

Changing Environments and Management IR Practices. Implications for US Trade Unions

Yonatan Reshef

Volume 43, numéro 1, 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050387ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/050387ar>

[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 cet article

Reshef, Y. (1988). Changing Environments and Management IR Practices. Implications for US Trade Unions. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 43(1), 43–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/050387ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article traite des problèmes que doivent affronter les syndicats industriels contraints d'appliquer les principes du syndicalisme d'affaires, alors que le milieu et les méthodes des employeurs se modifient en matière de relations professionnelles. Depuis le début, les syndicats américains ont adopté une orientation économique de leur stratégie dans le domaine des relations du travail. Cette orientation de leur activité devient de plus en plus difficile à appliquer à mesure que l'environnement change et que la philosophie du patronat en matière de relations du travail délaisse les attitudes d'opposition traditionnelles.

Ce qui importe, c'est que ces syndicats doivent agir à l'intérieur d'un régime de relations professionnelles plus mutualiste, un système caractérisé par, entre autres choses, un nombre de plus en plus considérable de programmes de qualité de la vie au travail (Q.V.T.) — 52 pour cent des entreprises de plus de 10 000 employés avaient institué un cercle de qualité en 1982; une forme quelconque de programme de participation existait dans 36 pour cent de l'ensemble des entreprises et dans 58 pour cent de celles qui comptent plus de 1 000 employés en 1985; enfin, des cercles de qualité ont été instaurés dans 36,3 pour cent et des groupes autonomes de travail dans 27,6 pour cent des entreprises suivies par Y American Management Association.

Quoique le nombre de travailleurs syndiqués touches par ce changement particulier ne soit pas connu, le fait qu'il se produit dans des industries fortement syndicalistes, telles que celles de l'acier et de l'automobile, en fait un sujet qui justifie une investigation. Pendant des années, l'orientation économique des syndicats s'est fort bien ajustée à l'approche hostile des employeurs en matière de relations professionnelles.

Celle-ci a été en partie le résultat de l'organisation scientifique du travail adopté par les employeurs dans l'industrie il y a environ huit décennies. Mais l'orientation économique des syndicats industriels ne s'y ajuste plus sans heurts. Aujourd'hui, au plan de l'établissement, l'approche inamicale des employeurs dans le domaine des relations de travail se modifie. Les changements ont affaibli les bases organisationnelles et institutionnelles des syndicats et mine la philosophie du syndicalisme d'affaires ainsi que la stratégie économique qu'il chérissait depuis longtemps.

Les syndicats, même ceux qui ont montré une bonne volonté véritable à collaborer avec les employeurs dans la bataille de la conquête des marchés, sont encore bien loin d'être capables de s'accommoder à un milieu changeant et à des relations professionnelles de type nouveau. Il leur faut encore forger le véritable régime socioéconomique requis pour mobiliser leurs membres, favoriser l'adhésion des travailleurs non syndiqués et engager la société dans son ensemble à appuyer leur cause. Si l'on s'exprime différemment, les dirigeants syndicaux qui agissent à l'intérieur de systèmes de relations du travail en voie de transformation doivent proposer une stratégie, une philosophie et un rôle nouveau à leurs syndicats et cesser de s'opposer aux initiatives stratégiques des employeurs. En conséquence, leur faut-il se poser plusieurs questions. Est-ce que la négociation collective est encore le mécanisme principal de règlement dans les relations entre employeurs et salariés? Comment les programmes de la qualité de vie au travail peuvent-ils être utilisés pour renforcer la situation des syndicats à l'usine? Les syndicats américains devraient-ils encore limiter leur action à la sphère économique où ils préconisent un régime de négociation d'affaires fondé sur des contrats? Le principal objectif des syndicats devrait-il être encore la gestion des mécontentements au lieu du travail? Quelles stratégies sont-elles possibles pour contrecarrer les stratégies importunes de la haute direction des entreprises et du gouvernement en période de ralentissement économique? Comment les syndicats peuvent-ils résister aux répercussions engendrées par la globalisation du marché des biens et des différences des couts du travail qui les accompagnent au niveau international? Peuvent-ils utiliser cette globalisation des marchés à leur avantage? Les dirigeants syndicaux devraient-ils jouer un rôle quelconque sur le marché international du travail?

À ces questions, il n'y a pas de réponses simples, de même qu'à plusieurs autres. En général, cependant, les dirigeants syndicaux devraient examiner et appliquer des méthodes de relations professionnelles à l'extérieur de la sphère des négociations collectives, peut-être même à l'extérieur des marchés économiques. Ils doivent se sentir libres de concevoir des options stratégiques mises en œuvre indépendamment des institutions traditionnelles de réglementation du travail et des pratiques actuelles en matière de relations professionnelles.

Changing Environments and Management IR Practices

Implications for U.S. Trade Unions

Yonatan Reshef

Since the first oil shock of 1973, in the U.S., significant changes have shaken long-standing industrial relations patterns in the union manufacturing sector. This paper concentrates on the challenges posed to manufacturing unions by changing environments and management industrial relations practices.

This paper explores the problematics facing U.S. manufacturing unions executing their traditional «bread and butter» philosophy under changing environments and management industrial relations practices. Since their inception American unions have advocated an economic orientation in their industrial relations strategy. This action orientation is getting ever tougher to apply as union environments are altering and management industrial relations philosophy is shifting from the traditional adversarial to the more cooperative pole.

For years, union economic orientation has neatly meshed with management adversarial approach to industrial relations. This approach has been, in part, the product of the scientific management adopted by employers in manufacturing some eight decades ago. But, manufacturing unions' economic orientation no longer applies that smoothly. Nowadays, at the plant level, management adversarial approach to industrial relations is changing. Wherever this change occurs it necessitates labor leaders to rethink long-cherished industrial institutions, strategy and philosophy, if unions are to regain their position in the U.S. politico-economic market. Politico-economic environmental changes, however, render union alternatives difficult to devise and apply.

* RESHEF, Y., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Business, University of Alberta, Edmonton, B.C.

