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NEW MEASURES OF UNION ORGANIZING
EFFECTIVENESS

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Personnel & Industrial Relations
Area

Working Paper No. 299

June, 1988

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NEW MEASURES OF UNION ORGANIZING EFFECTIVENESS

ABSTRACT

This study considers the effect of union organizing effort, success and the selection of organizing targets on the potential for union growth. The findings indicate that between 1976 and 1985, union organizing effectiveness declined markedly in the United States and that U.S. unions were less successful in new organizing than Canadian unions.

In recent years, a large body of research has documented the sagging fortunes of the American labour movement (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Troy and Sheflin, 1985; Lipset, 1986; Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986). One factor contributing to the long-run decline in union membership and union density (the proportion of nonagricultural employment that is unionized) has been the lower union success rates in National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) certification elections (Seeber and Cooke, 1983; Dickens and Leonard, 1985). Other contributing factors include shifts in product and labor markets (Roomkin and Juris, 1978), the widespread adoption of union avoidance strategies by employers (Kochan, McKersie and Chalykoff, 1986; Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986), and the failure of the present legal framework to adequately protect employees' right to organize (Weiler, 1983; Rose and Chaison, 1987).

The purpose of this study is to consider another explanatory variable, namely the ability of unions to organize new members. It is widely recognized that new organizing is essential to the expansion of collective bargaining generally and in order to replenish members lost through attrition by individual unions. Employing new measures of organizing effectiveness, we found that U.S. unions exhibited a diminished capacity to organize new members. Moreover, when the U.S. organizing data are compared with data from Canada, a country with a similar industrial relations system, we found Canadian unions consistently outperformed their U.S. counterparts by a wide margin.

U.S. - CANADA COMPARISON

Over the past thirty years, U.S. union membership has stagnated and declined. There was modest growth between 1956 and 1979, as membership rose from 16.4 million to 22 million (34 percent). These gains largely disappeared in the 1980s when membership fell by approximately 5 million (Troy and Sheflin, 1985; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). Moreover, union density fell from 33.4 percent in 1956 to 17.8 percent in 1986 (Bain and Price, 1980; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). In contrast, Canadian unions experienced robust growth. From 1956 to 1986, union membership increased by 2.4 million (176 percent) and union density increased to 37.7 percent from 33.3 percent (Labour Canada, 1986). Whereas in 1956, union density stood at about one-third of nonagricultural employment in both countries, the Canadian figure is now more than twice the level of the United States.

Cross-sectional data reveal additional U.S.- Canada differences. Union density figures for gender, part-time/full-time employment status, education level, age, occupation and industry are broadly consistent with the aggregate data. Even among purportedly "harder-to-organize" workers, e.g., part-time workers, younger workers and white-collar workers, union density in Canada was double the U.S. level. In the service sector, union density was more than five times higher in Canada (Rose and Chaison, 1987).

It is also noteworthy that Canadian sections of U.S.-based unions have grown more rapidly than their parent organizations. As shown in Table 1, Canadian membership rose relative to U.S. membership in 12 large international unions between 1962 and 1983 (Troy and Sheflin, 1985). In some cases, e.g., the Autoworkers, Machinists and Steelworkers, large membership gains were achieved in Canada while steep membership losses

occurred in the United States. Even among U.S. unions that experienced membership gains, the growth rates were substantially lower than those recorded by their Canadian sections. Considering the centrality of new organizing to union growth, it would appear that Canadian unions have been more effective in recruiting new members.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Most research on union organizing effectiveness has focused on certification outcomes, i.e., the percentage of union victories in certification elections. For example, it has been shown that the union success rate in NLRB certification elections fell from 65 percent in 1955 to 46 percent in 1985 and that Canadian unions consistently won about two-thirds of their certification attempts since 1970 (Rose and Chaison, 1987). To a considerable extent, the variation in certification outcomes reflects differences in certification procedures. In the United States, the NLRB relies on elections which often are accompanied by protracted employer campaigns and unfair labour practices (Seeber and Cooke, 1983). Canadian labour boards primarily rely on signed union membership cards to certify unions.

