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Revival of the American Labor Movement: Issues, Problems, Prospects

Abstract

[Excerpt] The purpose of this book is to examine union revitalization efforts: to identify central developments, to analyze strengths and weaknesses in the new initiatives, and to assess progress made and prospects for the future. We ask questions such as: Can union decline be reversed? Are there serious indications of revitalization beyond new leadership and publicity? What accounts for successes and failures so far, and what strategies have shown the most promise for future success? Can innovations in areas such as vocational training consortia contribute to labor movement revitalization? Are there ways to reconcile the contradictions between an "organizing model" of unionism and the traditional member-focused "servicing model" of the postwar era? Can unions successfully target relevant groups (beyond the existing blue-collar and public-sector bases) such as women, minorities, service employees, semiprofessionals, and professionals? Can political action and legislative campaigns on issues such as trade contribute to reversing the decline, or is this only a way to hold the line (or even worse, an inadequate strategy of the past)?

This book is designed to target these and related questions by bringing together the work of highly regarded experts whose research and analysis indicate contrasting answers and perspectives. There is, to be sure, a great deal of opinion trumpeting on many of these questions; the focus here, by contrast, is on research: hard evidence and causal analysis provide grounded answers and realistic perspectives. We hope that the analysis presented will offer meaningful signposts for future research as well as for policymakers and union leaders regarding what is and is not possible, what may and may not work.

Keywords

labor movement, unions, organization, labor rights, revitalization

Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Labor and Employment Law | Unions

Comments

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Revival of the American Labor Movement

Issues, Problems, Prospects

Lowell Turner, Harry C. Katz, and Richard W. Hurd

Despite the American labor movement's loss in the bruising battle over the China trade bill, supporters and opponents of the movement agree that after years of decline, labor has once again become a powerful political force. "It's like night and day comparing the AFL-CIO's political operations today with those in the 1994 elections," said Charles Cook, who publishes a nonpartisan political report. "It's like comparing a Model T with a Ferrari." In other signs of labor's strength, white-collar workers, including doctors and psychologists, are flocking into unions as never before, and labor registered its biggest organizing victory in sixty years by unionizing 74,000 Los Angeles home-care workers in 1999.¹

Since the 1970s, researchers have chronicled the decline of the labor movement and the shrinkage of collective-bargaining coverage to a small fraction of the American workforce. For those who believe that strong unions and collective bargaining agreements are essential characteristics of a healthy and economically just democratic society, these have been gloomy times indeed. And not only have talented researchers explained the decline, many have implied or even openly argued that decline is inevitable, that labor unions are relics of an earlier industrial era and on their way to obsolescence in a modern high-technology and service-based global economy.²

Quite surprisingly, however, from the depths of despair, a strange and unexpected series of events emerged into public view by the mid-1990s. From a few organizing unions of the 1980s (SEIU, AFSCME, ACTWU, CWA, and others), from the new AFL-CIO Organizing In-

¹Steven Greenhouse, "Despite Defeat on China Bill, Labor Is on Rise," *New York Times* (May 30, 2000): A1, A18.

²See, for example, Troy 1986.

stitute founded in 1989, from the rise to prominence of a new generation of energetic and progressive union leaders, emerged a wave of fresh activist energy throughout the American labor movement. The most dramatic indication of revitalization came with the 1995 watershed victory by John Sweeney, who headed an insurgent slate in a contested election for AFL-CIO leadership. The “New Voice” candidates campaigned on a platform calling for massive additional resources and energy for both organizing and political action, a platform that has since been widely implemented. By the turn of the millennium it was not yet clear whether this new activism would be enough to launch a full-fledged labor movement revival. But it was clear that new hope was present and realistic, with the challenge of revitalization now at the top of the agenda for a once demoralized labor movement.

The purpose of this book is to examine union revitalization efforts: to identify central developments, to analyze strengths and weaknesses in the new initiatives, and to assess progress made and prospects for the future. We ask questions such as: Can union decline be reversed? Are there serious indications of revitalization beyond new leadership and publicity? What accounts for successes and failures so far, and what strategies have shown the most promise for future success? Can innovations in areas such as vocational training consortia contribute to labor movement revitalization? Are there ways to reconcile the contradictions between an “organizing model” of unionism and the traditional member-focused “servicing model” of the postwar era? Can unions successfully target relevant groups (beyond the existing blue-collar and public-sector bases) such as women, minorities, service employees, semiprofessionals, and professionals? Can political action and legislative campaigns on issues such as trade contribute to reversing the decline, or is this only a way to hold the line (or even worse, an inadequate strategy of the past)?

This book is designed to target these and related questions by bringing together the work of highly regarded experts whose research and analysis indicate contrasting answers and perspectives. There is, to be sure, a great deal of opinion trumpeting on many of these questions; the focus here, by contrast, is on research: hard evidence and causal analysis provide grounded answers and realistic perspectives. We hope that the analysis presented will offer meaningful signposts for future

research as well as for policymakers and union leaders regarding what is and is not possible, what may and may not work.

