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Organizing Activity Among University Clerical Workers

Abstract

[Excerpt] As union membership has declined and blue-collar employment has contracted, union organizers have shifted their attention to white-collar workers in the largely nonunion service sector. Interviews with union organizers indicate that a disproportionate share of this organizing activity has been aimed at college and university clerical employees. In order to gain a better understanding of this activity, two avenues of inquiry were pursued. Interviews were conducted with 48 union officials who have been involved in university clerical organizing. In addition, a questionnaire concerning the unionization of clerical workers was mailed in 1986 to personnel directors of all colleges and universities in New England with accredited bachelor's degree programs.

This paper summarizes the interviews with union officials, focusing on factors which influence organizing success among university clericals. The hypotheses which are developed are then subjected to econometric analysis using data from the survey of personnel directors and other sources.

Keywords

labor movement, union organizing, clerical workers, higher education

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Organizing Activity Among University Clerical Workers

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As union membership has declined and blue-collar employment has contracted, union organizers have shifted their attention to white-collar workers in the largely nonunion service sector. Interviews with union organizers indicate that a disproportionate share of this organizing activity has been aimed at college and university clerical employees. In order to gain a better understanding of this activity, two avenues of inquiry were pursued. Interviews were conducted with 48 union officials who have been involved in university clerical organizing. In addition, a questionnaire concerning the unionization of clerical workers was mailed in 1986 to personnel directors of all colleges and universities in New England with accredited bachelor's degree programs.¹

This paper summarizes the interviews with union officials, focusing on factors which influence organizing success among university clericals. The hypotheses which are developed are then subjected to econometric analysis using data from the survey of personnel directors and other sources.

The Organizing Environment on Campus²

The geographic stability of universities helps make them attractive organizing targets. There is little chance that management will relocate work under the threat of unionization. This stability is important because organizing typically proceeds slowly with clerical workers (Hurd and McElwain, 1988). Employees of universities traditionally

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¹ Copies of the interview schedule and questionnaire are available from the authors on request.

² Except where noted, this summary is based on the organizer interviews. A complete list of union officials, their affiliations, and the dates of the interviews is available on request.

have freedom to communicate on the job. This facilitates the organizing process by allowing union supporters to keep in touch with each other and to talk about the union in the office with their co-workers. Furthermore, most campuses are open to the public, allowing union organizers greater access to workers than they have in nonuniversity campaigns.

As is true with clericals in other settings, organizing is easier where the workers are familiar with unions. The familiarity may be present because unions are well established in the broader community, because family members or friends belong to unions, or because other university employees in the area are unionized. In some cases prior existence of a staff association on campus is helpful, particularly if the officers of the association feel frustrated due to lack of influence and support the organizing effort. Based on the interviews we can also deduce that the presence of a faculty union would be particularly beneficial.

Organizers agree that faculty play an influential role. Most university clericals have few problems with their immediate supervisors. In fact, they take pride in their association with faculty members, particularly those who publish articles or are otherwise professionally active outside of the university. Some organizers complain that the prestige associated with university employment creates a barrier to organizing. Other organizers believe that the prestige issue can be used as an organizing tool—the clericals work closely with respected professionals, and yet clericals themselves are accorded neither notice nor compensating monetary rewards.

On a related point, university clericals who seek union representation often complain of lack of dignity, lack of respect, or being treated like second-class citizens. These feelings are often crystallized as women's issues, with attention drawn to pay inequity, lack of upward occupational mobility, and problems with day care. The importance of women's issues in university campaigns differs from the prominence of traditional trade union issues in other clerical organizing (Hurd and McElwain, 1988).

Public universities are easier to organize because they do not resist organizing as vigorously as private universities. Furthermore, organizers have easy access to lists of employees and to financial and budgetary data, and can sometimes exert political pressure.

This overview of the organizing environment on campus has highlighted some of the key factors which might affect both the attractiveness of a particular university to union organizers and the

potential for success where a campaign is initiated. In the following section the influence of several of these factors is subjected to statistical analysis.

Empirical Model

The statistical analysis focuses on the 124 four-year colleges and universities in New England which had enrollments of 500 students or more in 1986.³ Three alternative dependent variables are defined: UNION, which takes on a value of one if the clerical workers at the university are represented by a union, zero otherwise; SUCCESS/FAILURE OF AN ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN, which is defined to be equal to one where clerical workers are unionized, zero otherwise (this variable is defined only for the subset of 55 universities which experienced an organizing campaign between 1970 and 1986); ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN, which takes on a value of one if there was an organizing campaign, successful or unsuccessful, among the clerical workers at the university, zero otherwise.

