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Union Attitudes Toward Management Cooperation

Abstract

Much has been written in recent years about the need for unions and managements in the United States to move beyond traditional collective bargaining and begin working together cooperatively to establish creative new programs which will increase productivity and improve the quality of working life. In this context, many authors have criticized union leaders for being hostile toward cooperative efforts, intimidated by prospects of increased productivity, and indifferent toward workers' needs for greater psychic satisfaction from their work. Some of these criticisms have been directed toward national union leaders who, it is said, are seriously out of touch with their constituencies' opinions and needs.

Keywords

unions, productivity, quality of work, joint program preference

Disciplines

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Comments

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Union Attitudes Toward Management Cooperation

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Much has been written in recent years about the need for unions and managements in the United States to move beyond traditional collective bargaining and begin working together cooperatively to establish creative new programs which will increase productivity and improve the quality of working life. In this context, many authors have criticized union leaders for being hostile toward cooperative efforts, intimidated by prospects of increased productivity, and indifferent toward workers' needs for greater psychic satisfaction from their work.¹ Some of these criticisms have been directed toward national union leaders who, it is said, are seriously out of touch with their constituencies' opinions and needs.

But how do local union leaders and activists feel toward their unions becoming involved in issues pertaining to productivity and quality of work? What sorts of issues do they feel can best be handled by traditional collective bargaining and which, if any, by other techniques, such as joint cooperative programs? What factors determine how they feel in specific situations?

Sample and Methodology

Our study was designed to explore these questions with 211 local leaders and activists from various unions located throughout New York State.² About one-half of the respondents

¹ See, for example, *Work in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973); Agis Salpukas, "Unions: A New Role?" in Jerome Rosow, ed., *The Worker and the Job: Coping with Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1974); Donald Ephlin, "The Union's Role in Job Enrichment Programs," Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Winter Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association (Madison, Wisc.: 1974), pp. 210-223; and William W. Winpisinger, "Job Satisfaction: A Union Response," *The Federationist*, February, 1973, pp. 8-10.

² This research was supported by grants from The Ford Foundation and the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University. Thanks are extended to Pam Lyons for her assistance.

were from New York City and one-half from three upstate locations.³ Most were local union officers, committeemen, or stewards. They were employed in a broad spectrum of industries and occupations, including professional and technical jobs. Their median age was about 40, with very few under 25 or over 55 years of age. Almost all were high school graduates, and about half had attended college. Nearly 80 per cent were male and about 65 per cent were white, 28 per cent black, and 7 per cent Spanish surnamed.

The opening section of our paper reports on preferences expressed by these activists among three approaches -collective bargaining, joint programs, or no union involvement-for dealing with 13 major industrial relations problems. The remainder of the report seeks to determine the extent to which preferences for handling these problems through joint union-management programs (distinct from collective bargaining) can be explained either (1) by cognitive attitudes toward specific issues or (2) by relatively "objective" structural factors such as the activist's age or his employer's financial condition.

Choice of Methods of Handling Issues

The dependent variable of main interest was the opinion of local union activists concerning the most effective way for their unions to handle the 13 job-related issues listed in Table 1. Respondents were first presented with these issues in an undifferentiated list and asked to choose the "best way" for their unions to deal with each issue from among three

³ For a more complete description of the sample, see Thomas A. Kochan, David B Lipsky, and Lee Dyer, "Collective Bargaining and the Quality of Work: The View of Local Union Activists," *Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association* (Madison, Wisc.: 1975), p. 153.

options: (1) set up joint programs with management outside collective bargaining (hereafter joint program preference or JPP); (2) seek improvements through formal collective bargaining; and (3) keep the union uninvolved. Later (in accordance with our understanding of relevant literature) we categorized these 13 issues judgmentally into three major areas: productivity, quality of work (QOW), and traditional union concerns. Table 1 indicates that the collective bargaining approach was favored by nearly three-fourths of the respondents for dealing with traditional issues, although this option was chosen by only 29 per cent for handling productivity issues and only 21 per cent for QOW issues. On the other hand, the joint program approach was favored by only about one-fourth of the respondents for traditional issues, although it was favored by 52 per cent for productivity issues and 63 per cent for QOW issues.

