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Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement

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Labor-Management Relations

Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement. By Steven Henry Lopez. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 314 pp. ISBN 0-520-23280-1, \$55.00 (cloth); 0-520-23565-7, \$21.95 (paper).

Through participant observation, interviews, and archival data, Steven Lopez provides rich and insightful description and analysis of six separate but interrelated organizing and collective bargaining campaigns run by the Service Employees International Union in Pennsylvania from 1995 through 1999. Each of the three sections in *Reorganizing the Rust Belt* compares two related campaigns, and in doing so focuses on the complex internal and external obstacles faced by American labor unions in the twenty-first century. The sections build off each other: the first examines a "simple" organizing campaign at one worksite; the second, privatization and contract negotiations struggles; and the third, a dynamic, extensive anti-union campaign run by a powerful conglomerate of nursing homes.

To explain how and why local unions were successful, Lopez reframes theories of movement participation to consider the *obstacles* facing social movement unionism, including historical forces, and individual actors' strategic decisions and resourcefulness in response to those obstacles, as opposed to the usual emphasis on favorable factors, processes, and mechanisms that converge to yield union gains. Three main sources of obstacles to social movement unionism are workers themselves, internal union organization itself, and powerful employers. Within this context social movement unionism is a process of change, which uses a grassroots approach to organizing new members, employs multiple forms of collective action to build worker solidarity, seeks genuine labor-community coalitions, and frames issues in broad political or justice terms.

Part I examines how labor unions overcome workers' negative views and expectations of unions formed through their prior experiences with business unionism. Looking at the differing strategies and outcomes of two organizing campaigns, Lopez finds that in the first case the union employed traditional organizing tactics, while in the second it used a grassroots organizing approach.

To explain *why* the grassroots campaign was

successful, Lopez postulates that its strategies and tactics, unlike those of the conventional campaign, effectively provided workers with necessary information, addressed their fears, and challenged the preconceptions they had formed based on their experiences with business unions, allowing them to reconstruct their views and expectations about unions. The key reason for the negative outcome of the traditional campaign, Lopez argues, was its failure to address workers' negative views of unionism based on their personal histories, which often included experiences with union violence and corruption or with "do-nothing" business unionism in a region that had suffered from deindustrialization and job loss. Lopez considers and rules out alternative explanations for the different organizing outcomes, including worker discontent, the presence and intensity of employer-run anti-union campaigns, and other environmental factors, and instead recounts the unions' strategies and tactics.

In Part II, Lopez describes two successive struggles of a local union: a fight against proposed privatization of nursing homes, followed by a battle to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement with a multi-site employer. While both campaigns achieved their goals, the collective bargaining struggle encountered more obstacles to gaining support and participation from workers, community members, and politicians. Thus the main question in Part II is why the people in the region viewed the two campaigns so differently. The short answer is that the privatization campaign was considered and framed as a social justice issue affecting everyone, whereas the contract negotiation battle was viewed as only a union and worker issue.

In the fight over privatization, workers participated in the campaign because they viewed privatization as a moral issue over quality care, which required a concerted response. The issue transcended the interests of the union and its workers, and as such, organizational inertia was not an immediate problem. However, organizational inertia and worker expectations did hinder the union's ability to mobilize workers during the contract negotiation campaign. Because of their prior experiences with patriarchal business unionism, workers did not rally around the union when negotiations stalled, as they expected the union to break the logjam unaided. Also hindering a prompt and unified response to employers' obstinacy at the bargaining table were the bureaucratic legacy of entrenched union staff (what Lopez calls staff resistance to change) and lack of organization

and leadership at the work site level. By educating the workers about the changes in the environment and challenges the union faced, the union staff were able to alter the role the union members were willing to play within the local union. However, during the contract negotiation campaign the workers were not inclined to continue high levels of participation once the goal was achieved, and were content to return to the servicing model.

In Part III, Lopez describes and analyzes two phases of a two-year battle between a nursing home conglomerate and three SEIU locals. The author's goal in this section is to highlight the impact that union leader resourcefulness, in the face of extensive management unfair labor practices, can have on the success of a campaign. Lopez discusses the dynamic interactions that occur between labor and capital and the way tactics and strategies evolve. For example, the company was trying to instigate an economic strike so as to be able to permanently replace striking workers, but because the employer committed a series of gross unfair labor practices, the union leadership was able to launch an Unfair Labor Practice strike. The ULPs and hostile management tactics eventually gave rise to a more ambitious, corporate-wide campaign by the union, which successfully turned a union issue into an issue about justice. The success of the campaign was due to the "cumulative effects of multiple, mutually reinforcing, sources of leverage" (p. 208), including legal decisions, public pressure, political support, worker mobilization, and militancy. In the examples Lopez provides, union leadership was more flexible and innovative than corporate management and was able to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds.

Lopez's book provides meaningful and unique insights into the internal dynamics of multiple phases of a local union's "lifecycle." As an intern and researcher, he gives the reader an insider perspective on specific issues healthcare unions face, as well as more generalizable information concerning practical obstacles local unions face in today's employment environment. He calls our attention to the importance of regional history as it affects individuals' experiences with and attitudes toward labor unions. He views unions and their leaders as occupying positions of power and choice as opposed to merely maintaining a reactionary or insignificant role in the American industrial relations system.

