Cornell University
ILR School

ILRReview

Volume 58 | Number 2 Article 8

1-1-2005

The Twilight of the Old Unionism

Leo Troy

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview

The Twilight of the Old Unionism

This book review is available in ILRReview: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview/vol58/iss2/8

Industrial Relations Theory

The Twilight of the Old Unionism. By Leo Troy. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004. xv, 181 pp. ISBN 0-7656-0746-8, $64.95 (cloth); 0-7656-0747-6, $24.95 (paper).

Leo Troy is known for the penetrating questions he raises about the role of unions and the institutionalized collective bargaining system. A skeptical voice among industrial relations scholars, he was one of the first to proclaim the late twentieth century collapse of unions in the U.S. private sector. This book presents a no-holds-barred version of his thesis that irrepressible economic forces have overpowered legal protections to render unions obsolete. It is the third installment of Troy's self-described "trilogy on labor relations in the United States." Unfortunately, this is the weakest of the three, lacking both the thoroughness of *The New Unionism in the New Society* (George Mason University Press, 1994) and the insightfulness of *Beyond Unions and Collective Bargaining* (M. E. Sharpe, 1999). Little here is new, and missing is the measured analysis that characterizes Troy's best work.

The key arguments are presented in the first half of the book. The falling membership and waning influence of unions are traced to economic trends—especially a shifting distribution of employment by industry and occupation, the increasing share of manufacturing jobs in high technology, the expansion of the service sector relative to goods production, and the relocation of industries to the South and Mexico. Troy's interpretation of these developments is that market forces have creatively destroyed the monopoly power bestowed on unions by the National Labor Relations Act. Even employer opposition to new organizing is traced to market forces.

Troy also disputes the notion of a representation gap for workers in the United States, arguing that the concept confuses "demand" with "effective demand." In his view, workers choose individual over collective representation because they fear the negative impact of unions on employment and job security. The tepid interest in collective representation assures the failure of attempts by labor to reverse its fortunes by organizing the unorganized. Efforts to amend labor law in order to facilitate organizing also are described as futile, since market forces will continue to overwhelm any legal remedy to union decline.

Having relegated the "old unionism" of the private sector to effective oblivion, in the second half of the book Troy offers three distinct essays related indirectly to the main theme. The first essay represents a synopsis of his earlier volume on the rise of public sector unions, *The New Unionism in the New Society*. Although there are a few updates, the argument and core supporting evidence have not changed. Combined with the decline of the "old unionism," the rise of the "new unionism" of the public sector assures the emerging dominance of the labor movement by white-collar unions, especially the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers. The two teachers' unions are described as coordinating activity so closely (to the detriment of public education) that they are "de facto one union," whose eventual merger is inevitable. Insulated as they are from economic forces, public sector unions are free to promote what Troy describes as an anti-market ideology. The political influence of public sector unions assures their long-term survival.

The second essay updates a thesis that Troy has developed in a series of journal articles. As a natural by-product of the operation of free markets, the twilight of the "old unionism" is described as pervasive across advanced industrial economies. To establish the validity of this assertion, Troy focuses on the Canadian experience because it is often cited as an exception. He argues that union density is higher in Canada than in the United States because of more favorable labor laws, particularly for government employees. It is the much higher level of "new unionism" that explains the deceptive appearance of relative stability enjoyed by Canada's labor movement. To demonstrate this point, Troy dissects Canadian governmental statistics on union membership, summarily dismisses them as inaccurate, and concludes that the trend for private sector unionization parallels the U.S. experience, though with a lag.

The final essay is devoted to the thesis that the Democratic Party has become the labor party of the United States. Troy points out that unions control substantial wealth. As their fortunes have faded in the marketplace, unions

have directed their attention to political solutions. The growing influence of public sector unions, with their disdain for markets and natural reliance on political action, has fueled the shift. Against this backdrop, the relationship between unions and the Democrats is portrayed as a natural fit, given a shared political philosophy that promotes government intervention in labor relations, society, and the economy. Adding in-kind services to cash expenditures, Troy estimates that labor's total contributions to the Democratic Party exceed $400 million for each two-year election cycle. This is characterized as sufficient to give labor significant control over the Democratic Party's agenda, and is cited as the main exhibit for Troy's case that labor is the "senior partner" in the relationship.

The reasoning in this concluding essay typifies Troy's unfortunate practice of avoiding evidence that might undermine his thesis. He never addresses the growing influence of the Democratic Party's moderate wing, whose members are not congenial to labor's political agenda. Although he does conclude that labor law reform is not likely, he ignores the weakness of the support offered to this central union priority during the Clinton years. A more balanced assessment of labor's role in the Democratic Party is presented by Taylor Dark in *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Cornell University Press, 1999). Dark agrees with Troy that the relationship is strong, but introduces nuance by tracing the ebb and flow of labor's influence depending both on how centralized and coherent labor's political program is and on its fit with the current leadership of the Democratic Party.

The essays on the Canadian experience and public sector unions also lack analytical balance. Troy's views on Canada have been thoroughly debated in academic journals, and there is no need to revisit the strengths and weaknesses here (see John Godard's article in *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 42, No. 3, July 2003, for the most recent and comprehensive critique). It is disappointing, though, that no new evidence is introduced to interpret the persistently higher level of private sector unionization in Canada than in the United States in the face of Troy's longstanding warnings of imminent decline. The public sector chapter rehashes previous arguments and relies too heavily on dated evidence; a more contemporary treatment would enhance the analysis. Troy overstates the influence wielded by the teachers' unions both within the labor movement (in selecting political priorities) and outside it (in relations with the Democratic Party). The working relationship between the two unions is more volatile than described, and long-run merger prospects are complicated by stiff opposition within the NEA.

The three essays in the book's second half are, in my view, an unfortunate distraction from the book's central topic and most important potential contribution: Troy's assessment of private sector union decline. His review of the data for the United States is compelling, and the evidence for the past two decades clearly bears out his earlier predictions. The uninterrupted fall in union density indeed is cause for questioning unionism's prospects, and Troy makes some excellent points about the failure of unions to adapt and the likely futility of efforts to reverse labor's fortunes by amending industrial relations law. What is less convincing is the notion that private sector union decline is inevitable, will be global in scope, and is caused by the independent operation of natural economic forces. The process has clearly been aided in the United States by aggressive bipartisan government policies to promote free trade and economic deregulation.

Troy distracts the reader from his more valuable observations when he allows his strong convictions to cloud his analysis. For example, he repeatedly applies the label "Luddites" to unions, using the term not in the original sense of opposition to technological change but rather to demean any effort by labor to interfere with the free market. Similarly, Troy's disdain for mainstream scholarship is evident in his caustic dismissal of conclusions reached by Richard Freeman and James Medoff, Thomas Kochan, Harry Katz and Robert McKersie, Anil Verma and Mark Thompson, Gary Chaison and Joseph Rose, and other prominent industrial relations scholars.

Devotees of the unfettered operation of the free market will agree with most of Troy's conclusions, but should find little solace in the quality of the supporting evidence. By the same token, those who disagree with the implied values would be unwise to summarily dismiss Troy's conclusions. In spite of the analytical flaws, many of Troy's critiques of the contemporary labor movement are on target and deserve careful attention from researchers and practitioners.

Richard W. Hurd

Professor of Labor Studies
Cornell University
Visiting Professor of Human Resources
and Organizational Dynamics
University of Calgary