

Employee Voice in the Anglo-American World: Some Implications for Unions

DAVID PEETZ
Griffith University, Australia

ANN FROST
University of Western Ontario, Canada

In considering the implications for unions of the worker voice surveys, we will focus on one aspect: the implications of the data, particularly regarding the worker desire for “cooperation,” for the push to an “organizing” model.

External Organizing

In thinking about new organizing, unions have several fronts on which they need to attack: organizing new workplaces and segments of the labor force traditionally overlooked, developing new methods of reaching out to workers, and piloting new forms of membership.

Across several of the surveys, young workers show a high desire for union representation but a low level of membership. In part this is due to the kinds of employers for whom they work and forms of employment they have. Youth tend to be concentrated in small workplaces, often working part time, with high turnover rates. Their attitudes toward work also tend to be weakly formed, so their demand for unionism is volatile and subject to change through experience. All these factors conspire to make them more difficult for unions to organize and easy to lose. Nevertheless, these workers are more likely to be vulnerable to exploitation by powerful employers. First contact with these workers is very important in shaping subsequent attitudes to unionism.

Unions need to develop new models of organizing these workers, be it via a sectoral focus on industries in which they predominate or focus on particular employers. A key element of success will be in informing them on how

Author’s address: Department of Industrial Relations and Centre for Work, Leisure, and Community Research, Griffith University, Australia

to organize. Young workers tend not to know their rights or how to go about forming a union. Some unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers in Canada have created a separate youth department in which they deploy youth organizers, to organize workplaces from the inside and educate youth about their rights.

There are new techniques available for reaching out to workers and new forms of quasi-membership. The AFL-CIO's Working America has created a coalition of community networks to promote social justice actions, as well as unionization, using the Internet (Freeman 2005). Exploitation of technology is critical for unions anywhere. In the United Kingdom, Unison has a site for working students. Australian unions offer Workers Online, a news and information source. Washtech, the loose affiliation of high-tech workers at Microsoft, is an organization of workers separate from their places of work. Through such quasi-memberships, unions can offer some workers access to collective resources and services without collective bargaining. Eventually though, unions will have to find ways to transition these people from virtual to real members.

Much of the unmet demand for voice is in small organizations (e.g., Boxall, Haynes, and Macky 2005, 7). Here it is most costly for unions to organize, yet most important for members to be self-reliant because of the high costs per unit of servicing. Formal structures such as works councils are least appropriate, because small businesses are largely run on informal lines (Callus, Kitay, and Sutcliffe 1992). Compared to others, small business workers often prefer to deal directly with management, though this does not mean intrinsic opposition to collective representation (Campolieti, Gomez, and Gunderson 2005, Tables A3 and A4). Unions need different approaches. Means of developing networks across organizations, including through use of new technology, and providing education and training to enable small business workers to effectively stand up for themselves, are issues to consider.

Cooperation and consolidation

Once unions have successfully organized a workplace, they must establish an ongoing negotiated relationship with the employer, with greater levels of cooperation emerging, though conflict will not disappear. It is essential that unions bed down the relationship so they can move on (Crosby 2005). A union cannot afford perpetual conflict. A large proportion of surveyed workers indicated their desire for some form of "cooperation" between workers and management. Although comparisons over time are not part of the study, in the Australian case there is some evidence that the focus on cooperation increased over thirteen years. A 1991 survey of employees in thirty-six Aus-

tralian workplaces found 55 percent of union members agreed that unions “really tried to cooperate” with management (data from study originally published in Peetz 1996). The 2004 Australian telephone survey had a figure of 70 percent for the same question (Teicher et al. 2005). Increases were also recorded in the proportions saying that management tried to cooperate with unions, that unions *should* cooperate more with management, and that management should cooperate more with unions. Although there are differences in survey sample and method, higher reporting rates may have been driven by the greater focus on “cooperation” and efficiency coming from changed economic and institutional circumstances in the 1980s.