Each of these dependent variables is dichotomous and its relationship to the independent variables is modeled as a logit binary choice model.⁴ For the dependent variable UNION, the logistic model assumes the form:

$$\text{Prob}(\text{UNION}) = F(x'_i\beta) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp(-x'_i\beta)}$$

where $F(\)$ is the logistic cumulative distribution function, x'_i is a vector of independent variables, and β is a vector of unknown coefficients. Maximum likelihood estimation techniques are used to estimate the β vector.

Our interviews and prior research suggest several independent variables:

1. *Whether or not the university is a PUBLIC institution.* Our interviews and descriptive statistics based on a nationwide survey of large universities regarding unionization of clerical workers (Hurd and Woodhead, 1987) suggest a positive relationship between PUBLIC and all three specifications of the dependent variable.

2. *The number of clerical workers, which is proxied by the ENROLLMENT of the school.* Previous research has consistently

³ There were 125 accredited colleges and universities in New England with enrollments of 500 or more in 1986 (Harris, 1987). Of these, usable data were obtained for 124 from the mail questionnaire and other sources.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the logistic model, see Judge et al. (1982, Ch. 19).

found a negative relationship between unit size and the percentage of workers voting for union representation (Heneman and Sandver, 1983). We hypothesize a negative coefficient on ENROLLMENT in the success/failure specification of the dependent variable. On the other hand, a positive sign on ENROLLMENT is hypothesized in the ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN equation. This reflects the presumption that organizers' targeting decisions are positively influenced by the potential number of new union members. Finally, the sign on the coefficient in the UNION specification is indeterminant since it incorporates both the positive impact of ENROLLMENT on targeting activities and the negative impact on union victory.

3. *The existence of a faculty union.* Separate dummy variables are defined for three faculty bargaining agents: American Association of University Professors (AAUP), National Education Association (NEA), and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Hurd and Woodhead (1987) find that faculty and clerical workers are either both union or both nonunion on 76 percent of large campuses nationwide. A positive coefficient on each dummy variable is hypothesized.

4. *The level of unionization in the area, as measured by the STATE UNIONIZATION LEVEL.* Our interviews and prior research on National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections (Seeber and Cooke, 1983; Hurd and McElwain, 1988) suggest a positive relationship between unionization level and all specifications of the dependent variable.

5. *The issue of prestige as measured by the STATUS of the college or university.* This variable takes on a value of one for schools with selective admission standards and doctoral programs and is otherwise equal to zero. Our interviews suggest that the coefficients on STATUS could be either positive or negative.

Results and Conclusions

Table 1 contains the results for four specifications of the logit model. Specifications 1 and 2 use the dependent variables UNION and SUCCESS/FAILURE OF AN ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN. Specification 3 also uses the SUCCESS/FAILURE dependent variable but omits PUBLIC as an explanatory variable. The fourth specification uses ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN as the dependent variable and also omits PUBLIC. Attempts to estimate the fourth specification with PUBLIC included were unsuccessful due to the limited variation in that variable for different values of the dependent variable, and due to the patterns of correlations among several of the

TABLE 1

Maximum Likelihood Logit Estimates: New England Colleges
and Universities with Enrollments over 500

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables			
	Union (1)	Success/Failure of Organizing Campaign (2)	Success/Failure of Organizing Campaign (3)	Organizing Campaign (4)
PUBLIC	4.028*** (1.149) [0.457]	2.062* (1.319) [0.276]		
ENROLL- MENT	0.003 (0.006) [0.0003]	-0.003 (0.007) [-0.0004]	-0.003 (0.006) [-0.0005]	0.032*** (0.011) [0.008]
AAUP	3.108** (1.528) [0.350]	3.089** (1.768) [0.414]	3.089*** (1.547) [0.587]	2.412*** (0.891) [0.599]
NEA	4.353*** (1.545) [0.494]	3.687** (1.763) [0.518]	4.687*** (1.513) [0.709]	4.983*** (1.152) [1.237]
AFT	4.926*** (1.514) [0.557]	4.761*** (1.991) [0.638]	4.828*** (1.859) [0.713]	2.395*** (0.819) [0.595]
STATE UNION- IZATION LEVEL, 1980	0.515*** (0.201) [0.058]	0.491** (0.224) [0.066]	0.318** (0.191) [0.048]	-0.135 (0.100) [-0.336]
STATUS	3.885+++ (2.456) [0.440]	2.963+ (1.652) [0.397]	2.376+ (1.344) [0.360]	1.161 (0.775) [0.400]
INTERCEPT	-14.798	-11.738	-7.712	-0.459
MODEL X ²	105.11	32.96	30.47	83.61
PSEUDO R ²	0.68	0.50	0.46	0.49
# OF OBSERV.	124	55	55	124