** The author is indebted to Brian Bemmels and Alan Murray for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

The emphasis here, then, is on those unions operating within the evolving mutualistic industrial relations system; a system which is characterized by, among other things, a growing number of quality of worklife (QWL) programs. According to Kochan, Katz, and McKersie (1986, pp. 152-53) and Verma and McKersie (1987), 52 per cent of firms with more than 10,000 employees had instituted a quality circle program, in 1982; some form of employee involvement program had been established in 36 per cent of all firms and in 58 per cent of firms employing more than 1,000 employees, in 1985; and quality circles had been introduced in 36.3 per cent and autonomous work groups in 27.6 per cent of the firms surveyed by the American Management association, in 1985. While the number of union workers affected by this change is unknown, the fact that the change is occurring in highly unionized industries such as the steel and automobile makes this issue worthy of investigation.

THE ADVERSARIAL INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEM

Embedded, in its formative years, in fear, intimidation and animosity the American industrial relations system has been governed by an adversarial approach toward employee-employer relations. This approach, according to Barbash (1981, p. 1), comprises three principles: First, «[a] feeling on the part of management that unions and collective bargaining are at best necessary evils in modern industrial society»; second, basic disagreement between the parties over the scope and substance of collective bargaining; and third, «[a] conviction on the part of the labor leadership involved that the union's main job is to challenge and protest management actions». In addition, within the adversarial system, unions' most deep-seated beliefs are that they should take care only of their members' immediate economic interests, not challenge the capitalist system, remain outside company decision making processes, and avoid government. As a result, unions' main focus is the job site and a limited collective bargaining agenda — wages, conditions of work, and meticulously defined job regulations (Deutsch, 1986; Wheeler & Weikle, 1983). In their efforts to achieve these targets, manufacturing unions have relied on an economic action orientation.

Economic orientation or strategy denotes efforts by labor to realize its goals through direct pressure on employers. At the union level, this involves strikes, collective bargaining, and occasional involvement in management policy making. At the worker level, economic actions also include individual acts such as turnover, absenteeism, and sabotage. A major assumption of the economic model is that the economic and political spheres are, and should remain, separate. Despite this, however, workers

may seek to advance their interests by lobbying the state on specific issues (Thompson & Juris, 1985). But in contrast, for example, with the European unions' political action, these actions are limited in scope and clearly subordinate to labor's dominant actions — collective bargaining and strikes.

The objectives of unions pursuing this action model are far more limited than for those pursuing a political orientation. Instead of seeking benefits for society as a whole, unions adopting the economic model primarily seek benefits for their own members exclusively (Murray & Reshef, 1987).

Because actions are aimed mainly at employers, the state usually becomes involved in the roles of employer or impartial conflict mediator. According to the economic model the state does not, and should not, play an active role in industrial relations (Crouch, 1978). That is, employers and unions rely on their own sanctioning capabilities rather than on government assistance — an approach known as *voluntarism*. Only when the «invisible hand» of the market is incapable of upholding the balance of forces among interest groups should the central controls of the state be invoked (Dahl, 1978).

Within the traditional, adversarial industrial relations system, industrial conflicts are viewed as inevitable but acceptable when governed by a fundamental societal consensus concerning the «rules-of-the-game». Industrial conflicts, then, can be classified as «normal» and «abnormal». Normal conflicts, explains Barbash (1980, p. 88), «are the conflicts essential to the maintenance of the system and without which the system is largely incapable of functioning». Normal conflicts arise from pressure tactics directed at legitimate targets, that is, those targets which have been specified on the agenda of negotiations between employers and worker representatives. If actions are directed at targets unrelated to immediate working conditions, the conflict is deemed aberrant since it is viewed as either irrelevant or threatening to the stability of the system.

To sum, the key assumptions underlying unions' activity within the adversarial industrial relations system include (Murray & Reshef, 1987):

1. Workers have little interest in broad social issues, they expect their union to improve their working conditions only and, with it, their own well-being.
2. Unions should rely on their powers and not expect government to reach out a helping hand.
3. Labor shares no common interest with management, thus,
4. Unions should stay outside management decision making processes, thus,

5. Collective bargaining is the unions' foremost mechanism for the advancement of worker interests.
6. Labor should challenge management actions, but should neither question the legitimacy of the capitalist system nor try to undermine its tenets.

Since the first oil shock of 1973, however, another model of industrial relations system has been evolving. Emerging as the parties' reaction to their rapidly changing environments, this system has rendered the long-established union economic model problematic to apply.

AMERICAN MANUFACTURING UNIONS' CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS

The set of factors which once supported most American unions' economic orientation has changed¹. The U.S. is moving to a service economy and employment in the manufacturing sector, traditionally the foremost union bastion, is contracting due to the introduction of new, labor-saving technologies (Sahiken, 1984, pp. 167-70) and «job export» policies (Halberstam, 1986, pp. 690-91). Worse, unions are being unable to keep their share of the manufacturing work force. Between 1980 and 1984, unions lost 1.4 million members in manufacturing, while the number of nonunion manufacturing workers rose by 700,000. In the same period, unions' share of the manufacturing work force fell from 32.2 per cent to 26.5 per cent (*The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 1985, p. 1).

Another important environmental change is the long-term shift in the demographic characteristics of the labor force. The manufacturing sector is losing ground to newly created service-producing firms — such as paralegal, physical therapy, computer programming, retail sales, foods, and system analysis — which, more and more, employ women, retirees, part-timers, immigrants, and highly educated and mobile workers (*Business Week*, August 10, 1987, pp. 48-53). This shift in labor's composition increases heterogeneity which, in turn, makes labor harder to organize and control (Halberstam, 1986, pp. 482-89). Some of these new groups do not identify with the «blue collar» image of traditional labor but lack any collective identity with which to replace it in the workplace. In addition, traditional union services, such as seniority and pension plans, geared toward organizational and career stability may not attract these workers who are mobile and often perform within dynamic industrial relations systems.

¹ This section draws heavily on MURRAY and RESHEF, 1987.

Juris and Roomkin (1980) point to a shift in manufacturing from the highly unionized «snow belt» to the «sun belt» as another factor in labor's troubles. The move has been caused due to the relocation of employers who prefer the greater union-avoidance opportunities these areas provide.