Insert Table 1 Here

Closer inspection of the data shows that local union activists were selective about the specific traditional issues they felt should be handled through joint programs. A relatively high percentage favored a joint approach for dealing with safety, promotion procedures, grievance handling, and hours; however, relatively few favored it for dealing with job security, wages, or fringe benefits. Although the specific issue of job promotion procedures was the only traditional area in which many respondents (18 per cent) felt the union should not become involved, 19 per cent maintained this attitude for productivity issues generally, and 16 per cent felt noninvolvement was the best way of handling QOW issues. Finally, it should be noted that JPP for productivity issues was highly related to JPP for QOW issues (the product moment

correlation was .63). However, this tendency did not carry over as strongly in the case of traditional issues ($r = .40$ between JPP-productivity and JPP-traditional issues and $.29$ between JPP-QOW and JPP-traditional issues).

Having looked at the activists' choices, we next tried to explain them. Our first possible explanation was in terms of cognitive variables.

Cognitive Variables

Here we sought to determine the extent to which unionists' attitudes toward joint programs could be explained by their attitudes toward specific issues and alternative methods of dealing with these issues (regardless of structural factors). Specifically we tested the hypothesis that activists will endorse joint programs for various types of issues if they feel that these issues are (1) important, (2) integrative rather than distributive⁴, and (3) not dealt with effectively through the collective bargaining process.⁵ Table 2 summarizes the hypothesized relationship between these factors and JPP and shows the zero-order and multiple correlation coefficients relevant to them.⁶

⁴ Richard E. Walton and Robert B. McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

⁵ "Importance" of the 13 issues was determined by respondents' ratings on a four-point scale ranging from not at all to very important. Whether an issue was seen as "integrative" or "distributive" was determined by asking respondents to indicate on a four-point scale the extent to which their union and management were trying to accomplish the same or different things. "Collective bargaining effectiveness" was also rated on a four-point scale, issue by issue.

⁶ In these analyses the joint program option for dealing with the various kinds of issues was coded 1 and the two remaining options (collective bargaining and no union involvement) were coded 0. These codes were totaled within each category of issues. For example, in the analysis of JPP for quality of work issues a respondent who said all three QOW issues should be handled through collective bargaining was given a score of 0, whereas

Insert Table 2 Here

One hypothesis was partially supported and two were not supported at all. As hypothesized, JPP for productivity and traditional issues was higher when respondents saw these issues as integrative rather than distributive; but this relationship did not hold at a significant level for QOW issues. Issue importance and collective bargaining effectiveness had no significant relationships with JPP for any type of issue. Finally, the three cognitive variables together yielded coefficients of determination (R^2) ranging from only .02 to .06 across the three categories of issues.

Since cognitive factors failed to explain the respondent's preferences, it was felt necessary to examine the structural factors that might affect the assumptions of rationality related to cognition.

Structural Variables

Four categories of structural factors were examined: personal characteristics, union characteristics, employer characteristics, and nature of union-management relations. The

one who said that two should be handled through joint programs and the third through collective bargaining was given a score of 2.

hypotheses shown in Table 2 were based on available literature where possible but clearly should be regarded as exploratory.⁷

Table 2 shows the zero-order and multiple correlation coefficients between the JPP for the three types of issues and the 18 structural variables.⁸ Although several of these variables showed significant correlation coefficients, no single structural variable was significantly related to joint program preference for all three types of issues. Personal and union characteristics tended to be related to JPP on productivity and QOW issues, whereas employer variables were more significantly related to JPP on traditional issues. Taking all three types of issues together, structural variables as a group provided a better overall explanation of JPP than did the

⁷ Most structural variables were measured using single items that are self-explanatory. A few, however, require some explanation. For example, the union characteristic "leaders represent members' interests" was measured by ascertaining on four-point scales the extent to which it was felt that local union leaders fight for what members want in negotiations and grievance handling, and then summing these two perceptions. "Security of leaders" was determined by asking whether local union leaders would be easily re-elected if elections were held the next day (coded 1), whether the outcome would be too close to predict (coded 0), or whether they would definitely be defeated (also coded 0). "Conflict over proposals" was obtained by asking respondents to indicate on a four-point scale how often conflict or disagreements occur in their local unions over the content of bargaining proposals. Degree of "rank-and-file influence" was based on a four-point scale indicating how much influence or power respondents felt rank-and-file members of their unions had in determining the content of bargaining proposals. "Future financial condition" of the employer was ascertained by asking respondents whether they thought that during the next year the financial condition of their employer would improve (coded 3), stay the same (coded 2), or decline (coded 1). The degree of "centralization of bargaining" was determined by responses to the following three options: all issues are negotiated at the local level, i.e., at the workplace (coded 1); some issues are negotiated at the local level and some at a more centralized level by national union people representing several plants or employers (coded 2); and all issues are negotiated at centralized level by national union representatives (coded 3).

