The Anthropology of Organized Labor in the United States

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Abstract

Anthropological research has produced a number of robust find-ings about organized labor. National and state policies are the chief determinates of unions' power to organize workers for concerted action to redress the imbalance between those who provide labor and those who control its use through ownership or management of capital. Unions are effective when workers do not accept man-agement paradigms of shared interest; the organization of produc-tion promotes worker self-organization; discussion among workers is possible; unions show members how to address problems with space, ideology, and management manipulations of emotions; and unions draw on community contacts and social relations beyond the workplace. Unions are ineffective when they are corrupt, racist, and inattentive to change. Servicing and organizing functions of unions are contradictory. These and other findings leave many topics that anthropologists have not ethnographically explored and define an agenda for future research.

INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL FINDINGS ABOUT LABOR UNIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

In spite of their various theoretical perspectives and methodological predispositions, anthropologists' findings about labor unions in the United States have converged to show that unions are effective (*a*) when workers see their interests as separate from those of management (Kasmir 1991), (*b*) when the necessities of the organization of production promote worker self-organization (Collins 1974; Kasmir 2005; Pilcher 1971, 1972; Wells 1996), (*c*), when it is possible for workers to discuss their concerns with each other (Kamper 2003, Brodkin & Strathmann 2004), (*d*) when laws and practices and policies are not aimed specifically at hurting unions (Durrenberger 1996, Wells 1996), and (*e*) when unions organize horizontally and show people how to address emotional, space, and ideological issues at work (Brodkin & Strathmann 2004). Unions are ineffective when they are corrupt, racist, and inattentive to changes in the surrounding political economy (Fink 1998, Grenier et al. 1994, Stepick et al. 1994).

Informal, local work-based groups are the key to organizing (Brodkin 1988, Brodkin & Strathmann 2004, Grenier et al. 1994, Kasmir 1991, Wells 1996) although success may depend on wider community support (Collins 1974; Zlolnisky 2003, 2006a,b). These groups and networks may be largely kin based (Pilcher 1972, Richardson 2006). In short, unions build on existing local networks as well as wider community support in a neutral or positive public policy atmosphere that does not cede overwhelming power to management.

A corporate-sponsored cultural revolution established the concept of markets in American culture as a means of justifying corporate power (Doukas 2003). The concept of the market is symbolic and plays a ritual role in supporting prevailing practices and justifies authoritarian methods of labor control in global systems (Collins 2002, Griffith 1987), and it therefore has a direct bearing on unions' effectiveness.

Although the question of investigator objectivity arises only when scientific research lends credence to subordinate rather than more powerful groups, one methodological finding is that investigator neutrality is not required for valid and reliable research results. On the contrary, involvement increases scientific validity and reliability (Barger & Reza 1987, 1989; Brodkin 1988; Singer 1995; Stephen 2003).

Anthropological research reinforces the finding that protest and reforms are not effective to change patterns of oppression because they last only as long as pressure does. Only structural changes can be effective, but external solutions of any kind imposed from the outside are not effective. Anthropological collaboration can be effective if (*a*) it places local situations in the global context (Weinbaum 2001), (*b*) recognizes the role of culture (Kasmir 1991, 2005; Stephen 2003), (*c*) acknowledges that people contest cultures (Singer 1995, Stephen 2003), and (*d*) uncovers relevant causal relationships and attends to relationships of power (Singer 1995, Stephen 2003).

In spite of these robust findings, the many practical, theoretical, and ethnographic issues that we have not explored in detail define an agenda for future research. Research on labor unions in the United States has challenged some theoretical formulations of anthropology and shown the robustness of others. I discuss these in more detail later.

DEFINING THE PHENOMENON

A wide range of ethnographic research converges on the conclusion that the relationships of power that law and policy define are the most important dimensions in shaping union activity and thought (Durrenberger

1996, Stephen 2003, Weinbaum 2001, Wells 1996, Zloliniski 2003). The differences in context between, for instance, the corporatist states of Scandinavia and Northern Europe and the United States are so great as to define distinct phenomena under different legal regimes and in different countries.

I emphasize those works that focus on unions as social, political, cultural, and economic phenomena. Sometimes we see unions in the background when ethnographers focus on work situations (Durrenberger 1996, Fink 1998, Foner 1994, Griffith 1995, Newman 1988, Stull et al. 1995, Wells 1996) or a locale (Zlolinski 1994, 1998, 2006b; Krissman 1995, 1995–1996, 1996).

