

## Union-Driven Economic Development Initiatives and Community Solidarity in Western New York\*

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### abstract

Critical Management Studies (CMS) uncovers organizational alternatives effaced by management knowledge and practice and gives attention to concepts often ignored by management scholars. Solidarity is one of these concepts. This article focuses on solidarity as it relates to economic development initiatives pursued by labor union leaders residing in Buffalo and other parts of the western region of New York. The first section of the article looks at the concept of solidarity in the labor union literature and in CMS. The second section surveys the origin and activities of the union-created Economic Development Group of Western New York. The third section examines how solidarity plays a role in that organization by considering some conceptual and practical implications of the group's initiatives. The article finds that the Economic Development Group is rethinking solidarity, something labor scholars see as essential to the future of unions; the group is also pursuing economic development projects with an eye to building communitywide solidarity, a strategy that challenges key aspects of what public- and private-sector managers have long considered the conventional wisdom.

### Introduction

Critical Management Studies (CMS) emerged as a sub-discipline in the early 1990s. In part, CMS was a reaction to the widespread elevation of management 'from a technique to a value,' which explains why CMS involves demonstrating that organizational reality is not natural, inevitable, or inherently superior to all conceivable alternatives. As Valerie Fournier and Chris Grey write, CMS probes the socially constructed nature of social arrangements and uncovers "the alternatives that have been effaced by management knowledge and practice" (2000: 18).

In pursuit of its aims, CMS gives attention to concepts that are often ignored by management scholars. Solidarity is one of these concepts. A look at *Organizational*

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*Behavior* by Stephen P. Robbins and Tim A. Judge (2007), authors of bestselling management and organizational texts, finds no entry for ‘solidarity’ in its index. Meanwhile, as David C. Jacobs’s introduction to this *ephemera* special issue shows, CMS scholars recognize that solidarity is a multifaceted notion that has long been relevant to organization theory and practice.

While all the articles in this special issue involve experiments in local solidarity, this piece focuses on economic development initiatives driven by labor union leaders residing in Buffalo and other parts of the western region of New York state. The first section of this article looks at the concept of solidarity in the labor union literature and in CMS. The second section surveys the origin and activities of the union-created Economic Development Group of Western New York. The third section examines how solidarity plays a role in that organization by considering some conceptual and practical implications of the group’s initiatives. The article finds that the Economic Development Group is rethinking solidarity, something labor scholars see as essential to the future of unions; the group is also pursuing economic development projects with an eye to building communitywide solidarity, a strategy that challenges key aspects of what public- and private-sector managers have long considered the conventional wisdom.

## Solidarity

Although Robert F. Hoxie’s *Trade Unionism in the United States* was written nearly a century ago, it remains a foundation of much contemporary scholarship involving unions. According to Hoxie, an understanding of labor unions rests on an appreciation of their aims, policies and methods, not on the study of union structures. Since unions are formed to address workers’ common needs and problems, the origin of unions is rooted in employees’ “common interpretation of the social situation.” Hoxie (1923: 53-77) does not explicitly use the term ‘solidarity,’ but the concept – in the form of what he calls a common or group ‘interpretation,’ ‘psychology,’ and ‘consciousness’ – is clearly at the heart of his study of unionism.

In 1996, more than two-dozen European labor scholars produced a collection of essays entitled *The Challenges to Trade Unions in Europe: Innovation or Adaptation*. The contributors stressed the need for unions to engage in a critical reflection on the notion of solidarity and concluded “only modest attempts at rethinking solidarity...have been made so far.” In addition, Ranier Zoll’s chapter emphasized that the reconsideration of solidarity has more than mere academic significance – it is, Zoll argued, essential to the continued survival of unions (Leisink et al., 1996: 21).

More recently, Hoyt N. Wheeler devoted attention to solidarity in a book on the future of the American labor movement. Wheeler agrees with his European colleagues that some form of worker solidarity is necessary for the labor movement to have a future. He also stresses that there are many possible forms, including the *narrow* (but intensive) solidarity of American Federation of Labor craft unions and the *extensive* (but shallow) solidarity of the Knights of Labor, which embraced the entire working class (Wheeler, 2002: 190-191). Wheeler also perceives an opportunity for workers to reach out to

employers and other local residents to fashion *community* solidarity. Reporting on European cases in which unions have been partners in local economic development, he writes that there seem to be ‘some significant advantages’ to such union activities, including a chance for unions to demonstrate “that they are an organic part of the community” (Wheeler, 2002: 174-175).

Turning to the CMS literature, one also finds various forms of solidarity. In fact, Patrick Reedy writes in the journal *Management Learning*, “Solidarity is not a straightforward or unquestionably positive concept and resists clear definition.” Reedy recognizes that solidarity “belongs to the same family of ideas as mutuality, reciprocity and community;” still, he uses the following metaphor to explain solidarity: “If the community can be likened to the building, then solidarity is the mortar holding the structure together” (Reedy, 2003: 95).

