

Book Review: Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organising

by Blog Admin

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In *Union Voices*, three industrial relations scholars evaluate how labour unions fared in the political and institutional context created by New Labour. Drawing on extensive empirical evidence, Melanie Simms, Jane Holgate, and Edmund Heery present a multilevel analysis of what organizing means in the UK, how it emerged, and what its impact has been. **Pietro Manzella** finds that this book is successful in its attempt to provide a different research focus by which organising activity is investigated.



Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organising. Melanie Simms, Jane Holgate, and Edmund Heery. Cornell University Press. September 2012.

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Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organising discusses British trade unionism over a period of roughly ten years, placing special emphasis on the major developments in organising activity. This is well-trodden ground for IR practitioners and academics, however this study provides many useful insights, as [Melanie Simms](#), [Jane Holgate](#), and [Edmund Heery](#) move away from traditional analyses, giving priority to the perspective of the organisers. This approach adds much value to the book, making it thought-provoking and of interest to a variety of readers. As is evident from the title, the focus is on union voices, the tactics and the tensions which revolve around organising activity, for the aim here is “to tell the stories of what organising is ‘like’ on the front line” (p. 2). This investigation from the point of view of the union members is made more meaningful by a thoughtful analysis of organising as a political process, a topic that has been given scant consideration in the literature. Among the six chapters that make up the volume, two stand out as particularly significant, chapters four and six.



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The fourth chapter, "Union Organisers and Their Stories", is perhaps the most engaging of the whole book. The intention is to cast light on the role of the organisers, outlining their tasks and the problems they have to face while acting as "agents of change". The first point which is dealt with is the motivation to train as a union organiser. Training, especially at the TUC Organising Academy is an intense and challenging experience for participants, and is aimed at developing the skills to promote a particular approach to trade unionism, focusing on aspects such as membership participation and activism. The main reason for taking part in this training is to bring about change in the movement, and to help workers to assert their rights. Those taking part develop an appreciation of the fact that organising strategies vary in crucial respects between unions. The insights gained tend to enhance the motivation that led them to become organizers in the first place. The authors argue that new union organizers were seen as a catalyst for change, as they were expected to contribute to a cultural shift towards more strategic organising. Accordingly, the first few intakes were intended by the Trades Union Confederation (TUC) to be the future of the labour movement. This raised expectations, but also gave rise to a degree of resentment from others working for the unions, especially those who had been active union members for a long time, which made it difficult for them to acknowledge the role of the newcomers. In particular, "Organisers described how they were ignored or left to find their own way sometimes with little management support" (p. 97), illustrating the circumstances under which they were frequently required to operate. Against this backdrop, it was hard to devise tactics and strategies and make a mark among the other unionists.

"Evaluating Organising" is the sixth and concluding chapter of the book, aiming to examine the criteria to measure the effectiveness of organising activity. An example is given which "illustrates some of the challenges of deciding – and evaluating – the purpose and outcomes of organizing work" (p. 152). The authors point out that two distinct ways may be adopted for assessing organising activity. The first considers the goals laid down by the union. Yet if evaluating outcomes only against the objectives set by the unions, there is a risk of narrowing down the focus to those goals that can be accomplished at a given moment in time. In the authors' opinion, unions are unlikely to set themselves objectives that are perceived to be impossible, chiefly because organising is resource-intensive and time-consuming. Hence the objectives laid down by the unions are the outcome of complex judgements, frequently made at a political level about what is achievable at a given moment. In the authors' view, this is indicative of the contemporary political context, both within the unions and in society at large, and might result in disregard for any wider perspective of what organizing should be. The second approach is based on a rather apolitical and ahistorical view of these developments, a perspective which, though more controversial, is preferred by the authors, who attempt to evaluate organising outcomes in the context of broader considerations about the changes that unions should make in order to reinforce their role as the voice of working people. To this end, a range of measures with different organising outcomes are considered, most notably increasing membership, collective bargaining, organizing underrepresented workers, organizing in new sectors, worker self-organisation, and union democracy.

Union Voices: Tactics and Tensions in UK Organising is successful in its attempt to provide a different research focus by which organising activity is investigated. The attempt to give voice to the organisers themselves is certainly commendable and the methodology used can be applied, of course after adaptation, to other countries, in order to gain insight into how unionism has changed over the years. The book covers a number of topics capable of engaging the reader, such as the criteria for assessing the outcome of organizing activity, and the reflection on organizers as a means to bring about cultural change within the unions. The book offers useful insights into the issues at hand. For the reader who is not from the UK, it serves as a valuable means to become familiar with union dynamics in Britain, and recent developments in trade union organisation.

Pietro Manzella is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Marco Biagi Department of Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy, and Senior Research Fellow at the Association for International and Comparative Studies in the field of Labour Law and Industrial Relations (ADAPT). He has an interest in linguistic and translation issues, with special reference to comparative labour law and industrial relations. He is English language editor of the *ADAPT LABOUR STUDIES BOOK-SERIES*, the Italian Labour Law Journal *Diritto delle Relazioni Industriali*, and the *E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies*. For more information visit www.adapt.it [Read more reviews by Pietro](#).