Many universities have departments of labor and industrial relations to prepare students for service in organized labor and in the human resources field of management. These departments are usually interdisciplinary and include approaches and methods from sociology, history, women's studies, management, business, human relations, industrial psychology, and social psychology. Although associations for labor studies exist and the body of literature from journals and university presses is constantly growing, there does not seem to be a coherent shared body of theory or method. Their focus on organized labor unites them. This literature is only tangentially related to anthropology, although virtually all anthropologists who address organized labor draw on it.

WHAT UNIONS ARE

The chief goal of the union movement is to organize workers for concerted action in support of their interests to redress the power imbalance between those who provide labor and those who control the conditions of its use through their ownership or management of productive resources. Because workers and owners of capital do not share interests, this relationship is necessarily adversarial. One question is what legal or extralegal means each can bring to bear in its struggle against the

other. When law enforcement is lax, corporations often break the law (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a).

American unions have two dimensions: organizing and servicing. Organizing is the use of personnel and resources to increase the strength of the union by organizing more work sites and workers to control of a greater portion of the labor market in an area or industry. Organizing can extend to electoral and legislative politics when unions mobilize support for candidates or causes. Servicing is negotiating and enforcing contracts that state the terms and conditions of union members' work. It entails policing of contracts to be sure that employers are in compliance and processing grievances to resolve alleged contract violations.

A union local is a territorial branch of a larger national or international organization chartered to negotiate, enforce, and service contracts on behalf of its members. Representatives of members at work sites address immediate problems such as minor disputes with management. They may be called delegates, or stewards, or some other term. (Nomenclature varies by union.) I use the term steward. Some employees of the local serve at the pleasure of the President and act as paralegals to back up stewards, negotiate contracts, and arbitrate the cases that the local supports (Erem 2001). These employees are often called union representatives (shortened to reps) or business agents (BAs).

The appearance of democracy demands terms by which members can seem to elect union presidents and officers (Waldinger et al. 1998). Union presidents hire and fire their staff (reps) and depend on reps to deliver members' votes to keep the presidents and their selected officers in office. Control of blocks of votes guarantees access to and influence on any person who depends on votes for the office—a local president or aspiring president (Fletcher & Hurd 1998).

If stewards and reps work well together on behalf of members, they cultivate feelings of mutual respect and loyalty. Especially

through grievance handling, reps can foster the idea that they are personally responsible for the job security and well-being of members at their sites and that the members are obliged to the rep, obligations the rep can call on for votes or other support (Combs-Schilling 1980). The more loyal units a rep has, the greater the number of votes she can control, and the larger her "base." The larger a rep's base, the more power she has, and the more likely she is to achieve a position as an officer (Durrenberger & Erem 1999a).

Paradoxically, taking on the extra duties of office detracts officers' time and attention from the units that make up the base. If the officer has to assign those units to another rep, she has to take some other measures to ensure the continuing loyalty of stewards, chief stewards, and members to herself as well as to ensure the loyalty of the rep that takes over her service responsibilities.

Thus, the interoffice politics of personalism are more salient to officers than they are to other reps. Thus officers, many of whom continue to act as reps for major units of the local, if for no other reason than to continue their cultivation of a strong base, are jealous of anything that might affect their relations with "their" stewards and members or the president (Combs-Schilling 1980, Durrenberger & Erem 1999a, Erem & Durrenberger 2000).

Implementing the organizing model requires the cooperation of reps to recruit and train stewards to replace the reps' service functions (Durrenberger 2002). Stewards may see this as a sign of weakness and a lack of support (Durrenberger & Erem 2005b, Zlolniski 2006b), whereas staff may see it as radically changing the terms of the politics of the local because it threatens their base by reorganizing the relationships of obligation and power (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a).

Emphasis on organizing reverses the polarity of obligation because the rep is obliged to the stewards for servicing their work sites. In the organizing model, real power is based in the work site and on how successfully stewards organize the members for concerted action, not on the personal relationships a rep develops with human resources managers to resolve grievances (Durrenberger 2002). Reps become less relevant to union officers because officers look to stewards to turn out the vote for them at election time. The organizing model thus makes leadership vulnerable to open elections (Durrenberger 2004). Leadership stability depends either on closing the election process or on a secure tried-and-true servicing model in which elections are by definition more or less closed.