Cooperation does not mean acquiescence. As Bryson and Freeman (2005, 15) point out, cooperation works only when unions are operating from a position of strength. What workers appear *not* to want is a continuous challenge. And, to the extent that they see a potential alignment of interest, they want management, more than unions, to shift their position. Australian union members are more vigorous in demanding that management cooperate more with unions (82 percent) than that unions cooperate more with management (66 percent). A similar pattern exists in New Zealand. And despite calling for more cooperation, workers almost unanimously want unions to vigorously defend their interests (Teicher et al. 2005; Boxall and Haynes 2005). Indeed, union members are more willing to take conflictual action against the employer when they perceive their union to have been “cooperative” (Peetz 1996). “Cooperation” appears to mean that the union has behaved “reasonably” in the eyes of its members, so members are willing to take on the employer when the employer has not reciprocated. In this respect, cooperation means union responsiveness to member concerns and interests.

Indeed, the data point to the need for unions to be open and responsive to worker needs. Workers report wanting the ability to influence decisions and behavior of both their employer and their union. Yet in the United Kingdom, unions’ biggest weakness is their perceived lack of openness and accountability (Bryson and Freeman 2005). Australian evidence shows how critical members’ perceptions of union democracy are in shaping the desire to stay in a union (Peetz and Pocock 2005). Workers expect their unions to both know their problems and do something about them.

The surveys tell us workers want establishment of formal decision-making mechanisms in the workplace. They want to see their union has sufficient clout to get things done. Throughout this is the need to balance cooperation and conflict. It cannot be managed if the union office is imposing its views on members’ actions. Rather, members need to be empowered to advance an agenda that reflects their needs. It is clearly a problem if individual workplaces

depart severely from overall common objectives or identify too strongly with employer interests at the expense of their own collective interests. Thus, the union organization must help shape workplace level expectations through information and advice and regular workplace contact, much more effectively than through rules and dictates. The union must keep a union agenda for change in front of its members so that the employer's does not become workers' only source of reference.

The British data suggest many non-union workers want a combination of voice—through both unions and works councils—especially once a workplace is unionized (Bryson and Freeman 2005, 15). Unions might consolidate their membership in organized workplaces through an agenda that incorporates a works council or equivalent structure. Such a mechanism provides an opportunity for members to have a *proactive* say in workplace governance. Despite their scope for proactive behavior on wages and conditions, when it comes to matters of workplace governance unions are essentially reactive institutions. A works council can be a legitimate part of the ongoing relationship between management and members—provided that body in turn genuinely involves, and reflects the interests and concerns of, members and is effective in articulating the needs of members. This emphasizes the importance of adequately training workplace representatives involved in them, and enabling representatives to have an active, ongoing role in workplace leadership in the long periods between collective negotiations.

Cooperation and Internal Organizing

The key idea behind the organizing approach is to empower members/workers to do things for themselves at the workplace, rather than being reliant on the union office to do it for them remotely. For strategy to be successful, it relies upon the union being able to construct or build up existing workplace structures and develop workplace representation. Through this, the union will be able to develop workplace activism among the membership more broadly.

The process of organizing around workplace grievances implies conflict with the employer. So is workers' desire for cooperation ultimately inconsistent with organizing approaches? We doubt it. For one thing, the desire for cooperation is nothing new. It reflects the inherently contradictory nature of the employment relationship since the foundation of capitalism: workers and employers simultaneously have conflicting interests over the distribution of income and power, but their immediate interests coincide inasmuch as the survival and prosperity of the employing organization is necessary for employees' job security and wages growth, and daily overt conflict is not a pleasant experience for most. There might be more emphasis on cooperation now than in

some earlier times, and even a shift in what Baldamus (1961) calls the “margin of condoned disparity” (that is, the accepted gap between effort and pay), but there is still a recognition of conflicting interests and as mentioned, an expectation that unions fight vigorously if workers’ interests are threatened. Moreover, any rise in a focus on “cooperation” cannot explain the decline of unionism, because that would imply that workers attitudes have turned more antiunion as unions have diverged from worker preferences. Yet U.S. data cited by Freeman (2005) show the unfulfilled demand for unions increasing. Other, Australian data (Bearfield 2003) show that employee preference for union membership has remained stable despite rapidly declining union density. The decline of union density reflects shifting institutional and power relationships and economic structures, not a shift in employee attitudes.

