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Research Priorities for the 1990's

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Research Priorities for the 1990's

Larry Haiven

In their book *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*, Panitch and Swartz maintain that by a process of seemingly "exceptional" measures Canadian governments are *permanently* taking away trade union and worker rights so as to bring about "the end of the era of free collective bargaining in Canada" (1988: 15). Others, taking up Panitch and Swartz's logic (e.g. Glasbeek 1987; Drache and Glasbeek 1989) insist that there is no return to the status quo ante, that things look very bleak for traditional Canadian industrial relations.

Given the fatalistic nature of these predictions, they demand vigorous debate. Yet thus far there has been little in the way of direct response from the academic industrial relations community. Is a wholesale destruction of the postwar collective bargaining system taking place and are we in the midst of a historic defeat of the Canadian labour movement? Or are the current depredations merely a cyclical aberration? It is not enough to say that it is too early to tell (Sack and Lee 1987) or that the relatively less aggressive anti-union stance by Canadian employers compared to the US is evidence of absence of the "new industrial relations" here (Adams 1988). Nor is it sufficient to suggest that the belated granting of collective bargaining and strike rights to public servants in the 60's and 70's was a tentative experiment that makes the withdrawal of those rights in the 80's somehow less ominous (Riddell 1986).

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A recurring feature of the analysis of Canadian industrial relations that makes joining this debate problematic is a preoccupation with pluralism and a focus on law and regulation. This is not surprising, given the intimate relationship between many industrial relations academics and that very law and regulation. But Panitch and Swartz argue from a political economy perspective, with an "emphasis on economic change and structural transformation" (Murray and Giles 1988: 801). In order to answer their argument or join it, it is necessary to take a broad, historical approach which examines the balance of forces among Canadian social classes and the strategic role of the state in altering that balance.

Some work has been done from this perspective that suggests that recent developments are only part of a long tradition of restrictive state intervention (McBride 1987), or that in the domain of the workplace, even the 'old industrial relations' has been much more limiting on worker self-expression than commonly assumed (Haiven 1991), or that Canadian unions have developed a resilience quite independent of the law that frames their interaction with capital (Russell 1991). These seem to suggest that Panitch and Swartz's thesis is too apocalyptic, not because current changes are not serious, but because the nature of the post-war consensus and the era of "free collective bargaining" are not all that they have been cracked up to be.

Considerably more research needs to be done to shed light on this debate. One method is to focus more attention on the workplace, to determine the impact of changes at the political or legislative level on day-to-day relations between unions and management. Another method is to examine the effect of neo-conservatism on industrial relations not only in Canada and the US, but in other countries as well, informing our analysis of events here by comparative perspective (Haiven et al. 1991). These will be discussed presently. Another research question must be to make sense of seemingly contradictory movements in Canadian labour regulation. At the same time as we saw assaults on long-standing labour law, such as in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, we saw advances in other jurisdictions in areas such as first agreement arbitration and unfair dismissal tribunals, while the new NDP government in Ontario is proposing even more sweeping improvements for labour. While some jurisdictions (such as Alberta) have withdrawn or restricted the right to strike in the public service, others (such as Manitoba recently and Saskatchewan and British Columbia earlier) have faced nurses' strikes without invoking permanent or temporary back-to-work legislation. All of these responses were by Conservative or Social Credit governments. And amid a general retrenchment in individual rights, especially those which cost money, the move to pay equity has proceeded apace. The question is not whether one group of reforms cancels the other out but how these initiatives fit into the changing political economy of Canada.

FOCUS ON THE WORKPLACE

Long studied in Britain, the workplace is the hidden abode of North American industrial relations. Far too many researchers here rely solely on

aggregate data. There are a number of reasons for this. First, workplace study takes a tremendous amount of researcher time. Second, what is observed is not easily quantifiable. Third, Canadian employers and unions are very suspicious of university-based researchers snooping around their workplaces observing and asking embarrassing questions and access is often denied. If access is granted by the employer, the union may well refuse to cooperate. Yet for the determined researcher, workplace-based study can be tremendously revealing. What is called for is not only an ethnography but an ethnomethodology of industrial relations.

This does not mean that the refinement of statistical techniques has not been an invaluable aid in the social sciences nor that micro case studies do not have problems of replicability. In fact, combinations of both methodologies, such as employed by Batstone et al. (1986, 1987), combine statistical rigour and broad purview with in-depth investigation of selected workplaces.