Several recent studies have created indices of the extent and outcomes of union organizing. For example, Block (1980) computed the number of certification elections per one thousand members of individual unions as a proxy for the extent to which these unions devoted resources to organizing. The allocation of organizing resources was more directly analyzed by Voos

(1984). She calculated the organizing expenditures of selected unions in relationship to the size of the unorganized portion of their jurisdictions. In a study of organizing in manufacturing industries, Seeber (1983) examined the proportion of nonunion employees in selected industry categories that were involved in both the annual certification elections conducted and those won by unions. Finally, among the measures devised by Dickens and Leonard (1985), in their study of the post-1950 trends in union membership, were the "organizing rate" (the percent of unorganized employees who were eligible to vote in certification elections in a given year) and the "success rate" (the number of eligible employees involved in elections that were won by unions as a percent of all employees involved in elections). In our study, we go beyond the industry and union related measures, while expanding the indices developed by Dickens and Leonard (1985). This is an attempt to create a barometer of overall union organizing effectiveness which can reveal major trends both over time and in relation to organizing in countries with comparable industrial relations systems.

METHOD

We initially compiled certification and union membership statistics for the period 1976 to 1985. The U.S. certification figures came from a data tape provided by the Data Systems Branch of the National Labor Relations Board. The Canadian figures are largely based on Ontario, the province which compiles the most comprehensive certification data (Ontario Ministry of Labour 1976/77 - 1980/81; Ontario Labour Relations Board, 1981/82 - 1985/86). Additional certification data came from the British Columbia

Labour Relations Board (1976-85) and Kumar, Coates and Arrowsmith (1986). Union membership figures for Ontario were derived from annual summaries prepared by Statistics Canada (1975-84).

From these data, we constructed several indices of union organizing effectiveness. These measures were developed in order to consider two issues. First, whether the drop in U.S. union membership has been associated with a decline in union organizing effectiveness. Second, whether union organizing effectiveness in the United States differs from the Canadian pattern. We believe that the potential for union growth depends on the aggregate level of organizing activity and the selection of bargaining units. Accordingly, to more fully understand union organizing effectiveness, it is necessary to examine the level of union organizing effort, the extent of organizing success, and whether organizing is targeted where the potential for future expansion is greatest.

Organizing effort refers to the level of organizing activity. Two indices of union organizing effort were developed. The first consists of the number of certifications attempted per 100 union members -- CA/100 MEMB. -- and the second consists of the number of employees that unions attempted to organize (through certification procedures) as a percentage of union membership -- EA/U. MEMB. (For all indices, union membership is lagged one year to reflect the membership base for new organizing.) The latter index measures the potential for union growth if all new organizing is successful.

It can be argued that our measures of union organizing effort are limited in two respects. First, it does not consider what proportion of organizing drives are employee-initiated as opposed to union-initiated. Second, by focusing on certification results, it ignores organizing campaigns that are started, but fail to attract sufficient support and are

subsequently abandoned. Unfortunately, there are no reliable data that capture the source and level of organizing activity. If such data were available they might reveal differences in the demand for unionization between Canadian and American workers as well as differences in union commitment to new organizing. In the absence of such data, alternative measures of union organizing effort are required. Our approach is to treat organizing effort as the willingness of unions to proceed to certification where a showing of interest exists among employees.

Organizing success is measured in terms of certification results. One measure calculates the number of certifications granted per 100 union members -- CG/100 MEMB. Two additional indicators of organizing success include net organizing gains as a percentage of union membership -- NG/U.MEMB. -- and net organizing gains as a percentage of employees attempted through certification -- NG/EA. Net organizing gains is defined as the number of employees certified less the number of employees changing from union to nonunion status as a result of raids and decertification votes. These latter two indices reveal the extent to which unions are able to attract new members and the contribution of certification victories to union growth.

Unions seeking to grow must also concentrate organizing drives in those sectors of the economy which are expanding, e.g., the service industry and among white-collar and professional employees. These sectors often are characterized by low unionization rates and strong employer resistance to organizing. Nevertheless, as employment shrinks in the traditional union strongholds, e.g., heavy manufacturing, new organizing targets must be located. To determine whether unions have adjusted their organizing strategies to attract new members in the growth sectors of the labor market,

we calculated the proportion of total certification activity taking place in the service sector and in white-collar bargaining units in the past decade.