Labor's relative power has been weakened by changing labor market conditions. Dramatically heightened foreign competition, a series of recessions starting in 1973, and deregulation have all prompted employers to pursue tough union-avoidance strategies. Strident anti-unionism is now acceptable, unlike fifty years ago when employers could not resist unionism without appearing to be conservative elite resistant to the progress of the New Deal (Piore, 1982). Then, employers responded pragmatically to unionism by adopting collective bargaining, now they are pursuing a variety of union-avoidance tactics (Lawler, 1986). Aggressive employer campaigns in representational elections (Lawler, 1984; Lawler & West, 1985), concessions made by unions even when there was no real need for them (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 1984, p. 1), shifting investments from union to nonunion plants (Verma & Kochan, 1985), the creation of nonunion subsidiaries (Cappelli & Chalykoff, 1985), and the use of mergers to threaten the unionized segments of the newly merged companies (Curtin, 1985) are just a few examples of how employers successfully weaken unions.

Recent legal decisions have further reduced unions' ability to resist employers so that «[e]ven when employees do select an exclusive representative, they may find themselves with less influence than organized workers previously enjoyed» (Craver, 1985, p. 609). Recent NLRB and court decisions have narrowed the scope of mandatory collective bargaining (for a useful review of such decisions see Schlossberg & Fetter, 1986). The Supreme Court in the *First National Maintenance Corp. v. NLRB*² and later, the NLRB in *United Technologies*³ established the «basic principle that management need not negotiate over corporate decisions on the capital structure of the firm, even though such decisions may affect the wages and jobs of employees covered by collective agreements» (Block & McLennan, 1985, p. 371). Consequently, corporations have been permitted to exercise unilateral control over strategic decisions such as plant closing and the shift of capital resources in response to economic change. Unions, on the other hand, can expect bargaining over such decisions only when they are premised on labor cost considerations.

2 *First National Maintenance Corp. v. NLRB*, 452 U.S. 666 (1981).

3 *NLRB v. United Technologies Inc.*, 269 NLRB 162 (1984).

Unions' position in the plant has been further eroded by the Sixth Circuit in *NLRB v. Streamway Division of the Scott & Fetzer Co.*⁴ In its decision the Court held that an in-plant representation committee organized and established by the company was not a «labor organization» under the *NLRA*. While allowing employee-employer cooperation ventures, this decision might have detracted from the representative role of the union in the plant and jeopardized the traditional regulatory function of the collective agreement.

Diminishing membership, an increasing number of successful decertifications (Goldfield, 1984), widespread concession bargaining, and growing employers' ability to «cheaply» avoid unions (Freeman & Medoff, 1984, pp. 233-39) indicate manufacturing unions' diminishing ability to successfully implement their economic strategy. Confounding unions' ability to apply the economic strategy is the changing management approach to industrial relations. Constituting a major break with past industrial relations philosophy and practices, this development has been giving rise to new industrial relations patterns. These patterns necessitate unions to reformulate their traditional industrial strategy if they are to regain their vitality in the political and economic markets.

NEW MANAGEMENT IR PRACTICES

Since the early 1970s, two recessions, deregulation, and mounting foreign competition have brought considerable pressures to bear on American manufacturers. Slowly but steadily, management has been learning that quality, not only cost, is a key to market success (*Business Week*, June 8, 1987, p. 139; *Globe and Mail*, June 17, 1987, p. B17). Understanding, either by looking at their Japanese counterparts or by probing into their own past practices, the potential embodied in «productivity through people» management has adopted a new outlook toward their role and industrial relations function in the workplace.

It is now a well established article of faith that there is more to management than planning, organizing, staffing, and controlling. Nowadays, managements, at least in the big corporation, play a role transcending that of day-to-day economic transactions. Managers are now seen as culture builders (Schein, 1985, p. 2). They are expected to manage their subordinates' commitment and motivation, thus inducing them to raise their efforts at work and concern for product quality. An instructive reflection of this is given by Xerox top executives' claiming that (*Business Week*, May 11, 1981, p. 89):

4 *NLRB v. Streamway Div.*, 691 F.2d 288 (6th Cir. 1982).

«[We] honestly believe that most people are naturally innovative, want to work hard, only don't because management doesn't create the kind of environment where they can.»

And that the creation of such an environment

«requires a change in attitude throughout a company, and that change must be supported from the top.»

Once this notion has made its way into managements' frame of reference, managements recognize (a) the inevitable link between the quality of industrial relations⁵ in their own house and the quality of the product they produce, and (b) the importance of the individual worker to quality production, because «the people down in the pits are the ones who really understand what's wrong with the system» (*Business Week*, June 8, 1987, p. 132; see also *Business Week*, May 11, 1987, p. 84). Consequently, managements have been trying to better manage their workers' motivation in an attempt to make them invest more energy in producing better products.

But, one cannot extract higher worker motivation and commitment, arguably indispensable ingredients for manufacturing better quality products, without creating a supportive environment of high trust, openness, cooperation, and easy communication. An environment where workers will not be afraid of undertaking higher responsibility and being innovative in performing their jobs. In short, once realizing that workers might perform better if their job is redesigned to fulfill both their mental and physical capabilities, management starts altering some of its traditional industrial relations practices, thus creating the culture necessary to support the structural change.

Growing managements' awareness of the link between worker motivation and commitment and a company's competitiveness underlies a radical change in a major assumption long-held by management and unions — that industrial relations are adversarial by nature. Now, more and more, management is learning that industrial relations, when defined in mutualistic terms, can positively contribute to higher product quality and a better competitive position. Consequently, management is implementing

⁵ Currently, the quality of industrial relations is considered to be the product of three factors: First, written rules, namely, a collective agreement and the appropriate laws; second, unwritten rules in terms of values, norms, customs and practices; and, third, common sense, an internal gauge which helps one assess the short-term implications of one's behavior, even though this behavior should be regulated by the first two factors. The quality of industrial relations itself is reflected daily through informal and formal disputes, absenteeism, turnover, or sabotage.

various QWL programs aiming at the dual goal of making work more satisfying and improving product quality (e.g., Jain & Giles, 1985; Long & Warner, 1987).

