

Research Needs in Canadian Industrial Relations: Emerging from the Solitudes

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Article abstract

To focus this discussion, "industrial relations" is defined as the organizations and processes through which wages, hours and conditions of work are determined for employees who are represented collectively. This definition excludes topics such as labour history, labour economics and labour law, frequently incorporated into industrial relations research, but separate here.

Research should address and attempt to explain the significant features of Canadian industrial relations, as well as provide the bases for predictions of the future. The distinguishing features of the Canadian industrial relations System for these purposes are its fragmentation, extensive legal regulation and pattern of strikes. Research needs should be based on this description of Canadian industrial relations, including the environment of the System, major actors within it, the processes of industrial relations and the results of negotiation.

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THE ENVIRONMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The fragmented structure of the Canadian industrial relations is well known and has been the subject of a modest body of research in connection with collective bargaining (Davies 1986). The normal treatment of regionalism in Canadian industrial relations is first to treat Québec as a unique case and secondly to regard other relevant differences as captured by statutes. Only labour historians have put any emphasis on other regional variables in industrial relations. At first glance, this state of affairs is remarkable. Canada is a nation of regions. The tensions between Québec and the English-speaking provinces are a continuing theme in Canadian history. In the 1970s, Alberta relied on its oil wealth to follow its own economic and political strategies, while many British Columbians believe their province is just as distinct as Québec.

What do we know about regional differences in Canadian industrial relations? When the impact of region in industrial relations is mentioned at all (apart from Québec), region is usually contrasted with provincial economic structure. Thus, Lacroix (1986) reports that three studies of strikes which used regional and industrial variables found that when industrial structure was taken into account, regional variables were not statistically significant. In general, the Québec experience has been analyzed skilfully, both in terms of industrial relations as a variation of the Canadian system (Boivin 1989) and with respect to

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specific aspects of industrial relations there (Hébert 1984). Provincial differences elsewhere are apparent, though there has been no effort to explain how these legal climates evolved or to tie these changes to any broader theoretical framework. In particular, there has been no effort to integrate the traditional variables of industrial relations systems theory at the provincial level.

For example, the British Columbia labour movement frequently appears to be unusually militant. Conversely, labour relations in the Maritime provinces seem relatively pacific. Political and economic systems may be the most logical independent variables, but historical or cultural factors may be equally important. Some of the insights of the study of comparative industrial relations may be useful in studying provincial or regional patterns of industrial relations.

THE PARTIES IN THE CANADIAN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEM

Looking at the three major actors in the Canadian industrial relations system, labour historians and industrial relations scholars have generated a substantial literature on the structure and functions of unions. The government or the state also has been studied extensively in Canadian industrial relations. The remaining actor, management, has been the least examined. Godard and Kochan (1982) published a survey of a sample of structures and objectives of Canadian industrial relations managers. As management assumed more of the initiative in industrial relations in the 1980s, American and British scholars elevated its role considerably as an agent of change (e.g. Kochan, McKersie and Cappelli 1984).

Within the general area of management in industrial relations, a major deficiency is the lack of any empirically-based statement of managerial policies. Anderson (1989) outlines several managerial strategies for industrial relations based almost exclusively on American data. Verma and Thompson (1989) cast doubt on the extent to which U.S. managerial practices are common in Canada. In light of the alleged management-driven "transformation" of American industrial relations, employer behaviour is especially important to an understanding of change in Canadian industrial relations.

Beyond any statements of managerial policy lie important questions about the determinants of these policies. Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986) proposed "strategic choice" as a source of change when American managers made conscious decisions to alter the nature of their relations with labour. Often the impetus for these choices originated in increased foreign competition, deregulation and product market changes. The Canadian context is sufficiently different from either the U.S. or the U.K. to suggest that different variables may be at work. By a strict interpretation of the strategic choice model Canadian managers did not exercise strategic choice by deciding not to alter fundamentally their relations with trade unions. Why did Canadian employers decide to work within the existing system of collective bargaining? Meltz (1985) proposes labour legislation as the significant variable, opening a line of research to examine the impact of different provincial labour policies on

management. Because of the relatively high degree of foreign ownership in the Canadian economy, it is also surprising that the impact of this variable has not been examined more thoroughly (but see Ng and Maki 1988).

