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Ouvrage recensé :

CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology by Arthur B. SHOSTAK,
Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1999, 288 pp., ISBN 0-7656-0463-9.

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Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations, vol. 56, n° 4, 2001, p. 820-822.

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CyberUnion: Empowering Labor through Computer Technology

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[B]y about 2003 or earlier the matter should be clear: The American labor movement will either be employing computers with finesse, or it will have become an inconsequential has-been, the organizational equivalent of "road kill" on the Information Superhighway (p. 6).

I learned of this book via e-mail. In fact, Art Shostak sent draft chapters to me as e-mail attachments although I had requested a hard copy typescript. Unfortunately, I was then using a crude e-mail package that could not open his attachments, and eventually ordered the book from amazon.com, despite much trepidation about putting my credit card into cyber-circulation. Such is one person's voyage in Cyberspace. Based on Shostak's *CyberUnion*, it seems my haphazard progress is not so different from that of many unions. The haphazard nature of union information technology (IT) adoption is a key theme. Shostak hopes to accelerate more systematic progress by drawing distinctions among the ways various unions have implemented IT, identifying "best practice," and encouraging unions to move toward a transformation to CyberUnion.

I was particularly eager to see what Shostak, who has written on union innovation, had to say about union IT use. I was amidst writing on this topic (see Fiorito, Jarley, and Delaney, "The Adoption of Information Technology by U.S. National Unions," *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 55 (3), 2000) and, finding a sparse literature, I was eager for theoretical guidance that might help frame my study, or practical examples that could clarify the meaning of quantitative data. Shostak's *CyberUnion* was disappointing in the first regard, satisfying in the second, and surprising in a third.

In the first regard, Shostak does not offer a systematic review of previous

theorizing or empirical work on IT's antecedents or effects on union performance. There is little or no discussion of systematic sampling or research methods. Many pertinent works are ignored. There is, for example, no mention of Templer and Solomon's pioneering study of IT adoption in Canadian unions ("Unions and Technology," *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 43 (2), 1988) nor recent works on union effectiveness. Instead, Shostak relies on futurist writings, popular news items, field reports from his former students and other trade unionists (some appear as essays in *CyberUnion*), a brief e-mail survey of unionists, interviews, and participation in practitioner conferences on union IT use.

Although one could quibble about the rigour of his research methods, one cannot deny that Shostak has ventured into a relatively unknown area and brought back new information and perspectives. Also to his credit, Shostak generally casts a broad net in his information gathering and documents his sources and methods. Obviously things are changing rapidly in IT. At his writing, there apparently was no published literature review on IT adoption in organizations or its effect on organizations, much less unions. Given Shostak's interest in trying to look forward, the emphasis on popular sources and futurist writings is understandable. Still, if one is trying to understand the causes and consequences of union IT adoption in the broader context of theoretical and empirical writings on unions, *CyberUnion* can be disappointing.

In the second regard, as a source of practical examples illustrating how unions can and do use IT, the book excels. Contributors address IT uses for administration, political action, organizing, bargaining, and activating and servicing

members. Additional essays address concerns of women workers and how union IT use relates to globalization. For unionists, these contributed essays and Shostak's integrating discussion provide practical guidance, possibly best practice models, and at least a source of ideas for adoption or adaptation. For academics, *CyberUnion* summarizes and details changes that we will read about in more academic terms years later. Shostak has opted for speed and relevance over rigour in some regards. For those examining quantitative data telling us things such as "Most unions report that IT has improved organizing and will improve their organizing even more in the future," these essays and Shostak's narration illuminate. They help to give meaning to the numbers.

The third and surprising aspect of Shostak's book is a typology that he uses to organize his views. He proposes four union IT-use types (pp. xx-xxi). The first is called "Cyber Naught," an approach "without direction or distinction; the situation of unions and locals making the least of the possibility." The second is "Cyber Drift," an approach "without a clear destination; the situation of unions and locals wandering in what may seem a digital desert." The third is "Cyber Gain," an approach or "direction without distinction; the situation of unions and locals making the most of computerization—but still missing much." Finally, the "CyberUnion" is a model toward which Shostak feels unions should aspire.

The first three types are intended to describe unions presently. Some, the Cyber Naughts, are virtually oblivious to IT developments, or at best are reluctant and resistant participants in IT advances. They reinforce the dinosaur imagery sometimes associated with unions. Cyber Drift unions are not averse to IT, but their adoption is haphazard. Their IT implementation lacks coherence. An organizing director may have heard of another union's application of

e-mail or laptop computers, and adapted it to his/her own union. But there is no conscious effort to make the most of IT potential in additional areas. The union's web page is static, an electronic poster, possibly not updated since it was created. Leaders may have e-mail addresses, but chances are good that a secretary prints e-mails for the leader and converts outgoing communications to an electronic format from dictation or hard copy. There is no IT "champion" whose charge includes IT diffusion. The Cyber Gain union remedies these faults. It has an IT champion, perhaps an IT department, and conscious intent to exploit IT's potential. Its web page is informative, timely, and interactive. Who could ask for more? The problem with Cyber Gain unions, Shostak asserts, is that they "do not deal with the future as much as they streamline the past" (p. 95).

The exposition of the CyberUnion and how it differs spans more than 70 pages. Separate chapters are devoted to each letter of the F-I-S-T acronym (Futuristics, Innovations, Services, and Tradition). The contrast that is most difficult to see is between the Cyber Gain union and the CyberUnion. Frankly, the line between the two is a bit fuzzy and it is difficult to find a concise statement of what a CyberUnion *is*.

The distinction seems to turn on the Cyber Gain union using IT to conduct "business as usual" (reference earlier quote on "streamlining the past"). For Shostak, being responsive to members, deliberate in assessing their views and those of potential members, and encouraging member participation seem to be the non-IT elements that make CyberUnions preferable to Cyber Gain unions. These are all worthy goals apart from any IT issues. (Even a Cyber Naught union with such aspirations would it not merit respect?) Using IT to do these things more efficiently and effectively make leaders more accessible, and constantly striving to keep the union's

infrastructure on the cutting edge of IT is what distinguishes the CyberUnion.

Shostak's CyberUnion is his vision of what unions need to be in the future. This is a vision that is heavy on IT, but not just about IT. One could argue that the book drifts from its main focus and could be more accurately but clumsily titled "Futuristic Responsive CyberUnions that Preserve Valued Traditions." Shostak's "drift" is deliberate, and arguably strengthens the book by providing a broader vision of what unions should be.

Do Shostak's types provide an accurate description of real world union types now or as they might exist in the future? Probably not. Like many typologies, this one intends to illustrate important differences rather than describe reality. It might have been worthwhile for Shostak to have delved more deeply into the subdimensions of IT use to provide a richer typology. In effect, we have a single dimension, IT sophistication, along which the first three types are arrayed. In reality, unions are arrayed continuously, perhaps with some

clumping, along the IT sophistication dimension. Finer distinctions can be drawn, and the book alludes to varied uses, e.g., for organizing, communications, bargaining, and political action. Exploring these dimensions and the configurations unions adopt with respect to them might be interesting.

Meanwhile, Shostak's *CyberUnion* offers an interesting and readable introduction to "unions and IT," with a hefty side order of futuristics. We will see much more on this topic. Unions worldwide are assessing options and devising appropriate strategies. TUC unions in the United Kingdom, for example, recently convened to decide whether they should launch an "e-union" (and if so, what it should be) and evaluate other more modest options for IT-related action. Although those looking for theoretical guidance may find the book disappointing, most will find it interesting and satisfying, and possibly helpful in their own theorizing about unions and IT.

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