There are numerous examples of recently implemented QWL programs⁶. Generally they include «a gain-sharing scheme, pay for knowledge, single status for unskilled workers, common facilities for management and workers, problem-solving groups, and even a level of guaranteed employment for [the majority] of the workforce» (Wood, 1986, p. 437). QWL programs have emerged within a framework of concession bargaining in basic industries such as the steel and automobile (*Business Week*, February 8, 1982, pp. 81-2; *Forbes*, March 10, 1986, pp. 80-6). By and large, they have been initiated by management, institutionalized through the concession bargaining (e.g., *Financial Times*, October 1, 1984, p. 27), and implemented with the help of the union. In return for its cooperative attitudes and tangible economic give-backs through collective bargaining, the union has gained voluntary recognition in certain new ventures, such as GM's Saturn venture (*The Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 1986, p. 7), a seat on the corporate board, as in Chrysler (for more cases see *Business Week*, May 7, 1984, pp. 151-53), or more say at the shop level.

The movement toward greater worker participation in decision making is most intensive at the shop level, where workers can have a voice in establishing production and quality standards and rules governing their relations with supervisors. This development marks a major change in managements' traditional conception of industrial relations. Presently, industrial relations, instead of being perceived as a hindrance to the production process and marginal to management mainstream strategic agenda (e.g., finance, marketing, mergers), is being incorporated into managements' overall business strategy.

Under the adversarial, scientific management approach, managements' main desire was to make the utmost use of production machines to increase production totals. Management, therefore, had tried to isolate the production process from any, supposedly, obstructive industrial relations element by either exhibiting an all-out resistance to trade unionism, or by supporting the principles of the adversarial industrial relations system.

In contrast, managements' adoption of QWL programs, together with concession bargaining, signals a significant overhaul in the function they have assigned to industrial relations at the point of production. Nowadays, managements are integrating industrial relations into an overall business strategy geared toward regaining a competitive edge. The function they

⁶ To review some of these examples the reader may wish to refer to GUEST, 1979; DONNELLY, 1977; WALTON, 1977; and FULLER, 1980.

have assigned to industrial relations institutions, old (trade unions and collective bargaining) and new (QWL programs), is unprecedented — to change the worker-machine and improve the worker-organization relationship. In the process, management learns how to supply workers with certain benefits without union involvement (e.g., Verma & Mckersie, 1987), thereby loosening union-member ties. That this might help management create a union-free environment is an added benefit for management, which «has never really come to terms with the legitimacy of the union's function in the work place» (Barbash, 1987, p. 168). The result might, sometimes, be a paradox — workplace cooperation projects which relegate unions to a peripheral role in the industrial relations system.

To sum, since the early 1980s, some managements have switched from «production-through-machines» approach to «production-through-people» approach, the precursor of which is QWL programs. By giving workers more say and higher responsibility in performing their job managements turn workers into «job owners». Consequently, workers, at least in some of those places which have adopted QWL programs, are not merely an extension of a machine or a working tool. They have gained some level of control over the job with various economic and psychological benefits (Katz, Kochan, and Gobeille, 1983; Verma & McKersie, 1987). They can identify problems and stop the production process, decide on the skill level they would like to acquire, and report directly to management.

This by no means implies that the primal management-labor conflict over resource allocation has been eliminated. What it does mean, however, is that management has learned how to manage part of it outside the grievance procedure and the bargaining table. Some unions, therefore, find themselves operating in an industrial relations system governed by new rules-of-the-game. Being significantly different from those governing the adversarial industrial relations system, the new rules challenge established union institutions and the industrial relations philosophy which underlies union action and organizational foundations.

CHALLENGES FOR TRADE UNIONS

By and large, manufacturing unions are not used to performing within production systems not based on adversarial employee-management relations. Executing since their inception their «pure and simple» philosophy, these unions have confined themselves to a limited bargaining agenda reflecting the immediate interests of their members in the workplace. While for years this orientation has meshed neatly with managements' industrial relations orientation, it is no longer the case. Changing union environments

and management industrial relations practices challenge union capabilities to deliver traditional services, regulate the worker-management relationship, maintain intra- and inter-organizational solidarity, avoid decertifications and attract new members.

It was mentioned above that three of the key assumptions (3 to 5) of the economic model are that: An inherent exclusivity of interest exists between the union and management; the union should not involve itself in management decision making; and collective bargaining, therefore, forms the basic regulatory mechanism of the labor-management relationship. QWL violates all of these assumptions, and the altering union environments render an alternative action model difficult to devise.

The basic idea of QWL is that workers contribute to the design of the production process. By doing so workers can improve both their own working conditions and plant efficiency. This implies that commonality of interest between labor and management does exist. By participating in decisions which influence plant layout and production design, workers and their union are being drawn into decision making processes that have traditionally been managements' sole responsibility.

This process seriously erodes collective bargaining's role as the preeminent regulatory mechanism of the labor-management relationship and with it unions' regulatory role in the worksite. To be effective, QWL programs must be free to consider such issues as manning, relative pay, and job flexibility which were once the sole responsibility of, and arguably still are an integral part of, the collective bargaining process. In reality, however, the line dividing the QWL's and collective bargaining's jurisdiction is growing finer. Frequently, the regulatory power of a collective agreement is jeopardized when management and workers are able to short circuit its jurisdiction and settle various problems through QWL arrangements such as «quality circles» (Bradely & Hill, 1987, pp. 79-80). Thus, whether deliberately or not, QWL programs have provided management with a leverage to loosen unions' grip over job regulation.

Indicating unions' inability to use traditional institutions to promote member interests and challenge employers' practices is the fact that, sometimes, collective bargaining turns out to be a complementary component in management strategy of coping with growing competitive pressures (Cappelli, 1985; Kochan & Katz, 1983). On these occasions, management uses the bargaining process to implement their own strategic decisions which have been formulated at the corporate level, away from the bargaining table. For example, according to recent collective agreements signed in the auto industry, both Ford and GM can adapt to market changes by eliminating one out of every two positions left open by attrition and by laying off workers if demand falls (though not if sales of domestically produced cars are hurt by those imported by the companies).

