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## [Review of the Book *Unions and Workplace Change in Canada*]

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## [Review of the Book *Unions and Workplace Change in Canada*]

### **Abstract**

[Excerpt] Some leading unions in Canada are notable for the diversity of their responses to workplace change. These unions' policies and strategies, which range from the Steelworkers' (USWA) bold experiment in employee ownership and co-determination at Algoma Steel to the Autoworkers' (CAW) activist response to the pressures of the Japanese production and management systems at the CAMI auto plant, have produced significant variation in change processes and outcomes. This range of activity by Canadian unions in response to workplace change provides a fertile area for study by industrial relations researchers, as well as important challenges for policy makers and practitioners in Canada. While *Unions and Workplace Change in Canada* may not provide the last word for those interested in this subject, as a record of the current state of knowledge, it will supply a useful source of information and a starting point for future researchers.

### **Keywords**

labor unions, labor movement, Canada, industrial relations

### **Disciplines**

International and Comparative Labor Relations | Labor Relations | Unions

### **Comments**

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Some leading unions in Canada are notable for the diversity of their responses to workplace change. These unions' policies and strategies, which range from the Steelworkers' (USWA) bold experiment in employee ownership and co-determination at Algoma Steel to the Autoworkers' (CAW) activist response to the pressures of the Japanese production and management systems at the CAMI auto plant, have produced significant variation in change processes and outcomes. This range of activity by Canadian unions in response to workplace change provides a fertile area for study by industrial relations researchers, as well as important challenges for policy makers and practitioners in Canada. While *Unions and Workplace Change in Canada* may not provide the last word for those interested in this subject, as a record of the current state of knowledge, it will supply a useful source of information and a starting point for future researchers.

*Unions and Workplace Change in Canada* is a product of the HRM Project centered at the Industrial Relations Centre at Queen's University. It is a useful contribution to the Project's broad agenda for examining trends in human resource management in Canada. As Kumar succinctly states in his introduction, the purpose of this particular study is "to evaluate the role and significance of unions and collective bargaining in facilitating workplace change" (p. 4). Following a review of the general literature on workplace change, this study moves in two main directions. The first begins with a conceptualization of the roles of management and labor in workplace change and proceeds to an examination of the positions each group has adopted in Canada. The second is an examination of the extent of workplace innovation in Canada.

On the first of those two themes, reflecting the focus of the study on the role of unions and collective bargaining, an important element of the book is its comparison of Canadian management's and labor's positions and agendas regarding workplace change. Some of this discussion is fairly general in nature, but one noteworthy exception is Kumar's identification of the divergence between the positions of two of the major private sector unions in Canada, the USWA and the CAW, in their policies on workplace change. In contrast to the CAW's more strictly adversarial approach and wariness

### Labor-Management Relations

*Unions and Workplace Change in Canada.* By Pradeep Kumar. HRM Project Series.

of co-optation through employee involvement schemes, the USWA has advocated an approach of active engagement of workers in decision making at all levels of the company. However, having identified this issue and recognized the debate over it in the labor movement, Kumar focuses on similarities between the unions' positions. Arguably, this focus results in an impression of greater unity in Canadian labor's agenda than is warranted.

The divergence between the USWA and CAW positions that Kumar identifies but does not dwell on could provide the basis for a number of very interesting questions on unions and workplace change for future research to explore: To what degree have the different union approaches produced different outcomes? Does the suitability of the different approaches vary by industry? Are the policy statements of the national-level unions reflective of the actual approaches to workplace change taken by their locals? In his study, Kumar focuses on the policies and positions of the national-level union structures. To advance the systematic consideration of these questions, future research will need to build on this base through methodologies such as more in-depth field research at the workplace level and more intensive study of union decision-making processes.

On the second theme, the incidence of workplace change, this study primarily reviews existing research, supplemented with some collective agreement data from Human Resources Development Canada's databases. Given the expanding volume of research on issues of work organization, it is now feasible to use meta-analysis of previous studies to examine overall developments (Appelbaum and Batt's *The New American Workplace* provides a prime example of that approach using U.S. data), and Kumar does so in this book to create a picture of the extent of workplace change in Canada. Indeed, the key strength of this book is the breadth of its coverage of existing research. This is especially notable in Chapter 5, which examines the existing evidence on the incidence of workplace change, and the appendices, which contain summaries of surveys and key case studies on this issue. These sections may be especially useful for comparative industrial relations researchers who want to gain an overview of developments in Canada. (One qualification: a major limitation of the very useful literature review is the absence of an author index and subject index. The bold titles in the appendices aid a visual search, but a proper index would have avoided the need for flipping and scanning through the

book to find summaries of particular studies.)

The overall picture that emerges is one of gradual, uneven workplace change. Kumar notes that workplace change generally has been more limited in Canada than in the United States. Another difference between the countries is that in Canada unions have generally played a more significant role in workplace change, reflecting their generally stronger position in the industrial relations system. A prominent element in this book is Kumar's persuasive case for recognizing and promoting the role of unions and collective bargaining in the process of workplace change.

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