RESULTS OF NEGOTIATIONS

Certainly strikes are the most visible output of the Canadian industrial relations system. In these circumstances, the narrow theoretical bases of strike research in Canada is astonishing. There is a substantial body of literature on the Canadian strike experience, virtually all of it done by economists, who examine typical economic variables, including unemployment, wages, inflation and profits (Anderson and Gunderson 1989; Lacroix 1987). Notably absent from research on strikes are examinations of noneconomic variables. Lacroix (1987) admits that "the institutional system of labour relations may influence relative strike costs", but does not specify what he means by an "institutional system" or pursue any line of enquiry about the possible effects.

A well-known aspect of Canadian strikes is the large interindustry variation in strike experience. Lacroix (1987) did a brief analysis of industry variation using the degree of foreign competition, concentration of sellers and buyers, contract duration, size of the bargaining unit and concentration as his independent variables. One would expect that the technologies employed in various industries, perhaps their physical location, union or management policies and divisions in the workforce all might have an effect on strike patterns. Lacroix emphasizes the degree of foreign competition to explain interindustry variation in strikes. He notes that transportation equipment manufacturing has a relatively high incidence of strikes. However, the construction industry has experienced elevated strike levels in some periods, while it has no foreign competition. Instability originating in cycles of building, especially government-sponsored megaprojects, may be responsible.

The most notable characteristic of Canadian strikes is their length. Yet there seems to have been no sustained effort to explain why Canadian strikes are so much longer than other nations. Gunderson and Melino (1990) and Gunderson, Kervin and Reid (1989) found that mandatory strike votes and conciliation diminish strike duration, as well as incidence. Since American strikes also are long by international standards, one might assume that "institutional systems" are somehow responsible for this phenomenon, given the broad similarities between industrial relations in the two countries.

Although mid-contract strikes are usually illegal, they do occur in substantial numbers (Ng 1987). Since most strike models are based on negotiations over wages, it is not clear how relevant they would be in explaining wildcat strikes, which often have other motives. Some research is not clear if mid-contract strikes are separated from totals when comparisons with the number of collective agreements signed are made. Gagnon and Hébert (1982) examined illegal strikes in Québec hospitals and did reach conclusions about their causes.

WORKPLACE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

While collective bargaining and strikes are the most newsworthy outputs of any bargaining-based industrial relations system, it is a cliché that the most important processes are the day-to-day relations among the employees, management and the union in the workplace. Yet these are scarcely analyzed.

The workplace processes that produce written records, especially arbitration awards, have been studied, especially where there are well-known compendia of the jurisprudence, plus numerous articles analyzing specific topics. Apart from arbitration, we know very little about labour-management relations in the workplace between negotiating rounds. Gandz (1989) and Ng and Dastmalchian (1989) seem to have done the only research on the grievance process in this country, both with restricted samples.

Notably absent from the Canadian literature is any research on fractional bargaining during the life of collective agreements or many other topics that might shed light on debates that exist elsewhere on the "struggle for control of the workplace". There is anecdotal evidence of workers' retaliation against what they perceive to be inequitable or harsh actions by management, by slowing down, engaging in minor acts of harassment or sabotage and the like, but no indication of the frequency of these tactics or their relationship to formal grievance procedures.

For example, in Bélanger's (1989) study of job control in a Canadian factory, employees established their own work pace so that they finished their assigned tasks up to two hours before the end of their shift and spent the remaining time socializing. Neither management nor the union was directly involved in this process.

Another symptom of the gaps in our knowledge of industrial relations in the workplace is the literature on labour-management cooperation. The Macdonald Commission managed to produce an entire volume on the subject (Riddell 1986) with only one empirical chapter (Newton 1986), which reported the results of a large survey indicating that Quality of Working Life programs are quite rare in Canada. Downie's recent review article (1989) identified one or two additional sources and contained glowing statements about 15 year-old bargaining innovations with no evaluative research.

WHY THESE NEEDS EXIST

There are many reasons for these gaps in our knowledge – insufficient funding being the most important. But apart from money, industrial relations research suffers from isolation from sociology and political science and proximity to the United States. Greater attention to Canadian issues and closer integration with cognate disciplines will focus research efforts more effectively.

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