In its reversal of the polarity of obligation, an organizing model threatens the central assumptions and practices of the locals' politics (Durrenberger & Erem 1999a, 2005a; Zloliknski 2006b). In the servicing model, reps need to maintain relations with stewards and members. Reps can convert these relationships into the potential for concerted action to gain negotiating power and the strength to service the unit between contracts. This requires that reps develop long-term personal relationships upon which they can base trust and credibility with often skeptical members and stewards.

In 1995 a four-year study that Service Employees International Union (SEIU) commissioned concluded that members prefer resources to go toward getting them better contracts, wages, benefits, and job protection. Leaders want to implement an organizing model to organize unorganized workers and to elect labor-friendly politicians. The two models of union behavior are at odds because each requires different uses of the same scarce resources such as money for salaries (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a, Wells 1996).

THE PLACE OF ORGANIZED LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES

Bronfenbrenner et al. (1998) summarize the state of the American labor movement. The organized share of the workforce peaked in 1946, the year before the Taft-Hartley amendments to the Wagner Act limited union organizing and mutual aid tactics and

empowered employers with new means of opposing unions by effectively banning strikes during the term of a contract and requiring unions to be attentive to servicing rather than organizing.

Worker disinterest, individualism, or some inscrutable difference between the United States and European countries do not account for this decline. Rather, it is due to well-organized, massive, and often violent opposition (Durrenberger 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1996; Johnston 1994; Vanneman & Cannon 1987). Other factors in labor's decline are structural, such as the flight of capital to low-wage countries and areas of the United States in which unions are weak, the shift from an industrial to a service economy, and the changes of law and administration that have moved unions toward being bureaucracies for handling quasi-legal cases (Durrenberger & Erem 1997a,b; 2005a). Union leadership gained the stability of the servicing model at the price of organizing power, but because that guaranteed and enhanced their positions of power, and a predictable if closed community of power, they were willingly complicit.

Economic factors account for only a third of the decline (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, p. 3). Much of the rest is due to the antiunion offensive of the 1970s and 1980s and the allied industry of consultants to keep enterprises union-free (Levitt & Conrow 1993). This pattern of class warfare has recently been enhanced. The Bush administration targeted unions because of their opposition to his economic policies and attempted to impose financial reporting rules that were so complex and so far beyond the usual practice for corporations or nonprofits that a federal judge stayed their implementation (Kaplan 2004).

Cohen & Hurd (1998) outline a general pattern of worker intimidation that Fantasia (1989) demonstrates ethnographically. Wolf (1999) discussed in his interpretations of Kwakutil, Nazis, and Aztecs the uses of power in the pursuit of class interests; his political ecology provides a dynamic theoretical framework for understanding labor movement in

the United States, although relatively few anthropologists have structured their research in these terms.

Sociologist Rick Fantasia argues that the bureaucratic routines imposed by Taft-Hartley for unions to provide member services channel conflict so that solidarity emerges only when workers must rely on such cohesion as a means to oppose employers outside these formal bureaucratic channels. Combs-Schilling's (1980) research with United Auto Workers (UAW) reinforces this view. Fantasia argues that in extraprocessual events, to use Bohannan's (1958) term, solidarity emerges; but under normal working conditions, there is no space for it. Durrenberger's (2002) study of Chicago stewards affirms this finding. Thus everyday routine action reflects less interest in unions and organizing than polls indicate (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998).

However, many ethnographic studies show that organizing potential is related to the networks that form around work routines and other daily relationships (Brodkin 1988; Brodkin & Strathmann 2004; Collins 1974; Pilcher 1971, 1972; Wells 1996; Zlolniski 2003, 2006b).

Economic and policy changes may have set the framework for the decline of American unions, but unions failed to respond even when they had the resources to do so. Some understood that they could not afford to wait until the climate was less hostile (Erem 2001). SEIU and the UAW bought many service workers and public sector workers into the labor movement. In 1995 Sweeney of SEIU and his slate were elected to lead the AFL-CIO on their promise to organize "at an unprecedented pace and scale."

Even though they committed significant resources to this effort (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998), the tension between allocating resources to organizing new work sites as opposed to using them to finance political action for those already organized was central to the decisions of some constituents to withdraw from the AFL-CIO in the summer of

UAW: United Auto Workers

AFL-CIO: American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations

2005 to form the Change to Win Federation to work toward organizing more workers at more work sites. Social movement theory offers one theoretical framework for understanding this federation and other aspects of labor such as corporate campaigns and even mobilization within work sites (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a).