Reedy draws on Emile Durkheim, Richard Rorty and Marilyn Friedman to explore aspects and implications of the concept of solidarity. Since Jacobs also mentions Durkheim, we look first at Durkheim’s (1933) *The Division of Labor in Society*.

As sociologist Timothy Shortell (2006) discusses in a recent essay, Durkheim and Karl Marx viewed society from different vantage points. Marx emphasized social conflict, while Durkheim focused on social order. Marx argued that the division of labor produced by capitalism generates employee solidarity, working-class consciousness, and social instability that end only when capitalism is eliminated. In contrast, Durkheim (1933:41) believed that social harmony is the normal condition of human society and that the division of labor is a fundamental basis of social order in industrial society.

*The Division of Labor in Society* contrasts two main types of solidarity – *mechanical* and *organic*. Mechanical solidarity is rooted in resemblances, what Reedy calls ‘ascriptive’ similarities – “primordial and given attachments, such as gender, kinship, tribe, ethnicity and nation” (Reedy, 2003: 95). In a society characterized by mechanical solidarity, Durkheim (1933: 70-110) finds the following: order is the result of universal conformity; religion often pervades the whole of social life; and deviations from group norms are treated as criminal acts and are severely punished.

Organic solidarity, meanwhile, rests on the division of labor, which brings differences and variations between people to the fore. Although individuality can flourish in a society characterized by the division of labor, there is also mutual dependence. This interdependence produces institutions and shared beliefs that regulate social relations. Organic solidarity is, in short, the mortar holding industrial society together (Durkheim, 1933: 181-199).<sup>1</sup>

Durkheim also mentions a third form of solidarity – *contractual* solidarity – which he attributes to the work of Herbert Spencer. Durkheim (1933: 200-229) is critical of this view because he believes contracts alone cannot provide sufficient social cohesion. As

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1 Durkheim treats mechanical and organic solidarity as the extreme ends of a continuum; a society can have elements of both types, but organic solidarity becomes predominant as the division of labor plays an increasing social role (Durkheim, 1933: 92).

Robert N. Bellah writes in *Emile Durkheim: On Morality and Society*, “For Durkheim, what is essential in organic solidarity is not contract but the moral basis of contract or the ‘noncontractual elements’ in the contract. If contract were simply a temporary truce between conflicting interests, and subject to every pressure a stronger party could enforce, it would provide far too capricious a foundation for a society based on the division of labor. A stable form of organic solidarity requires an institutionalized system of enforcing good faith and avoidance of force and fraud in contract. It requires, in a word, justice” (Bellah, 1973: xxv).

In fact, contractual solidarity opens the door to two ‘abnormal’ forms of division of labor discussed by Durkheim (1933: 353-388) – anomic and forced. “The anomic form results from a lack of regulation of the social relations involved in the division of labor. The result is undue conflict between different groups and a loss of a sense of the meaning of the individual’s contribution to a larger whole. The forced form results when stronger contracting parties use unjust [coercive and/or fraudulent] means to enforce their will on weaker parties” (Bellah, 1973: xxvii). Thus, without organic solidarity, there is social instability and/or class war.

Attention to Durkheim’s discussion of contractual solidarity and abnormal forms of the division of labor (which includes an analysis of how these notions differ from a world with organic solidarity) helps shed light on what Reedy means when he calls organic solidarity ‘consensual’ and “characterized by equality between members” (Reedy, 2003: 96). According to Durkheim, organic solidarity involves contracts in which “the values exchanged are really equivalent; and, for this to be so, it is necessary for traders to be placed in conditions externally equal.” Moreover, “true individual liberty does not consist in suppression of all regulation, but it is the product of regulation, for this equality is not in nature” (Durkheim, 1933: xxiii). Thus, in a world of organic solidarity, regulations imposed upon members of society allow all parties equal freedom from physical or economic coercion and enable them to interact on a consensual basis.