⁸ The interpretation of these correlations was straightforward in all but two cases, i.e., "skill level" and "form of (employer) ownership" had multiple response categories. Rather than dummy code all response options on these variables, a chi-square analysis was first performed and the variables were then dummy coded to maximize relationships with JPP. In the case of skill level, this involved the comparison of professional and technical workers with all others. For the variable "form of ownership," it involved the comparison of government and nonprofit organizations with individual- and family-owned businesses and with corporations.

cognitive variables (although no R^2 was higher than .20). Beyond these general points, several specific issues warrant discussion.

Personal characteristics. These variables were included because case studies and reports of productivity and QOW programs often suggest that some workers may be more responsive to such efforts than others.⁹ The personal characteristics examined here were more closely related to JPP for productivity and QOW issues than for traditional issues. In particular, those union activists who were better educated, white, and employed in professional and technical jobs tended to favor joint programs on productivity and QOW issues. In addition, joint programs for QOW issues were looked upon more favorably by those earning higher wages. Neither age nor sex, however, seemed to play any role in determining JPP.

Union characteristics. Union characteristics, too, were more highly related to JPP for productivity and QOW issues than for traditional issues. However, only one hypothesis involving union characteristics -that pertaining to the racial heterogeneity of the membership - was supported across both productivity and QOW issues. Respondents in unions with relatively few minority members tended to favor joint programs to a greater extent than those in unions with a relatively high proportion of minority members. Interestingly, however, this tendency did not hold with respect to the percentage of females in the union. These results are consistent with our findings that the respondents' race was significantly related to attitude toward joint programs, but that sex was not.

⁹ Work in America.

The hypothesis that respondents would tend to favor cooperation with a management on productivity issues if the union had a low level of internal conflict over the content of bargaining proposals received partial support. Apparently, internal union harmony facilitates JPP on productivity issues, but does not necessarily do so with respect to either QOW or traditional issues.

Contrary to the hypothesis, the JPP on both productivity and QOW issues was negatively related to the extent to which union leaders were seen to represent members' interests. The original hypothesis was based on literature that discusses the fear of union leaders of being co-opted by management in joint programs and consequently losing the ability to represent members' interests effectively.¹⁰ It was felt that union activists would be hesitant to risk endorsement of joint programs unless they believed their leadership was aggressively pursuing union goals. Apparently, however, the view prevails that if the leadership is having difficulty representing members' interests in collective bargaining, nothing will be lost and something may be gained by entering into joint programs.

None of the remaining union characteristics was significantly related to JPP. The failure of the "security of union leaders" variable to be a factor is particularly surprising in view of the literature that suggests strongly that joint programs involve political risks for union leaders.¹¹ It

¹⁰ This is perhaps the central theme that runs throughout most discussions of the reasons why collective bargaining has survived as the central channel of decision making between unions and employers. For an early statement, see Ernest Dale, "Increasing Productivity Through Labor-Management Cooperation," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, III (October, 1949), 33-44

¹¹ Ibid.

may be that the risk factor has been overemphasized. This interpretation must be regarded with caution, however, since only 40 per cent of the respondents held positions above the level of steward or committeeman. A study involving only union officers might yield quite different results.

