

REVIEWS

Bray, M and Taylor, V (Editors) *Managing labour? essays in the political economy of Australian industrial relations* Sydney, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986, 263 p.
Price: not stated.

This book was particularly interesting to a labour historian frustrated by the absence of both theoretical debate and much new research on labour history in New Zealand. Despite the focus upon Australian industrial relations there is considerable relevance for New Zealand in the discussion on how industrial relations have developed over the course of this century. Both countries developed very early centralised systems of conciliation and arbitration, about which much has been written.

The book is essentially a critique, from a Marxist perspective, of existing theories and research in industrial relations. Most research in Australia, the editors argue, represents "a prevailing orthodoxy with roots firmly located in a mix of detailed description, a limited consideration of theory and a problem agenda more attuned to management's labour problems, rather than the reverse". Such theory as does exist is predominantly pluralist, criticised for carrying "assumptions that social power is somehow equally distributed among a multiplicity of competing individuals and groups . . . (and having) failed to properly conceptualise the conflictual nature of relations between capital and labour . . .". Further, such research as has been done has concentrated heavily upon the workings of conciliation and arbitration.

It is time for the discipline, the editors propose, to move away from such a narrow focus and place industrial relations within a wider understanding of political economy. "As we see it, . . . to advance understanding of some feature of social life (of which industrial relations is part), requires that attention be given to the economic sphere, to the ideological and cultural spheres, to the part played by the state apparatus and to the historical dynamics of the situation." This would include utilising the insights from other disciplines such as industrial sociology, and the debates over the labour process and the role of the state in its relationship with the dominant capitalist class. The collection of essays within this book are intended to begin this process.

The first chapter, by Vic Taylor and Mark Bray, provides an excellent overview of the various theories within the field, and the dominant pluralist stance among Australian industrial relations writers. The first 5 chapters focus upon management and the authors all stress the need to study management objectives and strategy. Previous work on management, according to Duncan Macdonald in his chapter on "Management and the labour process in two New South Wales Government organisations" suffers from the pluralist conception "that management's objectives in industrial relations are (or should be) the development of 'good industrial relations'". But this is certainly not apparent from the subsequent case studies where management's objectives are more carefully considered.

Michael Quinlan provides an interesting account of managerial strategy and industrial relations in the Australian steel industry between 1945-1975. He convincingly shows how an aggressive management strategy for dealing with labour derived from a relatively privileged economic and political position for the industry which employed successive waves of migrant labour. Management was able to resist any moves towards workplace independence, and adopted a "minimum interaction strategy of a minimum benefits package and laying off workers as required". In this instance the highly centralised bargaining procedures suited the company very well. It is this point that is picked up by Howard Guille, later in the book, who provides a penetrating critique of the value of industrial relations to unions. In another interesting chapter Stephen Frenkel looks at the large corporations, and includes a fascinating section on the goals and subsequent behaviour and tactics of big business in their dealings with labour relations.

The last 4 chapters focus upon labour. In her chapter on the Telecom workers and their battle to retain the concept of service to the public and mediate automation, Claire Williams

has much to say that is applicable to the present corporatisation in New Zealand of various government departments. The different strategies employed by 2 unions seeking equal pay for women is the subject of a chapter by Margaret Gardner, who concludes with some interesting observations upon the position of women and women's issues within the broader union movement.

Given that New Zealand is currently in the throes of a new orthodoxy embracing a user-pays philosophy in public service, attacks upon existing wage bargaining in favour of market-led wage determination, and economic reconstruction entailing massive job losses in some industries, the plea by the authors of this volume for the study of industrial relations to be placed in a wider political economy framework appears so essential as not to need repeating. Yet the conclusion reached by Howard Guille seems not entirely inappropriate in New Zealand:

While unions and workers have been the real losers in the recent and still current crisis, industrial relations theories have been irrelevant and little more than apologies for it. Indeed, scholastic industrial relations carried on virtually oblivious to the changed circumstances and avoided Marxist critiques as ideological and corporatist ones as foreign. In the period of rising unemployment, restructuring of industries and the run down of the public sector, industrial relations writers were content to propose changes in arbitration, to recast union structure, to document the impact of technological changes and even, occasionally to stand on the sidelines and cheer valiant workers. It is an unenviable record . . .

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Edwards, Richard, Garonna, Paolo, and Todtling, Franz (Editors), *Unions in crisis and beyond: perspectives from six countries* Dover, Massachusetts, Auburn House, 1986, xii and 350pp. Price: £30 (hardback).