RESULTS

Table 2 examines the level of union organizing activity in the United States and Ontario between 1976 and 1985. In the United States, organizing effort declined both in terms of the number of certification attempts per 100 union members and the number of employees attempted as a percentage of union membership. For U.S. unions, certification attempts in the 1980s dropped to nearly half the level recorded in the mid-1970s (from 3.6 attempts per 100 members to 2 attempts per 100 members). Similarly, the potential membership expansion through certification declined from approximately 2 percent to 1 percent. In Ontario, certification attempts and employees attempted experienced modest declines following the 1981-82 recession, but in each case rebounded in subsequent years. More significantly, both measures were substantially higher in Ontario than in the United States. Certification attempts per 100 members were three to four times higher in most years and Ontario's unions attempted to expand membership by 3.0 to 4.6 percent through new organizing, whereas U.S. unions attempted to expand membership by .9 to 2.3 percent. The Ontario-U.S. differential in organizing effort increased in the later years of the series. These findings suggest that the overall differences in the performance of North American unions may result from a drop in organizing effort by U.S. unions and a corresponding expansion of organizing activity by Canadian unions.

Insert Table 2 about here

An examination of organizing success is presented in Table 3. The results are broadly similar to those involving organizing effort in that U.S. unions were only half as successful in the mid-1980s as they were in the mid-1970s. The number of certifications granted per 100 union members fell from 1.7 in 1976 to .9 in 1985, net organizing gains as a percentage of union membership dropped from .6 percent in 1976 to .3 percent in 1985 and net organizing gains as a percentage of employees attempted declined from 34.1 percent in 1976 to 22.4 percent in 1985. The data also indicate that Canadian unions have been substantially more successful than their American counterparts. For example, the number of certifications granted per 100 union members was seven to ten times greater in Canada after 1981. Indeed, in the same period, the actual number of certifications granted in Canada (excluding Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island) was higher than in the United States. This is truly remarkable given Canada's population and labour force are approximately one-tenth the size of the United States. Although labour relations boards in Canada have broader jurisdictions and can certify employees in the parapublic sector, e.g., municipalities, health care and education, this factor does not significantly detract from the observed differences. This is because the parapublic sector was heavily unionized by the late 1970s and has not experienced much employment growth in the period under review (Rose, 1984).

Insert Table 3 about here

Other indices of organizing success reveal significant differences between the United States and Ontario. Net organizing gains as a percentage of union membership were two to three times greater in Ontario prior to 1981 and, in recent years, were five times greater. On average, net organizing gains added 1.5 percent to total union membership. Unions in Ontario also recruited a larger proportion of the employees they attempted to organize. Net organizing gains as a percentage of employees attempted was 10 to 25 percent higher in Ontario than in the United States for five of the past seven years.

In addition to aggregate levels of organizing activity and success, consideration also must be given to labour's willingness to organize in the emerging areas of employment growth, e.g., the service sector and white collar workers. In the United States, certification elections declined 44 percent in the service sector, 83 percent in white collar bargaining units and 72 percent among professional and technical employees from 1976 to 1985. As a percentage of total certification activity service sector cases increased from 18 to 22 percent, but cases involving white collar and professional and technical employees fell from 15 percent to 7 percent of the total cases. In contrast, service sector certifications granted in Ontario and British Columbia steadily increased from 16 percent of total certifications in 1971 to 36 percent in 1985. Moreover, white-collar certifications in Ontario increased from 20 percent of total certifications (1975-80) to 24 percent (1981-85). Thus it appears U.S. unions have been less active in organizing where unions traditionally have been weak.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that union organizing effectiveness is an important variable contributing to differences in the performance of the U.S. and Canadian labour movements. In the United States, there is evidence that between 1976 and 1985 union organizing effort and success fell dramatically and that there has not been a major effort to expand the frontiers of collective bargaining. In contrast, unions in Canada exhibit higher aggregate levels of organizing activity and success, and have made greater efforts to organize the service sector and white collar employees.

Although we cannot prove it with our broad measures of union organizing effectiveness, there is reason to believe that the deteriorating position of American unions is the result of two recent and major trends. First, because of increased employer resistance in protracted election campaigns, American unions have sought alternative avenues for expansion and have offered associate memberships, absorbed small unions, engaged in increased internal organizing (i.e. recruiting workers who are in their bargaining units but are not union members), and launched corporate campaigns and consumer boycotts. Most of these strategies seek to bypass the NLRB's election process and expand membership without arousing employer opposition. A second reason for the decline in union organizing in the United States is the widespread concession bargaining and the increasingly proactive position of employers in bargaining since the early 1980s. As employers demanded wage and benefit cuts or freezes, and threatened increased outsourcing, mass layoffs, and plant relocation, many American unions may have had to shift their financial and human resources from the expensive and time consuming work of recruiting new members to protecting

the employment and past bargaining gains of their members. As well, there has been a significant decline in the perceived instrumentality of unions among nonunion workers in the United States (Farber, 1987). Canadian unions, faced with considerably less pressure for concession bargaining and with access to certification procedures that reduce the potential for and impact of employer resistance, showed greater organizing effectiveness.