Employer characteristics. Unlike personal and union characteristics, employer characteristics were more strongly related to JPP on traditional issues than on productivity or QOW issues. In fact, all three employer characteristics examined (future financial condition, size, and the form of ownership) were significantly related to JPP on traditional issues. Only one characteristic (size) was significantly related to JPP on productivity issues, and none was related on QOW issues.¹²

It is somewhat surprising to find that union activists who expected their employers' financial condition to worsen in the future apparently were willing to join in cooperative programs to deal with traditional issues but not productivity issues. Perhaps the threat of harder times makes labor union activists reluctant to stray from traditional issues (even if this involves new approaches to traditional issues) to different and perhaps unfamiliar territory. This tendency may be exacerbated when the new territory is productivity, an area labor unionists often instinctively associate with more profits and fewer jobs. Parenthetically it should be noted that, contrary to our hypothesis, a bright financial future for the employer did

¹² Size is measured by the number of people employed in the plant or branch where the respondent worked.

not make local union activists significantly more willing to enter into joint programs with respect to QOW issues. Apparently, the prospect of increased organizational “slack” does not create strong urges to improve the quality of working life. This generalization might not hold, of course, if all the respondents were in organizations that had experienced “slack” from which they had actually extracted favorable wages, benefits, and working conditions over a period of years.

Small size seems to favor the development of joint programs to deal with productivity and traditional, but not QOW, issues. Perhaps small size breeds a degree of trust that is necessary to deal with “bread and butter” issues of work load, work speed, manning requirements, working hours, and the like, but this type of climate is not necessary to venture into the “softer” issues relevant to the quality of working life. It is not surprising that joint programs to deal with traditional issues were more favored by labor union activists employed in government and nonprofit organizations. The scope of bargaining is normally constrained in public sector employment, and local union activists may see joint programs as a way of expanding their organizations’ influence over traditional issues. This tendency, however, appears to be limited to traditional issues, because respondents employed in government were not more anxious than their counterparts in private firms to enter into joint programs to deal with productivity and QOW issues.¹³

¹³ For earlier statements in this vein, see Clinton S. Golden and Virginia D. Parker, *Causes of Industrial Peace Under Collective Bargaining* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), or James J. Healy, *Creative Collective Bargaining* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1966)

Union-management relations. Consistent with the findings on employer size, the potential for joint programs on productivity and traditional (but not QOW) issues appears to be enhanced when there is a general lack of hostility between the union and management.¹⁴ Bargaining structure seems not to significantly influence JPP for any type of issue, contrary to our hypothesis. This may reflect the crudeness of our measure of bargaining structure, however, rather than the actual state of affairs.

Conclusions and Implications

Three general conclusions can be drawn from the data. First, the degree of support for joint programs among labor union leaders varies widely depending upon the types of issues under consideration. This support is fairly high with respect to quality of work issues, moderately high with respect to productivity issues, and, as expected, quite low with respect to traditional issues. Second, the degree of support for joint programs is not explained by local union activists' views with respect to the importance of the issues involved or the effectiveness of their unions in dealing with the issues; it is, however, somewhat explained by the personal characteristics of the individuals involved, the structural features of their organizations, and the

¹⁴ In the present exploratory study, zero-order correlations probably provide more insight into the data than do multivariate techniques. However, since the structural variables were somewhat intercorrelated it was thought useful to sort out the best predictors of JPP for each type of issue by using forward-selection stepwise regression models with the .05 level of significance as the criterion for variable entry. See Fred N. Kerlinger and Edward J. Padhazur, *Multiple Regression in Behavioral Research* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973). The variables making an incremental contribution to explained variance were: (1) JPP-productivity issues (race, skill level, and lack of hostility in union-management relations), (2) JPP-QOW issues (skill level, per cent minority members in the union, and extent to which leaders represent members' interests), and (3) JPP-traditional issues (expected financial condition of the employer and form of ownership). All variables had the same signs as they had in the correlation analysis. Coefficients of determination (R^2), however, ranged only from .09 to .11.

nature of union-management relations. Third, the importance of the personal, structural, and relationship variables tends to vary depending on the type of issue. Certain personal and union characteristics seem to be related to the respondents' preferences for joint programs on productivity and QOW issues, whereas characteristics of the firm seem related to preferences for joint programs on traditional issues.

