

Local Unions and Workplace Restructuring: Introduction

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Local Unions and Workplace Restructuring: Introduction

Local unions are receiving renewed research attention as changing regimes of labour regulation in many industries and nations highlight the challenges facing local unions in the context of workplace restructuring. These challenges come from both above and below.

A relative decline in pattern bargaining and, in the context of increasing product differentiation and international competition, a weakening of the ability of larger union groupings to impose pattern agreements, have underscored the role of the local union in these changes. Where the national union previously set the trend, there is increased onus on local unions to do as best they can in increasingly heterogeneous circumstances.

At the same time, especially in the private sector, local unions have been led by employers from a simple focus on guarantees about employment to discussion of the conditions that might ensure continuing competitiveness and, hopefully at least, a greater degree of employment security. This leads directly to union involvement in continuous negotiations over new production and quality systems and the organization of work therein. The promise of course is one of increased participation and possibly a better life for their members at work. But the demands on the local union in this context can be daunting: in particular, the need for new skills and expertise, for which it is necessary to rethink the relation between local and national union or other intermediary levels of the union restructure, as well as new sources of fragmentation and conflict within the workforce. And, at the same time, there are real pressures towards local isolationism – what is often referred to as micro-corporatism or forms of enterprise unionism.

These twin challenges then make the local union a fulcrum of change. In the North American labour relations regime at least, it can be argued that the local union is at the very heart of the debate over union renewal. It's with this set of changes in mind that we sought to bring together studies that share a focus on the role of the local union. The initial impetus was in linked panels organized by Pradeep Kumar, Christian Lévesque and Gregor Murray at the 2000 Canadian Industrial Relations Association meetings in Edmonton to which *RI/IR* added other submitted texts. This thematic

contribution also picks up on key themes already explored in these pages in recent volumes: in particular, Lévesque and Murray ("La régulation paritaire du changement à l'épreuve de la mondialisation," Vol. 53, No. 1, 1998) and a special thematic issue of *RI/IR* (Vol. 54, No. 1, 1999) on industrial relations in the new workplace.

The result is four articles featuring studies of local unions in this new context. The first, by Paul-André Lapointe, draws on longitudinal case studies in the pulp and paper industry in Quebec. It looks at different models of worker and union participation in the context of work reorganization in order to highlight the quite different bases of union participation in management. He finds that some of these experiences entail more powerful local unions while others involve weaker local unions and that the degree of local union power makes a tremendous difference in terms of the depth of union participation in management.

The second article, by Ann Frost, picks up on this theme of power or what she labels local union "capacity", particularly as it relates to the role of the national union of which the local union is a part. In seeking to situate a number of local unions in the U.S. and Canada in the context of three larger national and/or international unions and their policy and service orientations, she advances a number of analytical propositions about the role of the national union in reinforcing the capacity of the local union to negotiate and represent its members in the context of workplace change.

This theme is also addressed by Reynald Bourque and Claude Rioux in their study of the changing role of the industry union federation (or national union) in the context of workplace change in the pulp and paper industry in Quebec. In an industry that has moved from highly co-ordinated bargaining to a more decentralized and even disarticulated pattern of local settlements, they examine the way that this industry union, in which one of the authors was a key actor over the last decade, has altered its practices and structures in order to foster some of the new skills required at local level and to promote a degree of external coordination between local unions facing increasingly heterogeneous circumstances.

The final contribution to this set of articles on local unions is a study by Don Wells of a single plant in the white goods or domestic electronic appliances industry in Canada. This is a tale of a traditionally strong local union buffeted by the global restructuring of the industry and seemingly compelled to engage in much more cooperative relations with management in order to secure a degree of job security for the plant. Wells chronicles how this increasingly exclusive focus on the fortunes of the plant or micro-corporatism comes at the cost of sharper distinctions between a core group of workers with a greater degree of job security and seniority and various other groups of workers whose relative insecurity serves as a

buffer in this context of greater economic uncertainty. In particular, Wells highlights how this takes place in what is otherwise seen as a progressive local union with fairly strong linkages to many of the defining features of social unionism. According to his assessment, this external orientation is weakened by an insufficient attention to the development of internal democracy within the local union.

A few key themes emerge from these four contributions, in which each places the local union at the centre of the research agenda concerning forms of workplace regulation.

First, the local unions in each of the studies are facing threats to job security. In this context, greater flexibility, increased workload and job loss inevitably seem to be the outcome of workplace restructuring. Yet there is also a much greater, if variable, union and worker input into new approaches to production management and quality management. Most local unions under study have therefore taken up the gauntlet of some kind of engagement with workplace change and the attendant notions of partnership.

Second, the local unions at the centre of these workplace changes have experienced quite variable outcomes, which leads to a focus on the explanations for this variation. While some of the variation is linked to product markets and other competitive conditions, one of the key elements emerging from these studies is local union power or capacity in improving the outcomes of workplace restructuring. A key theme emerging from this range of studies is that considerable caution is required as regards overly simplistic assumptions about the tremendous new role for local unions in the management of production systems. It appears that such a new role is only likely for local unions that can mobilize sufficient power or capacity in this new context.

Third, given this focus on power and/or capacity, these studies are particularly concerned with different sources of union power in this changed context for local unions. One key insight concerns the role of the larger union in building that power and the changes that this implies in terms of structure, services and the organization of service delivery. In essence, there is clearly a need to rethink many of the structures and services developed by national unions in a context of more centralized and/or co-ordinated bargaining with a primary focus on wages and conditions. Yet it is also clear that an overly optimistic view of the potentially transformative character of external linkages merits some caution. If external involvement of the local union is one method of limiting a certain propensity to micro-corporatism, local union power must be built from within, notably through a more robust local union democracy, as well as from without.

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