WAYS OF ORGANIZING LABOR AND KINDS OF LABOR ORGANIZATIONS

Ethnography reflects a long-standing distinction in the United States between skilled labor organized as crafts and less-skilled labor as a factor of production (Brodkin 1988, Combs-Schilling 1980, Pilcher 1972, Stepick et al. 1994). Some use the word "Fordism" to mean the organization of relatively unskilled labor to complete industrial tasks in complex organizations of machines and people to produce things. The guiding principle is thus that successive waves of mechanization replace all skilled components of production processes.

Unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) historically organized workers at such industrial work sites. The organizing goal was for every worker at a site to belong to a single union that would establish the conditions of work and remuneration with management on behalf of the workers represented by the union. These organizations recognized that management considered all labor to be interchangeable, one factor of production in a complex process.

In contrast are those tasks that resist deskilling such as wiring buildings, masonry, glazing, plumbing, and the various levels and types of carpentry from framing to finishing, and medicine. Such trades traditionally organized as separate crafts under the AFL with a hiring process or hiring hall through which anyone wishing to use that craft would obtain labor (Pilcher 1972, Stepick et al. 1994).

Whereas a single union would represent all workers at a site under the CIO model, under the AFL crafts model, each specialty would have its own union. For instance, in a hospital, nurses, technicians, dietary workers, housekeeping workers, maintenance workers, and landscape workers would each have a separate union. Or some might have unions and others not.

The federation that withdrew from the AFL-CIO in the summer of 2005 included both types of unions. Recently, as industrial forms of organization have replaced craft forms, the distinction between the two types of labor and organizations has become less clear. Thus, some hospitals are organized as industrial plants with all workers from janitors to nurses in a single union. Lawyers, paralegals, and support staff may be in a single bargaining unit or at least the same union (Durrenberger 2001a). Pulskamp (2006) discusses the organization of computer programmers, Breda (1997) discusses nurses, and Foner (1993, 1994, 1995) discusses nursing home workers. One question this ethnography highlights is to what extent "professionals" share interests with others in the same bargaining units and to what extent their professional status is a delusion when their work relations are proletarianized (Pulskamp 2006).

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Broad anthropological approaches to unions include political ecology, practice theory, collective action theory, social movement theory, and applied or public anthropology.

There are a variety of styles within the general approach of political ecology. Wolf (1999), for instance, explored the relationships between how people think about the world to make it intelligible and the organizations of their economic and political interactions. He investigated how cultural configurations articulate with power to arrange the settings and domains of social and economic life, especially the allocation and use of labor. Beyond describing ideologies in cultural terms, he argued, we must also understand

how they articulate with the organizational measures and material resources that they try to affect or transform. Wolf did not show the interworkings of ideology, organization of labor, and disposition of products in his three examples so the complex dynamic that Wolf articulated remains an abstract if credible argument, which has informed much of the work of Durrenberger & Erem (1999a,b, 2005a,b). Lave's practice theory (e.g., 1988) goes beyond Wolf's conclusions and offers more theoretical treatment than he does and helps articulate Wolf's conceptual structure with ethnographic observations (Durrenberger 1997, Durrenberger & Erem 1999a,b, 2005a,b).

Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that people do not learn by transference of abstract knowledge but by practice, by moving from peripheral participation to more central and expert roles in communities of practice, people who recognize and validate certain kinds of skilled activity. Transference of abstractions does not change people's minds or behavior, but changing people's everyday lives to involve them continuously and progressively in communities of practice does effect such changes. These concrete situations provide the basis for identity formation (Holland et al. 1998). Wolf poses significant questions, and Lave provides a theoretical means of answering them. Chicago union members' conceptual models of their union differ, for instance, depending on the realities of power and organization at their various work sites and at the same work sites at different times (Durrenberger 1997; Durrenberger & Erem 1999a, 1999b, 2005a; Erem & Durrenberger 2000).

Another relevant dimension to political ecology in anthropology, which has not been much used in the study of unions, is political economist Eleanor Ostrom's collective action theory, relevant because workers organize unions to achieve collective goals. Acheson (2003) provides an accessible anthropological review of Ostrom and her colleagues' theoretical reflection, experimenta-

tion, and ethnographic exploration of issues that arise from collective action (e.g., Ostrom 1997, Ostrom et al. 1994, Ostrom & Walker 2003).