We are often misled in Canada that the contents of collective agreements and the arbitral jurisprudence can tell the real story of how the parties resolve their differences. But there is an entirely different story taking place in the workplace, where formal and informal methods coexist (see Haiven 1988). The workplace is a goldmine of research possibilities for scholars with the time, patience and research skills. And there exists an excellent way to crack open this goldmine dramatically to entice people to survey its riches. It is, ironically, a quantitative exercise: the Workplace Industrial Relations Survey.

Anyone who has tried to investigate the workplace in this country has no doubt encountered the paucity of reliable survey information on employment practices at establishment level. There are bits and pieces of survey data about (e.g. Statscan surveys on earnings and hours; Conference Board survey of Pay for Performance), as well as the Labour Canada database on the contents of collective agreements covering 500 or more employees (which, by the way can be dangerously misleading since the median size of unionized establishment is much lower than 500). But there is nothing nearly as comprehensive and informative as the books that have emerged from the British Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys (Daniel and Millward 1983; Millward and Stevens 1986; Daniel 1987). Information otherwise unavailable or scarce that could be garnered from such a survey includes:

- some idea of rates of disciplinary dismissal across employers
- the prevalence of payment-by-results systems
- the extent of introduction of multi-skilling in trades
- information on workplace trade union organization such as numbers of shop stewards, facilities provided by the employer, existence of full-time union reps on site, composition and vitality of negotiating, grievance and health and safety committees (despite considerable statistics on unionized establishments, little is known about union activity *within* organizations)
- workplace-level information on strikes, especially wildcat strikes (which elude capture in current statistics).

The British WIRS studies, intended to be replicated every four years, provide an incredibly rich fund of information on personnel and IR practices

across the range of British industry as well as longitudinal insight into changing practices.

Interestingly, the Australians have launched their own WIRS studies (AWIRS Project Team 1990) and there is talk of such a project in the US and New Zealand. Multi-country workplace level research has also been undertaken in Europe (IDE International Research Group 1981). The data generated by such a project in Canada could provide the material for many researchers, many monographs and articles plus the very real prospect of working with the British and the Australians (and possibly others) on cross national comparisons.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In the wake of the restructuring of the world economy and its redivision into distinct trading blocks, comparative industrial relations is once again a subject of some importance. The dialectic of cooperation and conflict between trade unions and employers in different countries is often a key to understanding comparative economic performance and to analyzing economic trends. As more and more corporations operate and source internationally, an appreciation of variations in industrial relations systems becomes more crucial an area of study. And as trade union movements attempt to cope with this phenomenon, they too must become international in their strategic thinking.

There has been no dearth of edited volumes containing reports on selected countries, tied together with a very general, but untheorized, introduction. And these are admittedly useful. But the very breadth of scope involved makes empirical work all the more frustrating. Considerably rarer and desperately needed are scholarly projects in this area that attempt any one or a combination of three things:

- Comparisons, employing the same criteria and methodology, of groups of countries.
- Application and/or construction of a unifying theoretical framework to explain variations and similarities.
- A concentration on the workplace as the focus of study.

The study of international variations in industrial conflict has been revolutionized in recent years by an interest in the political economy of industrial relations. In this approach, conflict is explained according to the organizational capabilities of labour and capital and their ability to mobilize and assert their interests in various spheres of struggle, including national politics (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Korpi and Shalev 1979; Cameron 1984; Burawoy 1985; Edwards 1986). But several nagging problems remain: failure to analyze several countries (like Canada and Britain) where workplace struggle is still the dominant form of working class self-expression, the neglected role of the state in the equation and a neglect of the workplace as a realm of study. More specifically, the following types of research are needed:

- *Intensive Studies*. Research that directly compares labour-management relations in specific workplaces in two or more countries and that examines the frontier of control and the nature of the effort bargain.
- *Extensive Studies*. Research that is more broadly comparative in one of two senses of the word:
 - Studies comparing workplace relations in two or more countries, at the level of an industry, for example. Such studies would contain a strong emphasis on labour regulation at the point of production and include those assessing the impact of the state and law on workplace relations in these countries.
 - Studies comparing patterns of industrial conflict across a large sample of countries that take a broadly political economy approach and attempt to relate observed patterns to the character of shopfloor relations in the countries examined.

CONCLUSION

What is called for then, is putting a zoom lens on what has been a somewhat fixed focus in Canadian industrial relations research. In one direction, we must globalize our view, not only to encompass other countries, but the larger political economy beyond the traditional "industrial relations system". In the other direction, we must try to discern the effects of political and legal enactments on the workplace. Only by moving in both directions can we understand the important changes now sweeping our country and the world.

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