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# The Future of Private Sector Unionism in the United States.

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## The Future of Private Sector Unionism in the United States.

selves to new tactics and membership involvement; build diverse organizational structures; root themselves in disadvantaged communities; bring in groups traditionally excluded from union jobs; engage in unconventional tactics; construe the relevant forms of solidarity broadly; and shift attention away from the market and toward the social realm. Nissen's comment that these elements may operate in tension points the way toward a fertile field of theory building.

The volume's central project, to map the causal relation between globalization and union strategies, remains at a very early stage of development. Robinson makes the case most directly by labeling the environmental change in question "neoliberal restructuring" and the result "social movement unionism," whose defining feature is its independence from the state and capital. In view of interpretations like this, it is jarring to read elsewhere in the volume about so many union activities shaped by the state and firms. Cohen and Rechenbach, for example, lay out two surprising sources of leverage for an international coalition: a labor-management partnership with SBC (formerly BellSouth) and a regulatory hearing in Europe to approve a corporate merger. Rather than ignore stories like this, theorists should use concrete evidence to address the argument, implied by Cohen and Rechenbach's account, that organizations of workers are becoming increasingly interdependent with firms and state agencies. Researchers could then make arguments about how (or whether) such relations interfere with the phenomena on Nissen's list.

This raises a central problem with the whole union revitalization literature: we still do not have a commonly agreed upon way to know revival when we see it. Robinson's definition of social movement unionism is unlikely to fill that role, because it is so restrictive that it may define the phenomenon out of existence. Nissen's list provides more guidance, because it moves beyond rigid categories, instead articulating several processes for future exploration. Both of these exercises, however, sidestep an enduring and central feature of trade unionism, namely, the quest for bargaining rights. In capitalist political economies, bargaining requires some degree of mutual recognition between unions and actors affiliated with capital and the state, and therefore sits uneasily with the political commitments underlying much of the book's analysis.

Nissen's book raises some problems with which future scholars will have to grapple. We will have to expose the models—causal and

organizational—to the light of detailed case studies and other data, and along the way map the causes, outcomes, and tensions of the labor movement's surge in activity. One hopes that the phenomenon lasts long enough for a body of grounded theory to emerge.

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*The Future of Private Sector Unionism in the United States.* Edited by James T. Bennett and Bruce E. Kaufman. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe. 2002. 420 pp. ISBN 0-7656-0851-0, \$79.95 (cloth); 0-7656-0852-9, \$31.95 (paper).

The precarious future of private sector unionism, one of the defining issues in contemporary American industrial relations research and policy, was the subject of two special issues of the *Journal of Labor Research* published in 2001 (Vol. 22, Nos. 2–3). The 16 papers assembled in this edited volume are from that two-part series. An introduction and a summary chapter written by the editors supplement these articles. The papers are generally of good quality, and they present a wide-ranging examination of the prospects for the American labor movement. They focus mainly on broad societal changes—in the economy and labor market, in organizations, in management's human resource strategies, and in the policy environment (for example, labor law)—that are having important effects on the labor movement. This timely volume is likely to stimulate much useful debate.

In their introductory chapter, Bennett and Kaufman review trends in American union density and membership in the private sector over the twentieth century, and in the public sector over the latter 50 years. This brief historical overview sets the stage for exploration of private sector unions' prospects for growth. The articles that follow could be said to fall into three categories (although they are not grouped that way): broad overviews of past trends and future possibilities; hypothetical explanations for the decline of American unionism; and discussions of strategies that might help the movement.

Three papers present broad reviews and analyses of past developments and future scenarios. In separate papers, Leo Troy and Edward Potter

explore a variety of recent structural, policy, and environmental change explanations for unions' long-standing difficulties and their future prospects. In "The Future of U.S. Private Sector Unionism: Did George Barnett Get It Right after All?" Bruce Kaufman provides a much-needed long view of the role of major factors affecting the labor movement in the twentieth century.

Seven papers offer fairly specific speculative explanations for the decline of American unionism. Seymour Martin Lipset and Ivan Katchanovski explore how individual workers' values affect union fortunes. Their treatment provides new evidence on a key facet of the demand for union services, and shows how changes in workers' values have, together with other influences, contributed to union decline. Henry Farber and Bruce Western examine the relative importance of employment growth rates in unionized and nonunionized segments of the economy versus organizing rates, over time, as explanations of union decline. James Bennett and Jason Taylor consider the role of progressive social policy in diminishing the need (demand) for union services. Daphne Taras and Allen Ponak examine how one aspect of the legal framework—agency shop laws—could affect union density. Barry Hirsch and Edward Schumacher estimate the size of the union wage premium over time and consider its potential effect on density, providing an important labor market perspective on union decline. Finally, two noteworthy and complementary studies consider the emergent effects of human resource management practices on the fortunes of unions: Jack Fiorito examines the effects of positive (progressive) human resource management practices on employees' demand for unionism, and Morris Kleiner considers how management opposition to unions affects trends in unionization.

Six papers explore unions' prospects for regaining lost ground, and possibly assuming a transformed role, by developing new strategies. Anthony Townsend, Samuel DeMarie, and Anthony Hendrickson consider possible responses of unions to emerging organizational arrangements; Saul Rubinstein assesses how unions can function as "value-adding networks"; Nancy Mills provides in-depth cases of new union strategies, such as forming sectoral coalitions among unions within a region; and Samuel Estreicher records an informal "conversation" among three top union strategists on the challenges confronting the labor movement. Two "object lesson" papers are those by Armand Thieblot, who

considers the case of declining unionism in the construction industry, and Edmund Heery, who suggests insights American unions could gain by studying the European experience.