Because the chief goal of contemporary American unions is to negotiate and enforce contracts that specify the terms of work for their members, a collective purpose, this is one plausible theoretical framework for the organization of research on unions. McCay (1998, p. 193) observes that the limitations of the work of these political-economy theorists are the "high and sometimes misleading levels of abstraction from empirical cases," which often omit significant details about how political and economic factors are embedded in social relations and cultural constructs. She writes that their perspective is narrowly focused on institutions as constraints that define rules of the games rather than how institutions both restrain and empower people and establish values that create sense and meaning, how institutions shape the everyday activities that shape their cognitions.

On the basis of theoretical speculation and ethnographic analysis, Ostrom concludes (1997, pp. 5–6) that self-organization to provide public goods or to manage common-pool resources is highly unlikely. However, others in the field argue that self-organization is not only possible, but effective unless there are institutional barriers (Acheson 2003, Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998, Fantasia 1989). Doukas's (2003) recent work in communities of central New York suggests that self-organization is usual and common in the United States but is widely thwarted by corporate interests organized to oppose it.

In the United States, the 1947 Taft-Hartley amendments to the Wagner Act of 1935 inhibit union organization by focusing on servicing functions (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998), and the political and workplace action of employers introduces other institutional impediments (Wells 1996). In short, unlike communities, any union faces massive opposition because the rules at all levels are designed to oppose them. In some jurisdictions,

the arenas of action such as labor boards are equally arraigned against effective union action (Wells 1996).

Another approach is social movement theory. Charles Tilly (1983, 1986a) observed that a limited number of forms of action are feasible to achieve the shared interests of any group of people (Tilly 1986b, 1990). Tilly (1995, p. 15) documents changes in "repertoires of collective action" and shows how the demonstration evolved in nineteenth-century Great Britain through a process of experimentation, bargaining, and standardization. Sidney Tarrow (1995) explains that a "repertoire of contention" is a set of familiar and approved actions people can use to make claims, e.g., the boycott.

Tarrow (1994) observed that some forms are modular and form a vocabulary of protest, which people can combine to suit their needs. As some of these forms become conventional, they lose their power, but as they become less risky, more people participate. As a repertory of protest is routinized, authorities learn how to diffuse or repress it. The cycle winds down and the repertoire may become an institutionalized feature of politics as usual. As one module in the repertory of contention, the strike, is rendered ineffective, another is developed. In-plant strategies allow workers to stay in a plant and apply pressure from the inside to gain concessions (Balanoff 1988, p. 17). When in-plant strategies become ineffective or impossible, strikes may gain impetus (Durrenberger & Erem 2005b).

New technologies have augmented the repertories of contention with very fast communication to multiple participants. Move On (**http://www.moveon.org**) and other such groups have mobilized petitions and phone campaigns to contend various issues. Howard Dean organized his 2004 presidential campaign and fundraising around computer media. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) is organizing a Web-based campaign against Wal-Mart. Sociologist Arthur B. Shostak (1999, 2002) has collected sociological research on these areas.

Rationales for participation are collective, evolving, and ongoing. A frame alignment perspective shows the linkages of individuals to movements to understand how individual interests, values, and beliefs become congruent and complementary with those of a movement even though the programs and values that movements promote may not be based on current sentiment and may not appear to have much relevance for the life situations and interests of potential adherents (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a, Snow et al. 1986, Snow & Benford 1992).

Killian (1984) characterizes the resource mobilization paradigm as the idea that "collective action is rooted in organizational structure and carried out by rational actors attempting to realize their ends" (p. 770). This approach opposes individual rationality and organizational direction to the spontaneity and emergent structures emphasized by the earlier collective-behavior paradigm. In the American Civil Rights Movement, spontaneous actions laid the foundation for emergent organizations and built on previous structures that sustained the spontaneous actions in a dialectic between planning and spontaneity.

Killian (1984) discusses a 1956 bus boycott in Tallahassee, Florida. There was a previous bus boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953, and by the mid-1990s, more than 40 years later, the boycott was well known in the repertoire of contention, and its roots in the Civil Rights Movement had not been forgotten. Knowledge of what to do to make a claim by means of a boycott is widely known from these examples and more recent ones (Wells 1996). It has become one of a culturally available and sanctioned set of options, as Tarrow (1995) put it.

