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

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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

Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

Suggested Citation


Required Publisher Statement

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production system and its effects on workers and labor-management relations begin to emerge. It becomes clear that Japanese production methods indeed pose considerable challenges to the traditional basis of labor's strength. However, it also becomes apparent that there are important differences in the degree of labor's resistance to the imposition of this hegemonic system. In a number of essays, the authors argue that it is the strategies and actions of organized labor that can explain the often considerable differences in outcomes across sites. Specifically, the authors point to the differences in strategies formulated and implemented by the UAW as compared to its Canadian counterpart, the CAW.

The authors highlight CAW Local 88's resistance to Japanese production methods at CAMI (the GM-Suzuki joint venture located in Ingersoll, Ontario) that galvanized worker resistance and culminated in a five-week-long work stoppage resulting in the moderation of the lean production system and an increase in labor rights. The authors attribute the Canadian auto union's success to aspects of the Canadian union movement derived from institutions and history "better" than those in the United States. Despite the power of the arguments about the differences between the strategic views of and the actions undertaken by the UAW in the United States and the CAW in Canada, the actual empirical evidence regarding the impact of the CAW's strategy on the nature of the labor-management accommodation under JPM and the effects of JPM on workers comes only from this single case.

Although the CAMI case stands in stark contrast to a number of U.S. lean production cases (especially Saturn and the nonunion transplants), it does not look terribly different from the case of AutoAlliance, where workers are represented by Local 3000 of the UAW. Rather than casting the debate at the level of national unions as the authors in this volume do, I would argue that the debate needs to be refocused at the level of the local union. In my own work looking at workplace restructuring in the steel industry in these two countries (where the same international union represents workers on both sides of the border), the critical variable in explaining differences in outcomes appears to be the capacities possessed by individual local unions. I would argue that the same may be said in the case of the auto industry.

A much more compelling story could be told about differences in local union institutions, practices, ideologies, and histories by looking at the CAMI and AutoAlliance cases as compared to the cases of Saturn and NUMMI or other auto assembly plants in both countries where lean production is being imposed in whole or in part on an existing work force and facility. Perhaps the critical question to be asked, with important implications for union strategists, is: why were UAW Local 3000 and CAW Local 88 relatively successful in confronting management to moderate the effects of lean production on their members while other locals of the UAW (and perhaps of the CAW as well), faced with similar pressures, were not?

Overall, this book makes a significant contribution to the debate over new forms of work organization in the auto industry. Not only does it provide a rich collection of varied types of evidence, but it also contains a wealth of critical thinking regarding the future of organized labor in this industry. In particular, the authors must be commended for taking seriously the challenge JPM raises for workers and their representatives and for exploring the implications of their possible responses.

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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
Johnston focuses on a comparable worth strike. To a large degree, this case ("The Women of the City") provides the bedrock for his theory of the public sector labor movement. The key insight 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 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 of general 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 purpose 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
Labor and Employment Law


The authors of this slender volume use the testimony before the Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations (the eponymous "Dunlop Commission") as a prism through which the state of industrial relations and labor law at mid-decade can be glimpsed. They first outline the law of unfair labor practices governing the selection of union representation and the conduct of good faith bargaining, with special emphasis on the inadequacy of remedies for systematic violations in both situations. They then provide a taxonomy of the choices a firm has in fashioning its labor relations: cooperation (with or without the presence of a union); adversarialism (in the unionized environment); or deunionization (either by relocation to nonunion areas or by confrontations that eliminate union representation). The two following chapters are devoted, respectively, to successful efforts at cooperation and systematic efforts to prevent unionization or eliminate it, as described before the Commission. The authors close with some ruminations on what the evidence tells us.

Though Block, Beck, and Krueger eschew making recommendations for legal reform, they identify some key areas of concern and draw some general conclusions from the evidence: the law's prohibition of company unionism does not prevent serious efforts significantly to involve employees in decisions on the content and performance of the job; the duty to bargain is a toothless obligation in the hands of employers that see unions as illegitimate institutions in the workplace; and though each discrete component of the law regulating the exercise of employee free choice may be legally defensible, the combination of legal ingredients is stacked in favor of employers who wish to remain or become nonunion. The larger consequence of the latter is captured in one of the book's best turns of phrase: "A system that was designed to provide a choice of representation to employers seems only to provide employers with a choice—a choice as to the type of employee relations system they will create" (p. 100, italics in original).

There remains a nagging question of who is the book's intended audience. For those knowledgeable about the current state of labor relations and labor law, the book offers little that is new. (It remains to be seen whether an unscientific snapshot of anecdotal evidence is an adequate basis for the authors' general conclusions; but I suspect few disinterested and knowledgeable observers would contest the gist of those conclusions.) Even from the viewpoint of interested lay readers, the book's brevity seems to have required that some points be oversimplified and, more serious, that important "next questions" be begged.

One instance of oversimplification is the book's treatment of the duty to bargain. The authors accurately point out that the Labor Act does not compel the making of a concession, and that the remedy power for a breach of the duty to bargain precludes the imposition of contract terms. As a result, they claim that management may present the union with proposals it knows the union will not (or cannot) accept. At impasse, management may implement its proposals; and if the union strikes, management is permitted to replace the strikers permanently. Thus either the union, fearing replacement (and decertification), will accept the unacceptable, or the company can hire itself out of unionization. In either case, management wins, because the "government will not become involved in the substance of [bargaining] proposals" (p. 91).

That account is incomplete in several ways, but suffice it to say that the law of "surface bargaining," in which the substance of bargaining proposals is looked at by the government, is nowhere mentioned. In a recent case that fits the authors' scenario closely, a company proposed an economic package and concessions to managerial control that it knew the union would not accept; it refused to soften them in any significant way, and it planned for the hiring of permanent replacements months before the