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[Review of the Book *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] In this splendid book, Paul Johnston applies his broad understanding of contemporary social theory to an analysis of a series of carefully matched field research cases to achieve genuine theoretical insights. His analysis addresses such fundamental issues as the nature of public sector unionism—its goals and the weapons it uses to achieve them, the ways it differs from private sector unionism—and the dynamics of social movement unionism. This work is an important contribution to the resurgent body of inductive theory development in industrial relations research that has emerged in recent years.

Keywords

labor unions, labor movement, research, unionism, public sector

Disciplines

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Comments

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Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace. By Paul Johnston. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1995. 262 pp. ISBN 0-87546-334-7, \$45.00 (hardback); 0-87546-335-5, \$18.95 (paper).

In this splendid book, Paul Johnston applies his broad understanding of contemporary social theory to an analysis of a series of carefully matched field research cases to achieve genuine theoretical insights. His analysis addresses such fundamental issues as the nature of public sector unionism—its goals and the weapons it uses to achieve them, the ways it differs from private sector unionism—and the dynamics of social movement unionism. This work is an important contribution to the resurgent body of inductive theory development in industrial relations research that has emerged in recent years.

The central argument in the book is that public and private sector labor movements fundamentally differ in both their goals and their sources of power. The private sector labor movement in the United States focuses its goals

on and derives its power from the labor market. By organizing across particular labor markets, private sector unions strive to improve their members' positions in these labor markets through the threat of economic action. Johnston argues that public sector unionism, in contrast, is based primarily on political-organizational resources. Rather than just focusing on improving their labor market position, public sector unions structure their demands around public needs and appeals to political legitimacy. As a result, whereas a key factor in private sector union strength is the solidarity of the workers within the union in taking economic action, in public sector union movements a key source of strength is the ability to build coalitions outside the union with other social and political groups.

Johnston's argument pivots around analyses of four closely matched case studies, two in the public sector and two in the private sector. The first public sector case Johnston examines is a comparable worth strike by a predominantly female group of city workers in San Jose in 1981. To a large degree, this case ("The Women of the City") provides the bedrock for his theory of the public sector labor movement. The contradictions he notes between standard private sector-derived notions of industrial conflict and the example of this public sector movement provide a convincing basis for the argument that public sector unionism is distinct from private sector unionism in important ways. The "Women of the City" were successful despite fairly weak internal union support for the strike because they had strong political and organizational links beyond the union. The framing of the dispute as one over comparable worth succeeded in providing political-bureaucratic legitimacy to the union's claims despite the presence and even precedence of other issues in bargaining.

As the main private sector case against which to compare the San Jose city workers' strike, Johnston focuses on a comparable worth strike by private hospital nurses in the Santa Clara "Silicon" Valley area in 1982. The two main comparison cases thus are similar in both social context and type of dispute. The key insight from the Silicon Valley nurses' dispute is that it was framed in terms of labor market goals and as a contest in labor market power. Despite greater internal union solidarity and seemingly strong bargaining power, the nurses' strike ultimately was defeated.

Although the contrast between those two cases effectively reinforces Johnston's argument that union movements in the public and private sectors are fundamentally different, his pur-

pose is not to draw a simple dichotomy, but rather to emphasize the social and historical contingencies of the particular forms the labor movements have taken. In particular, he argues that private sector unions have also engaged at times in social movement unionism, joining in broader social movements and pressing for social change rather than just focusing on the labor market. Thus he draws a parallel between the broad political and social coalitions entered into by the public sector unions described in this book and the social activism of the private sector labor movement of the 1930s.

To extend his analysis, Johnston turns to a comparison of two cases of unionism among custodians in the private and public sectors in San Jose in the late 1980s. Johnston contrasts the failures of the city custodians' union in this period with the successes achieved by the Justice for Janitors campaign in the private sector at the same time. He argues that the relative success of Justice for Janitors is accounted for by a turn to a private sector social movement unionism corresponding to the social movement unionism approach taken by the public sector unions described in "The Women of the City" case. While social movement unionism was characteristic of the public sector labor movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, during the late 1980s social movement unionism started to emerge in the private sector even as it was subsiding to some degree in the public sector.

Johnston's private sector examples are included in the study primarily as comparators, rather than as the basis for a more general argument about a broader turn to social movement unionism in the private sector. However, his discussion does suggest that social movement unionism is a feasible and potentially a desirable strategy for private sector unions. We may see such a movement with the recent change in leadership of the AFL-CIO and the emergence of successful models such as the Justice for Janitors campaign. However, some significant questions about the merits of social movement unionism are as yet unanswered, including the crucial issue of the inter-industry and inter-occupational group transferability of these models.

Broader conclusions about the possibilities of social movement unionism in the private sector will have to await further research and the outcome of ongoing developments in the labor movement. Whatever the trajectories of the private and public sector labor movements turn out to be, the issues and theories that Johnston has explored will provide a rich vein

for researchers and participants alike to develop.

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