

Book Review for the Journal of Economic Literature

*Rekindling the Labor Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*;

editors: Lowell Turner, Harry Katz, Richard Hurd, Industrial and Labor Relations,  
Cornell University Press. 2001

Reviewer: Teresa Ghilarducci, University of Notre Dame

One out of ten workers in the US private sector workforce is covered by a collectively bargained labor contract and this is the lowest share among OECD nations. Few dispute that unions have more bargaining power when union density is larger. The burning question is why don't American unions have more members?

Many economists use choice theory to explain that since workers can organize and vote for union representation they simply must not want to be in unions and that the decline of unions reflects an economic and social evolution that makes them unnecessary in the modern economy. This book does not defend the role of unions or the economic effects of a union premium. Instead it initiates a serious scholarship to rethink the received wisdom that unions are in decline by providing detailed and scrupulous case studies on recent events that suggest a "rekindling" of the labor movement. This book is an exceptionally high quality collection of 13 integrated chapters that are clearly well planned and edited, from leading scholars in industrial relations, law, management, economics, and political science.

Sociologist Paul Johnson challenges scholars and activists to tolerate an informed dialogue on the question "what do unions want" within an 'Erving Goffman' social movement frame – an orienting, motivating, and unifying idea: a story we tell about ourselves (p.27). The "story" entails defining unions as community and citizenship movements. The narrative includes immigrants as key players. Sociologists Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong compare recent failed and successful organizing drives in Southern California. Janitors and residential drywallers, many who are undocumented Latino immigrants achieved union contract coverage in the late 1980s and early 1990s despite their fear of deportation (or worse) and their newcomer and low social – economic status. The Justice for Janitors campaign incorporated sophisticated corporate campaign tactics so that the organizer could say, "Someone will get pissed when they learn that it costs the owner one cent to give us a raise" (109). The campaign's use of guerilla theater, trained organizers, quality research, and political allies is a celebrity case of strategic planning.

Economist Charles Heckscher and Historian Susan Cobble provide a fresh contribution to the literature on worker mobility, the increasing insecurity of the employment contract, and the diminishment of an internal labor market. Heckscher contrasts an organization like "Working Today," a nonprofit organization aiming to serve the employee benefit and network needs for a mobile workforce that does some of what unions do, namely, providing public goods in the form of employee benefits, with what unions do as organizations formed by persons with similar employers provide a real voice, community, and identity. Cobble revives the language of craft and industrial unionism and connects the organizational strategies of workers who identify with their skill –

carpentry, sewing, wait staffing, mining – with the current issues facing technical and professional workers.

Richard Hurd and William Fletcher address the objectives and constraints of change agents within the labor movement and apply organizational and behavioral theory to describe that a third way of organizing – organization transformation -- will work based on case studies. Organization evolution is too slow and organizational combustion – forcing organizing goals on a union staff – is like “creating a series of crises and picking up the pieces is akin to shoving nitroglycerin until there is an explosion. The results won’t be pretty.” (p.184)

For those interested in organization change and structure should examine Gary Chaison’s chapter on union mergers and Jill Kriesky’s discussion of the central labor council’s role in implementing the AFL-CIO’s “New Voice” leadership goals.

Political scientist, James Shoch, and legal scholar, Lance Compra, discussions of NAFTA and trade issues, in general, help unpack the puzzle on how unions adapt to what looks like a profoundly stacked fight against powerful forces to lower labor costs. A money manager frankly discussing why his firm’s portfolio of selected equities succeeds admitted the firm chooses the largest and oldest companies because, among other reasons, they uniquely have the move capital quickly to take advantage of cheaper labor. And that this meant future profits because 2 billion peasants are ready to work. Labor was the main organizer of the first large – scale protest in the United States on trade at the 1999 Seattle meetings of the World Trade Organization. Shoch describes the politics of PAC money and the votes for NAFTA and the preferential trade partner designation for China and Compra describes how labor unions have used the NAFTA trade agreements and remedies to advance the cause of establishing global workers’ rights in trade agreements.

A reviewer’s choice to note selected contributions in a wide ranging collection of essays is based on point of view rather than on quality judgments. The collection applies political theory, social movement frameworks, organizational and behavioral theory to describe how unions can get more members by being relevant and responsive to the changing global economy. Labor processes, and suburban and urban structures. The book was designed to correct a shortcoming that the institutional literature “doesn’t tell us how institutions came to be or how they change.” (22). It should be valuable to scholars in management theory, strategic planning, social movements, and labor relations. Union members and union staff would get an important overview of the state of the labor movement. Historians will refer heavily to this book as the best overview of the state of trade unions in the U.S. in 2002.