

In this paper we examine union bargaining for work-life flexibility in the USA and Australia. Within both the comparative industrial relations and the work-life literatures, the role of labor unions in shaping work-life flexibility policies and practices is often overlooked. Moreover, there are relatively few comparative studies that focus on union strategy for negotiating and administering work-life flexibility policies and practices and the impact this has on workers. In a highly topical and relevant way, the paper thus makes a direct and innovative contribution to the theme of union agency.

Following the work of Freeman (1976; 1978; 1980), Freeman and Medoff (1979;1984) and Budd and Mumford (2004) we observe that union strategy toward flexibility can follow three paths. (1) Unions use their monopoly power to negotiate general leave benefits but do not go much beyond that. This is the traditional monopoly power approach focused on leave benefits and ignores schedule flexibility. (2) Through collective voice, unions respond to membership needs and negotiate leave and schedule flexibility provisions. (3) Unions can facilitate the use of these policies and practices by providing information to employees. Building on this work we add another 'empowering' strategy, whereby unions negotiate and facilitate leave and flexibility policies and also become part of administering flexibility by empowering individuals to solve problems with their supervisor. In this strategy, the union recognizes that the use of leaves and flexible schedules is primarily determined in individual negotiations with supervisors at the work group level. The union becomes an active agent in administering these policies by training individuals to negotiate their flexibility and by educating supervisors. This is a direct involvement approach or another form of facilitation that relies on training and skill-building rather than just information. In many ways this union strategy is consistent with union roles in high involvement work systems or joint-responsibility union models (Block and Berg 2007).

What strategy a union takes toward work-life flexibility will depend on many factors. Frege and Kelly (2004: 36) note that there has been little truly comparative research on union strategies (Hyman 2001a). Most comparative

studies have focused on explaining differences in union density or strike activity (Blanchflower and Freeman 1992; Western 1997) or on explaining and classifying different union types, structures, or identities (Poole 1986; Martin 1989). There have been virtually no studies comparing local union strategy with regard to work-life flexibility policies and practices.

In this study we ask the following questions: What type of flexible work-life policies do unions negotiate? What explains the difference, if any, between the bargaining approaches of US and Australian unions with regard to flexible work-life policies? To what extent do union negotiated work-life flexibility policies and practices affect individual employee work family conflict.

Flexibility policies and practices are considered to be those that facilitate work-life balance, such as the duration and timing of work (flex-time, compressed workweeks, part-time work, job share and telework) and personal leave policies (sick, personal, vacation and carers leave).

The data for this study comes from a variety of sources using a multi-level research design, including visits to establishments that have negotiated a variety of flexibility policies with local unions, interviews with workers and their supervisors, managers and union officials, detailed examination of union contract language, and a survey of employees in selected departments.

Our sample focuses on non-academic, union-represented employees in two US universities and two Australian universities. Universities are excellent organizations to study flexibility among represented, non-academic staff because they include a broad range of occupations and range of jobs with differing time constraints. These data form a rich picture, from multiple points of view, of the character and adoption of different work-life flexibility policies, the use of these policies by workers, as well as management and union roles in negotiating and administering these policies.

Three key findings emerge from the study. First, there are significant differences in the union contract language between the universities, reflecting

their different funding status and institutional contexts. Second, the survey evidence points to differential effects of union presence and support in the two countries in terms of the effect on the work-family conflict of workers. Third, in all cases, supervisor support is critical for workers' experience of work-family conflict. While unions operate at a more macro level of bargaining, (e.g. claiming higher wages and, in the US, better health care benefits), work-life policies and practices are often negotiated at the department level, with the supervisor seemingly holding the key to workers' ability to avail of work-family flexibility practices. Thus, a union empowerment strategy can assist workers in negotiating with their supervisors about access to and use of flexibility policies.

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