

Industrial & Labor Relations Review

Volume 62, Issue 1

2008

Article 8

Reigniting the Labor Movement: Restoring Means to Ends in a Democratic Labor Movement.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Labor-Management Relations

Reigniting the Labor Movement: Restoring Means to Ends in a Democratic Labor Movement. By Gerald Friedman. New York: Routledge, 2008. xviii, 195 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-77071-8, \$130 (cloth).

The decline in power and influence of labor movements across the advanced capitalist world has spawned a cottage industry of books purporting to diagnose the problems facing organized labor and prescribe solutions. It needs to be said that most of these accounts are disappointing; decline often seems over-determined by the sheer number and variety of causes, and the prescriptions tend to have an ahistorical quality, based more on optimism of the will than strategic analysis. That is why this book is both important and refreshing; it provides a historically rich, data-driven, and theoretically sophisticated argument that stretches back to the late nineteenth century to offer a parsimonious explanation of both the growth and decline of labor movements. Along the way, Friedman's account suggests tantalizing hints of the kinds of shifts in outlook, ideology, and organization that will be necessary to reverse decline.

Reigniting the Labor Movement proceeds through a series of loosely linked chapters that together make up a coherent argument, but do so in a somewhat meandering manner, frequently pausing for fascinating diversions into moments of labor history and periodic reformulations of the central thesis. One of the many charms of this book is the way in which the author uses detailed accounts and character sketches of particular events and actors to illustrate his argument. We get a discussion of the paternalistic managerial strategy of the Paris Gas Company to show the importance of worker empowerment and protection from "petty tyranny" for early trade unionism. A fresh look at the political struggles and revolutionary polemics of Rosa Luxembourge, the Marxist and fierce labor advocate active in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century, serves to recover a lost strand of socialist thinking, one that helps inspire Friedman's wider argument about worker consciousness. The experience of the 1974–79 Labour government in Britain, and the largely unsuccessful efforts of those on the left of the party to offer an "alternative economic

strategy" to financial orthodoxy, are dissected in order to point to the disastrous consequences for the British labor movement of not challenging that orthodoxy more strenuously.

An important strength of the argument presented in this book is the generalizability it acquires through the author's integration of rich historical detail with statistical datasets—covering, for example, strike frequency, union membership, and partisan control of government—for 16 industrialized countries. Of the many insights derived from these datasets, the close association between high levels of industrial conflict and rapid union growth is most, excuse the pun, striking: unions grow five times as fast during years with high levels of strikes as in years without strike waves.

Together, the historical vignettes and statistical analysis are used to bolster the main thesis animating the book, and serve as explanation for generalized labor movement decline. The argument is that the original goals of labor movements were worker empowerment and democracy at work; nascent trade unionists were moved far more by resistance to subordination and capitalist control than by hopes of material gains. Friedman views the labor movement of recent decades, organized to engage in regularized collective bargaining with employers to divide up the surplus, as less radical, less democratic, and ultimately less viable than a labor movement whose focus was on democratizing the workplace.

Furthermore, participation and democracy have to be present inside labor movements themselves, because the power of collective action is learned through practice resulting in *explosions* of mass consciousness. The growth of labor movements, therefore, was closely tied to waves of mass mobilization. As Friedman puts it, "The strike precedes the union" (p. 115). Strike waves are difficult to predict, appearing as "moments of madness" that both mobilize workers and sufficiently intimidate employers and politicians that they are willing to make the kinds of concessions that permit the long-term survival of trade unions.

That, however, is where the Catch-22 of union growth and decline sets in. Worker mobilization and participatory unionism are necessary to create strong labor organizations, but unions then need to control and channel that mobilization in order to bargain with employers and the state and to survive. Unions accepted "order for concessions" (p. 157). This required that unions limit internal democracy, which in turn served to

demobilize the labor movement. Bureaucracy and organization change the goals of trade unions and shift decision-making to leaders. Once employers and governments were ready to counter-attack at the end of the 1970s, they encountered ossified, demobilized labor movements that rapidly succumbed to the combination of legislative and managerial assaults.

This book's argument, which combines Rosa Luxembour's theory of class consciousness and Michels's iron law of oligarchy, is similar to that of Claus Offe and Helmut Wieselth in their "Two Logics of Collective Action" (in Offe's *Disorganized Capitalism*), which surprisingly is absent from the bibliography. It represents an old and venerable tradition in labor scholarship: early Marx; anti-Lenin; anti-materialist. It has been memorably described by Jonathan Zeitlin as "rank-and-fileism" in the sense that it anticipates an ordinary worker who is always more radical and more willing to engage in collective action than her union leaders. Friedman has developed a sophisticated and nuanced version of this argument, which, bolstered by his statistical study of the relationship between strike waves and union growth, has enabled him to compose a sweeping account of a century of union growth and decline across the advanced capitalist world. His conclusion is that in order to thrive again, labor movements will need to recapture their focus on democratizing the workplace and become more internally democratic and willing to encourage and facilitate collective action.

It is a powerful and challenging thesis, and part of its power is that it provokes the reader—or at least this reader—to argue with it at almost every step. Three parts of the argument are worth more attention. First, union democracy is under-defined, and its relationship with membership mobilization and demobilization is asserted rather than demonstrated. There is a spectrum of types of union democracy on offer across the cases examined in the book, ranging from the highly participatory to the more formally representational, and yet membership decline occurs almost everywhere. British unions had highly decentralized, internally democratic structures in the 1970s and yet suffered the same fate as their more centralized, less participatory American counterparts. Swedish unions are highly centralized, with control over strikes and finances held by the confederations, and yet membership decline has been far less serious in Sweden than elsewhere. Just what kind of internal structures might have averted the generalized demobilization that Friedman demonstrates? Setting aside the question of whether most union members want

a form of permanent mobilization, there is real debate as to whether mobilization is more likely to be fostered by top-down or bottom-up structures, as the current controversy within SEIU indicates. John Kelly and Edmund Heery's careful work on British union officials suggests that, at least by the 1990s, those officials were more radical and more anxious to engage in collective action than were their members.

