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Unions in a Globalized Environment: Changing Borders, Organizational Boundaries, and Social Roles.

Bruce Nissen

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BOOK REVIEWS

Labor-Management Relations

Unions in a Globalized Environment: Changing Borders, Organizational Boundaries, and Social Roles. Edited by Bruce Nissen. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. 293 pp. ISBN 0-7656-0869-3, $65.95 (cloth); 0-7656-0870-7, $24.95 (paper).

The American union revitalization literature has come along at an odd time. Even as union vitality as we usually measure it—the percentage of the work force that belongs to unions—has declined, researchers have intensified their search for signs of life. Perhaps union busting, downsizing, whipsawing, and human resource management have discredited the old industrial relations orthodoxy that, in order to make sustainable gains for workers, worker organizations will have to embrace specific capitalist institutions. In this atmosphere, the contentious grass-roots activism of workers provides a window into the future of worker representation, a laboratory of democracy, and a light of hope in an otherwise dark polity.

Unions in a Globalized Environment is the latest major contribution to this stream of research. Editor Bruce Nissen presents eight chapters of widely varying quality, authored by an impressive group of participants and observers and grouped around three phenomena.

First, some parts of the labor movement have opened themselves to the activist energies of immigrant groups. The link between labor and the community-based activism of immigrants and others, Paul Johnston observes, has much wider implications than one might at first suppose, since it bridges the gap between workplace and neighborhood that has traditionally narrowed union agendas. Ruth Milkman's chapter makes an extremely well-documented case that immigrant organizing explains a significant part of Los Angeles's recent transformation from "company town" to organized labor's "R&D center." Nissen and Guillermo Grenier examine rich case study data to try to explain why four Miami local unions enjoyed different levels of success in bringing immigrants into their organizations.

Second, as production has become more globally integrated, some unions have begun to emphasize international solidarity, raising the question, as Nissen puts it, of how the labor movement can "achieve its own globalization." Steve Babson's nicely detailed article on cross-border networking of North American rank-and-file autoworkers provides some reason for optimism. He acknowledges, however, that these forms of union coordination are not (yet) widespread. Similarly, Henry Frundt's article modeling "bi-directional" cross-border coordinated organizing points to the limitations imposed by the overall "nationalist" tenor of U.S. unionism. Jeff Rechenbach and Larry Cohen's article describes a campaign of telecommunications unions in the United States, Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, and New Zealand that forced a major global telecommunications firm to recognize world-wide a set of worker rights. The integrated union strategy this article depicts—which includes international networking, bargaining, intervening in regulatory fights, and labor-management partnership (!)—is far more sophisticated than our current models can explain.

The final chapters attempt to come to terms with a third phenomenon: an alleged shift in union goals that is said to be in response to political-economic restructuring. Fernando Gapasin and Edna Bonacich sketch in Marxist terms how industry restructuring creates new challenges for multi-union attempts to organize Los Angeles's many manufacturing workers. Ian Robinson uses "stylized facts" to deduce that neo-liberal restructuring of the political economy will produce leftist social movement unionism. Although Robinson's prose will test the patience of most readers, his deterministic argument is worth the effort of re-reading. Paul Johnston makes the very different argument that citizenship is a theme that has a chance to unify otherwise divergent union agendas in a social labor movement.

Nissen's introductory and concluding chapters articulate some central themes of the revitalization literature. Revived unions open them-

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