Durkheim’s examination of abnormal forms of the division of labor also drives home two main points in *The Division of Labor in Society*. One is that society is not merely a constraint on human freedom. Economists often view regulation as encroaching on and diminishing the domain of individual liberty, but this section of Durkheim’s book stresses that regulation can also eliminate the coercion that limits a person’s freedom in an unregulated setting (including the freedom to develop one’s talents and capacities). The other main point is that there is nothing ‘natural’ about a world held together by organic solidarity. Achieving organic solidarity and a world with such liberty and justice “is a conquest of society over nature.” Humanity escapes nature by creating another world: “That world is society” (Durkheim, 1933: 386-387).<sup>2</sup>

Richard Rorty’s contribution to solidarity, meanwhile, is his approach to achieving an expansive conception of human solidarity. Rorty is sympathetic to those who seek universal human solidarity as a foundation for action. However, he sees appeals to

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2 Note that although Durkheim believed social harmony is the normal or usual condition of human society, he did not view it as occurring naturally. Instead, like today’s CMS scholars, he argued that this harmony must be socially constructed.

universal humanity as problematic in two ways. First, he cannot rely on a common humanity that stands “beyond history and institutions” because it runs counter to his philosophical perspective, which insists on contingency and the role that “contingent historical circumstance” plays in generating belief (Rorty, 1989: 198). Second, he argues that generous action seldom occurs because we view the recipient of our generosity as a fellow human being. “Our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race,” he writes (Rorty, 1989: 191).

The key to this logjam, Rorty argues, is to be found in recognizing that “feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient.” Achieving more inclusive solidarities, therefore, rests on “the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’” (Rorty, 1989: 192). Thus, for Rorty, universal human solidarity is built not on philosophical or religious treatises, but on journalistic accounts and other forms of communication and interaction that enable us to identify with the details of others’ lives (1989: 190-192).

Of course, beyond the boundaries of ‘us’ is the realm of the outsider. Marilyn Friedman (1989), for example, stresses that women are often ignored or excluded when notions of solidarity are constructed. The labor literature also finds such exclusion: “Very often the old ‘core industrial working class’ considered women as outsiders (and therefore excluded from solidarity), not to mention immigrants and ethnic minorities,” writes Zoll (Leisink et al., 1996: 87). For CMS scholars, an awareness of exclusion demands reflection, but it also necessitates a consideration of alternative visions of human society (Reedy, 2003: 97).

## **The Economic Development Group**

In the early decades following World War II, the economy of Western New York (WNY) was booming. Jobs were so plentiful that workers needed only to cross the street to change employers. During the 1970s, however, Buffalo and the surrounding area became fixed in the nation’s mind as an archetypal ‘Rust Belt’ community. Indeed, a 1978 report produced locally acknowledged that Greater Buffalo “displays the classic syndrome of economic illness endemic to many Northeastern cities:” urban decay fueled by widespread plant closings and diminished economic prospects for local workers and businesses (Ahern, 1978: 2). The WNY region has been struggling to recover ever since.

Out of that struggle have come a number of successful experiments with plant-level labor-management cooperation, and union leaders sought to apply that experience to local economic development in 1999. Liberated from traditions that long kept unions focused only on the bargaining table and the grievance procedure, the goal of these labor leaders is to take an active role in shaping the future of their community. To date,

the projects of their Economic Development Group (EDG) have fallen within four broad areas: constructive labor relations, regional energy, workforce development, and neighborhood revitalization.

According to Hoxie, the key to accounting for a labor organization's strategies and actions is to examine the origin and development of its 'group interpretation' of interests, aims, scope, character, and methods. That interpretation will be influenced by economic, political and other features of the environment in which the group operates, Hoxie argued, as well as by members' personal characteristics (native and acquired), group dynamics, history and experience. When unionism takes shape, these many influences yield both a shared view of the problems workers face in a given setting and a common interpretation of what must be done (Hoxie, 1923: 53-77).

Space constraints prevent a comprehensive and detailed discussion, but some of the factors that shaped the EDG's development of a group viewpoint in 1999 and early 2000 can be identified. A brief survey of some background influences is followed by a summary of the EDG's origins and activities.<sup>3</sup>

While WNY cities such as Buffalo and nearby Niagara Falls were hit hard by wrenching economic change in the 1970s, the experience of those communities was in many ways a bellwether for the challenge to industrial competitiveness that soon confronted the entire nation. By the mid-1980s, there was widespread concern – among leaders in business, labor, academia and government – about the American economy's ability to prosper in an increasingly global and competitive environment (President's Commission, 1985).

From the vantage point of many in the U.S. labor movement, the United States in the 1990s faced a choice between two paths to national economic revitalization – a 'high road' and a 'low road.' According to the AFL-CIO's Human Resources Development Institute (HRDI) and sympathetic academics, the low road is characterized by an employer emphasis on avoiding unions and competing on the basis of low wages, and by public policies that roll back worker protections and environmental regulations; in contrast, the high-road is characterized by companies operating in a climate that encourages competition on the basis of worker productivity, labor force skills, innovation, and product quality (HRDI, 1998; Marshall, 1996). In 1998, the HRDI sought to promote pursuit of the latter at the community, state and regional levels by

