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Union Recognition: Organizing and Bargaining Outcomes

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Union Recognition: Organizing and Bargaining Outcomes. Edited by Gregor Gall. London: Routledge, 2006. xviii, 260 pp. ISBN 041-534-3364, \$65.00 (cloth).

Union revitalization has fully established itself as a subject of study in international industrial relations. This line of inquiry has become especially vibrant in the United Kingdom, where a series of edited volumes has appeared documenting the post-Thatcher situation of British trade unions. Gregor Gall's new edited book contributes to this literature with case studies and survey data on new organizing and an elaborated version of mobilization theory.

The volume's main strength is its empirical base, which is rich enough to support fine-grained description and interpretation of events over the past three decades. The chronology of those events is itself uncontroversial and easy to summarize. In 1979, the British government and employers began an offensive against the unions. They fired high-profile trade unionists in large factories, decertified bargaining units, provoked strikes, and closed and privatized unionized workplaces. The offensive led to a dramatic decline in union membership and union power. Throughout the British workplace, a sense of union marginalization set in.

In the 1990s, the notion of "social partnership" became a hot topic for the Labour Party industrial relations experts and the right wing of the trade union movement. By signing "sweetheart deals," "partnership agreements," or "single-union agreements," unionists hoped to engage with the more enlightened side of management to move beyond the trench warfare that characterized much Thatcher-era industrial relations. Although social partnership did lead to some new forms of influence, it did not reinvigorate member participation, and in many cases it led to the establishment of a much weaker form of trade unionism. During the late 1990s, unions began adopting an "organizing" approach, which meant mobilizing workers to establish bargaining, even where employers were opposed.

One of the most important tools for organizing was the Employment Relations Act, passed by the new Labour government in 1999, which introduced Britain's first statutory enforcement

mechanism for union recognition. The act set forth procedures for workplace elections and sanctions for employers that ignored election results. Since 1995, when the Labour Party announced its intention to reform industrial relations laws, nearly 850,000 workers have become newly covered by recognition deals, compared to just 42,000 workers who have seen unions derecognized in their workplaces. Although these developments stabilized union membership and bargaining coverage, a critical question was left, based on the experience in the United States. The worry was that statutory recognition would lead to, in the words of Edmund Heery and Melanie Simms, American-style outcomes, "in which a significant proportion of campaigns are defeated, where the requirement to prove majority leads to recognition in small, tightly defined bargaining units, and where successful campaigns are often not translated into collective bargaining" (page 47).

The book tells this story in intricate detail. Heery and Simms present survey data on union organizing methods, employer responses, recognition agreements, and first contracts. Sonia McKay, Sian Moore, and Hannah Wood analyze the act and the resulting collective agreements. Alex Bryson analyzes a pair of vast datasets on worker perceptions of union effectiveness. The volume contains interesting British case studies on the resilience of trade unionism in the "provincial newspapers" (Gall); community-supported union organizing campaigns in Asian workplaces (Jane Holgate); the attempt to build a national organizing model at the insurance union (Fiona Colgan and Chris Creegan); union responses to the restructuring of Rover cars (Alan Tuckman and Michael Whittall); labor-management partnership at a bank and the Eurotunnel (Paul Golan); and an organizing campaign at a call center (Melanie Simms). Also included are overviews of union organizing policy in the United States (Lisa Jordan and Bob Bruno), Australia (Joseph Rose), and Canada (Gerard Griffin).

The book's analytical agenda is to contribute to mobilization theory, as outlined in John Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (Routledge, 1998). In that book, Kelly sketched an alternative direction for industrial relations theory drawing on Marxism, social movement theory, and social psychology. The chapters of the Gall volume draw on Kelly's theory to tease out the causes of collective action in their cases. These include perceived injustice, workplace-based collective

identity, and changes in the economic environment. McKay, Moore, and Wood conclude that “statutory and semi-voluntary recognition can be conceptualized in terms of mobilization theory (Kelly 1998) since it is generally the outcome of successful collective organization motivated by perceived injustice in the workplace, generating a shared group identity” (p. 114). Jordan and Bruno state that the “validity of [Kelly’s] emphasis on the balance of power between capital and labour, and union capacity to mobilise workers’ ‘collective interests’ into forms of oppositional action is borne out in our research” (p. 181). Tuckman and Whittall argue, “There was almost certainly some relationship with the economic context as well as a ‘cycle’ of involvement ... possibly also linked with ‘long-wave’ cycles in the economy as Kelly (1998) suggests” (p. 96).

These statements are undoubtedly valid. However, the book’s evidence does not neatly fit the theory, and several running themes in the book seem to contradict it. The most obvious seeming contradiction concerns the relationship between mobilization and union revitalization. Despite the rise of the organizing model and an increase in mobilization, union membership continues to decline, and bargaining coverage has failed to grow as fast as the number of overall jobs. Gall writes of “mobilization per se being necessary but not sufficient” (p. 133), and the book’s concluding chapter is full of dark, pessimistic turns of phrase. The problem is that, like most of the literature, this book discusses union revitalization and mobilization together. If there is no causal connection, an explanation is in order. Similarly, an institutionalist argument coexists uneasily with the mobilization argument. Gall writes in the conclusion, “Under capitalism, trade unionism and collective bargaining are highly dependent upon employer and state support for their existence and operation” (p. 235). This seems to contradict or complicate the argument from mobilization theory that unions derive their power from workers taking collective action in the workplace against injustice. Another problem has to do with the interests and identities of workers. Two of the cases involve an “us and them” different from what we would expect for a theory derived from Marxism. Holgate’s chapter shows that unions organize some workers around identities that have as much to do with ethnicity and race as with class or work. Tuckman and Whittall’s account of Rover raises a similar problem, since in their case the “them” against which British workers mobilize includes German trade unionists. With such a wide range of contradictory evidence and arguments, the book could have contained a debate over the causes,

effects, and definitions of mobilization. Instead, it warmly compliments the mobilization theory and avoids disagreement with it.

This book will be useful for scholars interested in British industrial relations. The chapters by Heery and Simms and by McKay, Moore, and Wood display interesting analyses of data on the intersection between the new legislation and union activity in the United Kingdom, and most of the case study chapters are valuable and interesting. The international chapters generate some potentially important hypotheses about the benefits and dangers of state support and the role of mobilization in the campaign process. For one group of readers, however—scholars committed to the development of mobilization theory—this book is not merely valuable, but essential.

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Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement. Edited by Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: ILR Press, 2004. 308 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4265-6, \$49.95 (cloth); 0-8014-8902-4, \$19.95 (paper).

Attempts to revive the trade union movement have attracted the attention of scholars worldwide in recent years, and this volume is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on union revitalization. Central to the project of revitalization, at least in the Anglophone world, has been increased commitment to organizing the unorganized, and *Rebuilding Labor* contains nine original studies of organizing in the United States. There are chapters that examine the incidence, form, and outcomes of new organizing initiatives, including a valuable piece by John DiNardo and David S. Lee that demonstrates that organizing does not cost workers their jobs—the difference in survival rates between matched unionized and non-unionized sites is precisely zero. There are also chapters that deal with organizers, examining their characteristics, motivations, and careers, as well as the reasons why some organizers stay in the labor movement and some—often after a depressingly short period of activism—leave. All of the chapters are of a high caliber, including an excellent review of the book’s themes by the editors.