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Workplace Change and the New Labor Movement

Abstract

[Excerpt] The authors of this set of papers sharply critique, from a variety of perspectives, the approach to workplace change that has dominated labor's thinking for decades. We have not attempted to balance these criticisms with arguments that labor can grow and prosper by fostering win-win methods and outcomes, because those arguments are well-known from a wide range of publications. Instead, we hope that these papers will stimulate and broaden the debate over a critical arena that has not been integrated with labor's new ambitions.

Keywords

labor unions, organizing, worker rights, workplace, labor movement

Disciplines

Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

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Workplace Change and the New Labor Movement

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At the 1995 AFL-CIO Convention, the debate between Tom Donahue and John Sweeney focused on whether the labor movement should be "building bridges or blocking bridges." This collection of essays expands their debate to challenge labor's approach to new work organization and new technology. The authors focus on the tension between the employee involvement, win-win, high road model of labor relations, and labor's new goals for revitalization through new organizing (Juravich), bargaining (Richardson), and economic and political strategies (Botwinick).

During the past twenty years of labor's decline, employee participation programs, new technology, and new work organization have been the vessels for a wide variety of hopes. Some thought that participation programs would provide fertile ground for new organizing. According to this theory, once given a taste of participation, workers would not be satisfied until they had the real thing; a real union of their own choosing. Others claimed that the participation process would offer workers a democratic "voice" within the workplace even if they did not unionize. Some thought that unions would be able to use participation plans to encroach on management's rights, gaining power and influence over spheres of decision-making that they had not been able to penetrate through the traditional bargaining process. Still others saw in new technology the end of routine jobs and an increased power for the skilled workers who would master new jobs. Restoring the competitiveness of American firms in world markets and harnessing the skill and resourcefulness of workers to ever more sophisticated technology would, some believed, create a level of prosperity that would benefit business and labor alike.

These hopes for workplace democracy and prosperity, shared by workers and employers alike, are not just abstract dreams. They have a real influence in the thinking and actions of labor and government policy-makers, even as it becomes increasingly apparent that these hopes have mostly gone unfulfilled. Despite a variety of well-documented negative impacts, business has largely had a free hand in setting up participation programs, reorganizing work, and introducing new technology in ways that often work against the interests of workers and their unions. Opposition has been very limited because

proponents of workplace change succeeded in framing the issue in a way that made opposition look anti-progress and even anti-worker

The authors of this set of papers sharply critique, from a variety of perspectives, the approach to workplace change that has dominated labor's thinking for decades. We have not attempted to balance these criticisms with arguments that labor can grow and prosper by fostering win-win methods and outcomes, because those arguments are well-known from a wide range of publications. Instead, we hope that these papers will stimulate and broaden the debate over a critical arena that has not been integrated with labor's new ambitions.