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3 According to Hoxie, "coming into direct contact with the unionists themselves" is crucial to understanding unionism: "Only by watching [unionists] closely in their formulation of plans and in their actual contests; only by getting them off guard or getting to know them well enough to break down their secrecy and reserve of hostility or to discount or interpret what they say; only, in short, by putting ourselves as nearly as possible into their places can we hope to get at the real character and causes of unionism" (1923: 28-29). At the same time, he stresses the need to "undertake the study in a scientific spirit, ...which means rooting out of our minds all prejudice and partisanship, being willing to follow the truth wherever it leads, and getting into the closest possible touch with the facts as they exist" (Hoxie, 1923: 30). This author has sought to achieve direct contact and maintain the scientific spirit by conducting an extensive series of interviews with dozens of members of the WNY community and by engaging in extended periods of observation in the region (in the capacities of both an academic researcher and a journalist). The contact began two decades ago, was most intensive when the EDG was being established, and continues to the present.

publishing *Economic Development: A Union Guide to the High Road*, which reported on a number of organizations that forged business, labor, and community partnerships to foster creation and retention of family-supporting jobs (HRDI, 1998).

A number of labor leaders in Buffalo and the surrounding area learned about the HRDI book and were intrigued by the idea of pursuing a high-road regional development strategy. In part, that is because the notion of creating labor-management partnerships resonated with them. Such partnerships were not new to WNY unions in the 1990s. Since the mid-1970s, labor and management in many enterprises throughout the region worked together to address common concerns via plant-level committees established by a local business-labor group called the Buffalo-Erie County Labor-Management Council. Although the Council lost much local influence and faded from the scene after its original director retired in 1993, its legacy is that most of the region's union leaders feel as comfortable engaging with employers in cooperative endeavors as they do participating in hard-nosed negotiations.

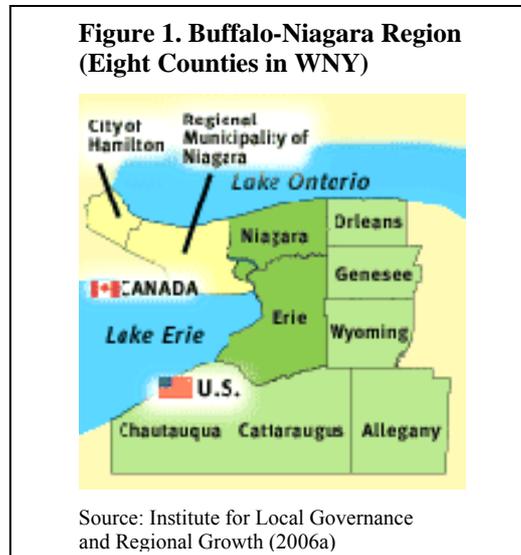
Industrial relations studies suggest that union involvement in economic development comes most often in response to a crisis – usually a plant closing or prolonged labor dispute that highlights an extended period of declining job opportunities and deteriorating labor relations. At first glance, then, it might seem strange that WNY labor leaders organized to participate in regional development activities during the boom period of the late 1990s. Although the local manufacturing sector had struggled for over two decades, the economies of WNY and the nation were expanding as the new millennium approached. Unemployment rates locally and nationally were lower than they had been in years, and union-management relations were generally harmonious. In fact, a number of WNY labor-relations partnerships won national awards in this period.

The union leaders' decision to organize for action is partly explained by the fact that they and other WNY residents felt the region was not sharing adequately in the nation's prosperity. In early 1999, for example, economists at Buffalo's Canisius College reported that, for the decade, personal income in the area was growing only about half as fast as in the nation as a whole (Palumbo and Zaporowski, 1999). There was a widespread sense that the region could and should be doing better.

There was also a critical incident that galvanized the labor leaders into action. In the spring of 1999, the Buffalo area's Chamber of Commerce, called the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, established a nonprofit, private business development and regional marketing organization in conjunction with the industrial development agencies of eight WNY counties. Members of the new group, called the Buffalo Niagara Enterprise (BNE), pooled resources and set ambitious goals for attracting capital investment and jobs to the Buffalo-Niagara region (see Figure 1).

Area labor leaders, especially those affiliated with the Buffalo AFL-CIO Council, wanted to let the members and staff of the new BNE – indeed, the entire community – know that they were willing to do all they could to expand area business and job opportunities. To be sure, the union members wanted to encourage creation of family-supporting jobs and a high-road approach to business development. As community residents, however, they also wanted the BNE to achieve its investment and

employment objectives; the unionists were interested in chipping in to support the BNE's efforts, not in battling over economic development strategies.



Union members believed they could play a valuable role in the regional marketing effort. Buffalo's image as a 'union town' was as deeply embedded in the national psyche as its association with snow and chicken wings, and for good reason: the metropolitan area had the highest unionization rate in the country in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, labor had to have a presence in the business-recruitment process, said the unionists – and not just to give 'organized labor' a human face. Union involvement provided labor and management the opportunity to undermine unfounded stereotypes while jointly spreading the word about the many area successes traceable to worker-management cooperation. It was not merely impossible to promote WNY and ignore unions; it would also amount to a missed opportunity, local labor leaders reasoned.

