



Hospitality unionism and labour market adjustment: Toward Schumpeterian unionism?

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a conceptual model for understanding emerging changes in a North American labour union. UNITE-HERE, largely representing textile and hospitality workers, has been at the forefront of debates on union revitalization in the US and Canada. UNITE-HERE is often characterized as a successful example of North American union renewal, but I argue that this often oversimplifies many complex and contradictory labour strategies. Much of the labour union renewal literature remains prescriptive and is only beginning to escape false binaries such as business versus social unionism, the servicing versus organizing model, or 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' administration. In this paper, I attempt to conceptualize the strategies adopted by the union as they exist in relation to the changing political economic landscape. I characterize the current labour practices as 'Schumpeterian unionism', a model which captures the shifting, contradictory, and multi-scalar relationships labour has with the broader community, capital and the state. The model is illustrated with a case study of UNITE-HERE Local 75's response to the 2003 SARS outbreak through their establishment of a Hospitality Workers Resource Centre to service unemployed workers.

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1. Introduction

For over two decades, economic restructuring in advanced capitalist economies has challenged organized labour and with the rare exception of a few northern European countries, labour union density in many advanced capitalist economies has been in a prolonged period of stagnation or decline (Moody, 1997; Fantasia and Voss, 2004; Visser, 2006). In Canada, the percentage of workers covered by unions is double that of the United States but has slowly declined to less than a third of the labour force (Akyeampong, 2004). The central question for many labour activists and researchers continues to be how labour can revitalize itself to maintain a capacity to shape economic landscapes. There has been no shortage of commentary on these questions as an entire literature on labour union renewal has been dedicated to the project for well over a decade (Bronfenbrenner, 2003; Fairbrother and Yates, 2003; Kumar and Schenk, 2006). Geographers have also weighed in on these debates, although the approach has focussed largely on the question of the how labour can (re)organize at scales compatible to that of contemporary capital (Herod, 1998, 2001; Castree et al., 2004; Tufts, 2007a).

For many, union revitalization involves a shift toward a social justice or 'social movement unionism' which organizes communities around a range of issues beyond the workplace as a means of

challenging the operation of the market (see Fletcher and Gaspasin, 2008). This departure is antithetical to the narrow 'bread and butter' business unionism which typified much of the post-war compromise industrial relations in Anglo-American economies. Even the staunchest advocates of social movement unionism, however, recognize it remains an ideal rather than actual practice. Moody (2007, p. 237) argues that social movement unionism has lost much of its 'unique meaning' as it now refers to any effort where the union reaches out to the community in an issue based campaign. For this reason, Kumar and Murray (2006) speak of 'social unionism' as a midway point between business and social movement unionism to characterize unions who adopt some of the more innovative strategies, but remain very much integrated into capitalist production.

In this paper, I too propose an understanding of union renewal which is located between the binaries of business and social movement unionism, but I theoretically embed such union strategy in larger processes of economic and political transformation. I argue that many of the labour renewal strategies currently observed can be interpreted as not only a reaction to, but also constitutive of neoliberalism and the re-scaling of capital and the state (see Jessop, 2002; Brenner, 2004). As an entry point into this discussion, the paper proposes a model of 'Schumpeterian unionism' juxtaposing the ideal-types of 'defensive Atlantic unionism' and 'ideal renewed social movement unionism'. I compare four areas of union activity: intra-institutional organizing; extra-institutional organi-

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zation; labour–management relations; and labour–state relations. Here, Schumpeterian unionism is defined as a model of labour organization that preserves working-class agency by adapting to successive rounds of economic ‘creative destruction’ (see Peck and Jones, 1994). In keeping with traditional Marxist interpretations of trade unionism, these practices are neither transformative nor revolutionary, but they may sustain labour as a viable economic agent within harsher variants of neoliberalism.

Aside from the labour union renewal literature itself, the conceptual framework is developed from two sources. Its first theoretical inspiration is largely drawn from Jessop’s (2002) political economy of evolving capital–state relations. In a groundbreaking article, Jessop (1993) forwarded the Schumpeterian workfare state (SWS) as a model of state–capital relations displacing the Keynesian Welfare State established in post-War Atlantic Fordist economies. At its core, the SWS model characterized a number of national policies aimed at implementing the neoliberal project (e.g., labour market flexibility, innovation). The SWS model is inspired by Schumpeter’s (1942, p. 83) treatise on economic evolution that centred the process of ‘creative destruction’ as ‘the essential fact about capitalism’ that must be understood in order to understand overall economic development. Over a decade, Jessop (2002) refined his initial model to where he speaks of Schumpeterian Workfare Post-national Regimes (SWPR) as the successor to the Keynesian state. The SWPR’s focus is on: economic policies which increase competitiveness in global markets; downward pressure on social wages with limited welfare; the rise of networks of public–private governance; and re-scaled state policy above and below the nation. From a geographical viewpoint, the most significant evolution of Jessop’s model is the integration of how capitalist states re-scale economic policy to global (e.g., policies allowing capital to flow to low wage regions) and sub-national levels (e.g., policies enhancing regional metropolitan competitiveness rather than national economic development). Indeed, it was the initial aspatiality of Jessop’s model that inspired a number of geographers to explore how restructuring of the welfare state was being played out across space at different scales (see Peck, 1996, 2001).

