Conceptualizing Labour Union Revitalization

Martin Behrens, Wirtschafts-und-Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut
Kerstin Hamann, University of Central Florida
Richard W. Hurd, Cornell University

Publication Date
2004

Abstract
[Excerpt] Unions have engaged in revitalization efforts in all five country cases that form the basis of comparison of this book, though they differ in the strategies they have pursued and the level of success they have had. Some of the strategies have been promising or even successful in terms of their immediate outcomes; others are still waiting to be fully implemented; and still others have failed to live up to the original expectations. While in many countries union activists are eagerly developing strategies to turn their fate, they are also facing some doubt or even resistance by politicians and academics alike who question the need for a strong and unified representation of labour. Here, we set out to provide a conceptual framework to understand better these various efforts at revival of national union movements.

The following section discusses existing analyses of union revitalization and argues that a comparative perspective is well suited to shed light on unions' revitalization efforts. We then introduce different analytical perspectives on the role of labour in the economy, politics, and society to help identify the significance of unions in an ever more global economy. The next section outlines the parameters of crisis for unions by tracing indicators of union strength over time. We then suggest a framework for conceptualizing union revitalization as a multidimensional process and argue that revitalization has different meanings depending on the specific national context.

Debates around labor revitalization strategies use this concept as shorthand for the best we might aspire to: a unionism that is militant, internally democratic, committed to social justice, attuned to class, and part of larger social and political mobilizations. The trick is to sort out the genuine commitments from the smoke and mirrors. Roots. Proponents of social movement unionism have found inspiration in the explosion of mass industrial unionism during the Great Depression. Laid-off union members wouldn't drop off the radar screen but would become fixtures at union halls — forming the natural base for campaigns to organize the unemployed. The Left. Social movement unionism shouldn't be conceptualized as a single variant or a set of boxes that need to be checked off. Labour unions are an essential component of a diverse and democratic soci- ety because they work to ensure that all classes are equally represented in the political sphere regardless of their wealth and monetary power. Most labour unions work to achieve economic equity, workplace democracy, and social justice through the extension and development of collective bargaining rights (Dawkins, 2009). Through such rights, labour unions can influence the rules and condi- tions which govern practical aspects of work, such as wages and hours. ... Union revitalization in the face of their current difficulties is therefore of fundamental importance. In sum, a theoretical conceptualisation of labour needs to be developed, which allows the analysis of labour at the international level, while incorporating an investigation of the different national institutional set-ups. Globalisation and the
role of labour at the international level. Globalisation is a complex concept. Here, the Trade Union Advisory Committee is treated as one interest organisation next to its business counterpart and environmental NGOs such as the World Wide Fund for Nature. Similarly, in Scholte’s analysis of the IMF’s interaction with civil society, the labour movement through its various institutional expressions is only one of a whole range of different NGOs, which has lobbied the international organisation (Scholte, 2000).