intense public criticism, she was compelled to acknowledge the issue and amend her stance [6].

Kathie Lee Gifford's initial refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the exploitative practices linked to her clothing line was emblematic of a broader trend within the apparel industry at the time. Given the industry's longstanding reliance on subcontracting, particularly through globalized supply chains developed over

the preceding four decades-major garment manufacturers often deflected blame for poor labor conditions by attributing responsibility solely to their contractors [7].

However, labor organizers have consistently argued that holding contractors solely accountable is neither effective nor fair. These subcontractors typically operate under tight financial constraints, with limited influence over pricing, product design, or material selection. As a result, they lack the structural capacity to ensure improved wages or working conditions. In reality, they represent just the initial layer of a complex, multi-tiered employer hierarchy that includes powerful brand-name manufacturers and influential retail chains.

In response to this systemic imbalance, labor activists in the 1990s developed a dual strategy to reconfigure the fight against sweatshop exploitation. The first component involved forging alliances between labor unions and a wide array of human rights organizations to promote the concept of social accountability, largely through campaigns aimed at influencing consumer behavior. The second component shifted the focus of demands away from low-level contractors and toward the higher-profit segments of the supply chain, specifically manufacturers and retailers. This marked a fundamental shift toward advocating for corporate governance reforms, whereby top-tier firms would be held responsible for the labor standards maintained within their subcontracted facilities.

The formation of a broad-based labor-community coalition was instrumental to the campaign's success. This was achieved by reframing traditional labor grievances within a human rights framework, thereby appealing to a wider moral and ethical audience. Exposés revealing the use of child labor, incidents of sexual harassment, severe exploitation, and the repression of union activities were positioned as fundamental violations of human dignity. This narrative attracted widespread support from religious communities, human rights advocates, and segments of the general public who might not have otherwise engaged with labor issues. Influential NGOs such as the National Labor Committee, Global Exchange, and Sweatshop Watch leveraged their national and international platforms to

amplify the movement's message. They mobilized public campaigns, including consumer boycotts of major brands like NIKE, GAP, and GUESS, pressuring them to take responsibility for unethical labor practices embedded in their production networks. These efforts culminated in the formation of a robust labor-community alliance that significantly amplified the movement's reach and impact achieving a level of influence that labor organizations alone would have been unlikely to attain.

Voluntary Corporate Codes of Conduct and the Governance of Labor Rights. The success of the anti-sweatshop campaign's second strategic objective (securing corporate accountability) was largely enabled by the strength of the labor-community coalition. As the alliance exposed widespread abuses in global supply chains and galvanized public support through consumer boycotts, many major apparel corporations found themselves under intense reputational pressure. In an effort to mitigate public criticism and restore their brand image, these companies began to adopt corporate codes of conduct that reflected the demands of labor advocates.

These codes, often modeled on the International Labour Organization's core Conventions, outlined fundamental labor protections, including prohibitions on child labor and forced prison labor, the right to organize and bargain collectively, limitations on excessive overtime, and a commitment to paying at least a minimum or living wage. Within a decade of the initial adoption of such frameworks, the majority of leading apparel brands operating in the United States had established formal policies reflecting these principles [8].

Importantly, many of these corporations also introduced mechanisms for enforcing these standards, marking a departure from earlier global norms, where ratification of international labor conventions by states often lacked meaningful enforcement. Some brands, including GAP and NIKE, created internal compliance departments tasked with overseeing adherence to their corporate codes. Others went further by engaging third-party auditors or accounting firms to conduct factory inspections [9].

Despite these efforts, numerous independent investigations have revealed

that internal and commercial monitoring approaches frequently fall short in safeguarding workers' rights. These limitations have prompted growing calls from labor and human rights organizations for independent monitoring mechanisms. Advocates argue that credible oversight must involve local trade unions and civil society organizations – entities capable of accessing workplaces in ways that ensure workers can speak freely and without fear of retaliation.

While discussions persist regarding the most effective form of monitoring labor standards, there is little doubt that the anti-sweatshop labor-community alliance has fundamentally reshaped corporate perceptions of governance and accountability. In contrast to earlier decades, when corporations routinely disclaimed responsibility for labor abuses within their supply chains, many enterprises today have been compelled to acknowledge their role in upholding international labor norms.

Whereas corporations previously distanced themselves from the working conditions in their subcontracted facilities, a significant shift has taken place. There is now a broad consensus within the apparel industry that adherence to fundamental labor rights is an essential component of responsible business conduct. Increasingly, corporations are expected to leverage their economic power to influence labor practices throughout their supply chains. In assuming this role, many apparel firms have gone beyond merely adopting codes of conduct – they have taken on active enforcement responsibilities that, in some cases, exceed the requirements of local labor legislation. This marks the emergence of a new paradigm in corporate governance, where businesses play a direct role in shaping labor conditions across global production networks.