Brenner (2004) has built upon Jessop’s work to define how the re-territorialization of state policies from the national-global and national-local has created a number of contradictory new state spaces. In particular, national policy supporting cities and the decentralization of power has shifted the governance and reconfigured state–capital formations toward the urban. It is the re-territorialization of the state to a number of scales which have proliferated the variations of neoliberalisms on the ground and requires researchers to now look at neoliberal policies as they ‘actually exist’ (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

The SWPR model and the work it has inspired have contributed significantly to our understanding of the evolution of the capitalist state and the complex ways local, regional and national governments have recast their relationships with capital and citizens in order to restore conditions of profitability in the midst of crisis. For labour unions, the implications of these policies must not be understated as they shape the quantity and quality of jobs delivered by capital and in some cases, challenge the rights of workers to organize effectively (Panitch and Swartz, 2003; Fantasia and Voss, 2004). While in most cases organized labour has been the target of SWPRs, it is problematic to conceptualize labour as outside processes shaping variations of capitalist states. Another approach is to explore how organized labour is changing in response to shifting policies of SWPR and how these responses are in many cases enabling neoliberal state projects operating at multiple scales. While many emergent labour union renewal strategies can still be discussed as a reaction to neoliberal restructuring and the regulatory environment imposed by SWPRs, other emerging union

structures and practices can also be viewed as an integral part of contemporary capitalist economies. In other words, it is consistent to consider how unions are implicated in various formations of neoliberal regimes since Schumpeterian economies will inevitably require the consent of Schumpeterian labour. It is within this theoretical framework, that the following discussion of labour union renewal is situated.

Second, the model has been conceptualized through its grounding in a larger empirical project on hospitality sector unionism in Toronto, specifically the experience of UNITE-HERE Local 75 (see Tufts, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). While a number of campaigns and initiatives of Local 75 may be characterized as Schumpeterian unionism, here I present an examination of the unions response to the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Toronto which adversely affected the city’s hospitality sector. The specific case study is the Hospitality Workers Resource Centre (HWRC), a service developed as a response to workers displaced from work by the crisis. The case study demonstrates how the choices unions make can contribute to neoliberal agendas while *simultaneously* reproducing labour as viable institutions. Further, it demonstrates how ‘Schumpeterian’ unions are re-scaling their strategies in the midst of global challenges. Grounded theoretical approaches are a huge strength of contemporary economic geography (see Yeung, 1997) and any new theoretical work must remain grounded in real political circumstances of workers’ lives. Abstracting organized labour’s practices too far from the realities of everyday political struggles leads to analyses which are far removed from unionism as it ‘actually exists’. Following an elaboration and definition of Schumpeterian unionism, I present Local 75’s response to the SARS outbreak to exemplify the model. I conclude with some broader implications for the model with respect to union renewal and the broader labour geography project.

2. Schumpeterian unionism

For some time researchers have recognized the need to transcend false binaries characterizing discussions of union renewal such as servicing versus organizing models or business versus social movement unionism. For example, Fletcher and Hurd (1998) recognized the limits of juxtaposing servicing versus organizing in discussions of union renewal almost from the initial conception. Many studies of labour union renewal also remain largely prescriptive and often ‘idealize’ labour transformation as an antithesis to the stagnant and defensive actions of retrenched business unionism. As a result, labour union renewal as it ‘actually exists’ remains hidden as the emphasis is on capacities to achieve an ideal form, such as a renewed social movement unionism. Labour union renewal, however, contains both complex and contradictory processes with uneven outcomes. In some instances, so-called ‘renewed’ unionism actually aids the neoliberal project while actions deemed ‘business as usual’ unionism may forestall its advancement. I address these contradictions by introducing the concept of ‘Schumpeterian unionism’ as one way of characterizing the current transformation of segments of Anglo-American labour movements.

A further aim of the model is to integrate labour union renewal into explanations of local variations of capitalism as labour union renewal itself is largely a geographical phenomenon. It is now widely accepted that local labour markets influence successive rounds of accumulation and reproduction. But labour union renewal is much more than a function of previous ‘layers’ of labour mobilization as the ability to make unions vibrant is largely dependent on the multi-scalar organization of workers and the ability of unions to ‘re-scale’ their activities in ways which are compatible with contemporary capital and capitalist states (Tufts, 2007a, 2007b;

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