A second point worth examining further is the role of economic context. In keeping with the anti-materialism that animates this book, the changing economic context over the *longue durée* plays little role in explaining labor mobilization, growth, or decline; the author goes to some lengths to explain why deindustrialization is not a sufficient explanation of decline. But one does not need to be an economic structuralist to acknowledge that, while men and women make their own history, they do it under conditions not of their own choosing, and those conditions include different production regimes. James Cronin's important work on strike waves in Britain makes it clear that moments of labor mobilization are not random, but are closely keyed to shifts in economic regime and occur in sectors undergoing accelerated restructuring. If that is the case, labor mobilization (as well as the union growth that accompanies it) and, presumably, labor demobilization are themselves linked in some way to shifts within capitalism.

The final issue that might have been worth exploring is the existence of alternative paths to labor movement growth. Friedman has deep knowledge and understanding of the cases of Britain, France, and the United States, and his argument about demobilization and decline is more plausible as applied to these countries. But what of the Scandinavian cases, where union decline has not been anywhere near so severe, and where a Bernsteinian reformist strategy was followed rather than the mobilizational one favored by Friedman? Sweden points to a strategy of gradual reforms, the slow construction of wider working-class collectivity and class consciousness through solidaristic policies, and the emergence of a genuine counter-hegemony, all with limited recourse to mobilization.

More attention to countries where decline has been limited might have strengthened the generalizability of the argument of this book. Nonetheless, *Reigniting the Labor Movement* is essential reading for the debate over the future of the labor movement. There is plenty of polemic to go around, but much rarer is carefully reasoned, historically informed analysis of the kind found here. Whether you agree or disagree with

Friedman's conclusions, any serious discussion of labor's fate must engage with his arguments.

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Labor and Employment Law

Fading Corporatism: Israel's Labor Law and Industrial Relations in Transition. By Guy Mundlak. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2007. 344 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4600-9, \$49.95 (cloth).

Industrial relations systems in many developed and developing countries are undergoing dramatic transformations. Responding to a variety of international- and national-level pressures and constraints, formerly stable institutions are shifting and, in many cases, giving way to altogether new ones. What is the nature of these pressures, and how have they brought about systemic change, sometimes very rapidly? These questions go to the heart of industrial relations scholarship. There is still much we do not know about how and why national industrial relations systems evolve and transform.

Guy Mundlak's *Fading Corporatism*, a case study of the history of Israel's industrial relations system that compellingly documents, in particular, two decades of change beginning in the mid-1980s, sheds considerable light on these complex and extremely elusive dynamics. Reaching as far back as Israel's pre-statehood years, Mundlak artfully uncovers the central forces and developments that account for a fundamental departure from a longstanding and deep-rooted corporatist tradition in favor of an emerging pluralist one.

In contrast to other volumes on industrial relations transformation, Mundlak's places the legal perspective front and center in the proposed analytical framework. He exposes the consistently overlooked importance of labor law, or "social law" more broadly defined, and of the institutions associated with this body of law, as both explanatory and outcome variables linked to this dramatic transition. Mundlak argues that at the heart of the shift from corporatism to pluralism is a fundamental shift in the roles and objectives of labor law itself. His contention that accurately portraying industrial relations change requires accounting for both the active and passive roles of labor law represents a clear challenge to the existing literature. Moreover, deepening the subtlety

of the framework he develops is a further argument that the nature of the relationship between labor law and industrial relations is itself subject to change. Mundlak's theoretical framework and evidence regarding the multifaceted and dynamic role of labor law is, in my view, one of the book's strongest contributions.

The book's nine chapters are organized into four main sections. The first section provides a general theoretical and definitional background of corporatism as an industrial relations system. Mundlak poses two questions that subsequently guide his analysis. First, under what legal conditions can corporatist and pluralist systems survive? Second, how did the legal infrastructure in Israel contribute to the shift from corporatism to pluralism? Mundlak's pursuit of this second question deeply involves him in research into the origins of the country's labor law. Following a brief review of the diverse conceptual approaches other researchers have brought to the study of Israel's labor relations system, the author situates the Israeli model of corporatism in a much broader comparative discussion. Then, in Chapter 2, he introduces the key actors and developments influencing Israeli labor law and industrial relations, as well as the unique and, in many ways, idiosyncratic characteristics of Israel's industrial relations system.

The second section addresses the question regarding the necessary underlying legal basis for corporatism by outlining the legal framework under which corporatism in Israel existed and, for the most part, thrived from the pre-statehood years until the late 1980s. Mundlak describes and analyzes the role of both labor legislation and adjudication, which together constituted corporatism's legal environment. On the legislative front (Chapter 3), corporatism appears to have benefited not only from substantive norms that created protective labor standards and ensured a role for each of the social partners, but also from the very process by which labor legislation was enacted. It is this process, according to Mundlak, that facilitated and encouraged dialogue among the three core corporatist social partners: the State, employers, and labor. But he also shows that legislation did not, by itself, constitute a sufficient legal infrastructure for the survival of Israeli corporatism. An essential complementary legal foundation for corporatism, he argues, was adjudication (Chapter 4). Mundlak sees the Israeli labor courts, established in 1969, as playing a key role in supporting corporatism by providing the necessary norms and rules of engagement for tripartite interactions on the one hand, and the autonomy to operate at the social partners