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Nearly a decade ago we joined a colleague at Clark University, Ed Ottensmeyer, in an attempt to use organization theory to shed light on the predicament of contemporary labor unions. We were responding to an invitation to submit a paper to a special issue of Research in the Sociology of Organizations devoted to industrial relations. Our collaboration produced the first application of the concept of legitimacy, as it was being developed in organization theory, to labor unions. We found that the unions' problems with legitimacy helped explain the apparent inertia of the labor movement in a time of crisis. Our basic research framework was discussed in 1991 at the national meetings of the Academy of Management. Two years later our paper was published, and we also presented our concepts and conclusions to an audience of top union staff at the annual meeting of the National Union Administrators Group.

These are the roots of the present book. We were so impressed by the power of legitimacy that we decided to continue our research on a grander scale and in a new direction. Our belief was that we could use legitimacy as a lens for seeing the labor movement anew, for explaining the causes of recent union successes and failures. We sought to refine and advance the conceptual foundation of our earlier work and, through a series of cases, understand how unions manage different forms of legitimacy with different constituencies. Legitimacy, we argue, matters a great deal to unions; it should lie at the very heart of the debates within the labor movement and in academic circles about their future direction.

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Unions and Legitimacy