Worse still, since unions are concentrated in declining industries (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie, 1986, pp. 48-50) they have become less capable of delivering their two foremost services — competitive wages and job security. There is growing evidence that nonunion employees are getting larger pay increases than organized workers (*Business Week*, December 29, 1986, p. 37), perhaps because in the highly unionized manufacturing sector, where job losses have been heavy since the 1981/82 recession, unions put more emphasis on non-wage issues⁷. Indicative of this development is the decline in Cost-of-Living-Agreements (COLA) and the increase in two-tier wage settlements. In 1986, only 3.5 million workers under bargaining agreements covering 1,000 or more employees had COLA coverage, down from a peak of six million workers in 1977 (*Bureau of National Affairs [BNA]*, August 28, 1986). Two-tier wage arrangements (specifying lower rates of pay for new employees) have doubled from 5% in 1983 to 10% in 1986, and for the fourth consecutive year median wage increases in these settlements were lower than median increases in all nonconstruction settlements (*BNA*, February 26, 1987). Employer bargaining objectives for 1988 indicate that more employers are seeking to eliminate COLAs and negotiate two-tier wage arrangements (*BNA*, 1987, 12:954).

In addition, unions have difficulties delivering job security. As mentioned before, under the 1987 collective agreements in the car industry, both GM and Ford guaranteed the jobs of current workers but retain the right to lay them off if demand falls. Moreover, GM can still go ahead with its plan to shut down 16 facilities, thereby eliminating more than 30,000 union jobs. Perhaps as a result of unions' inability to deliver job security, workers, more and more, prefer to decertify their union when they believe the union threatens their company's competitiveness (*The Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 1985, p. 22).

Since union capabilities to deliver selective services are weakening and since the three most important things workers expect from their jobs (a good salary, job security, and appreciation for a job well done) are increasingly being provided by nonunion firms (*Business Week*, July 8, 1985, p. 76), unions cannot stem declining popularity and organizational atrophy. Thus, given that «industrial relations abhors a vacuum» (Barbash, 1987), when unions loose ground as worker service agents certain union functions have to be performed by management and/or government agencies. Indeed, nowadays, more and more, the courts and state legislatures are becoming

⁷ The recent bargaining round in the mining industry vividly illustrates this point. While the miners are declaring that they are «pretty flexible on wages», they put job security on top of their bargaining agenda (*Business Week*, November 2, 1987, p. 99). The United Mine Workers' leaders have realized that to maintain their union organization they must stem their union's spectacular decline (UMW's active membership has dwindled by one-third since 1984, to about 85,000).

the most effective advocates of employee rights (*Business Week*, July 8, 1985, p. 72), thereby further eroding the needs for unions.

It is not, therefore, surprising that the percentage of all workers — including union members — who favor unions declined from 60 per cent to 47 per cent, between 1977 and 1984 (*Business Week*, September 21, 1987, p. 22) and that unions have lost four million members since 1975. Between 1980 and 1985, while jobs increased by seven millions union membership fell by 3.1 million (*BNA*, March 26, 1987). Consequently, nowadays, unions represent less than 14 per cent of the private nonagricultural labor force (*Business Week*, September 21, 1987, p. 22).

Recruiting difficulties also contribute to union decline. Nonunion companies are willing to go to any lengths to keep their workers happy so they remain union-free. For example, IBM is considering extreme measures to maintain its full employment policy (*Business Week*, July 7, 1986, pp. 54-5; *The Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 1986, p. 4), and Worthington Industries, a steel company, keeps its work force at 100 persons per plant to facilitate communication and increase employee-management trust. Consequently, nonunion workers are more pleased with their pay, job security, and other aspects of work than their counterparts were seven or eight years ago, even though real earnings have declined since 1977 (*Business Week*, September 21, 1987, p. 22). Perhaps this is why nonmanagerial, nonunion workers' desire for union representation fell from about 40 per cent in 1977 to 32 per cent in 1984 (*ibid*).

The blend of changing environments and management industrial relations practices endangers another union cornerstone — inter- and intra-organizational solidarity. In the auto industry, for example, QWL arrangements impinge on a major assumption of the United Automobile Workers' (UAW) traditional industrial relations approach — connective bargaining⁸. By permitting different working conditions and different pay-scales through pay-for-knowledge arrangements across plants, QWL undermines connective bargaining, thereby directly threatening union solidarity (Katz, 1985, p. 100). The reason being the growing competition among individual workers, work groups, and plants (Luria, 1986). For example, when asked who you are competing with, a GM Personnel Director answered — «we are competing with every plant in the GM system» (reported in Wood, 1986, p. 431). And, in the 1987 negotiations at GM, «the real story... is at the local level, because that's where productivity gains will come from» (*Business Week*, August 10, 1987, p. 25).

⁸ Under the connective bargaining principle, wages and working conditions had been standardized across the auto industry and within each company. All workers in the industry doing the same job earned the same wages. Intracompany wage variation across plants was avoided by the elimination of piece-rate and the national standardization of job classification across plants (KATZ, 1985, pp. 29-38).

In other cases, considerable conflict developed between local unions and their nationals over the willingness of the former to participate in QWL programs as a *quid-pro-quo* for economic concessions (Cappelli, 1985). So much so that, recently, disillusioned union members created the National Rank and File Coalition Against Concessions to counteract national leaders' will to accept concessions and cooperate with managements who are involved in plant shutdowns (*BNA*, February 26, 1987).

Solidarity problems also have occurred among unions representing different work groups at the same company when some unions agreed to create QWL programs in exchange for monetary concessions while other unions disagreed. Recently, Pan Am's unions, trying to attract investors to save the company, agreed to offer 20% savings through wage cuts and changes in work rules. But, Pan Am's largest union, the Transport Workers Union, refused to join the coalition and is resisting pay cuts or other concessions (*Business Week*, October 19, 1987, p. 57).