In addition, many of the prerequisites for cooperation are no different now to what they were a century ago and are consistent with organizing approaches to unionism. Chief among these is trust: despite conflicting interests, parties can still have fundamentally cooperative relationships if they believe that the other party speaks the truth and keeps its word. A second prerequisite for cooperative behavior is mutual recognition: parties cannot behave cooperatively if one seeks to deny or prevent the existence of the other. There is nothing in the organizing model that seeks to deny trust or the existence of employers or management. The best way for unions to ensure recognition is through strength, and organizing approaches provide the best opportunity for unions to demonstrate the strength that forces employer recognition. Organizing unions need agreements with employers that recognize their legitimacy and enable union delegates (representatives) access to induction, grievance procedures, and union training—and provide for an ongoing workplace role (Crosby 2005).

We can also shed further light on the significance of cooperation and common interest by briefly turning to unpublished data from a recent survey of 2400 Australian union delegates (Peetz and Pocock 2005). When given a forced choice in a telephone survey, three quarters of delegates said that a union should emphasize the common interests of employers and employees, as opposed to instead promoting its own separate agenda. But despite members’ and employers’ desire for “cooperation,” workplaces with delegates who said the union should emphasize common interests scored no better than others in terms of changes in unionization or other measures of union success or influence. Delegates who were less inclined to emphasize common interests were more likely to face a hostile employer and have mobilized a workplace collective action, but even a majority of those who had mobilized a collective action against a hostile employer acknowledged common interest between employer and employees. This tells us there is nothing unusual or

astounding about the existence of common interest and of a need for cooperation—it is simply one side of the employment relationship coin.

Unions require a specific set of capabilities to engage with management in this joint fashion (Frost 2000). They require an independent vision of what the objectives of workplace change ought to be, one that recognizes both common and conflicting interests of workers with management, and represents the interests of workers. They require sufficient leverage to ensure that management take their input seriously, rather than make unilateral workplace decisions (Bryson and Freeman 2005). Training for local union leaders and activists is important, and workers need to take responsibility for interacting with their management counterparts. Workers cannot simply sit back and rely on “the union” as some off-site business agent to deliver it to them. Workers need to realize that they are the union and that through their own activism they are able to achieve their objectives. This is all consistent with the organizing agenda.

Although there is a difference between what unions need to do to successfully externally organize and what they need to subsequently do to maintain an effective collective union presence, getting the relationship between internal organizing and cooperation right is just one aspect of maintaining an effective, active union presence in a workplace. Issues for unions who have successfully organized a workplace include those mentioned above as well as how to develop and maintain a sense of collective identity; how to promote norms that encourage collective behavior; how to develop ongoing connections or “social capital” among members (Jarley and Johnson 2004); how to get members to cooperate with each other—and not just with the employer; how to ensure that employees perceive that their union membership brings with it power and a sense of ongoing involvement in a collective; and how to ensure that altruistic behavior by members is not subverted by free riding of nonmembers. None of these is inconsistent with the organizing approach. But this does suggest that unions need sophisticated strategies and highly trained workplace representatives to consolidate the gains made through successful organizing campaigns permanently.

Conclusion

Unions need to re-create themselves while still maintaining their traditional core mission of representing employee collective interests in the workplace. Organizing, both internally and externally, will remain the key to achieving this objective. Only a few unions have made the major changes internally needed to succeed in the new environment.

Once initially organized, workers also need to be brought into the union as involved and active members. Internal union democracy is important as

workers demand a say in their union and the direction it pursues. Successful workplace relations require a stable accommodation with the employer. Engaging in such activities is not a simple undertaking. It is too easy for the union to adopt the employers' vision for workplace outcomes and become little more than a mouthpiece for the employer. Successful union engagement in joint activity requires strength, a separate union vision, and vigorous representation of it to both union members and the employer. Establishing enough strength to be recognized as permanent and legitimate is perhaps easier done outside the United States than inside. Unions also require ongoing active involvement, which does not imply conflict with the employer so much as effective participation of members in ongoing structures and processes of consultation or workplace governance. Unions cannot simply have a burst of activism every three years. Works councils may be a legitimate forum for promotion by unions and if participants are properly trained can help maintain member activism.

Going forward it will be important to identify how successful unions have maintained the activism and involvement of their members at the workplace over time. Workers continue to desire collective representation and formal involvement in decision making in their workplaces. A process of renewal through an ongoing commitment to organizing both internally and externally and a careful consideration of how best to engage proactively with and on behalf of members with the employer would ensure unions remain a vibrant institution in these countries.

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