We believe that the measures developed in this study combined with our comparative analysis provide a clearer profile of union decline in the United States. The evidence indicates that the decline is apparent, not only in membership figures, but with organizing effectiveness as measured by organizing effort, success and direction.

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TABLE 1
Changes in Membership of Large International Unions, 1962-1983

UNION	U. S. MEMBERSHIP 1962-1983	CANADIAN MEMBERSHIP 1962-1983	CANADIAN MEMBERSHIP AS A PERCENT OF INTERNATIONAL UNION	
			1962	1983
Autoworkers	- 110,800 (- 10.9%)	+ 62,900 (+ 106.8%)	5.5%	11.9%
Carpenters	- 69,200 (- 10.5%)	+ 29,500 (+ 49.6%)	8.3	13.1
Electrical (IBEW)	+ 127,400 (+ 19.0%)	+ 35,400 (+ 99.4%)	5.0	8.2
Food & Commercial Workers	+ 678,600 (+174.1%)	+124,900 (+1,236.6%)	2.5	11.2
Garment Workers (Ladies)	- 93,600 (- 24.8%)	+ 2,200 (+ 12.4%)	4.5	6.6
Hotel & Restaurant Employees	- 111,300 (- 26.3%)	+ 18,000 (+ 135.3%)	3.0	9.1
Laborers	+ 1,000 (+ 0.2%)	+ 38,600 (+ 229.8%)	4.0	12.0
Machinists	- 152,000 (- 24.2%)	+ 24,400 (+ 61.0%)	6.0	11.9
Plumbers	+ 46,500 (+ 19.0%)	+ 19,000 (+ 100.0%)	7.2	11.5
Service Employees	+ 301,400 (+108.7%)	+ 52,200 (+ 407.8%)	4.4	10.1
Steelworkers	- 295,900 (- 37.3%)	+111,000 (+ 129.1%)	9.8	28.4
Teamsters	+ 196,000 (+ 14.8%)	+ 54,000 (+ 138.5%)	2.9	5.8

(Source: Troy and Sheflin, 1985)

TABLE 2

Union Organizing Efforts in the United States and Ontario, 1976-1985

YEAR	U. S.		ONTARIO	
	CA/100 MEMB.	EA/U.MEMB.	CA/100 MEMB.	EA/U.MEMB.
1976	3.6	2.1%	10.2	3.4%
1977	3.7	2.3%	9.3	3.8%
1978	3.3	2.1%	9.6	3.4%
1979	3.4	2.2%	10.6	4.1%
1980	3.1	2.0%	10.3	4.0%
1981	2.9	1.8%	9.8	4.6%
1982	1.7	1.0%	6.7	3.0%
1983	1.7	.9%	7.9	3.0%
1984	1.8	1.0%	9.4	3.8%
1985	2.0	1.2%	8.2	3.8%

CA/100 MEMB. - the number of certifications attempted per 100 union members.
EA/U.MEMB. - the number of employees that unions attempted to organize through certification procedures as a percentage of union membership.

TABLE 3

Union Organizing Success in the United States, Canada and Ontario, 1976 - 1985

YEAR	U. S.			CANADA		ONTARIO
	CG/ 100 MEMB.	NG/ U.MEMB.	NG/EA	CG/ 100 MEMB.	NG/ U.MEMB.	NG/EA
1976	1.7	.6%	34.1%	10.5	n.a.	n.a.
1977	1.8	.7%	31.0%	8.7	1.3%	35.3%
1978	1.6	.7%	33.9%	9.4	1.3%	38.4%
1979	1.5	.6%	27.1%	8.6	2.1%	50.4%
1980	1.5	.6%	28.0%	10.0 ^a	1.8%	44.8%
1981	1.3	.5%	26.5%	9.9	1.4%	31.2%
1982	.8	.2%	23.2%	8.2	.9%	29.0%
1983	.8	.3%	31.5%	6.8	1.3%	42.1%
1984	.9	.2%	20.4%	7.5	1.7%	45.7%
1985	.9	.3%	22.4%	7.8	1.6%	41.2%

a estimate

CG/100 MEMB. - the number of certifications granted per 100 union members

NG/U.MEMB. - net organizing gains as a percentage of union membership

NG/EA - net organizing gains as a percentage of employees attempted through certification.

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