The public-relations firm hired to work with the BNE seemed to think the unionists had a point. After studying the region's strengths and weaknesses for three months in early 1999, Development Counselors International (DCI) stressed the importance of drawing attention to the region's highly productive workforce. Noting that General Motors called its Tonawanda, New York, engine plant one of the company's most productive facilities, Ted Levine of DCI suggested promoting Buffalo-Niagara as the "the most productive region in North America" (Meyer, 1999a: B7).

As news about creation of the BNE began to spread throughout the region, the Buffalo AFL-CIO Council convened a series of meetings of the area's interested union leaders. The 14 leaders participating in those initial gatherings were diverse in terms of race, gender and industrial affiliation, and most had extensive experience with workplace-level union-management initiatives and other joint labor-management projects. The meetings generated a set of objectives and possible initiatives for what participants called the WNY AFL-CIO Economic Development Group. The union leaders agreed to build a working relationship with the BNE (in pursuit of 'mutual economic development interests'), expand the geographic scope of the group's efforts by reaching out to AFL-CIO labor councils in nearby counties, and endorse the appointment of

Kevin Donovan (area director of United Auto Workers in WNY and vicinity) as EDG spokesperson (Buffalo AFL-CIO Council, 1999).<sup>4</sup> On July 22, 1999, the EDG convened a breakfast meeting with public officials from the region and introduced the organization and its goals (see Table 1).

By early 2000, the EDG's 'group interpretation' of its situation was in place and the organization was ready for action. AFL-CIO labor councils in seven WNY counties backed the EDG's structure and mission, and the group's leaders were in close contact with AFL-CIO's Working for America Institute, successor to the HRDI.<sup>5</sup> Services of a day-to-day coordinator had been secured and specific project areas were identified, based on members' perceptions of both the issues most important to the region and the initiatives that would best allow them to make a difference. In addition, progress was made on securing operating funds and on chartering the group as a nonprofit corporation (eventually achieved under the abbreviated name Economic Development Group, Inc.).

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create a strong, diversified economy with living-wage jobs for all and quality standards of living in WNY</li><li>• Strengthen a highly skilled workforce as a competitive regional advantage</li><li>• Secure a voice for organized labor in economic development in the region</li><li>• Mobilize organized labor to seize and expand opportunities for partnership with regional job creation efforts, building on mutual interests</li><li>• Actively promote progressive, constructive labor relations throughout WNY, and publicize the successes as a regional advantage</li><li>• Coordinate and build labor cohesion in regional economic development efforts, learning from one another</li></ul> |
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Table 1. Objectives of the WNY AFL-CIO Economic Development Group (as declared on June 25, 1999 and presented to the region's public leaders on July 22, 1999) Source: Buffalo AFL-CIO Council (1999)

A major early EDG goal was to promote cooperative labor-management relations at the enterprise and community levels within WNY. Such cooperation was viewed as essential not only to retaining and improving existing jobs but also to creating new ones via local business expansion, enterprise startups, and attraction of corporations from outside the region. Pursuit of this objective led the EDG and BNE to jointly commission – at the EDG's suggestion – a Cornell University study of the region's employment relations and workplace practices, called *Champions at Work: Employment, Workplace*

4 Kevin Donovan, 47 years old at the time, was widely recognized as the perfect leader for the EDG. As a longtime union representative at a General Motors plant sold in the 1990s to American Axle and Manufacturing, he forged innovative labor-management partnerships that helped avoid shutdowns in tough times. In the mid-1990s, Donovan and colleagues successfully presented American Axle with the business case for expanding operations to address a persistent problem with the quality of outsourced parts work. The result was creation of 120 new WNY jobs in 1999 and a facility that by late 2000 had so much work it was 'busting at the seams' (Donovan, 2000).

5 The EDG represents union members in the following WNY counties: Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara, and Orleans. The scope of the business community's BNE includes an additional county, Wyoming, a largely rural area with few union members. According to a regional studies institute at the SUNY-University at Buffalo, the total population of these eight counties was just under 1.6 million in 2000 (Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, 2006b).

*Practices and Labor-Management Relations in Western New York* (Fleron et al., 2000). It also resulted in establishment of a business-labor practitioners' network, dubbed the Champions Network, intended to spread the use of cooperative labor relations in the region and assist in attracting companies to WNY (by fielding business re-location inquiries and participating in ongoing public-private regional marketing initiatives).