The economic, technological and political developments of the past decade or so have placed severe strains on trade unions in virtually all advanced industrialised democracies. The economic difficulties experienced since the first oil shock of the mid-1970s — characterised by slower output and productivity growth, large fiscal deficits, higher inflation and a return to mass unemployment in many countries — have tended to reduce union membership, weaken union bargaining strength and slow the pace of improvements in real wages. At the same time, the labour movement has been confronted with major challenges arising from rapid technological innovation, substantial changes in patterns of ownership and in economic structure, and a significant increase in employer militancy. Added to this, the political climate in most OECD countries has become much more antagonistic to trade union activities and aspirations with many governments passing legislation aimed at "freeing up" the labour market and reducing union power. Needless to say, such developments pose serious questions about the appropriate role, indeed the very existence, of trade unions and western societies: Are unions to be regarded as a more or less temporary phenomenon in the history of industrial capitalism? How can trade unions operate effectively in the increasingly competitive world economy, and in the new era of flexible specialisation rather than mass production? How should they respond to the challenge posed by the current tide of neo-conservatism? And what is the likely shape of trade unionism in the future?

This recently published volume by Edwards *et al.* is but one of a growing number of books and articles concerned with such issues. Here 10 industrial relations experts from various countries have come together to assess the current situation facing trade unions and the way they have responded to the adverse economic and political circumstances of the past decade. Six countries have been examined in depth, namely, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Austria and Sweden. The rationale for this selection lies in the authors' desire to compare and contrast developments in each of what they regard as the 3 main kinds of western-style trade unionism: the case where unions act mainly as bargaining agents for particular groups of workers (United States/United Kingdom); the case where unions serve as constituent elements in systems of "political unionism" (France/Italy); and the case where unions have been incorporated to a considerable extent into social-democratic governmental

arrangements (Austria/Sweden) (see p. 10). In many respects this is an interesting selection for it enables an evaluation of the experiences of trade unionism in markedly diverse institutional and political settings. On the other hand, it can be argued that the 3 categories delineated by the authors are somewhat artificial, and unsatisfactory for analytical purposes. After all, there are huge differences between the union movement and the industrial relations framework in the United States and the United Kingdom. Indeed, the United Kingdom model has as much in common with that of Italy and France as it does with the United States. Likewise, a strong case can be made that state/union relations are very different in Sweden and Austria and that it is inappropriate to treat them as if they were members of the same family.

Conceptual models aside, there is much to commend in this study. For example, each of the country analyses provides a wealth of data on the current state of the union movement. Trends in union membership and union penetration are well documented. Recent changes in bargaining structures and union and employer strategies are discussed in detail. And developments relating to industrial relations legislation, employment protection and the role of the state (if any) in dispute resolution and wage determination are outlined and evaluated. Moreover, each of the country analyses includes a brief assessment of the likely prospects and future directions of the union movement during the remainder of the century. On the whole, these assessments are informative, thought provoking and persuasive.

Despite these positive features, the quality of the study is marred by the failure of the authors to provide a systematic overview of recent trends and developments in industrial relations and a thorough-going comparative analysis. The introductory chapter by Edwards, although useful, is short and does not attempt to integrate, or supply an overall assessment of the evidence arising from the 6 country studies. In this respect, the study would have benefited greatly from a comprehensive concluding chapter. Equally disappointing is the fact that developments in countries other than the 6 examined are virtually ignored. The reader is thus wondering to what extent some of the trends identified in certain countries are peculiar to these countries or part of a much wider international pattern. For example, how widespread is the apparent waning of working class consciousness which has been noted in several countries? To what extent have recent innovations in Swedish economic policy, such as the introduction of wage-earner funds, influenced union movements elsewhere? How can one account for the fact that the economic difficulties experienced by Austria in recent years have strengthened the social partnership, whereas the reverse has been the case in most other countries? These and many other questions are not adequately addressed.

There is also a striking absence of theorising in some of the chapters. A good illustration of this is the fact that the chapter on the United Kingdom makes no mention of the large and burgeoning literature on corporatism. Nor does it consider the likely pattern of state/union relations in the event of the Thatcher Government being defeated. For example, is a corporatist approach along Austrian lines or similar to that attempted during the Social Contract of the 1970s a viable option for a future Labour Government, and if not, why not? And if corporatism is to be ruled out, then what kind of politico-economic strategy is available to a centre-left administration? Perhaps indicative of the extent to which such issues have been ignored and theoretical concerns eschewed is Edwards' claim in the introductory chapter that, in contrast to most of the other countries studied, no accord was established in the post-war era in Britain between the union movement and the government (p. 11). One can only assume that he has never heard of the Social Contract, or, if he has, that he considers it to be of little consequence.

Overall, however, this is a useful comparative study. It provides a good introduction to the systems of labour relations in the 6 countries examined, and it describes very clearly the many critical issues which must be addressed by trade unions if they are to meet the challenges posed by an increasingly hostile intellectual and economic environment.

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Frenkel, Stephen J and Coolican, Alice *Unions against capitalism? a sociological comparison of the Australian building and metal workers' unions*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1984, 350p.

Unions against capitalism seeks to analyse and compare 2 of Australia's largest and most militant unions. The first part of the book examines the context in which unions exist and

operate, the role of the state, the unions' structures, and employer attitudes. The second part analyses the policies and tactics of union officials and discusses union ideology. It also includes 9 detailed studies of disputes and is probably the section which readers will find most useful.

