

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Colin CROUCH : *Trade Unions : The logic of Collective Action.* Glasgow, Fontana Paperbacks, 1982, 251 pp., ISBN 0-00-635873X
Albert REES : *The Economics of Trade Unions.* Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, 200 pp., ISBN 0-226-70702-4

Alexander J. Matejko

Volume 39, numéro 1, 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050019ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/050019ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Matejko, A. J. (1984). Compte rendu de [Colin CROUCH : *Trade Unions : The logic of Collective Action.* Glasgow, Fontana Paperbacks, 1982, 251 pp., ISBN 0-00-635873X / Albert REES : *The Economics of Trade Unions.* Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, 200 pp., ISBN 0-226-70702-4]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 39(1), 212–215.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/050019ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 1984

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

confrontations with rank-and-file miners who had come to union headquarters during the strike to demonstrate. Miller caused several of these ugly situations by refusing to meet with members who had come long distances to air their views. During the course of bargaining, he had avoided irate miners, the press, and sometimes even the negotiating table itself — at the time when the union needed a strong, visible leader. (p. 132) ...

Arnold Miller was no longer a reformer, and the administration he led was no longer pursuing significant democratic change within the union. (p. 136)

Why? Clark tells us what happened, but not why.

In 1979, plagued by health problems, Miller resigned and was replaced by his chosen vice-president, Sam Church, a former Boyle supporter and a practitioner of the iron hand, more in the Lewis and Boyle mold than in that pioneered by Miller.

What is the legacy of that brief period of reform? Why the relapse? Clark's book does not give us many answers. In Nova Scotia the UMW local is again under trusteeship, the first time since the Lewis years. Is there any connection? Clark's book, unfortunately, does not provide any answers.

Paul PHILLIPS

University of Manitoba

Trade Unions: The Logic of Collective Action, by Colin Crouch, Glasgow, Fontana Paperbacks, 1982, 251 pp., ISBN 0-00-635873X.

The Economics of Trade Unions, by Albert Rees, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. IX + 200, ISBN 0-226-70702-4.

Both these books break the rigid barriers between sociological and economic accounts

of trade unions. Crouch argues lucidly for a fresh and rational approach to the study of union activity, and on the occasion to discuss it seems appropriate to mention also the previous book by Rees, even when in general both books do not have much in common. Crouch takes a rational-choice approach and this brings him close to economics. He takes a distance to the Marxist approach. According to him, "Whatever the value of Marxist contributions, they are marred by two crucial characteristics: the assumption that all issues can be reduced to those of capital and labour, and the search for revolutionary consciousness (...). To construct an entire theory of trade unionism around a non-existent phenomenon — the revolutionary working class — is to produce something of limited usefulness in understanding the real day-to-day choices of trade unions and their members" (pp. 37, 219-220).

The subjective perceptions and attitudes of workers are important for Crouch only as long as they say something meaningful about the **rationality** in workers' conduct. The need of people to make constant choices about means to adapt, or about the priority to be accorded different goals, or about the best means of treating conflict and obstacles (Ibid., p. 39) is the major focus of the book by Crouch.

On the other hand, A. Rees focuses on the 'rationality' of unions from a broad perspective. According to him, the economic losses imposed by unions are not too high a price to pay for their successful protection of workers against arbitrary treatment by employers. This is a way to keep the great mass of manual workers be committed to the preservation of the existing system (p. 187). There are grave dangers in doing nothing about waste and the growth of unchecked power; there are also dangers that unwise treatment can be worse than the decreases" (Ibid., p. 188).

In both books unions are treated as the permanent parts of the existing system having a vested interest to co-operate with other parts but at the same time following their

own goals and concerns. The problem of trade unionism in the U.S. is — according to Rees — its partial neglect of some basic functions in rising social conscience, responding to the changing needs of working people, deepening industrial democracy, etc.

