ILR Review

Volume 56 | Number 3 Article 11

April 2003

Mutual Aid and Union Renewal

Bruce Nissen
Florida International University

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Abstract
Mutual Aid and Union Renewal. By Samuel B. Bacharach, Peter A. Bamberger, and William J. Sonnenstuhl. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2001. 200 pp. ISBN 0-8014-3842-X, $39.95 (cloth); 0-8014-8734-X, $16.95 (paper).

BOOK REVIEWS

Labor-Management Relations

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Mutual Aid and Union Renewal examines the well-known decline of unions in the United States in the past few decades, and argues that unions could renew themselves and once again become a major force. The argument is a fascinating one, and it should draw a great deal of interest and debate.

The authors assert that unions have recently failed to achieve member commitment or to legitimize themselves with their members. This failure, they argue, stems from unions' adoption of a servicing logic, whereby union leaders through a bureaucratic process deliver material gains to the members. Members are expected to pay their dues; leaders are expected to deliver good wages and benefits (and, to some degree, good working conditions). This method of operating can theoretically give unions an instrumental legitimacy; as long as the union "delivers," the members remain loyal. But the servicing logic does not expect or encourage member involvement, and member loyalty is shallow and dependent on continuous delivery of expected benefits. In short, because unions act like insurance companies, it is no surprise to find levels of loyalty and involvement among their members that are about the same as those found among an insurance company's clients.

An alternative logic of action for a union is the mutual aid logic, whereby unions are organized as an extended or fictive family. Members have multiple mutual obligations toward each other, and extensive involvement is part of the very functioning of the organization. The old slogan "An injury to one is the concern of all" illustrates this logic of action. The commitment of the members is more normative and less instrumental.

The authors argue that the earliest labor movement was built on a logic of mutual aid, but that unions slipped away from this type of organization toward the servicing model in the post–World War II years. The bureaucratic servicing model worked fairly well during a period of economic expansion and a relatively benign market environment. But the recent period of deregulation, globalization, and marketization of all relationships has made it difficult or impossible for unions to "deliver" in the way they used to. Consequently, they face a crisis of legitimacy that cannot be solved under the servicing logic of action. However, a return to the mutual-aid logic can regain legitimacy for unions and help them rebuild and renew themselves.

The final chapters of the book focus on union programs for intervening when members have alcohol or other substance abuse problems. These programs are often called member assistance programs (MAPs), and they involve fellow workers intervening when they see a member heading toward job loss and self-destruction due to substance abuse. Three unions are examined: the railway brotherhoods, the Association of Flight Attendants, and the New York City local of the Transport Workers Union. The authors examine the histories of these unions, their shift away from and eventually back toward the mutual-aid logic, and the operation of their recent intervention programs. The book argues that these programs are restoring the normative legitimacy of the unions, enabling them to rebuild for the future.

One impressive feature of this book is the clear theoretical exposition at the beginning. The authors provide a very concise overview of issues such as commitment and its relationship to beliefs and attitudes, two different types of commitment (instrumental and normative), the relationship between commitment and legitimacy, the theoretical notion of "logics of action," and different types of logics of action in the union context. This clear exposition provides an excellent theoretical background for their argument that

unions need to return to a logic of mutual aid to renew themselves.

An interesting issue left mostly unexplored in the book is the relationship of its argument to other debates concerning the direction organized labor should take. The authors do discuss the "mutual gains unionism" or "value added unionism" promoted by numerous industrial relations scholars. This brand of unionism, they argue, is still confined within the servicing logic of action and is unlikely to renew unions. They also note that their perspective is compatible with the "organizing model" promoted against the "servicing model" by some labor activists and sympathetic labor educators and academics. However, almost all proponents of the organizing model also argue that organizing must be done to build a powerful social movement to fight against workplace injustices and for broader social justice. In short, they connect their critique of the servicing approach to concepts like "solidarity" and "social movement unionism."

Are "mutual aid" and "solidarity" identical? Related? The authors do not address this question. Their choice of member assistance programs as examples of "mutual aid" may indicate that they are thinking of something quite removed from "solidarity," if that term means mutual support and organization against employer abuses. None of their examples of mutual aid have much to do with the employer, or with a struggle to force an employer to treat the work force better. If this is intentional, the authors' prescription for union renewal may simply entail self-help of a Salvation Army type, rather than build solidarity and organization to

struggle against adversaries.

Or perhaps this is not the intent. The book itself is unclear on this topic. In any event, further discussion and clarification of what exactly "mutual aid" means, and particularly how it relates to concepts like "solidarity," would be most useful.

This stimulating and insightful book should provoke much discussion and debate. The topic of potential union renewal is a central one for all concerned about the fate of the U.S. industrial relations system and of the nation itself.

Bruce Nissen
Director of Research and Non-Credit Programs
Center for Labor Research and Studies
Florida International University

Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy. Edited by Charles D. Thompson, Jr., and Melinda F. Wiggins. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xv, 320 pp. ISBN 0-292-78177-6, $50.00 (cloth); 0-292-78178-4, $21.95 (paper).

The brief opening dedication in *The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy* both honors a group of college students (Student Action with Farmworkers, or SAF) who work to improve conditions for some of the nation's two million farmworkers and memorializes an activist, Oliver Townes, whose death was partly due to his lack of health benefits, a deficiency shared with the farmworkers to whom he was devoted. The dedication thus neatly stakes out the authors' goal: to promote identification with, and advocacy for, the migrant and seasonal workers who help put food on our tables.

This collection of 11 essays by advocates, attorneys, academics, and service providers is a readable and practical teaching aid targeted to interested activists, be they undergraduates, clergy, or individuals in other walks of life. The sympathetic accounts of farmworkers' struggles clearly convey the economic, social, and political powerlessness of America's largely immigrant and invisible agricultural labor force. Approximately half of all farmworkers are in the United States illegally; most earn poverty-level wages and live in secluded, employer-owned camps or in overpriced, rundown rooms in town; many suffer health problems; some migrate between the United States and Mexico; many are unfamiliar with our laws and customs; and their unorganized voices are drowned out by the clout of the agribusiness lobby. Simply put, migrant and seasonal farmworkers are denied the dignity and justice that a civilized society owes people who contribute to its welfare. But as Charles Thompson writes in the introduction, the never-ending supply of newcomers desperate for work virtually ensures continuation of the status quo.

Each chapter focuses on some aspect of farmworkers' lives or on the political-economic forces controlling them. Readers learn about workers' families and traditions, about their housing, health, and children's education, and about the disappearance of small farms, the importation of foreign "guestworkers," farm