

Study may serve as cautionary tale for AFL-CIO, new allies

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A new Dartmouth-led study suggests the AFL-CIO's plan to partner with progressive non-union groups may be easier said than done.

The AFL-CIO's campaign to align with nontraditional allies is intended to broaden the group's influence – the proportion of American [workers](#) belonging to a union fell to 11.3 percent last year, the lowest figure the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has ever recorded – but the study's findings underscore the difficulties the AFL-CIO will likely face when it has to share power and negotiate objectives with its new partners.

The [study](#), published in the journal *Mobilization*, looks at two of the most significant coalition [labor](#) movements in the last half-century, both in Charleston, S.C. Researchers compared a successful dockworkers' protest campaign (2000-2001) with a much-ballyhooed but ultimately less-successful hospital workers' strike (1969). In both cases, the disgruntled workers turned to outside groups for help. The key difference, the authors conclude, is that the hospital employees became too reliant on their partners, while the dockworkers managed to stay in control.

"The AFL-CIO's new initiative holds the promise of building a broader and more inclusive political movement, but it will be no easy task," said Marc Dixon, associate professor of sociology at Dartmouth and the paper's first author. "This study shows that labor groups working in coalition campaigns need to be able to negotiate the steep power imbalances often involved if they want to see success."

Provided by Dartmouth College

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