Crouch tries to answer the question why workers have the interest to combine into unions strong enough to overcome the barriers of unionization: fear of persecution, cost of union fees, conflict with the employer, etc. Several people enjoy the benefits of having a union at their workplaces but they are not ready to join it. The union in order to become attractive to its actual or potential membership has to offer tangible benefits, reduce the relative costs of membership, and increase the nuisance of not being a member. As long as the unions depend in their recruitment on specific occupational communities in which are some pressures and counterpressures, they do not have to suffer the disadvantages of recruiting within the anonymous mass population. The reality of the union which the individual worker encounters is far more often a face-to-face group (Crouch, p. 65) and therefore his personal calculation has to take into consideration the factor of loyalty towards colleagues.

The ease to use the union organization, as well as the dependence on organization as a means to achieving goals, both play a major role in the decision to join the union and to stay with it. For example, if collective bargaining is wide spread and concerned with important issues, there is more interest among the workers to join the unions. On the other hand, the low degree of dependence on employment, as among some categories of women, will influence negatively the interest in joining unions.

As long as the collective may be helpful in the problem-solving at the individual or group level, there is a great chance that people would join the union in order to gain rewards not available in the case of acting alone. With the unions gaining power in the society they become more attractive to join.

For example, in the U.K. "Workers may now see unions as capable of protecting them from the implications of unemployment, which was not the case in previous period of high unemployment" (Ibid., p. 13).

The threat to withdraw labour remains the main factor under disposal of the union but it is more convenient to remain at the level of a **threat** than to start a strike. The longer the strike the weaker the workers' position. The employer usually is in a much stronger position than the union to endure a long strike. Trade unions are irredeemable bargainers (Ibid., p. 117). In order to gain something important to them, they have to manipulate their power and willingness to withhold the co-operation with the employer. However, in order to reach their goals the unions have a vested interest in achieving some status quo. The defence of an existing standard from attack is the basic union goal which is difficult to achieve without having an adequate information available mainly from the employer.

The conservative bias characteristic to many unions, and evident especially in the field of technological progress, takes its roots from the defensive union position. "New goals will be adapted in place of old ones only when their relative attractiveness is very high, because unions will set a high price on the risk of novelty" (Ibid., p. 127). The appetite to take all power in society diminishes with the affluence and recognition of unions as elements of the system.

The unions in order to succeed have to be down to earth. "A choice of strategy is not just a choice between goals, but a choice between goals set in the context of the means needed to secure them" (Ibid., p. 139). The actual chance to win bargaining may be more probable in some items than in the others, and therefore unions concentrate their pressure on the fields particularly well controlled by them. The level of negotiation also is of great validity in this respect: in the case of a local negotiation different items play a major role than in the case of a centralized negotiation.

Of course, the matter of bargaining is not limited only to the manifest substance but also has something to do with the latent contest of power. Both sides try to achieve specific gains and at the same time improve their relative positions. Unions search for **rights** in order to gain more security, and the employers deny them these rights in order to preserve for themselves traditional controls. From this perspective, the search for rights and regulation is an aspect of the search for control (Ibid., p. 157).

Unions may be accused of obtuseness for asking to have more control and better pay but not being ready to request from members a sense of duty. However, in the reality any promise in this respect may cost the unions dearly when they share responsibility with the management and lose their confidence among workers. "Many British managements seem to have been willing over a number of years to concede fairly extensive workplace controls for the workforce, the latter having enjoyed them at the expense of higher wages" (Ibid., p. 158).

The internal arrangement within unions may be oligarchic, as R. Michels saw it, but not necessarily. The rationality of representation and the rationality of administration do not automatically exclude each other. Unions try to reach some kind of balance between two rationalities rather than maximize either of them at the expense of the other (Ibid., p. 167). The members will simply leave when the leaders care only about themselves. "Elimination of the possibility of exit may render voice more powerful, by forcing the discontented to use energies to get improvements rather than simply going elsewhere" (Ibid., p. 171). It is not true what Michels said that union members are always trapped and incapable of either acting autonomously or of doing anything to arrest the progressive neglect of their representation.

On the other hand, obviously there is some differences of orientation between the leaders and the led. "The union's central interest is securing its capacity to make deals.

While the members' interest is in the substantive outcome" (Ibid., p. 176). Leaders have to restrain members' immediate pursuit of material gains in order to gain more room for the long run union policy. The perspective differs much between leaders located at various levels of the union hierarchy. There are various intensities of activation in the union and different spheres of interest.