The anti-sweatshop labor-community coalition has not only altered the dynamics of employer-employee relations within the apparel sector, but also helped extend the discourse on labor rights into broader arenas of global policy. Its influence has permeated debates on trade and finance, as well as public procurement and consumer regulation. Core labor standards have been proposed for integration into international trade agreements such as the North American Free

Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and have also been advocated for adoption by financial institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

At the national and local levels, the campaign has also galvanized institutional reforms. Student activists have successfully pushed for university licensing agreements to include labor rights provisions in over 100 U.S. universities. In addition, grassroots advocacy has led to the enactment of municipal ordinances in cities such as San Francisco, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, mandating that government procurement be conducted through sweat-free supply chains [10].

Building Social Dialogue Through Unionization: The Case of California Home-Care Workers. The campaign to unionize approximately 100,000 home-care workers in California represents one of the most significant achievements for the American labor movement since the early 1940s. This success was made possible through an unprecedented alliance between labor unions and communities of elderly and disabled individuals – groups typically considered recipients of care rather than active agents in labor organizing. Together, they restructured the home-care delivery system in a manner that advanced the interests of both workers and care recipients. This model introduced a novel form of labor-community collaboration that reimagines industrial relations around mutual dependence and shared goals.

Home-care workers, also known as personal care attendants, provide essential services to individuals who are elderly, chronically ill, or disabled. Their responsibilities often include household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, alongside intensive personal care including bathing, feeding, and mobility assistance. In California, the majority of these workers are employed under the state-run In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) program. This initiative, launched in the 1970s, reflected a policy shift aimed at deinstitutionalizing care by promoting independent living for vulnerable populations in private homes rather than in long-term care facilities.

Before unionization efforts took hold, working conditions for home-care

providers were deeply precarious. Most were paid only the state's minimum wage – an amount insufficient to lift them above the federal poverty threshold. They received no employer-sponsored health insurance, retirement benefits, or paid leave. Despite being allowed to work up to 283 hours per month without eligibility for overtime compensation, many workers struggled to secure full-time hours. The work itself was often physically and emotionally taxing, requiring a diverse set of competencies including medical knowledge, physical strength, and end-of-life care.

The workforce was predominantly composed of women from historically marginalized backgrounds, including African-American, Latina and Asian immigrant communities. A substantial portion (nearly half) were family members providing care to their own relatives, referred to in programmatic language as "consumers." This demographic and relational complexity further underscored the unique nature of the organizing campaign, which merged labor rights advocacy with community care ethics [11].

Historically, unionization has been the primary mechanism through which workers in low-wage sectors have achieved improvements in pay and working conditions. However, in the case of California's home-care sector, labor organizers encountered a number of formidable structural and logistical barriers.

The most immediate challenge was uniting a workforce that was highly decentralized and largely invisible. In Los Angeles County alone, an estimated 74,000 workers were dispersed across more than 4,000 square miles. The nature of their employment, working independently in private homes, meant that most had no regular contact with other caregivers, severely limiting opportunities for traditional workplace organizing. High turnover rates, approaching 50 percent annually, further complicated outreach efforts. Many workers simultaneously served multiple clients each week, making consistent communication difficult.

In addition to geographic and occupational fragmentation, the workforce was characterized by profound linguistic and cultural diversity. In Los Angeles County alone, over 100 different languages were reportedly spoken, reflecting the

sector's strong representation of immigrant and minority communities. This extraordinary diversity posed a serious challenge to building solidarity and cohesion among workers, requiring organizing strategies that were both linguistically inclusive and culturally responsive [12].

A second major issue was the legal and institutional ambiguity surrounding collective bargaining. Although the In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) program issued paychecks to home-care workers, it lacked statutory authority to engage in collective bargaining with a labor union. This legal gap created a fundamental challenge for union recognition and contract negotiation.

Complicating matters further, several core managerial functions such as hiring, directing daily tasks, and terminating employment had been delegated to the care recipients themselves, referred to as "consumers." While these individuals technically exercised employer-like authority, they could not reasonably be considered bargaining counterparts. Most were reliant on public assistance and had no financial capacity to offer improved wages or benefits. As a result, the traditional employer-employee framework did not readily apply, and no single entity bore full responsibility for employment terms. This legal fragmentation necessitated innovative solutions to establish a viable structure for collective representation and negotiation.