To recapitulate, changes in union environments and management industrial relations practices have been challenging U.S. manufacturing unions on several counts. First, unions have difficulties to deliver traditional services such as pay increases and job security. Second, they have lost part of their regulatory capabilities. On many occasions, the worker-management relationship is regulated outside the collective agreement's jurisdiction. Third, union intra- and inter-organizational solidarity has diminished. The above changes have increased competition among individual workers, work groups, and locals of the same and of different unions. Fourth, unions cannot stem the tide of decertifications and to, finally, attract new members. The question is, what choices do unions striving to revitalize themselves face?

UNION CHOICES

Unions trying to revitalize themselves as a major force in society and industrial relations systems face choices at two levels — a long-term, strategic level and a short-term, tactical level. At the strategic level, unions should decide on the role they will play in the politico-economic market and on the type of relationship they will maintain with their environments in the long-run. Such a decision concerns the action orientation or strategy unions will employ over the next decades. The choice here is whether to keep advocating the traditional or seek a new action orientation comprising a new set of underlying assumptions. Hence, an outcome of this decision may be long-term changes in the assumptions currently underlying union philosophy and action.

At the tactical level, unions' decisions depend on their strategic choice. But whatever the strategic decision is unions will face tactical choices as well. To illustrate, if unions decide to keep implementing their current economic orientation, they have several tactical choices, each having its own costs and benefits. For example, it has been argued that to prevent further erosion of their institutional power, unions must take a greater role at corporate level policy making (Kochan & Piore, 1984; Kochan, McKersie, and Cappelli, 1984). «To survive, unions must develop a compensating role at the top or the strategic level, and across all levels unions must deliver new 'goodies'...» (McKersie, 1985, p. 646).

The challenge here is two fold: First, how to convince management that cooperation cannot be complete if enacted only at the shop level; that no full-fledged industrial pact can be drawn unless top business and labor leaders cooperate in determining national economic goals. Second, in case labor leaders do successfully penetrate corporate strategic decision making bastions, does it herald the end of labor's organizational, political, and institutional decline?

Another tactical path available within the economic orientation concerns unions' service menu. If they are to attract employees in the growing service-producing industries, unions should develop a new service agenda which will reflect the unique needs of these employees. This agenda should be configured such that the member-service relationship will not be mediated only by the employing organization. Indeed, adopting a report of its Committee on the Evolution of Work, the AFL-CIO is offering members direct benefits (i.e., life and health insurance programs, low-cost credit cards) outside the structure of a collective bargaining (*BNA*, June 18, 1987).

This choice entails several problems. First, unions' direct benefits and management ideology and interests are not mutually exclusive. Employers can still provide the very same services, thereby eliminating this incentive to unionize. Second, the higher the number of members linked to unions through direct services, or «consumerism», rather than through shared social experiences, the lower the intra-union solidarity. Third, the higher the competition among unions offering direct services, the more expensive these services for unions and the lower the inter-union solidarity. Finally, direct services fail to cater to the unique needs of minority work groups such as women and immigrants.

Whether deliberately or out of sheer inertia, evidence presented throughout the paper suggests that manufacturing unions keep practising their traditional economic orientation with somewhat altered nuances at the shop level. Unions still rely on traditional regulatory institutions in their search for effectiveness, emphasize immediate interests as their major recruiting and organizational maintenance device, and generally perceive

QWL programs merely as a tactical adjustment to economic necessity. In the rare cases when unions try to introduce strategic changes (e.g., union-management cooperation together with less emphasis on the collective agreement as the foremost regulatory mechanism) into their action orientation's underlying assumptions, they face great difficulties. Internal strifes, low worker trust, and perhaps a perennial attachment to tradition hinder the development of a new union strategy and philosophy.

The argument here is that if manufacturing unions are to reemerge as a vital force in American society they must search for a new action orientation. The recent decade has demonstrated that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the union organization on the basis of a narrow menu of selective services. Perhaps, a new, more global union orientation should be devised. It should transcend the bargaining arena and members' immediate interests. It should emphasize a new «sense of moral outrage» based on global issues, such as, budget allocation, and how to counteract the impact of international wage differentials on local employment and the massive layoffs accompanied technological developments. The crux of the argument is that, global issues exist which if effectively framed could restore that «sense of moral outrage» which bound the public to the union movement in those times when unions enjoyed their greatest success. To accomplish this, and regardless of the direction a new union strategy takes, unions must entertain strategic options which can be implemented independently of the traditional institutions of unionization and job regulation.

DISCUSSION

Changing management industrial relations practices and union environments pose various challenges to manufacturing trade unions in the United States. The former changes challenge long-cherished union «bread-and-butter» philosophy and economic strategy. The latter changes render alternatives difficult to devise and apply. Unions, even those which have shown genuine willingness to cooperate with management in the battle for market position, are still a far cry from being able to accommodate altered environments and industrial relations patterns. They have yet to forge the right socio-economic agenda required to mobilize their members, organize nonunion workers, and engage the community at large in their cause. Moreover, labor leaders who operate within changing industrial relations systems must design an alternative strategy, philosophy, and role for their unions, and cease constantly reacting to management strategic initiatives (Shaiken, 1984, p. 270; Reshef & Murray, forthcoming).

Among questions labor leaders should deal with are: Is collective bargaining still the foremost regulatory mechanism in employee-employer relations? How can QWL programs be used to enhance unions' position in the plant? Should American unions still limit themselves to the economic arena where they advocate an ever contracting «bread-and-butter» bargaining agenda? Should unions' main objective still be the management of discontent in the workplace? What strategies are available for unions to counteract top management and government obstructive strategies in times of economic downturn? How can unions counteract the repercussions unleashed by the globalization of the product market and the accompanied international labor cost differentials? Can they use the globalization of this market to their own favour? Should labor leaders play any role in the international labor market?

There are no simple answers to these and many other questions. Generally, however, union leaders should explore and apply methods to affect industrial relations outside the bargaining arena, perhaps even outside the economic marketplace. They must feel free to entertain strategic options implemented independently of the traditional institutions of job regulation and industrial relations practices.

Like management, then, union leaders should think strategically. For example, improving plant cooperation is meaningless without aligning it with an overall approach to industrial relations; or, increasing job security through concession bargaining can be detrimental to unions if not supported by measures to increase union impact over corporate strategic decision making. In times of slower growth, deregulation, globalization, rapid technological change, fierce nonunion competition, and hostile policy unions must integrate and make consistent all aspects of trade unionism — organization, job regulation, service delivery, political action, underlying philosophy — if they are to revitalize themselves and revolve outside managements' orbit.