The Cornell study demonstrated that WNY is a leader in positive labor relations, which put the region in a new light in the eyes of many. In addition to showing that joint labor-management problem solving is a core characteristic of WNY labor relations, the study found that WNY 'is a world-class region' in terms of workforce quality and workplace practices. It also confirmed the results of earlier academic studies that show "unions contribute to the success of high-performance workplaces" (Fleron et al., 2000: 7). The study was well received in the region and garnered attention from the nation's business press; when asked whether the findings would make corporate site-selection professionals change their views of WNY, Lance Yoder, managing editor of *Expansion Management* said he expected it would cause them to 'take a second look' at the area (Williams, 2000).

The Cornell study and Champions Network do indeed appear to have had an impact on site-selection consultants and the business community. In 2005, the BNE was named by *Site Selection Magazine* as one of the Top 20 local economic development groups in North America (Starner, 2005). In early 2006, meanwhile, *Expansion Management* named Buffalo to its list of 'America's 50 Hottest Cities' for business expansion or relocation (Kirzner, 2006). On those occasions when business executives from outside the region have expressed anxiety about local unions, the BNE has called on the Champions Network to help put their concerns to rest (Greer and Fleron, 2005: 17). The EDG plans to further promote WNY later in 2007, when it joins the National Electric Contractors Association as co-sponsor of an economic development exposition in Buffalo.

Reliable and affordable supplies of electricity and heat are essential to WNY, where winters are long and as many as half of the jobs depend on manufacturing (Maguire, 2002). As a result, the EDG has, from inception, given special attention to projects that help provide low-cost energy to the region. In 2000, the group took the lead in working to renew the license that governs the region's hydropower plant, the Niagara Power Project. EDG leaders initiated an unconventional, consensus-building re-licensing process that gave all area stakeholders a voice in the financial, power-allocation, and community issues associated with operating the plant during the coming decades. Indeed, the EDG's chair, Donovan, co-chaired the re-licensing consensus committee that enabled the plant to submit its renewal application two years early (a regional development official was the other co-chair). More recently, the EDG teamed with Siemens Building Technologies to convert and expand a gas-fired plant providing thermal energy to city-owned buildings into a biomass-fueled facility that can heat numerous workplaces and residences in Buffalo's downtown (Barrett, 2006).

Providing reliable, low-cost energy to private sector employers is seen as a way to help retain and expand job opportunities in the city, but the EDG also has other goals for its Buffalo thermal energy initiative, which is (in 2007) just beginning to move from the

conceptual stage to the initial stages of operation. For example, fueling the heating plant with willow shrubs and other energy crops grown in WNY will help support the region's farmers, and construction associated with the plant's expansion will provide jobs for skilled workers and training opportunities for area youth. Indeed, the EDG calls "training the underrepresented to take advantage of new opportunities" a cornerstone of the project (Economic Development Group, 2004: 17).<sup>6</sup>

## Solidarity Revisited

The previous section explained that solidarity provides the 'group interpretation' giving shape to the nature and functioning of the EDG. This section further probes how solidarity plays a role in the EDG in order to identify some conceptual and practical implications of its initiatives. Special attention is given to the EDG's rethinking of solidarity and to the group's attempt to establish a regional sense of community solidarity.

A clear implication of the EDG case study is that, at least in WNY, the labor movement is indeed rethinking solidarity. As mentioned above, scholars in both Europe and the United States have for at least a decade emphasized the need for labor unions to take a new look at the notion of solidarity that drives union actions. During the half-century prior to establishment of the EDG, inter-union cooperation at the regional level was practically nonexistent in America (Eimer, 1999: 67-68). Even WNY's Buffalo-Erie County Labor-Management Council, which operated from the mid-1970s until the end of the 1990s, focused almost exclusively on promoting plant-level, labor-management cooperation. Thus, the EDG's mid-1999 statement of goals, which included an intention to build regional labor cohesion and pursue a common economic-development action agenda, signaled a new direction for the area's labor leaders.

The EDG was constructed around what Wheeler would call an 'extensive' notion of worker solidarity, which represents a major break from the job consciousness long dominant in the American labor movement. This broadly inclusive notion is the product of early and active EDG participation by leaders of union locals representing many different types of workers, including carpenters, autoworkers, nurses, utility workers, musicians, hospital orderlies, operating engineers, teachers, construction workers, supermarket clerks, teamsters, and steelworkers. Moreover, the organization's focus on attracting and retaining family-sustaining jobs, rather than on insisting on union employment, prevents exclusion of non-union workers from the EDG conception of solidarity.