Consequently, the union was confronted with a fundamental dilemma: it needed not only to determine who should be recognized as the employer for bargaining purposes, but also to find a way to establish that entity within a legal framework that would permit formal collective negotiations. This challenge underscored the complexity of organizing in a publicly funded but privately delivered care system, where neither the state agency nor the consumers fit the traditional employer role unambiguously [13].

A third and equally pressing obstacle involved the question of how to build bargaining power in the absence of traditional labor tactics. In most unionization campaigns, the threat of labor withdrawal – i.e., a strike-serves as a primary tool for exerting pressure. Yet in this context, a strike was neither ethical nor practical.

The services provided by home-care workers were highly individualized and, in many cases, essential to the health and well-being of the recipients. Interrupting care could endanger lives and alienate public opinion, particularly consumers, many of whom were elderly or disabled-opposed unionization. Such a scenario would risk portraying the workers as adversaries rather than caregivers.

As a result, the union was compelled to identify an alternative foundation of leverage – one that could generate political and public support without disrupting critical care services. This required rethinking traditional labor strategy and forging new pathways for advocacy and influence.

In response to the multifaceted challenges facing the unionization of home-care workers, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) developed a comprehensive, long-term strategy centered around three core pillars: (1) launching an intensive grassroots organizing campaign among home-care workers; (2) forging strategic partnerships with care recipients and the wider community; and (3) advocating for the creation of “public authorities” that would serve as employers-of-record for the purposes of collective bargaining.

The scale and persistence of the SEIU’s organizing efforts cannot be overstated. In some cases, the union successfully enrolled tens of thousands of dues-paying members years before securing a formal collective bargaining agreement. In Los Angeles, organizing efforts were geographically structured around political precincts, enabling workers to mobilize collectively and exert electoral pressure on local officials. Meanwhile, in Oakland, the union established a community-based Workers’ Center, which served both as a gathering space and a training hub for new members [14].

Given the sector’s high turnover rate and the extended timeline of the campaign (which in some regions spanned more than a decade) organizers had to continuously recruit and re-engage between 10,000 and 15,000 workers annually across the state. This sustained effort was crucial for maintaining momentum and demonstrating to policymakers and the public that there existed broad-based and persistent support among home-care workers for unionization.

Following the successful mobilization of a base among home-care workers, the union advanced its strategy by forming a collaborative alliance with the consumer movement. This strategic realignment brought together two groups: workers and care recipients, who had traditionally occupied separate or even oppositional positions in care systems. By reframing their relationship as one of mutual interest, the campaign cultivated a shared commitment to improving both working conditions and care quality.

Although some consumers initially expressed skepticism toward union involvement, the majority came to view the partnership as a means of professionalizing the workforce. They recognized that enhancing wages and training for personal attendants would reduce turnover and improve the consistency and reliability of care. In various counties across California, coalitions of labor advocates and consumers spent years collaboratively researching viable models and coordinating joint actions.

Throughout this process, union representatives came to appreciate the central importance of consumer autonomy, particularly for individuals with disabilities who required control over the terms of their daily lives. They also acknowledged the concerns of elderly consumers, who valued background checks and safeguards when selecting caregivers [15]. In turn, consumers increasingly recognized that improved labor conditions were directly linked to their own well-being, and that the union could serve not only workers' interests but also act as a powerful ally in advancing high-quality, stable, and respectful care.

Conclusion. Labour-community alliances represent an emergent form of social institution capable of uniting trade unions and civil society groups around shared objectives. These alliances facilitate new channels of social dialogue that not only strengthen support for labor-related agendas but, in certain contexts, possess the transformative capacity to reshape established industrial relations frameworks.

The anti-sweatshop campaign exemplifies how such alliances can transcend traditional labor disputes. What began as a movement focused on

employer-employee dynamics evolved into a global campaign for corporate accountability, driven by strategic partnerships between labor unions and human rights organizations. This coalition successfully influenced multinational corporate behavior and established a precedent for broader advocacy in domains such as international trade, global finance, and ethical procurement: spaces where citizen engagement in social governance is gaining traction.

Similarly, the organizing campaign of home-care workers in California highlights the potential of labor-community partnerships to construct entirely new models of labor governance. The collaboration between workers and care recipients (who were both service providers and beneficiaries) resulted in the institutional creation of public authorities, enabling collective bargaining and union representation for over 100,000 workers. This partnership was grounded in mutual respect and shared interest, setting a powerful example of how social alliances can reconfigure labor relations in sectors marked by informality and fragmentation. The durability and replicability of this model will depend on the continued strength of the coalition between workers and the communities they serve.

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