Proposal to 47th Annual CIRA Conference, June 2010

Jason Foster
Academic Coordinator, Industrial Relations
Athabasca University
jasonf@athabascau.ca

Hard Lessons from Alberta:
The Difficulties of Applying EU-style Social Dialogue in Canada

Context
The Canadian labour movement currently is not and, arguably, never has been particularly influential in shaping public policy (Kwavnick, 1972; Panitch & Swartz, 2003). This reality has been a source of great frustration for union leadership and activists (Panitch & Swartz, 2003). Within the labour movement the question naturally arises of how to increase influence on policy. Many look toward European labour and its relative success, wondering if the processes used in Europe can be successfully transplanted to Canada. A core component of their success is the use of tripartite, “social dialogue” policy-making processes, where labour, capital and the state jointly resolve key economic and social issues (Keller & Bansbach, 2001). But how possible, or even desirable, is it for Canadian unionists to adopt and tailor the European model for a Canadian policy context? What ramifications are there for Canadian labour if it were to attempt the European model? Can it invigorate labour’s policy influence, or does it represent something of a primrose path?

Canada’s few attempts at tripartite policy processes, such as labour force development, have met with little success due to structural and political conditions persistent in its industrial relations system (Bradford, 1998; Haddow & Sharpe, 1997). However, some researchers have speculated that social dialogue-style processes may succeed on a more modest policy scale (Haddow & Klassen, 2004).

Research Topic
The paper examines two cases studies from the province of Alberta which serve as recent examples of tripartite, European-style process applied to a specific policy area, namely occupational health and safety. The case studies represent a contemporary attempt to apply tripartite principles in a Canadian context, and therefore offer an opportunity to update and refresh our understanding of the potentials and limitations of such processes.

The paper will begin by examining the political context of the two case studies – how and why the Alberta government launched a new kind of process. It will examine the process used in each example, and evaluate the outcomes from the perspective of labour. The effectiveness of the process will be measured by examining labour’s ability to gain outcomes that further its political interests (ie. enhanced safety measures for workers).

The power and structural dynamics that shaped the outcomes will be discussed, leading to a conclusion of whether the case studies should encourage Canadian labour, or instead give it pause when considering a move toward the European model.

Methodology
The data for the case studies was compiled through participant observation, as the author was a representative on the two Task Forces being examined. The direct observation is supplemented with
documentary evidence, including minutes, terms of reference and draft reports, and with informal interviews of other participants and a formal debriefing of labour representatives at the conclusion of the processes.

The analysis of the process outcomes is informed by power resources theory (Korpi, 1983; Stephens, 1979). Power resources theory allows for the isolation of power structures and dynamics and their effect on process outcomes.

Analysis

The paper argues that adequate power resources were not present for labour to achieve its policy goals, and that the attempt at a new policy-making structure was insufficient to overcome the broader political and economic power imbalances found in Alberta industrial relations. There were some positive labour outcomes, but they were substantially limited and defensive in nature. This highlights a complex dilemma facing labour regarding these types of processes. SD-style processes are inadequate for achieving labour’s political agenda, but the modest gains cannot be ignored by labour advocates.

More specifically, the paper tests Haddow and Klassen’s (2004) speculation that social dialogue-style processes of a more modest scale, examining narrower fields of policy, may possess some potential to succeed in Canada. The case studies suggest that a more narrow policy field does not increase chances for greater outcomes.

Finally, the paper suggests there is an additional dilemma facing labour, in addition to the complex decision-matrix in assessing whether to participate in such processes. Unions may pay a price through a reduced ability to mobilize through a creeping culture of compromise that can arise through participation in these kinds of processes.

Conference Theme

The author suggests that this proposal falls under Theme Two in the Thematic Call for Papers. It directly addresses the question of the role of social dialogue in dealing with issues confronting workers in the 21st century.

References