Durrenberger & Erem (2005a) show how a union movement that appeared to many of its members to have little bearing on members' life situations was able to help individuals achieve their immediate goals when they engaged in a spontaneous boycott to protest against what they perceived to be racially

motivated injustices. Using the terms of Snow et al., a union rep was able to align the civil rights frame of members at a hospital with the labor frame of the union to achieve victories for both the members and the union.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

Melding a topical agenda with the methodologies of ethnography and the potential for engaged research defines the future of union studies in anthropology. One will find a large literature on engaged research, but here it suffices to suggest that anthropologists who collaborate with union members, officers, and staff to define research questions will be able to contribute most actively to this program. This collaboration helps narrow the gap between the participants' various inside views as union members, stewards, reps, staff, and officers and outside investigators' more etic views (Durrenberger & Erem 2005). Both the validity and the usefulness of such work depend on accurate understandings and descriptions of power relations (Nader 1997). Many of these questions can be profitably addressed from the points of view of the firms or corporations involved to understand better their rationales, methods, and strategies of labor relations. This would increase our understanding of the dynamics of capitalism in practice, and many anthropologists have successfully worked with corporate management to address a range of ethnographic questions.

Whereas particular union locals may be more or less closed in on themselves, at the national level, the American labor movement is reaching out to academics to identify research that would foster the national discussion of workers' right to organize and the consequences of policies and practices that suppress it.

Because American workers have never been free to form or join unions without fear of employer interference or retribution they have been systematically denied the right to organize, form unions, and engage in collective bargaining. Specific ethnographic questions that anthropologists have until now addressed piecemeal and without any unifying theoretical framework include the nature and effects of employer interference with the right to organize; why and how it matters; and the consequences for individuals, firms, communities, and the nation, including increased levels of inequality and poverty, suppression of wages, reduced ability of women and people of color to close economic gaps, silencing of workers, and the lack of any countervailing force against corporate power.

Employers often meet workers' attempts to organize with antiunion campaigns (Brodkin & Strathmann 2004, Bronfenbrenner 1994, Bronfenbrenner & Juravich 1998). Thirty-six percent of voters in union representation elections explain their votes as responses to employer pressure. Eighty-five percent of those specifically mention fear of losing their jobs (Comstock & Fox 1994). More ethnographic studies of the effects of firing union supporters, threats of workplace closing (Weinbaum 2001), captive audience meetings, and one-on-one meetings of management with workers and other antiunion tactics as well as full-scale ethnographic accounts of organizing campaigns like Brodkin's (1988) would be useful to understand whether and how these tactics vary by industry and worker ethnicity, gender, or other features.

Many labor studies works contain anecdotal or qualitative accounts. To be useful, ethnographic research in anthropology does not mean substituting "qualitative" or anecdotal evidence for the scientific description first outlined by Malinowski (1922) augmented with quantitative methods (Bernard 2005) to describe and measure perceptions and attitudes to go beyond the investigator's personal experience to understand that of participants.

Some memoirs provide evidence about the union busting industry (Levitt & Conrow 1993), but little systematic data exist on the scope, nature, or scale of the industry as a whole, its finances, its staff recruitment

practices, or the university professors and lawyers who advise and consult with them. The emic views of such firms and consultants and how well they correspond to etic realities are also significant.

Although we have some estimates (Kaufman & Stephan 1995), we know little about how much employers spend per worker or in total on antiunion campaigns or the impact of those expenditures on productivity or on the larger economy. Nor do we know what part of these expenses are externalized to taxpayers through business tax deductions. Research to develop valid and reliable methods of estimating these costs would be of theoretical as well as practical interest. Such research would help establish an etic perspective on the economics of union organization and the adequacy of corporate views. We do not know to what extent corporate opposition to organizing is ideologically and how much is economically motivated. It may well be that such spending on opposition to organizing is irrational even from the corporate point of view.

Although anthropologists have studied issues of gender, class, and racial identity in unions (Collins 1974; Grenier et al. 1994; Kasmir 1991, 2001, 2005; Pilcher 1971, 1972; Wells 1996; Stephen 2003; Stepick et al. 1994; Zlolniski 2003, 2006b) and the role of identity in labor segmentation (Brodkin 2000; Griffith 1987, 1993), we have not systematically studied how employers use identity issues to thwart unions (Sciacchitano 1998). Reichart (2006) has studied the role of gender issues and of women in mine workers' unions, and Richardson (2006) discusses family relationships and use of kin-terms among union members. More studies of how unions successfully incorporate such issues of identity into their organizing strategies would be useful, especially as they reach out to new immigrants.

