

BUREAUCRACY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT

Kyoung-Hee Yu, Australian School of Business, University of New South Wales
UNSW, SYDNEY NSW 2052

Email: khyu505@yahoo.com

Paper submitted for the 15th World Congress of the IIRA, Track 4: Institutions, Processes and Outcomes

For approximately half a century since the post-war years, the dominant organizational form of American trade unions is understood to have been bureaucratic unionism. Bureaucratic unionism is characterized by a federated organizational structure represented by a division of labor between the national union and local unions (Barbash, 1967; Bok & Dunlop, 1970; Ulman, 1955); union operations governed by existing institutional arrangements rather than extra-institutional resources (Barbash, 1984; Fantasia & Stepan - Norris, 2004a); and chief attention to economic issues over social change or political reform (Barbash, 1984; Commons, 1921; Perlman, 1966). Lastly, bureaucratic unionism is deemed to have been unsuccessful in incorporating new groups of workers in the labor market (Goldfield, 1987).

Bureaucratic unionism has been contrasted with social movement or political unionism, where unions mobilize moral and political resources to challenge power relationships in the existing social order. Scholars have pointed out that the latter type of unionism has not become institutionalized in the United States because of an absence of ideology among American workers and unionists, and because of the pragmatism in their approach to unionism. Selig Perlman, for example, noted that the absence of class consciousness among American workers created a particular "home grown" and "stable, job conscious" unionism in the U.S. compared to the socialist labor movement which had developed in Europe around the same time (Perlman, 1966: 186 -189).

In recent years, several unions appear to have digressed from the bureaucratic unionism model. These unions organize new groups of workers, particularly immigrant workers and women in low wage service sectors, based on the workers' social identities. These unions no longer shun involvement in policy change, and rather than put up with the existing collective bargaining framework, they effectively use extra-institutional resources, such as public corporate campaigns and acts of civil disobedience, as part of their mobilization strategy. The success that these unions have had in growing their organizations at a time of union decline has stimulated scholars to propose that a return to social movement unionism by some unions may usher in a revival of the labor movement (Clawson, 2003; Fantasia & Voss, 2004b; Milkman & Voss, 2004). But precisely how these "social movement unions", as they have been

characterized, and unionists working in these unions are different from bureaucratic unions and unionists has not been addressed in previous literature.

The recent emergence of reformed unions in the United States that seemingly are responding both to changing environments and to the needs of socially deprived groups belies the conventional wisdom that change is hard to come about in bureaucratic systems. Studies of how these unions organize have depicted them as having the impact of a social movement, which, in American labor, is a fading memory. The changes in strategy, ideology, and practice that these American unions have shown prompt questions about the process by which these unions have arrived at these changes. That is, how do bureaucratic systems open themselves up to change through social movements and what happens when they do so? More broadly, what does this portend about institutional change in the labor movement?

In the main part of this paper, I review the historical change process in the Service Employees International Union, the largest of such unions in the U.S., that led to the introduction of social movement elements into a bureaucratized system. The SEIU is not only the largest of the new unions that are heralding institutional change in the labor movement. Among all the American unions, SEIU has been most successful in organizing new members; it has authored the most radical innovations of the institution of collective bargaining in the United States; and it is arguably the most influential union in the U.S. if not the advanced industrialized world (Clawson, 2003; Fantasia et al., 2004b; Lerner, 1996; Milkman, 2006).

I find that historical change in the SEIU has not resulted in the types of change thought to constitute social movement unionism. The union did not become decentralized; rather it became more centralized with the reforms. Similarly, the basic strategy of the union, which has been to build power for collective bargaining, has stayed constant. Despite the constancy in structure and practice, I find that the seeds for a new form of unionism are sown in changes in the way that careers are organized in the SEIU that began in the 1980s. This meso-level analysis of career forms allows me to identify why despite the presence of oligarchy, tensions between bureaucracy and social movement are mediated in the SEIU. I relate my findings to the literature on institutional change in the labor movement. I argue against a thesis that characterizes recent changes in the reformed unions as a shift from business unionism to social movement unionism, and show that the unionism practiced by the SEIU today builds on past institutional legacies. Unlike earlier literature which black boxes the change process, I show that change is a dynamic political process in which actors and their careers play a big role.

References

- Barbash, J. 1967. American unions: structure, government and politics . New York: Random House.
- Barbash, J. 1984. The elements of industrial relations . Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bok, D. C. & Dunlop, J. T. 1970. Labor and the American community . New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Clawson, D. 2003. The next upsurge : labor and the new social movements . Ithaca: ILR Press.
- Commons, J. R. 1921. Introduction. In J. R. Commons & D. J. Saposs & H. L. Sumner & E. B. Mittelman & H. E. Hoagland & J. B. Andrews & S. Perlman & D. D. Lescohier & E. Brandeis & P. Taft (Eds.), History of labour in the United States . New York: Macmillan.
- Fantasia, R. & Stepan -Norris, J. 2004a. The Labor Movement in Motion. In D. A. Snow & S. A. Soule & H. Kriesi (Eds.), The Blackwell companion to social movements : xvii, 754 p. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Fantasia, R. & Voss, K. 2004b. Hard work : remaking the American labor movement . Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goldfield, M. 1987. The decline of organized labor in the United States . Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lerner, S. 1996. Strategic labor organizing: how to win against the odds. Dollars and Sense (205): 32-37
URL: <http://www.dollarsandsense.org> .
- Milkman, R. & Voss, K. 2004. Rebuilding labor : organizing and organizers in the new union movement . Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Milkman, R. 2006. L.A. story : immigrant workers and the future of the U.S. Labor Movement . New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Perlman, S. 1966. A theory of the labor movement . New York: A. M. Kelley.
- Ulman, L. 1955. The rise of the national trade union; the development and significance of its structure, governing institutions, and economic policies . Cambridge: Harvard University Press.