These conclusions must be regarded as tentative, given our limited sample and use of survey methodology which elicits verbal preferences that may not translate into workplace behavior. Nevertheless, several suggestions for those interested in joint programs can be offered. First, before deciding to launch such endeavors, one should carefully diagnose the importance workers attach to *specific* job-related issues so as to avoid investing resources in areas in which workers have little interest or would prefer their union avoid. If the decision is made to expand union-management relations to deal with productivity and QOW issues, substantial communications, training, and educational efforts will be needed at the local level to demonstrate the potential benefits of union involvement in these areas for the unconvinced segment of the work force. This unconvinced group will also have to be assured that there are adequate safeguards against the erosion of the formal bargaining process in dealing with traditional issues. In the long run, skeptical attitudes are likely to be changed by the achievement of tangible and meaningful payoffs.

Any group of local union officials choosing to confront these issues is likely to encounter a good deal of controversy among their constituents over whether it will be more beneficial to attempt handling the issues through the formal bargaining process or through a supplemental

joint program. Joint programs on QOW issues are likely to receive a more favorable response than are joint programs on productivity issues. These programs also are likely to receive the most favorable response in unions composed of white-collar, technical, and high wage employees. Apparently, internal political and organizational factors that have been stressed in the collective bargaining literature as limiting the potential for joint programs are a less important constraint on QOW issues, although they do seem to pose a barrier to the development of joint programs on productivity issues.

The attitudes of union activists toward joint programs with management is one that is potentially very important to those advocating programs of change to improve productivity or the quality of working life.¹⁵ The present study has begun to explore this issue, but obviously much remains to be done both conceptually and empirically.

¹⁵ Thomas A. Kochan and Lee D. Dyer, "A Model of Organizational Change in the Context of Union-Management Relations," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, XII (January, 1978), 159-178.

TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT "BEST WAY" FOR UNIONS TO
DEAL WITH SELECTED JOB-RELATED ISSUES

Issues related to:	"Best way" to handle		
	Joint programs	Collective bargaining	Union not involved
Productivity	52%	29%	19%
Adequate resources available	62	21	18
Productivity specifically	51	25	24
Work load/speed	44	42	14
Quality of work	63%	21%	16%
Control of work	54	27	19
Interesting work	68	16	16
Relationship with supervisors	66	19	15
Traditional	23%	73%	4%
Safety in workplace	41	57	2
Job promotion procedures	38	44	18
Grievance procedures	33	67	0
Working hours	31	66	3
Job security	12	86	2
Earnings	6	94	1
Fringe benefits	4	96	1

TABLE 2
CORRELATES OF UNION ACTIVISTS' PREFERENCES FOR JOINT PROGRAMS
OUTSIDE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TO HANDLE THREE TYPES OF ISSUES

Explanatory variables	Hypothesized relationship	Types of issues		
		Productivity	Quality of work	Traditional
<i>Cognitive variables</i>				
Importance of issues	+	.12	-.12	-.11
Issues perceived as integrative or distributive ^a	-	-.19**	-.09	-.19**
Collective bargaining effectiveness on issues	-	-.04	-.08	-.05
R ²		.06	.14	.22
<i>Structural variables</i>				
Personal characteristics				
Age	-	-.06	-.11	-.06
Education	+	.15*	.19**	-.02
Sex (male=1, female=0)	?	.03	.10	.06
Race (white=1, minority=0)	+	.24**	.18**	.05
Wage level	+	.02	.13*	-.05
Skill level (professional and technical=1, all others=0)	+	.20**	.19**	.09
Union characteristics				
Leaders represent members' interests	+	-.13*	-.19**	-.11
Security of leaders	+	-.06	.00	.10
Conflict over proposals	-	-.17**	-.12	-.01
Rank-and-file influence	+	-.09	.01	-.09
Per cent minority members	-	-.19**	-.23**	.01
Per cent female members	-	-.04	-.09	.01
Average wage of members	+	.04	.05	.01
Employer characteristics				
Future financial condition	- ^b	.03	.05	-.25**
Size	-	-.15*	.03	-.15*
Form of ownership (government and nonprofit=1, individual or family owned and corporation=0)	+	.03	.08	.21**
Union-management relations				
Lack of hostility	+	.15*	.07	.14*
Centralization of bargaining	+	-.09	-.03	.06
R ²		.20	.18	.18

*Significant at .05 level. **Significant at .01 level.

^a Higher values = more distributive.

^b + for QOW issues, - for productivity and traditional issues.

^aRichard E. Walton and Robert B. McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).