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Recensions

Book Reviews

Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies

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In March 1996, the AFL-CIO and Cornell University jointly sponsored a rare event—a conference bringing together academics and union activists to share research and experiences about organizing. This collection of 20 papers from that conference cannot capture the lively discussions among the 200 participants, but it does provide a remarkably complete and contemporary view of the state of organizing, and therefore the state of the unions in the United States.

An introductory chapter is followed by 20 chapters divided into sections on building a framework for sustainable organizing; community-based organizing outside the National Labor Relations Board procedures; ways that unions involve members and allies in organizing; determinants of workers' support for unionization; and organizing strategies in selected industries.

A common theme expressed throughout the collection is that the revival of the American labor movement, the restoration of the unions' size and influence, depends on nothing less than a massive organizing effort. And this means not only devoting greater money and manpower to organizing campaigns, but experimenting with new tactics, developing comprehensive strategies, and transforming unions into organizations designed for growth rather than institutional maintenance.

The enormity of the organizing task, well known by now in the industrial relations community, is briefly described in the first chapter. Presently, only 11 percent of the private sector labor force in the United States is unionized. Unions must organize 300,000 new members just to keep up with the growth of the labor force and offset the loss of thousands of union jobs because of layoffs and plant closings. Employers' opposition to unions is intense. Half of certification elections are lost and the number of elections is down sharply since the early 1980s. Nearly a third of union organizing victories do not result in first contracts. A return to levels of union density of thirty years ago, more than twice the present rate, can be achieved only through a tremendous increase in organizing activity and success. The next 20 chapters show how this might be done.

Edited books are usually evaluated in terms of the logical sequence, similar styles, and common themes and perspectives of the chapters. But for this volume, a better measure is diversity; how each chapter in its own way reveals a dimension of organizing so that in combination they capture the size, complexity, inherent difficulty and excitement of what the unions must do. In these terms, this book is a huge success.

Innovations in organizing, such as UNITE's workers' centers or the Service Employees Justice for Janitors, are described in detail but traditional organizing through labor board certification is not neglected. Some authors compare and evaluate tactics with case studies; others test behavioral theories with data analyses. Individual chapters deal with organizing in industrial contexts as diverse as steel, construction, coal mining and the public sector.

The scope of topics is extraordinary. For example, Katherine Sciacchitano tells us how the United Electrical Workers managed to get its first contract at a manufacturing plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin with a majority African American workforce by forming alliances with community groups. Also using case studies, Ronald Peters and Theresa Merrill isolate the important role of clergy and other religious persons in successful organizing campaigns at a large airport and a medical center. In contrast, Roger Weikle, Hoyt Wheeler and John McClendon use interview data to test a theory of why and when workers take collective action. Writing about an entirely different dimension of organizing, Bill Fletcher and Richard Hurd describe how the transition from the service to organizing models of unionism affected locals of the Service Employees. In a provocative study, Dan Cornfield, Holly McCammon, Darren McDaniel and Dean Eatman analyze

survey results showing that workers who are immersed in community organizations outside the workplace are unlikely to support unions during organizing drives. And in one article, Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich analyze certification election data to evaluate union tactics in private sector, while in another they consider tactics in the public sector, again using election data.

Throughout this collection, readers will find studies of the aspects of organizing that receive short shrift in the academic literature, e.g., alternatives to labor board procedures, the union members' role in organizing, the contributions to organizing by community organizations and union allies, and the impact of a resurgence in organizing on life in the local and national union. Fortunately, the editors and contributors cared about making their work accessible to a wide audience. The writing is clear and jargon-free, and there is a comprehensive index and combined bibliography (two features seldom found in edited volumes).

This is the state of the art in union organizing. Even the most experienced organizer will learn something new from this collection and it is hard to imagine how courses on contemporary American unionism or organizing can be taught without it.

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