UNION EFFECTIVENESS: IN SEARCH OF THE HOLY GRAIL

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Setting: Declining Union Power and Influence

- Bad news for workers
- Sharpens interest in practical question of union effectiveness
- Limited academic contributions
  - Few studies (compared to say, wage effects, organizing, renewal?)
  - Often lacking conceptual rigor and completeness, e.g., focus only on organizing effectiveness
  - Many renewal studies, but often neglect effectiveness or its connections to renewal

From John Budd’s *Labor Relations: Striking A Balance* (2010, 3e)
Toward A Framework

• Cumulatively, the bigger picture of union effectiveness is overlooked – *cannot see the forest for the trees*

• Our purpose:
  – Identify weaknesses, gaps
  – Grounded conceptualization can help to connect means and ends, agency and environment, process and outcomes
Unions as Workers’ Organizations

• **Of, by, and for workers:** Worker power, worker powered?
• Ultimate goal: Protect and advance living standards and working lives through a primary focus on workplace
• 1st order of analysis: Focus on outcomes and various penultimate goals
• 2nd order of analysis: Resources and processes, strategies and tactics, to achieve outcome goals. The former are *potential* sources of power, a means to the end of achieving goals, but power does not assure effectiveness
• The “levers of power” (bargaining, protest, etc.) *tend* to be arena-specific, but perhaps mobilization (volunteerism) is the most universal (see Gall & Fiorito 2012 *BJIR*)
Union Effectiveness
Assessing Prior Research in Terms of Attention to ...

• Dimensions and criteria
• Arenas and scales of organization and operation
• Levers of power
• Strategies and tactics for leveraging sources of potential power effectively and efficiently
Organizing as a Lever of Power?

Vivian Scott Hixson, the commissioned artist, left out “levers of power” included in my original stick-figure version, but a colleague said “Just as well; they looked like lollipops.”
Literature Review

in Brief

😊 Good news! There’s a lit. Various attempts, perspectives, models addressing “UE,” something to build on

😢 Bad news: The lit is sparse, and contains notable weaknesses (surprise?)
   – Effectiveness not clearly defined
   – Partial UE definition: e.g., effectiveness = organizing?
   – Partial re unions: e.g., nationals or locals or members’ views
   – Sometimes sketchy on posited causal relations
   – Often poor measures and less-than-compelling findings
Literature Review in Brief, cont’d

A few “favs” re UE 😊

• “Classics” such as Perlman, Barbash, Batstone, Bok & Dunlop
• Fiorito, Jarley, & Delaney (1993) on goals-systems model for UE
• Boxall & Haynes (1997) on strategies and UE
• Clark (2009, 2e) on behavioral science and UE
• Lévesque & Murray (2010) on power and renewal

These provide a solid foundation for model building, notwithstanding that each has limitations for our purposes
Goals-Systems Model
Adapted from Fiorito, Jarley, & Delaney (1993)

Environment
- Employer opposition
- Worker demand for representation
- Government policies

Basic Union Goals
- External / Workplace

Basic union strategies
- Bargaining
- Organizing
- Self-help
- Politics
- Member solidarity
- Resource acquisition

Organizational characteristics
- Innovation
- Administrative structuring
- Centralization
- Democratic structures

Union effectiveness
- Effectiveness dimensions
  - Bargaining
  - Organizing
  - Self-help
  - Politics
  - Member solidarity
  - Resource acquisition

Effectiveness indicators
Toward an Integrated Conceptual Framework

• Working defn: UE is successful application of appropriate levers of power to achieve goals (both process and outcome)
• Various levers of power (e.g., strikes, demonstrations) from collective resources, e.g., mobilization capacity, allies, funds
• Arenas of operation:
  – Labor, product, & capital markets in the economic arena
  – Elections, lobbying in the political arena
• “Highly dynamic” nature (Clark 2009) notable. Yesterday’s levers may be today’s lollipops (ineffectual); “withering strikes”?
• Strategy: When and where to exercise levers of power
• Broad enough to fit different unions, but specific enough to allow comparison, perhaps even a “universal score card”
Goals-Systems Model

**Basic Union Goals**
- Operationalize into objectives

**Power levers**
- Economic
- Political
- Industrial
- Social
- Ideological
- Financial

**Process of actions**
1. Choose arena
2. Apply resources of disruption
3. Deploy strategy and tactics

**Generate outcomes**

**Union effectiveness**
- UE dimensions
- Bargaining
- Organizing
- Self-help
- Politics
- Member solidarity
- Resource acquisition

**UE criteria indicators**

**Economy/society**
- Employer opposition
- Worker demand for representation
- Government policy and action
- Capital, labor & product markets
- Public opinion

**Environmental influence**
Conclusion

• Union effectiveness is *still* an underdeveloped concept
• A concept that deserves more attention
• Present effort hopefully offers modest advance
• Truly a work in progress – your thoughts most welcome!
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AND THE SEARCH CONTINUES
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