Admittedly, this is a partisan book, just as it also is a collection of scholarly work. The authors, without exception, believe that a viable, independent labor movement is essential in a democratic society. We are all close observers of industrial relations and the labor movement, and much of our research is informed by close personal contact with unionists and the processes we describe. The closeness to practice combined with the analytical tools of academia provides a richness of perspective that is often missing in dryer, more detached scholarly writing. Crossing the boundaries of fields including industrial relations, sociology, political science, and economics, we believe that research breakthroughs and theoretical advances are most likely in interdisciplinary analysis that targets and builds upon day-to-day realities. It is in this spirit of broad inquiry and close observation that we work and offer our research findings and analysis.

Although the authors and editors of this collection agree on the importance of unions, a range of views is represented regarding the efficacy of current efforts at renewal. Some of the authors focus on successful initiatives consistent with the AFL-CIO's strategic approach and offer or imply an optimistic appraisal of labor's future. Others applaud current efforts but are less enthusiastic because of institutional inflexibility that stands in the way of effective strategic reorientation. A few of the contributors present alternative conceptions involving redefinition of the role of unions and how they relate to workers, employers, and the government.

The chapters in the first section of this volume address the problems, prospects, and alternative scenarios and strategies facing labor. Here the key question is whether a particular strategic reorientation holds the key to labor's revitalization and the terms of that reorientation. The chapter by Lowell Turner and Richard Hurd as well as the one by Paul Johnston argues that in order to revitalize, the American labor movement will have to transform itself into "social unionism" and link up with broader social movements throughout American society. While Turner and Hurd emphasize the rise, fall, and rise again of social movement unionism, Johnston sees labor movement growth in campaigns for the expansion of citizenship.

Charles Heckscher presents an equally bold and controversial vision for the labor movement when he asserts that the key to the future growth and success of unions lies in their ability to create representation structures that accommodate the needs of the increasingly mobile American workforce. Heckscher sides with those who believe that workers' attachments to any particular firm are likely to be short-lived, and therefore new forms of "associational unionism" are needed.

Dorothy Sue Cobble makes a more modest, though related, claim by stressing that unions should become more sensitive to the needs of workers who feel strong occupational links rather than ties to a single employer or job site. Cobble claims that occupational unionism could draw lessons from the craft unionism that stood as a real alternative to the industrial union model that became predominant in the post-World War II period.

The chapters in the next section have a more empirical focus in their examination of the recent organizing efforts within the American labor movement. They provide rich additions to the growing literature assessing these efforts. Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong trace the complexities of organizing among low-wage workers in Los Angeles and show that neither top-down nor bottom-up styles provide a simple prescription for success. They also hint at the long-term problems unions face in sustaining activism and cohesion after an organizing victory. The chapter by Amy Foerster and the one by Bill Fletcher and Richard Hurd report the tensions created within the ranks of American unions because of the top-down and directive nature of the Organizing Institute and a number of other AFL-CIO initiatives. Jill Kriesky examines the AFL-CIO's recent union cities initiative focused on local labor councils, and clarifies both what is new in these efforts and the problems confronted to date.

While organizing is clearly at the center of the American labor movement's current agenda, in recent years unions have also adopted new collective-bargaining tactics and restructured through mergers as part of revitalization efforts. The chapter by Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich reports how the steelworkers linked corporate campaigns to more aggressive bargaining approaches that in some important demonstration cases stopped the near automatic success employers had been having through the use of permanent striker replacements. Gary Chai-

son evaluates the extent of recent union mergers and the various factors that motivate them. Mergers, he argues, appear to work best when motivated by the advantages gained from administrative coordination and economies of scale. Eric Parker and Joel Rogers describe successful local coalitions in Wisconsin involving unions, employers, and labor-market intermediaries to promote economic development and worker training.

Union revitalization in the United States also has included politically oriented initiatives that seek to influence international trade rights and global labor conditions as revealed by the papers in the final section of this volume. James Shoch describes the ebb and flow of labor's fortunes in fights over free trade agreements, indicating both the conditions necessary for labor's "fast-track" legislative victories and the problems inherent in building similar future coalitions. Lance Compa analyzes union efforts to influence international rights and standards. Whether at the domestic or international level, Shoch and Compa describe how through practical and pragmatic political activities and compromises labor has scored limited but important successes in the international arena.

We hope this book will convince you of the richness of innovation now under way within the American labor movement. At the same time, new strategies and possibilities make it essential to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and the prospects for expanded revitalization. The book closes with Harry Katz's reflections—an assessment of the prospects as well as a reminder of the limitations and critical problems of recent efforts.

The renewal of the labor movement, we believe, is a precondition for both the revitalization of American democracy and the democratization of our increasingly global society. If this book contributes in some small way to a broadening and deepening of contemporary union efforts aimed at modernization, reform, and renewed influence in the American political economy, it will have served its purpose.