In fact, the EDG doesn't stop at worker solidarity. Instead, the aim is, as mentioned above, to 'seize and expand opportunities' that benefit the entire region. Thus, EDG

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6 Providing workforce development opportunities, with special attention to women and minorities is, in fact, central to other EDG projects, including one that links neighborhood revitalization efforts to a publicly funded schools reconstruction initiative. "It's not a high-road economy unless the whole community can benefit. We need to enable participation by those who have been excluded from paths to prosperity in the past," says Richard Lipsitz, an EDG Board member (Lipsitz, 2006).

area revitalization projects involve community associations and the faith-based community in search of ways to ensure training and employment opportunities for women and minorities underrepresented in building trades and to enhance the quality of education for youth in disadvantaged WNY neighborhoods. In addition, as discussed above, the EDG seeks to work with the business community to expand investment in the region, and it has designed its Buffalo thermal energy project in a way that can benefit area farmers. Indeed, all EDG projects have aspects that contribute to pursuit of the organization's goal of achieving *communitywide* solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

The EDG case draws attention not only to the notion of community solidarity, which is the *product* of labor's fresh look at solidarity, but also to the importance of recognizing 'rethinking solidarity' as a *process*. The EDG did not emerge spontaneously and fully formed; rather, as indicated above, it was the result of a series of discussions convened by the area's Buffalo AFL-CIO Council as a response to regional developments. The "common interpretation of the social situation" (to use Hoxie's words) generated by those meetings, the EDG action agenda, and specific implementation steps that followed were all arrived at through interactive engagement and consensus-based planning. Consistent with the writings of Durkheim and CMS scholars, which both strive to 'denaturalize' social reality, there is nothing predetermined or natural about the process or outcome of the re-conceptualization of solidarity that occurred in WNY.<sup>8</sup> As Peter Leisink and his colleagues write in the introduction to *The Challenge to Trade Unions in Europe*, solidarity requires discussion and even debate: "Solidarity is not a *priori* condition, but the outcome of repeated efforts to create commitments and alliances among workers despite their differences" (Leisink et al., 1996: 21).

An examination of the EDG also illustrates Wheeler's point that labor's involvement in local economic development provides a chance for unions to show that they are an organic part of the community. When the EDG was first announced, its spokesperson Donovan met with a reporter and explained, "We [organized labor] need to show people that we're not green-eyed monsters with horns, trying to take away business [from the region]" (quoted in Meyer, 1999b: A9). More recently, Richard Lipsitz, an EDG board member, expressed a similar view, "We are making a difference in people's lives, and we hope to make more of a difference over time.... Meanwhile, if the community comes to realize that union people aren't the enemy, then that's all the better" (Lipsitz, 2006).

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7 While some might see an emphasis on community solidarity as requiring the WNY labor movement to sacrifice traditional worker aims, those in the EDG still reserve the right to engage with employers in an adversarial manner when necessary. The ability to engage in distributive bargaining one day and work on mutual-gains initiatives the next is characteristic of many contemporary labor leaders not only in WNY, but elsewhere as well. As Leisink and his colleagues write, "It is important for unions to master the whole repertoire of union-employer relationships and to be able to choose whichever model seems appropriate" in a given situation (Leisink et al., 1996: 23). Similarly, Wheeler stresses that cooperative and adversarial engagement are "really complementary aspects of unionism," which "must be combined for the labor movement to carry its special contribution to society into this century" (2002: 185).

8 For a discussion of 'denaturalization' (the effort to counter the perception that existing social and organizational relationships are natural and/or unavoidable) in the CMS literature, see Fournier and Grey (2000: 18-19).

The EDG seeks more than a regional awareness that unions are a constructive part of the WNY landscape, however. It also aims to be an institution that *builds* communitywide solidarity. This has conceptual and practical implications. While EDG members are guided by a community-oriented consciousness, they recognize that such a notion has not been the guiding force in WNY during recent decades. Indeed, economic and political factions and partisan infighting have long characterized the area. As a result, the EDG has carefully chosen projects that help build regional support for their vision by bringing diverse groups together to work on shared goals (Donovan, 2000; Lipsitz, 2006).

The EDG attempt to build communitywide solidarity emphasizes finding commonalities – shared interests and region-based affinities, especially ones that may not be readily apparent – that can bring diverse segments of the region’s population together. In the short term, the EDG seeks to get WNY residents to identify with each other on concrete matters so that they are willing to jointly participate in specific projects on the basis of self-interest and shared identity. In the longer term, the EDG envisions that such collective action will have spillover effects that generate an inclusive, area-wide sense of solidarity based on experience (Lipsitz, 2006).

At the conceptual level, this is an illustration of Rorty’s ideas about solidarity. In both Rorty and the EDG, the focus is on enabling people to *identify with others* (to view them as ‘one of us’) and act because of that identification, rather on fostering a sense of *obligation for others* (who are not viewed as ‘one of us’). Moreover, in choosing projects that emphasize communitywide interests, the EDG is, as Rorty would say, influencing “which similarities and differences strike [WNY residents] as salient” (Rorty, 1989: 189-198).

