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What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American Workplace

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What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American Workplace. Edited by Richard B. Freeman, Peter Boxall, and Peter Haynes. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2007. vii, 244 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4445-6, \$49.95 (cloth); 978-0-8014-7281-7, \$19.95 (paper).

This important book deals with an absolutely pivotal issue in industrial relations, the future of worker representation in the 21st century. It addresses this question from the perspective of workers themselves. At the heart of the book are cross-national survey data reporting workers' declared need for voice at work and their evaluation of the diverse institutions that can supply that need. The editors aver that workers are the "consumers" of the institutions that govern workplaces" (p. 2), and the book presents a consumers' assessment of trade unionism, non-union systems of representative voice, such as consultative forums, and employee involvement and other procedures (for example, town meetings, open-door schemes, and employee opinion surveys) that allow for direct participation.

The research data are gathered from six Anglophone societies: the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. These have been selected because they share a common heritage, descent from Britain, and have unifying or similar institutions, such as a tradition of common law and relatively pragmatic, market-oriented trade union movements. There is local adaptation and variation across the group (for example, Britain and Ireland's membership in the European Union; the United States' distinctive labor law that prohibits indirect representation not based on trade unions) but sufficient commonality to form a class. Thanks to this combination of similarity and difference, according to the editors, meaningful comparisons can be drawn, and lessons taken from one member of the class can plausibly be applied to another. The research itself also exhibits common descent with adaptation: it employs Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers's Worker Representation and Participation Survey of 1994–95, but with updates and amendments to that instrument to suit the circumstances of the six national cases.

Because of these commonalities, as well as a

good job by the editors, the book is much more coherent than are most edited collections. It begins with an introduction by the editors that justifies the case selection, identifies the themes of the book, and explains the methodology. The six chapters that follow present the findings from each of the national studies in turn. A common format is followed in these chapters, with useful cross-referencing to identify similarities with and divergence from other cases. Three integrating chapters then follow, which consider the results from all six cases from the perspective of the main industrial relations actors—trade unions, employers, and government. Whereas the national cases are focused on analysis, these chapters are oriented toward practice and extract policy lessons for each stakeholder. Finally, a chapter concisely summarizing the findings and main conclusions nicely rounds off the volume.

What then does the book have to say about employee voice in the Anglophone world? One set of conclusions relates to worker representation through trade unions. The contributors duly note the grim recent past and current travails of trade unions in each of the six countries but also record some encouraging findings for the labor movement. Across the six cases there is substantial unmet demand for union voice, which is most pronounced among young workers, low-income workers, and workers from problem-workplaces that generate a high level of grievance. Where union voice is available, moreover, workers tend to rate the union positively, though with a distinct preference for union cooperation with the employer rather than militancy. On the down side for unions, the cases identify a substantial free-rider problem at unionized worksites, much of which is due to failures of union recruitment: many seeming free-riders report no attempts by unions to recruit them. Perhaps the most worrying finding for unions, however, concerns the attitudes of the millions of workers in union-free employment sectors. Here there is a widespread acceptance of the non-relevance of unions and a conviction that they can do little to improve the circumstances of employees. As the authors of one of the country chapters note, "Indifference is the biggest impediment to re-unionization in New Zealand" (p. 160).

The other main set of conclusions addresses both direct and indirect forms of non-union voice. Here again, it appears that exposure to institutions predisposes workers to endorse them:

both forms of non-union voice are welcomed and are associated with positive outcomes for workers. This pattern of findings represents a notable break with the classic literature on these institutions, particularly in Britain, which tended to emphasize their marginality—in particular, their proneness to deal with issues that were incidental, not central, to the employment relationship, and their typically early demise.

Much of the treatment of these institutions in the book is concerned with their relationship with union voice, and contributors assess what can be thought of as competing substitution and complementarity theses. The evidence presented is variable across the six countries but provides support for both viewpoints, suggesting that there is no single or necessary relationship between union and non-union voice. Evidence for substitution is strongest in Britain and the United States, and takes two forms: first, demand for union voice is reduced where there are institutions of direct worker participation; and second, there is some evidence of these institutions “out-performing” union voice, at least in terms of worker estimates of management responsiveness to their concerns. Evidence for complementarity is found more broadly, and again takes two forms. On the one hand, both direct and indirect non-union voice are associated with a union presence; in fact all three institutions are commonly found operating alongside one another in a single workplace. On the other hand, there is evidence of a reinforcing effect, with the outcomes for workers and workers’ own subjective assessments being most positive when dual systems of worker participation exist. This is particularly so where union and non-union indirect voice sit together.

The primary conclusion the contributors draw from this set of findings is that there is room in the workplace for a diversity of voice institutions. The book calls for the revitalization of unions, identifying a need for greater investment in organizing but also in the development of new partnerships with employers. But its authors want union renewal to lend support to and work together with systems of direct participation and non-union representative forums. This mix of diverse but complementary institutions is seen to be developing across much of the Anglophone world, with the glaring exception of the United States. Here the distinctive form of U.S. labor law, referred to above, makes it difficult to establish non-union representation. The book ends with a statement that governments must “guarantee the right to union representation” but also “give workers and managers the right to establish non-union forms of representative voice, where they

seek that mode of voice regime.” “In both areas,” the editors note, “the United States has much to learn from the experiences of the other major English-speaking countries” (p. 220).

The book makes a very strong case for the diversity of voice regimes, and the argument mounted here must be a reference point for all future discussion of worker representation. Nevertheless, I have two reservations about the argument, one minor and the other of greater substance. The minor reservation has to do with the language of consumer choice that is used to frame the discussion and endow all “voice-products” with equivalence. Workers certainly “chose” trade union voice historically in that they created the labor movement with their political and intellectual allies. What they did not actively choose, however, was systems of workplace participation, which were created by their employers. The purpose of these institutions has variously been to pacify workers, integrate them into the firm, and manipulate their attitudes and behavior. Workers have been the objects, not the subjects, of these institutions. Non-union institutions have a distinct origin and status, separate from that of unions, and the notion of a market for voice disguises this fact.

The major reservation concerns the standard that is used to assess different institutions, the subjective preferences of workers expressed through a survey. Of course, these preferences must form part of any assessment of workplace governance, whether one regards workers as consumers or as citizens. But they are not the only measure, and perhaps they should not be the sole standard against which institutions are judged. From a radical frame of reference one would argue that institutions of worker voice should be assessed on the degree to which they challenge the existing settlement at work and are redistributive both in channeling income to workers and in endowing them with power. By this standard, trade unionism historically has been a more potent force than the non-union alternative and for this reason must occupy the primary position in any project to enhance voice at work.

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Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa. Edited by Jon Kraus. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. x, 296 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-60061, \$90.95 (cloth).

The existence of strong trade unions has histori-