

## Compte rendu

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*Varieties of Unionism. Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy,*

edited by Carola M. FREGE and John KELLY, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 215 pp., ISBN: 0-19-927014-7.

This book compares union strategies for revitalization at the national, sectoral and local levels in a number of industrialized countries (the USA, UK, Germany, Italy and Spain), with the aim of providing analyses with policy implications for unions. The main strategies identified are organizing, labour-management partnership, political action, reform of union structures, coalition-building and international solidarity. There are ten chapters, each (except for the first, written by Lowell Turner) provided by a pair, or group of three authors, dealing with these strategies in a thematic way across the five countries examined. The book is rounded off by the editors' conclusion entitled 'Varieties of unionism' where the editors engage with the now well-known 'varieties of capitalism' idea.

Turner's introduction opens the volume with an up-beat, optimistic and positive tone. Acknowledging the reality of union decline, especially in the USA, he stresses the urgent need for the trend to be reversed and emphasizes the extent and variety of the efforts made by unions in these countries to revitalize themselves. 'Thus', he says, in a breath-taking generalization from the five national cases used here that illustrates his approach of making large claims that go beyond his evidence, 'We find active efforts at labour movement revitalization everywhere in the global North' (p. 6). In reality, of course, important parts of the 'global North' such as the entire Russian-speaking world and Japan, are simply not dealt with.

In the chapters that follow, many authors approach their subjects in a more balanced way and make their formulations with more care, even if Turner-like optimism is sometimes (as we show below) in evidence. Chapters

two and three are general and focus on 'Conceptualizing labour union revitalization' (Martin Behrens, Kerstin Hamann and Richard Hurd), 'Union strategies in comparative context' by the editors. Chapter four, 'Organizing the unorganized' is by Ed Heery and Lee Adler, while chapter five (Michael Fichter and Ian Greer) deals with what some might call organizing's antithesis, 'social partnership', asking whether it is, in fact, a tool for revitalization. Chapter six (Kerstin Hamann and John Kelly) looks at unions as political actors. Chapters seven and eight discuss internal re-structuring and external coalition-building ('How does restructuring contribute to union revitalization' by Martin Behrens, Richard Hurd and Jeremy Waddington and 'The new solidarity? Trade union coalition-building in five countries' by Carola Frege, Ed Heery and Lowell Turner). Chapter nine by Nathan Lillie and Miguel Martinez Lucio is entitled 'International union revitalization: the role of national union approaches' and is valuable because it achieves a more nuanced (and therefore useful) analysis than some other chapters.

Three chapters are now reviewed to show how the book's themes are handled: union strategies in comparative context by the editors, the chapter on re-structuring, and the conclusions. The first of these identifies six possible strategies and considers two of the overall themes: why do different union movements adopt varying mixes of the book's five strategies and how can their different degrees of success be explained? Why, for example, is the 'organizing' approach more commonly adopted in the 'Liberal Market Economies' than in the other countries? The answer lies, the editors suggest, in

a combination of structural variables interacting with the 'historical embeddedness of union movements' (p. 40). Thus, organizing is likely to feature as a central method of revitalization where bargaining coverage is closely tied to union density.

The chapter on the important subject of re-structuring distinguishes between 'external structure', i.e. the union movement's boundaries, and two types of 'internal structure': union governance and administration or management and resource allocation. Re-structuring, the authors suggest, may be categorized according to the motivations for change and may be aggressive, defensive, or transformative. The latter category is favoured by the authors because it is not designed to protect vested interests but rather to involve all constituents and prospective constituents in change processes. Re-structuring is examined at the national confederation, union and at the pan-European levels. We are told (p. 131) that unions have 'pursued mergers and introduced internal reforms in governance and administration with the clear intent to achieve transformative results'. However, it is far from clear to this reviewer that union mergers in Germany or Britain were conducted as transformative measures and indeed, the opposite could well be argued, including in the cases analyzed here. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, the lens is rather rose-tinted.

The conclusion attempts to make out an argument for how cross-country variations in union strategies and revitalization outcomes contribute to the current neo-institutionalist 'varieties of capitalism' theories. It does so by asserting the importance of union strategies and their interactions with those of other actors. How this is going

to help unions is obscure. On the other hand, this conclusion strikes a very different note from that struck by Turner and some other contributors by arguing (realistically, it seems to this reviewer) that the current 'revitalization' has modest proportions when seen in the historical perspective of comparison with the revivals of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Overall, the collection offers a useful antidote to overly deterministic accounts of trade unionism in the countries examined based on environmental features. It helpfully pulls together aspects of a number of national experiences and examines their inter-relationships. However, the usefulness to trade unionists hoped for by Lowell Turner is open to question because important strategic approaches are overlooked, possibly because of the orientation towards a discussion with 'varieties of capitalism'. Thus, the book does not even touch on important aspects of unions' revitalization such as the strategic use of trade union education. Union education, with its distinctive methods and approach, is a dynamic tool for change in some unions involving the unions themselves (and not just the participants) in learning. This has occurred in many unions in the Russian-speaking part of the 'global North', where the ILO and Global Union Federations have made major efforts to use union education to involve, organize and learn from their own members and indeed non-members. Even in some unions in the countries discussed in this book, unions have attempted to use union education as a strategic tool. There are more strategies for union revitalization available than this book allows.

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