At the practical level, meanwhile, the EDG’s specific, community-building projects present opportunities that were missed entirely by public and private managers operating in conventional ways. Even when an outside consultant told WNY business and government leaders that a major regional strength was the skill and productivity of its workforce – and that an obstacle to luring new investment was a negative perception of unions, especially among companies not accustomed to dealing with organized labor – it took the labor movement to suggest promoting the area’s harmonious labor-management climate and its beneficial impact on the region’s labor force and enterprises. As indicated in the previous section, this union-initiated strategy has proven successful in that it is clear that site selectors, who in the past would often dismiss WNY because of high unionization rates alone, are now willing to give the region a serious look.

The Niagara Power re-licensing project provides another concrete example. If the EDG hadn’t taken the initiative on this project, then the conventional, adversarial licensing approach would have been followed, an approach that is more expensive and time consuming than the consensus-based method. According to one union leader, the project gave labor ‘a place at the table’ and ensured that the renewal process – involving numerous settlement agreements that determine electricity allocation and the community impact of plant operations – was used “for purposes of improving the WNY

economy” (Lipsitz, 2006).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the EDG’s leadership in the re-licensing process received praise from all corners of the WNY community, and the inclusive nature of the consensus approach provided all area stakeholders “with an integral say in the project’s future,” said New York State Assemblywoman Francine DelMonte (quoted in Saltzman, 2005). With the Niagara Power initiative, the EDG found more than a way to ensure it had a voice, it also found a way to promote a sense of community solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, communitywide solidarity does not replace all other forms of solidarity. Even Durkheim recognized that organic and mechanical solidarity would coexist and that the latter would at best predominate (Durkheim, 1933: 174-193). Yet, the fact that many forms of solidarity can exist at the same time underscores the opportunity to promote and build an inclusive notion of solidarity. Further, coexistence of different forms of solidarity underscores CMS scholar Martin Parker’s argument that although senses of community grow within and around work organizations, “they can never be exclusive of other, non-organizational senses of community,” which means managerial attempts to control worker and/or citizen social identities are open to challenges from those with alternative visions (Parker, 1998: 89). As Jacobs writes in the introduction to this special issue, there is always the chance that the notion of an inclusive community can “trump traditional economic roles” and that managers, workers, and neighbors can work together as civic equals (Jacobs, this issue). Thus, the task of the EDG is to raise awareness of community solidarity as a local possibility and to give that notion a fighting chance of serving as the decisive factor in various local decisions.

## **Conclusion: Solidarity as a Foundation for Action**

This article has focused on economic development initiatives led by labor union leaders residing in the western region of New York. The first section looked at the concept of solidarity as it appears in scholarly research on unions and in some of the CMS literature. The second section surveyed the origin and activities of the union-created EDG. The third section examined how solidarity plays a role in that organization by considering some conceptual and practical implications of the group’s initiatives. The article finds not only that the EDG is rethinking solidarity, but also that the group is pursuing economic development projects with an eye to building communitywide solidarity.

While the article has focused on solidarity, it is important to stress that solidarity is not an end in itself. Solidarity is, rather, a foundation for action. Thus, struggles over competing notions of solidarity are ultimately struggles over alternative action paths, and reformulations of this concept provide an opportunity for moving a community in new directions and for achieving social change.

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9 According to Lipsitz, “Without the EDG, environmentalists and developers would have had a voice, but not area workers” (2006).

10 The entire WNY community was invited to participate in the Niagara Power re-licensing, and those at the table included a wide range of individuals and representatives, such as business owners, members of neighborhood associations, public officials, leaders of the Tuscarora Nation, and local sportsmen.

When it comes to marketing WNY and to other aspects of regional economic development, the EDG has challenged the conventional wisdom of managers in the public and private sectors. In doing so, it has achieved some early results, and even some praise from various corners of the community. There have also been setbacks. While the BNE and EDG are cordial to each other, a solid and enduring working relationship has yet to materialize. The Champions Network has been a casualty of the failure to achieve such a partnership. The Network continues to exist as a project of the Western Regional Office of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, but it is no longer a project of the EDG, which has decided to focus its attention on other, more promising initiatives (such as expansion of the Buffalo thermal heating plant) (Barrett, 2006).

The EDG's long-term goals are ambitious and the group might not ultimately succeed in having a major impact on WNY. Still, a key message of the CMS literature is that the future is not predetermined, and the EDG's way of thinking about – and acting on – economic development would probably not have had a chance in WNY in the absence of its efforts. And so the EDG continues, shedding light on alternatives effaced by management knowledge and practice and 'making a difference' daily in whatever ways it can (Lipsitz, 2006).

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