

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Going Public: The Role of Labor-Management Relations in Delivering Quality Government Services edited by Jonathan BROCK and David B. LIPSKY, Champaign, Illinois: IRRA, 2003, 321 pages, ISBN 0-913447-86-2.

Gene Swimmer

Volume 60, Number 1, Winter 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011548ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/011548ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Swimmer, G. (2005). Review of [*Going Public: The Role of Labor-Management Relations in Delivering Quality Government Services* edited by Jonathan BROCK and David B. LIPSKY, Champaign, Illinois: IRRA, 2003, 321 pages, ISBN 0-913447-86-2.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 60(1), 192–194. <https://doi.org/10.7202/011548ar>

Going Public: The Role of Labor-Management Relations in Delivering Quality Government Services

edited by Jonathan Brock and David B. Lipsky, Champaign, Illinois: IRRA, 2003, 321 pages, ISBN 0-913447-86-2.

This volume, produced as part of the Industrial Relations Research Association Series, contains 11 studies by different authors about labour management cooperation in the public sector. The book begins with an introduction written by the editors (Brock and Lipsky), who do a solid job at tying together the sometimes disparate material which follows. They situate the volume in the context of the dilemma faced by public sector labour-management relations in the US and elsewhere: the demand for increased efficiency and improved quality in the delivery of public services. While some analysts argue for privatization of public services, this volume focuses on labour-management cooperative relationships as a possible solution. Based on the evidence presented in the remaining chapters, they conclude that there are convincing success stories associated with public sector labour management cooperation, but the practice remains fairly rare, because of systemic barriers. Some of these barriers include statutes and some oversight labour boards which do not encourage labour management cooperation as well as the inherent politics of public sector labour relations which create instability. Nonetheless, the authors believe that the demographics of public sector unions (increasingly being "knowledge workers") plus the continuing threat of privatization will lead the parties to place a higher priority on cooperation in the future.

Chapter One, by Lorenzo Bordogna, is the only international study in the volume. He presents a thoughtful overview of the extent of public sector employee relations reform since 1990, aimed at increasing value for money in public service delivery, across eleven industrial democracies. He concludes

that the countries fall into three groups. The first group, Britain, New Zealand and Australia, were at the forefront of the "new public management" (NPM) movement, where the government oversaw privatization, introduction of "market-like mechanisms," decentralization of authority and bargaining, and a weakening of public employees' special prerogatives. France, Germany, Spain and Japan make up the other extreme, where changes to traditional public employee relations have been limited and incremental in nature. Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Canada fall somewhere in between the two extremes, adopting some NPM techniques.

The second chapter, by Terry Thomason and John Burton, looks at the trends in American public sector union density over the last 20 years, but is only tangentially related to labour management cooperation in the sector. This is a thorough empirical examination, tracking union density by level of government, public service industry, occupation, race and gender. The findings indicate a stable overall union density for the public sector (at about 37%), in stark contrast to private sector union density which has fallen from about 17% to 9%. This public sector stability hides two competing forces which have been at work. Public sector unions often have been successful at using political lobbying to increase demand for the public service they provide, which leads to higher employment (and union density), while some employers have successfully transformed public sector union jobs into private sector non-union jobs through privatization (decreasing union density).

Stephen Goldsmith presents a fascinating case study of successful labour management cooperation in the city

of Indianapolis (Chapter 3). He was directly involved as mayor of the city, having run for election on a pledge to shrink municipal government (the municipal union actively campaigned against him). He explains how his administration engaged the municipal and firefighters' unions in a process to revitalize the city's services, without raising taxes, to stem the migration to the suburbs. For municipal services, the union was given the right to bid on any work prior to privatization. The union was given full access to financial and other relevant information (and a city-funded consultant to assist them), and the authority to propose changes to how work was done. The firefighters were brought into the partnership, by a joint commitment to worker safety. Once trust had developed, it was possible for the parties to introduce a plan to reduce firefighting costs by closing some fire stations. As a result of these processes, between 1992-98 no union employees were laid off, compensation increased, city taxes were reduced, grievance and accident rates fell by at least 80%, and customer satisfaction increased. Goldsmith's account serves as an outstanding "how to" lesson for courageous public sector managers and politicians.