REFERENCES

- BARBASH, J., «Like Nature, Industrial Relations Abhors a Vaccum: The Case of Union-Free Strategy», *Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles*, Vol. 42, no 1, 1987, pp. 168-177.
- , «Values in Industrial Relations: The Case of the Adversary Principle», *Proceedings of the 33th Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association*, 1980, Madison, IRRA, 1981, pp. 1-7.
- , «Collective Bargaining and the Theory of Conflict», *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 18, no 1, 1980, pp. 82-90.

- BLOCK, R.N., and K. MCLENNAN, «Structural Economic Change and Industrial Relations in the United States' Manufacturing and Transportation Sectors since 1973», in H. Juris, M. Thompson, and W. Daniels (eds), *Industrial Relations in a Decade of Economic Change*, Madison, IRRRA, 1985, pp. 337-382.
- BRADLEY, K., and S. HILL, «Quality Circles and Managerial Interests», *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 26, no 1, 1987, pp. 68-82.
- CAPPELLI, P., «Plant-Level Concession Bargaining», *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 39, no 1, 1985, pp. 90-104.
- , and J. CHALYKOFF, «The Effects of Management Industrial Relations Strategy: Results of a Recent Survey», *Proceedings of the 38th Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association*, 1985, Madison, IRRRA, 1985, pp. 171-178.
- CRAVER, C.B., «The NLRA at Fifty: From Youthful Exuberance to Middle-Aged Complacency», *Labor Law Journal*, Vol. 36, no 8, 1985, pp. 604-615.
- CROUCH, C., «The Changing Role of the State in Industrial Relations in Western Europe», in C. Crouch and A. Pizzorno (eds.), *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe since 1968*, New York, Holmes & Meier, Vol. 2, pp. 197-219.
- CURTIN, W.J., «Management Approaches to Collective Bargaining: The Dynamics of Change in the U.S.», *Proceedings of the 38th Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association*, 1985, Madison, IRRRA, 1985, pp. 158-170.
- DAHL, R.A., «Pluralism Revisited», *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 10, no 2, 1978, pp. 191-203.
- DEUTSCH, S., «New Technology, Union Strategies and Worker Participation», *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 7, no 4, 1986, pp. 529-539.
- DONNELLY, J.F., «Participative Management at Work», *Harvard Business Review*, 55, January-February, 1977, pp. 117-127.
- FREEMAN, R.B., and J.L. MEDOFF, *What Do Unions Do?* New York, Basic Books, 1984.
- FULLER, S.H., «How Quality-of-Worklife Projects Work for General Motors», *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 103, July, 1980, pp. 37-39.
- GOLDFIELD, M., «The Causes of U.S. Trade Union Decline and their Future Prospects», *Research in Political Economy*, Vol. 7, 1984, pp. 81-159.
- GUEST, R.H., «Quality of Work Life — Learning from Tarrytown», *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 57, July-August, 1979, pp. 76-87.
- HALBERSTAM, D., *The Reckoning*, New York, Morrow, 1986.
- JAIN, H.C., and A. GILES, «Workers' Participation in West Europe: Implications for North America», *Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles*, Vol. 40, no 4, 1985, pp. 747-772.
- JURIS, H.A., and M. ROOMKIN, «The Shrinking Perimeter: Unions and Collective Bargaining in Manufacturing», in H.A. Juris, and M. Roomkin (eds.), *The Shrinking Perimeter; Unionism and Labor Relations in Manufacturing Industry*, Lexington, Lexington Books, 1980, pp. 197-211.

KATZ, H.C., *Shifting Gears: Changing Labor Relations in the U.S. Automobile Industry*, Cambridge, MIT press, 1985.

————, T.A. KOCHAN, and K.R. GOBEILLE, «Industrial Relations Performance, and QWL Programs: An Interplant Analysis», *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 37, no 1, 1983, pp. 3-17.

KOCHAN, T.A., H.C. KATZ, and R.B. MCKERSIE, *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations*, New York, Basic, 1986.

————, R.B. MCKERSIE, and P. CAPPELLI, «Strategic Choice and Industrial Relations Theory», *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 23, no 1, 1984, pp. 16-39.

————, H.A. KATZ, and N.R. MOWER, *Worker Participation and American Unions*, The Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 1984.

————, and M.J. PIORE, «Will the New Industrial Relations Last? Implications for the American Labor Movement», *Annals*, 473, May, 1984, pp. 177-189.

————, and H.C. KATZ, «Collective Bargaining, Work Organization, and Worker Participation: The Return to Plant-Level Bargaining», *Labor Law Journal*, Vol. 34, no 8, 1983, pp. 524-530.

LAWLER, J.J., «A Typology of Counter-Organizing Tactics», *Proceedings of the Spring Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association*, 1986, Madison, WI, IRRA, 1986, pp. 549-554.

————, «The influence of Management Consultants on the Outcome of a Union Certification Election», *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 38, no 1, 1984, pp. 38-51.

————, and R. WEST, «Impact of Union-Avoidance Strategy in Representation Elections», *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 24, no 4, 1985, pp. 406-420.

LONG, J.R., and M. WARNER, «Organizations, Participation and Recession: An Analysis of Recent Evidence», *Industrial Relations/Relations Industrielles*, Vol. 42, no 1, 1987, pp. 65-88.

LURIA, D.D., «New Labor-Management Models from Detroit?», *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 86, no 5, 1986, pp. 22-28.

MCKERSIE, R.B., «New Dimensions in Industrial Relations», *Labor Law Journal*, Vol. 36, no 8, 1985, pp. 645-648.

MURRAY, A.I., and Y. RESHEF, *American Manufacturing Unions' Stasis: A Paradigmatic Perspective*, Unpublished manuscript, University of Alberta, Faculty of Business, 1987.

PIORE, M.J., «Can the American Labor Movement Survive Re-Gomperization?», *Proceedings of the 35th Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association* 1982, Madison, IRRA, 1982, pp. 30-39.