The problem with the book is that academic comparisons rarely work and this study is no exception to the rule. In theory, it sounds like a good idea to examine intimately the operations of the Metalworkers Union and the Building Workers Union and draw conclusions from the comparison, but in practice the result is confusing and sometimes disjointed.

The book is packed with information and every aspect of the 2 unions' activity is minutely analysed (350 pages of it), yet names are never mentioned and the book remains curiously impersonal. It is as if the 2 unions actually do operate along the lines of the organisation theory models described in the text rather than in the quirkish, sometimes idiosyncratic way we know they in fact do work. Whilst I am not a supporter of the "great man in history" position, too little regard has been paid to the personalities involved. Less than half a page is devoted to discussion of the 2 dominating figures in the unions and only brief reference is made to the left parties to which these officials belong. The differences between the parties are inadequately analysed and the authors dwell on the obvious international differences rather than on the more subtle differences of style and leadership. The most significant difference for the union movement between the 2 relevant parties, the SPA (Socialist Party of Australia) and the CPA (Communist Party of Australia), was not their international stances but their differences in style of organisation within the union movement. Thus the SPA leadership of the BWIU tightly controlled the union and carried out cautious and in many ways conservative industrial policies whereas the CPA, with more adventurous industrial policies was unable to do more than merely "influence" the AMWU. The "tight ship" approach was not only impossible for the CPA but not considered particularly desirable.

My major problem with this book obviously boils down to a difference with the authors about the importance of ideology in a structural analysis of an organisation. You cannot ignore the implications for a union of a leadership credo which reviles "left adventurism", espouses "unity" and "solidarity" and practices lowest common denominator politics.

Another problem the authors run into is that their knowledge of the 2 unions in NSW is vast but their understanding of the greater trade union movement and more specifically the way the 2 industries operate outside of NSW is not as good. For instance, when the authors discuss hostility between the skilled (BWIU) and unskilled (BLF) workers in the building industry they dismiss ideological differences as unimportant and concentrate on 4 other "organisational" aspects such as size and new technology. Such an approach fails to recognise that the BLF and BWIU co-exist peacefully in those states such as Queensland and Western Australia where the leaderships are under different ideological influences. Surely if factors such as relative union sizes and the introduction of new technology were to create hostility, then such a manifestation would be Australia-wide, not confined by state boundaries?

The authors argue that though it would be tempting to explain the hostility between the 2 unions in NSW by the fact that the BLF is pro-Peking and the BWIU pro-Moscow, this cannot be so because relations were probably just as hostile in the period 1969-73 when a pro-CPA leadership controlled the BLF. Frenkel and Coolican fail to understand that 1969 was the crucial year which marked the beginning of the split between the CPA and the SPA and consequently the end of the previously amicable relationship between the 2 unions.

Little is written about the 2-way relationship between the unions and the Australian Labor Party. In fact the influence of the unions, particularly the metalworkers on the recent policy of the Labor government is mostly ignored. The famous ALP-ACTU Accord of 1983 was mainly architected by Laurie Carmichael of the metalworkers and is jokingly referred to as "the metalworkers' revenge".

Another aspect of union organisation is peculiarly ignored. When discussing full time officials there is no mention whatever of the increasingly common practice of allowing university graduates to become employees of the union and eventually decision-making elected officials without any genuine rank-and-file experience. Whilst both unions' rules allow this, the metalworkers do not let it happen whereas the BWIU sees no problem in it.

Minor arguments I have with the authors are the virtual absence of discussion about women's activity in the unions (although 8.3 percent of AMWU members are female). In fact, when discussing full time officials they refer to them as "he" when I know of at least one female officer in the AMWU.

I also must quibble with their use of the words "part-time" when they are referring to honorary officials. The officials they describe are not paid part-time officials but rank and

filers with genuine honorary positions. In Australia there are cases where genuine part-time officials exist and the distinction should be kept.

I keep wishing Coolican and Frenkel had read some anarchist, or even feminist literature on power. Like most industrial relations specialists their concept of power is structured and formal. They accept that a mentor system for full time officials operates in both unions but show little interest in the effect this has on the organisation. Does it produce clones of the present leadership? Does it encourage yes-men (or women)? What happens when a client breaks faith with his mentor? Are these clients chosen because they have no independent power base with which to threaten the leadership? Is this why university students without rank and file contacts are often preferred in these mentor situations?

Sometimes within the excessively formal and academic language of the book, human concepts such as friendship, pubs, argument etc disappear. The ethos of the building industry unions is different to that of metalworkers because building workers move around from job to job. They end up knowing each other. Metalworkers can spend all their lives in the one shop and never feel part of a greater "metal industry ethos".

However it is unfair to review a book and argue that it should have been a different book and that is exactly what I have been doing. The strengths of *Unions against capitalism* are that it seeks to set up an overriding framework within which unions may be examined and analysed. This is in itself a daunting task. The authors have managed the huge amount of information involved with skill and considerable accuracy. It is certainly a worthwhile book to have written but it does exemplify many of the traps involved in writing about Australian unions.

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