As the editors note, the volume brings together analysis and points of view of both academic researchers—for the most part, industrial relations researchers—and practitioners. This diversity of analyses and thinking on a rather complex issue is a strong point of the volume, although some unevenness results from the differing approaches and depths of analyses. While the studies are largely descriptive, there are several exceptions; notable among these is the empirical study by Farber and Western, which makes a major contribution to our understanding of where American unionism is headed in the private sector and why.

Given that the featured papers in this volume were all previously published—and, moreover, appeared together in two consecutive, readily obtainable numbers of a journal—some readers may turn to Bennett and Kaufman's summary chapter with particular interest, hoping to find in it a justification for the collection. The editors' conclusion is that the evidence, on balance, clearly predicts further moderate decline in union density, but also suggests that unions will remain an important part of the economic and social landscape. This concluding chapter does add to our understanding of the studies' implications. There remain, however, several aspects of the volume that could have been enhanced.

While the book offers some international perspective on the fortunes of American unionism, there is a lack of analysis of the international context and its relevance to the American situation. Perhaps the volume would have been more cohesive if it had been confined exclusively to studies of American issues. But I believe that understanding only the dynamics of the American industrial relations, economic, and social systems may be inadequate for making full sense of past developments in private sector unionism, and definitely *is* inadequate as a basis for projecting future developments. The importance of an international perspective on national labor movements is well illustrated by industrial relations developments in such key industries as auto assembly and telecommunications (for example, see Harry Katz's 1997 book, *Telecommunications: Restructuring Work and Employment Relations Worldwide*), as well as by globalization's complex effects on industrial relations and organized labor (for example, Harry Katz and Owen Darbishire, *Converging*

*Divergences: Worldwide Changes in Employment Systems*, 2000; Jacques Bélanger, P. K. Edwards, and Larry Haiven, *Workplace Industrial Relations and the Global Challenge*, 1994).

The final synthesis chapter would probably have benefited from more extensive integration of the extant literature on the factors underlying the decline in American private sector unionism with the results derived from the studies in the volume. This would have broadened its scope and relevance as a review piece.

Finally, in their reflections in the summary chapter, the editors suggest that unions as a "social institution [have] to pass the 'market test' for survival" (p. 382). This assessment is probably correct for American unions—functioning, as most of them do, as "business unions." But in exploring the future of American unionism, it might have been useful to consider the long-run possibilities for American unions if they were to evolve more as social and political organizations. If unions cannot do so, then, as the results of the studies in this volume clearly suggest, their prospects are limited. Critically exploring the long-run prospects for an institutionally transformed labor movement would have added an important dimension to the concluding analysis.

These suggestions notwithstanding, a number of the papers in this book make quite useful contributions to the debate over the future of American unions and to our understanding of their decline. The volume is well worth reading.

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*How New Is the "New Employment Contract"?*  
By David I. Levine, Dale Belman, Gary Charness, Erica L. Groshen, and K. C. O'Shaughnessy. Kalamazoo, Mich.: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2002. 263 pp. ISBN 0-88099-232-8, \$40.00 (cloth); 0-88099-231-X, \$22.00 (paper).

This timely and provocative book presents an array of evidence on changes in the employment relationship. The research it presents differs in two important ways from previous work on this topic. First, it focuses on the wage side of the employment relationship, in contrast to the duration, stability, or security of

employment itself. (For an example of the latter sort of study, see David Neumark, *On the Job: Is Long-Term Employment a Thing of the Past?* 2000.) Second, while earlier research studied general changes in the stability of wages (for example, Peter Gottschalk and Robert Moffitt, "The Growth of Earnings Instability in U.S. Labor Markets," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, No. 2, 1994), Levine and his co-authors link their analysis of wages more strongly to a fundamental behavioral hypothesis regarding changes in the employment relationship that has been offered by researchers in management (for example, Peter Cappelli, *The New Deal at Work*, 1999). Specifically, the book asks whether changes in the wage structure are consistent with the implications of declining importance of internal labor markets.

Among the critical implications of weakening internal labor markets that the authors assess are (1) increasing similarity of mean wages employers pay for similar employees, and increasing similarity of internal wage structures (relative wages by education, tenure, and so on) across employers; (2) declining wage premia for working for large employers, and increasingly similar internal wage structures across large and small employers; (3) increasing correlation of wages of large employers with wages in labor markets in which they are located; (4) more reliance on merit pay and bonuses; and (5) increased acceptance or perception of pay cuts as "fair." In short, the *New Employment Contract* argues that proof that "internal labor markets are in decline" requires evidence that "wages are closer to market wages" (p. 55).

While some of these questions can be assessed using standard household surveys, data are also required on the wage structure of specific employers, and on perceptions of fairness. As such, the authors use an eclectic collection of five data sets: the Current Population Survey, data from the Hay Consulting Group, the Cleveland Salary Survey, a survey of manufacturing establishments in Indiana and Japan, and a survey on perceived fairness in the employment relationship carried out in the United States and Canada.

The answer the book reaches regarding its overriding question is unambiguous. Virtually none of the evidence on the wage side suggests that the employment relationship has changed much. As the authors write, "The basic result of this volume is clear: there is no pattern of declining importance of pay rigidities, or of institutional forces more generally, in determining compensation" (p. 160).