RESHEF, Y., and A.I. MURRAY, «Toward a Neoinstitutionalist Approach in Industrial Relations», *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, forthcoming.

SCHEIN, E.H., *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1985.

SCHLOSSBERG, S.I., and S.M. FETTER, *Labor Law and the Future of Labor-Management Cooperation*, U.S. Department of Labor, BLMR 104, 1986.

- SHAIKEN, H., *Work Transformed*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.
- THOMPSON, M., and H.A. JURIS, «The Response of Industrial Relations to Economic Change», in H.A. Juris, M. Thompson, and W. Daniels (eds.), *Industrial Relations in a Decade of Economic Change*, Madison, IRRRA, 1985, pp. 383-407.
- VERMA, A., and R.B. MCKERSIE, «Employee Involvement: The Implications of Noninvolvement by Unions», *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 40, no 4, 1987, pp. 556-568.
- , and T.A. KOCHAN, «The Growth and Nature of the Nonunion Sector within a Firm», in T.A. Kochan, (ed.), *Challenges and Choices Facing American Labor*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985, pp. 89-117.
- WALTON, R.E., «Work Innovations in the United States», *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 57, July-August, 1979, pp. 88-98.
- WHEELER, H., and R. WEIKLE, «Technological Change and Industrial Relations in the United States», *Bulletin of Comparative Industrial Relations*, Vol. 12, 1983, pp. 15-34.
- WOOD, S., «The Cooperative Labour Strategy in the US Auto Industry», *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 7, no 4, 1986, pp. 415-447.

Le milieu changeant et les pratiques des employeurs en matière de relations de travail: leurs conséquences pour les syndicats américains

Cet article traite des problèmes que doivent affronter les syndicats industriels contraints d'appliquer les principes du syndicalisme d'affaires, alors que le milieu et les méthodes des employeurs se modifient en matière de relations professionnelles. Depuis le début, les syndicats américains ont adopté une orientation économique de leur stratégie dans le domaine des relations du travail. Cette orientation de leur activité devient de plus en plus difficile à appliquer à mesure que l'environnement change et que la philosophie du patronat en matière de relations du travail délaisse les attitudes d'opposition traditionnelles.

Ce qui importe, c'est que ces syndicats doivent agir à l'intérieur d'un régime de relations professionnelles plus mutualiste, un système caractérisé par, entre autres choses, un nombre de plus en plus considérable de programmes de qualité de la vie au travail (Q.V.T.) — 52 pour cent des entreprises de plus de 10 000 employés avaient institué un cercle de qualité en 1982; une forme quelconque de programme de participation existait dans 36 pour cent de l'ensemble des entreprises et dans 58 pour cent de celles qui comptent plus de 1 000 employés en 1985; enfin, des cercles de qualité ont été instaurés dans 36,3 pour cent et des groupes autonomes de travail dans 27,6 pour cent des entreprises suivies par l'*American Management Association*.

Quoique le nombre de travailleurs syndiqués touchés par ce changement particulier ne soit pas connu, le fait qu'il se produit dans des industries fortement syndicalisées, telles que celles de l'acier et de l'automobile, en fait un sujet qui justifie une investigation.

Pendant des années, l'orientation économique des syndicats s'est fort bien ajustée à l'approche hostile des employeurs en matière de relations professionnelles. Celle-ci a été en partie le résultat de l'organisation scientifique du travail adoptée par les employeurs dans l'industrie il y a environ huit décennies. Mais l'orientation économique des syndicats industriels ne s'y ajuste plus sans heurts. Aujourd'hui, au plan de l'établissement, l'approche inamicale des employeurs dans le domaine des relations de travail se modifie. Les changements ont affaibli les bases organisationnelles et institutionnelles des syndicats et miné la philosophie du syndicalisme d'affaires ainsi que la stratégie économique qu'il chérissaient depuis longtemps.

Les syndicats, même ceux qui ont montré une bonne volonté véritable à collaborer avec les employeurs dans la bataille de la conquête des marchés, sont encore bien loin d'être capables de s'accommoder à un milieu changé et à des relations professionnelles de type nouveau. Il leur faut encore forger le véritable régime socio-économique requis pour mobiliser leurs membres, favoriser l'adhésion des travailleurs non syndiqués et engager la société dans son ensemble à appuyer leur cause. Si l'on s'exprime différemment, les dirigeants syndicaux qui agissent à l'intérieur de systèmes de relations du travail en voie de transformation doivent proposer une stratégie, une philosophie et un rôle nouveau à leurs syndicats et cesser de s'opposer aux initiatives stratégiques des employeurs.

En conséquence, leur faut-il se poser plusieurs questions. Est-ce que la négociation collective est encore le mécanisme principal de règlement dans les relations entre employeurs et salariés? Comment les programmes de la qualité de vie au travail peuvent-ils être utilisés pour renforcer la situation des syndicats à l'usine? Les syndicats américains devraient-ils encore limiter leur action à la sphère économique où ils préconisent un régime de négociation d'affaires fondé sur des contrats? Le principal objectif des syndicats devrait-il être encore la gestion des mécontentements au lieu du travail? Quelles stratégies sont-elles possibles pour contrecarrer les stratégies impopulaires de la haute direction des entreprises et du gouvernement en période de ralentissement économique? Comment les syndicats peuvent-ils résister aux répercussions engendrées par la globalisation du marché des biens et des différences des coûts du travail qui les accompagnent au niveau international? Peuvent-ils utiliser cette globalisation des marchés à leur avantage? Les dirigeants syndicaux devraient-ils jouer un rôle quelconque sur le marché international du travail?

À ces questions, il n'y a pas de réponses simples, de même qu'à plusieurs autres. En général, cependant, les dirigeants syndicaux devraient examiner et appliquer des méthodes de relations professionnelles à l'extérieur de la sphère des négociations collectives, peut-être même à l'extérieur des marchés économiques. Ils doivent se sentir libres de concevoir des options stratégiques mises en oeuvre indépendamment des institutions traditionnelles de réglementation du travail et des pratiques actuelles en matière de relations professionnelles.