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; $\partial P/\partial x$ in brackets.

* Significant at .10 level, ** significant at .05 level, *** significant at .01 level (one-tailed test).

+ Significant at .10 level, ++ significant at .05 level, +++ significant at .01 level (two-tailed test).

More specific variable definitions are available on request.

independent variables. So that we might still be able to examine the impact of the other variables on ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN, PUBLIC was omitted in specification 4. Specification 3 is included for purposes of comparison.

The model chi-square statistics indicate a significant relationship between our set of independent variables and each of the dependent variables. The maximum likelihood equivalent to the R^2 , the pseudo R^2 , ranges from 0.46 to 0.68. These values are quite large relative to the R^2 in the literature on cross-sectional analysis of the determinants of unionization.

The hypotheses are generally substantiated by the results. PUBLIC has the predicted impact on the UNION and SUCCESS/FAILURE dependent variables. The signs of the coefficients on ENROLLMENT support our hypotheses, but the magnitudes of these coefficients in specifications 1, 2, and 3 are very small and not significantly different from zero.

As expected, the presence of a faculty union has a significant positive impact on clerical organizing success. Furthermore, the magnitude of the impact varies depending on the faculty bargaining agent, in the following descending order: AFT, NEA, AAUP. This order is consistent with the styles of these three organizations (union versus professional association) and their degree of integration with the broader labor movement. Further analysis indicates that the relationship between faculty unions and clerical unions has two distinctive components. The *prior* existence of a faculty union facilitates clerical organizing by providing a supportive environment. In addition, general conditions on a specific campus may be conducive to *both* clerical and faculty unionization.⁵

STATE UNIONIZATION LEVEL has the hypothesized positive impact on the UNION and SUCCESS/FAILURE dependent variables and this relationship is significant in specifications 1, 2, and 3. Our hypothesis about the sign of a coefficient is not supported in only one case: the targeting activity of unions is not positively influenced by the level of unionization in the state.

Results for specifications 1, 2, and 3 indicate that higher status universities are more likely to have successful organizing campaigns and clerical unions. We should note that STATUS captures the relative prestige of employment at some universities compared to others, rather than the prestige of university clerical employment relative to other clerical employment. The significant positive impact of STATUS on university clerical organizing deserves further explanation. One organizer currently involved in several university clerical campaigns offered an intriguing interpretation. On more prestigious campuses, there is often a core of well-educated, politically astute

⁵ Analytical details will be provided by the authors on request.

clericals who have a strong attraction to the university because of the challenging work which goes on there. Their expectations are higher than typical university clericals, and they are particularly frustrated by the limitations of their jobs. These workers often become involved in union organizing campaigns and make for a committed, high quality, independent organizing committee (Schaffer, 1988).

A comparison of specifications 3 and 4 indicates that union targeting is not totally consistent with factors which influence success. The size of a university has a significant positive impact on targeting, but no impact on success. The level of unionization in a state has a significant positive impact on success, but a negative (though insignificant) impact on targeting. Although STATUS has a positive impact on both targeting and success, the impact on targeting is insignificant while the magnitude of the impact on success is larger and the relationship is significant. These results suggest that organizing success might increase if unions place less emphasis on the size of the university and concentrate more on prestigious institutions in states with relatively high levels of unionization. In fairness to union organizers, we should qualify these suggestions by noting that of the campuses in New England where clerical organizing campaigns were conducted during the 1970-1986 period, 71 percent were unionized in 1986.

We caution that our research is based on regional data and should be subjected to further testing using a national sample. We do not address nonenvironmental issues which might affect the outcome of specific campaigns, such as organizing tactics or resistance strategies. We believe, however, that our analysis provides a useful framework for future research.

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