Employers do not have to recognize unions at work sites unless they have agreed to do so when a majority of workers have signed union cards, a process called card check recog-

nition. Otherwise, they must hold a National Labor Relations Board–supervised election among employees. We can only speculate on the results of either contested elections at work sites or card-check recognition.

Fighting an election can be expensive and divisive but produce solidarity among employees (Fantasia 1989). Card-check campaigns may be less confrontational and time-consuming for union staff, and less expensive for corporations, but may result in less solidarity among workers for the kind of self governance that the organizing model demands (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a). In short, what appears to be a victory for unions in card-check recognition may not be. We have no ethnographic evidence on the consequences of these two methods as they relate to worker productivity during and after organizing campaigns, the long-term functioning of the bargaining unit, and solidarity among workers. It may well be that corporations benefit from union organization in terms of increased productivity and longevity and reduced turnover rates and training costs.

Employers sometimes avoid unionization by promising to provide workers the benefits that the union is organizing to achieve. It is important to learn the fate of workers who vote not to organize on the basis of these promises. Do employers keep their promises in the long run? A follow-up study of the Duke University hospital that Brodkin (1988) studied would be useful to compare the quality of work and level of benefits with workers in hospitals that did vote for collective bargaining representation with a union.

Another source of comparative evidence would be studies of economic sectors that have never organized and the reasons they have not organized.

Finally, we have suggestive but limited evidence on the differences resulting from how unions themselves are organized. Some unions are tightly controlled and closed; others are very open and democratic. Leadership in service-oriented closed locals may well be virtually unassailable. Because of the

dynamics of reciprocity, staff may resist adoption of an organizing model even if the impetus comes from higher levels of organization. However, during elections progressive leadership that breaks down the nexus of reciprocity to favor organizing may be vulnerable to coalitions of dissatisfied members (Durrenberger 2004). Stability can be guaranteed by making the election process inaccessible. Although there are reform movements from within union membership (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a), these may be less effective than top-down nondemocratic forms of organization. Thus a paradox seems to be that progressive change is more likely from a nondemocratic than from a democratic structure (Durrenberger & Erem 2005a). More case studies would clarify this crucial point.

Brodkin (2000) develops a cogent analysis of race, gender, and class, but class remains an understudied and confusing topic. Durrenberger (2001a) reviews salient issues and suggests the importance of ethnographic studies of class (2001b). Newman (1988) distinguishes American middle-class ideology of meritocratic individualism from working-class thought patterns that are more structural. Durrenberger (2001a, 2002) and Durrenerger & Erem (2005a) did not find ethnographic support for these distinctions. There is little empirical evidence on content or the relationships among class consciousness and union consciousness and action (Durrenberger 1997, Durrenberger & Erem 2005a); however, there is strong evidence that union consciousness is shaped by the everyday realities of power at work sites, which in turn are formed by national-level policies and power relations (Durrenberger & Erem 1999b, 2005a). Thus one finds direct relationships between national-level power and individual cognition and culture in the way Wolf (1999) suggested. These findings are important to policy in an age when ideologically motivated groups are actively shaping national culture (Doukas 2003).

Although I have limited this review to studies of unions in the United States, comparative studies of unions in different countries under different laws and policies would help clarify the range and scope of legal and policy limits and possibilities and perhaps help to define legislative agendas.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. Ethnography provides useful knowledge of unions that contributes to anthropological theory.

2. There is no unified theoretical or methodological approach to unions, but promising theoretical approaches include collective action theory, social movement theory, political ecology, and practice theory.

3. Government policies at all levels are relevant to understanding local action.

4. The role of labor unions is to ameliorate the inequities of power that the class relations between workers and owners of capital define via the power of collective action.

5. Corporations often disregard the law.

FUTURE ISSUES

1. We need to explore the nature and effects of employer interference with workers' right to organize.

2. Another important set of topics is the relationship of union organization to productivity, poverty, equality of women and people of color, employee satisfaction, and health care delivery.

3. Future studies should examine the role and effectiveness of union reform movements.

4. Studies of the roles of race and gender in corporate and union practices are important.

5. Investigators should try to determine sources of countervailing forces against corporate power.

6. Studies should describe corporate disregard for the law.

7. Future studies should develop emic and etic analyses of the role of ideology versus reality in corporate management.

8. Studies of corporate rationales, methods, and strategies of labor relations are important.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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