Chapters 4 (written by Robert Tobias) and 6 (written by Marick Masters and Robert Albright) concern labour management partnerships at the Federal level, fostered by the Clinton Administration. Tobias focuses on the agreement between the National Treasury Employees Union (where he served as president) and the US Customs Service. The union was given a role in the design and implementation of the newly reorganized Customs organization, dealing with many issues outside the scope of bargaining. One outside consultant's analysis estimated a 25% rate of return for Customs from this investment in cooperation between 1994-98. Unfortunately, the initiative

withered away, when a new Customs chief executive, with a philosophy against delegation, was appointed. Masters and Marick present the results of a survey of approximately 700 union and management representatives on sixty federal partnership councils. Council participants generally agreed that their partnerships were collaborative, reasonably important decision making bodies which improved the labour relations climate (better communication and fewer grievances) as well as internal customer satisfaction. There was less support for the view that the councils had increased productivity or reduced cost. High performing partnerships were characterized by strong management commitment at the top executive and political levels, union representatives who had a strong union membership base, and where both sides had the necessary information and expertise.

Sonia Opsina and Allon Yaroni's research dealt specifically with the important labour and management competencies of labour management cooperation (Chapter 5). They conducted six in-depth interviews with manager and union representatives from three different successful partnerships. In these cases, there was a shift away from the traditional work roles of the parties. As part of the transformation, employees and union leaders had to acquire more technical expertise, while managers had to become more people oriented to provide coaching and foster teamwork.

In Chapter 7, Jeffrey Keefe looks at the challenges for unions as agents of change in the workplace. Based on a review of private sector literature, he concludes that local unions' involvement in workplace transformation programs is an important determinant of success, as they aggregate worker preferences, and protect employee reps from reprisals through the grievance procedure. Nonetheless, union leaders are often ambivalent about participating, because involvement may conflict

with their advocacy role in representing members, and because they are sceptical of management's commitment to real joint action (as opposed to occasional consultation meetings). These barriers reinforce the importance of management being pro-active in building trust (as was the case in Indianapolis).

Charles Kerchner (Chapter 8) advocates that teacher unions (and by implication other professional unions) should become more like a guild, by becoming involved in maintaining the quality of education. He provides examples where in isolated cases, employers and teacher representatives have developed plans to improve teacher quality, including mentors for new teachers, peer review, teacher certification programs with financial rewards for certification, and differential pay based on merit and subject area shortages. He advocates changes to the US legal environment that would encourage more teacher unions to address education quality: making educational quality a joint bargaining responsibility and requiring the parties to determine measurable student-learning goals, with other aspects of the collective agreement related to performance vis-à-vis these goals.

In Chapter 9, Martin Malin explores the impact of US legal decisions about the public sector "scope of bargaining" on labour management cooperation in the sector. Based on an analysis of the jurisprudence, he concludes that the approach adopted by legal decision-makers, of balancing the union's right to bargain working conditions against management's unilateral right to determine public policy, has resulted in a narrow scope of bargaining. More importantly, it encourages both sides to resort to litigation to determine "bargainability," rather than address the issue. He argues that this excessive legalism, which is a barrier to cooperation, could be reduced by imposing a legal requirement to

"consult" about all working conditions. That way, the parties would be obliged to address issues first, and could reach a mutually beneficial agreement, before going to the courts.

The final chapter, written by Adrienne Eaton and Paula Voos, concerns the ramifications of public sector supervisors being able to join unions. This is another well researched paper on an interesting topic, which is tangential, at best, to labour management cooperation. The authors conducted in depth interviews with approximately thirty New Jersey public sector managers and union representatives to determine whether the fact that supervisors were union members affected their performance. Based on the interviews they conclude that, "People can be loyal to the mission of the agency (and act as supervisors to further that mission), while they are also union members."

Though the chapters are all of high quality, they rely on many different methodologies and are written as stand-alone pieces. As a result, many authors cover the same background material (for example, numerous discussions of Bush revoking the Clinton Administration's Executive Order requiring federal labour-management partnerships). This makes reading the entire volume at once somewhat repetitive. In addition, several of the chapters, though concerned with issues of public sector labour relations in the United States, are only tangentially related to labour management cooperation. Finally, the relevance of several studies to Canadian practitioners will be limited; particularly, those dealing with eccentricities of US public sector labour relations law. Given these caveats, this remains a valuable collection of papers.

GENE SWIMMER
Carleton University