I have two related comments about the notion of social movement unionism. Although

Lopez's work is descriptively rich and analytically insightful, I feel the use of social movement unionism as a theoretical framework is unnecessary and unconvincing. My comments concern the ambiguous and seemingly circular definition of social movement unionism—an issue relevant, I think, to ILR research at large.

Lopez's definition of social movement unionism—as I summarized it above, "a process of change that uses a grassroots approach to organizing new members, employs multiple forms of collective action to build worker solidarity, seeks genuine labor-community coalitions, and frames issues in broad political or justice terms"—cannot be criticized as anomalous, because it is similar to the definition adopted by other authors. My dissatisfaction with it, therefore, is not laid against Lopez alone. In brief, I find the definition(s) of social movement unionism so broad and open to such a variety of interpretations as to have little practical use. For example, how would one know if a "genuine" attempt to reach out to the community was made? Likewise, given the many definitions or forms coalitions can take, does it matter if the coalition lasts for one day versus one year? Is it the attempt to branch out that is important, or the actual success at forming a lasting relationship with community organizations? Similarly, many issues can be framed under the broader terms of "respect and dignity," yet merely marketing an issue as a social justice one does not necessarily mean people interpret as such.

Nor is this criticism applicable only to social movement unionism; terms such as business unionism, service-oriented unionism, and even rank-and-file unionism invoke multiple meanings and suffer from ambiguity. These popular terms are used to describe processes, outcomes, strategies, and even ideologies within local unions encompassing too many concepts to be of practical and theoretical usefulness.

To his credit, Lopez does not fully embrace the common definition of social movement unionism or theories of movement participation, and instead calls for shifting the emphasis, as noted above, from factors facilitating unions' success to the internal and external obstacles they face today. Of concern and largely unexamined within the social movement unionism model is the role the membership plays in the day-to-day operations of local unions in terms of decision-making and degree of worker control. The possibility exists that a local union could adhere to the four loosely defined components of social movement unionism Lopez

cites—grassroots organizing, genuine community coalitions, multiple forms of collective action, and the framing of issues in broader social justice terms—and yet operate in an undemocratic, top-down fashion, with minimal worker participation in decision-making and goal formation for the local union.

Second, even accepting the specified definition of social movement unionism, some of the facts Lopez presents seem to indicate that during certain campaigns social movement unionism was not present. For example, in the second campaign discussed in Part I, the union did not build coalitions with external organizations to win the organizing campaign. Likewise, in the contract negotiations campaign, the union was unsuccessful at building and using coalitions within the community.

While the SEIU locals and campaigns in question may or may not be social movements, what Lopez does illustrate is that some unions are in a period of transition, and this transition is littered with surmountable obstacles. While being honest about the relatively small number of unions that are in this transition phase, he leaves the reader with a sense of optimism that unions will be able to adapt or transform themselves. An additional contribution of the book lies in the detailed information Lopez provides concerning the internal and external obstacles local unions face, which could provide the basis for new typologies and theory formation to better explain current events and aid the labor movement in moving forward.

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Industrial Relations, Politics, and Government

Unions in the Time of Revolution: Government Restructuring in Alberta and Ontario. By Yonatan Reshef and Sandra Rastin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. xviii, 279 pp. ISBN 0-8020-8753-1, \$60.00 (cloth).

The writing of this review closely coincided with the funeral of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan. One frequently mentioned event in his political career is his destruction of the air

traffic controllers' union in 1981. Some believe this action ushered in a new era in U.S. labor-management relations. Former Secretary of Labor George Shultz later stated that Reagan's actions gained him considerable respect among foreign leaders, who concluded that Reagan's amiable demeanor concealed strong views and character. Whatever one's interpretation of this event, the American labor movement did not or could not defend the rights of the striking controllers in any substantial way. The dilemma facing U.S. unions when dealing with a determined and popular right-wing government was not unique. The authors of this book analyze the strategies, tactics, and options of Canadian labor movements confronted by hostile governments.

Canada is a nation of regions, so provinces administer most aspects of labor relations. Individual provinces have distinct political cultures. Alberta is the most conservative province politically, and lacks an effective liberal opposition. Ontario, Canada's industrial heartland, was governed for decades by moderate conservatives, always challenged by reformist Liberals and labor-oriented New Democrats. In the 1990s, both provinces elected neo-conservative governments. Victorious premiers called their programs "revolutions," an ironic term for a package of policies consisting principally of tax cuts, reduced public expenditures, and privatization of government services. Premier Ralph Klein of Alberta, taking office in 1993, pledged to eliminate the provincial deficit quickly and the provincial debt eventually, a program that became known as "the Klein Revolution." Two years later, Ontario Premier Mike Harris swept into office on the basis of the "Common Sense Revolution," a more ambitious program that included cutting the power of public sector unions, especially the teachers. Both governments had strong majorities, meaning that no parliamentary opposition could stop them. They accurately gauged the probabilities of labor collective action based on previous experience with the labor movement.

Both of the "revolutions" threatened the status of unions in provincial public services, health care, and education. Unions in these sectors, with limited support from other labor organizations, formulated responses to government actions. Electoral politics had failed. The narrow scope of collective bargaining offered little hope of success. The authors analyze labor's responses through the lens of social movement theory, which examines the actions of less powerful groups to advance their interests through