The national leadership has preferences which are the reverse of those of the shop-floor organization. As long as the control remains remote to the union members they prefer to gain **cash** than collective power, but for the leadership the latter is of crucial importance in the long run as long as the organizational weapon remains under their control.

On the other hand, union leadership is able to bargain with the employers from the position of a collective power only as long as the membership is willing to follow. The integration of shop-floor activity within the national unions is in the vested interest of both leadership and the rank-and-file; therefore, it is not justified to treat unions as unavoidably broken internally.

Unions have a deep political interest but "the purpose of unions' political action is simply to ensure the non-interference of politics in their industrial activity" (Ibid., p. 191). The wage-employment constraint directs unions to the political field in order to regulate the economy according to their interests. In this respect there is a major difference in perspective between union locals and national leadership.

There is the near-inevitable drift of trade-union behaviour into politics, whether its members like it or not and whether its leaders take much interest in it or not" (Ibid., p. 201). Through the friendly political parties the trade union movement can influence political developments remaining beyond its direct reach.

In the context of social democracy "a pattern of industrial relations seems to develop which does have some strange similarities

with nineteenth century Catholic ideas of corporatism; a fascinating irony given the old antagonism between socialism and Catholicism" (Ibid., p. 207). Unions are likely to concede more to gain participation the more important the forum concerned (Ibid., p. 210).

This growing 'politicization' of unions makes them vulnerable to internal tensions as long as they are willing to sacrifice the immediate interests of their members, as well as the social causes, primarily the fate of unemployed, in order to secure for themselves a secure place within the 'establishment'. The shop-floor organizations have a vested interest to oppose corporatism, and under the present arrangement they become a major source of tension. "On several occasions union behaviour has implied that it is not worthwhile reaching deals with them since their arrangements will be upset by autonomous shop-floor action" (Ibid., p. 219).

Crouch emphasizes the disparity between the necessity of the trade union movement acting at the national and international level, and its decentralized and mass-participative level (Ibid., p. 217). However, he seems to underestimate the potential of modern trade unionism to reform itself in adaptation to the external changes within the environment. Of course, the burden of conservatism remain heavy, particularly in the relationship to union and shop-floor democracy. However, with the growing educational upgrading of the union membership some internal reforms become unavoidable and sooner or later the new forms of union participation and management have to appear. This is already evident in those unions which appeal to the semi-professional personnel and depend in their attractiveness on the new model of leadership free of the authoritarian bias.

The weakness of the analysis offered by Crouch is in the lack of recognition how fast the environment of trade union is now changing exercising a substantial pressure upon the whole trade union movement. The differences existing between the young and the old

blue-collar workers should be recognized. The growing work participation of women needs at least to be mentioned as a factor of trade union transformation. The role of ethnic and race minorities also should not be forgotten.

As regards the world movement it is necessary to take into consideration the growing role of the Third World and the clash of interests between unions representing rich and poor countries. The limitations of the scope of the book by Crouch mainly to the U.K. empoverishes to some extent the perspective taken by the author of this otherwise very well written book.

Alexander J. MATEJKO

Université of Alberta

The Political, Economic, and Labor Climate in India, by V. Venkatchalam and R.K. Singh, Philadelphia, The Wharton School Industrial Research unit, University of Pennsylvania, 1982, pp. 147, ISBN O-89546-030-0, ISSN 149-0818.

This monograph on India is a part of the Wharton School's series on Multinational Industrial Relations Research Program.

The objectives of these series, as stated in the foreword are to supply: "(1) Key factual information and research concerning the activities, programs, policies and potential impact of the international unions including the "trade secretariates"; ... (2) similar information regarding the International labor organization and other transnational government bodies, which frequently are used for and/or support international union objectives and which have adopted codes of conduct for multinational corporation, that could significantly affect international labor-relations; (3) evaluation of the political, economic and labor climate affecting investment return in countries throughout the world; and (4) analysis and comparison of employee relations and public policy issues among different countries".