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Workers after Workers' States: Labor and Politics in Postcommunist Eastern Europe

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Workers after Workers' States: Labor and Politics in Postcommunist Eastern Europe

dence of protectionism has emerged from eighteen years of linking labor rights and trade in the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences. And *neutral* international mechanisms with significant developing country representation should determine non-compliance and remedial programs, considering sanctions only as a last resort.

Moran goes on to observe that voluntary compliance mechanisms may produce results superior to those from a WTO-based system of labor rights enforcement and could be effectively complemented by ILO activities. This insightful discussion is marred, however, by a treatment of international labor standards that is logically inconsistent with the discussion in Chapter 4. Moran says that "the simplicity and straightforwardness of commitments" embodied in workplace codes of conduct would make it "relatively easy" to identify violations (p. 100), yet these commitments are less well defined than obligations in international labor instruments, which Moran asserts are "fraught with controversy" (p. 151).

Beyond Sweatshops is an important contribution to labor rights literature. It provides a solid and useful economic analysis of factors that ensure maximum FDI benefits for host countries, through backward linkages and spillovers to local companies and workers, generated by the introduction of foreign firms' intangible assets, such as technologies, business and management skills, human relations policies, and marketing capabilities. It falls short on the prescriptive side, however. The complexity and difficulty of linking workers' rights and trade are not reasons to give up on developing an enforceable international labor rights regime; they are reasons for getting it right.

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Workers after Workers' States: Labor and Politics in Postcommunist Eastern Europe. Edited by Stephen Crowley and David Ost. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 241 pp. ISBN 0-7425-0998-2, \$75.00 (cloth); 0-7425-0999-0, \$26.95 (paper).

The contributors to this edited volume, writing from a political science perspective, share the view that labor in post-communist society

has suffered persistent weakness. The book's focus is thus on the relationship between labor and politics in the transition countries of the former Soviet bloc. The book addresses two basic questions: why labor has been quiescent in post-communist Europe, despite unprecedented political freedoms coupled with truly painful economic change; and why labor remains a weak social and political actor more than a decade after the start of the transition. The book aims not only to measure and explain labor's weakness in the post-communist era but also to explore the impact of that weakness on the consolidation of democracy.

In the introduction, David Ost and Stephen Crowley begin by outlining their conceptual framework for analyzing decreasing union power. They judge the extent of union weakness by seven major indicators: levels of union membership; styles of management; strength of collective bargaining; number and impact of strikes; nature of political alliances; union impact on public policy; and workers' material well-being.

The introduction then looks at three possible explanations for labor weakness. The first would assign blame to economic conditions—a drastic fall in production, continued downsizing, non-payment of wages for months, and the like. The editors grant that hypothesis some value in explaining union weakness in Russia and Ukraine, but they reject it as an explanation of union weakness in eight other countries, given the lack of evidence that economic hardship provoked a crisis of social unrest in those countries. The few protests over these conditions that did occur, they argue, were not linked to the labor movement. Union leaders may have feared that union organizing in such circumstances carried too much of a risk of backlash; and strikes are difficult to organize when factories have stopped production and unemployment looms as a real threat.

The second possible explanation is derived from resource mobilization theory. After the break with communism, this hypothesis runs, labor was starved of the resources it needed to grow and consolidate its strength. The editors question the factual accuracy of that picture. They argue that the privileged access to resources enjoyed by trade unions in state socialist societies largely continued after 1989 for many unions, which were able to retain property, funds, factory radio systems, newsletters, and even newspapers.

The third possible explanation is that some aspects of labor's ideology and union identity—

habits of thought formed over decades of state socialist rule—have been fundamentally at odds with a healthy adjustment to democratic capitalism. The editors view this explanation, too, as implausible. Such a picture, they argue, implies stubborn adherence to a strongly defined set of ideas and values, whereas what has been manifest during the years of transition has been a wavering, unclear ideology and a weak union identity.

Chapters 1–10 are essays focusing on the state of trade unions and the relationship between labor and politics in ten countries. The writers are experts with extensive experience in the regions they examine. The countries covered are the Czech Republic (discussed by Anna Pollert), Hungary (András Tóth), Slovakia (Jonathan Stein), Poland (David Ost), Romania (David A. Kideckel), Bulgaria (Grigor Gradev), Croatia (Marian Kokanović), Serbia (Mihail Arandarenko), Ukraine (Włodzimierz Panków and Evgenii Kopatko), and Russia (Stephen Crowley).

All ten essays accept the premise that labor in post-communist Europe is weak, but the authors bring a variety of theoretical, methodological, and empirical tools to bear in studying that phenomenon. Also differing across these chapters is the structure of presentation. Because of this variation, the chapters do not lend themselves to cross-comparison. The editors of the volume say that they have deliberately avoided the comparative method because institutions or events that indicate union strength in one context might merely represent a carry-over from the communist years in another. The question of labor's weakness or strength can be meaningfully answered, they argue, only within a particular national context.

The authors of the country essays capably outline important trends in labor restructuring in post-communist Europe and Russia. The chapters are based on diverse evidence derived from in-depth case studies of the ten countries. Each chapter thus reads as an independent national case study survey of labor weakness in post-communist society, focusing on a specific aspect of union restructuring. Unfortunately, the volume does suffer expositionally from the lack of a unified analytical approach. Not only is it difficult to compare the countries' experiences, but the want of coordination also results in inefficiency, as several general arguments about labor weakness are needlessly repeated.

The volume's conclusion, written again by the editors, tries to explain the origins and implications of apparent labor weakness. For

Ost and Crowley, labor weakness means workers' and trade unions' inability to shape conditions of work or public policy in accord with their interests. The specific signs of such weakness they describe, citing evidence from the foregoing empirical chapters, are declining trade union membership, increasingly hierarchical management, toothless collective bargaining, redundant agreements, infrequent and ineffectual strike action, ineffective or non-existent political alliances, minimal union influence over public policy, and declining material outcomes for workers.

While the editors acknowledge that economic factors, resource problems, and the institutional specifics of each country have played a part in union weakness, a variable they judge even more important is unions' own attitudes and strategies, which in large part are in reaction to their communist past. In particular, labor's experiences under communism made it hyper-skeptical of unions, an attitude that has been reinforced by the dominant ideologies of the new post-communist elites. Ost and Crowley regard that crisis of socialist ideas as itself a key factor explaining union weakness. Thus, globalization cannot fully explain the dilemmas faced by labor in post-communist Europe, or the way unions have thus far responded to those dilemmas. There are factors unique to post-communist societies. For the editors, the contexts in which union leaders act and the ideas that guide their activity matter.

The volume as a whole is a helpful guide for understanding trends in labor power in post-communist Europe, as well as broader economic and political change both there and in other transitional societies. I recommend it to academic scholars and students of post-communist Europe. Practitioners and policy-makers from the region who are interested in the political aspects of union restructuring may also find the book valuable, even though the editors refrain from saying whether they think any policy-oriented solution to the labor weakness problem holds promise.

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At Home and Abroad: U.S. Labor Market Performance in International Perspective. By Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn.