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# The Future of Worker Representation

Geraldine Healy

*Capital & Class*

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Geraldine Healy

Edmund Heery

Philip Taylor

William Brown

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## The Future of Worker Representation

meso- and macro-level issues confronting the world of labour tomorrow?" The answers are not uniform, but it is made clear that the trade unions can realize their potential for the future only if they are prepared to accept the new conditions of the post-industrial world. They may, according to the concluding chapter, gain new legitimacy insofar as they play a triple role, which "consists in defending both their members' material interests (business unionism) and their individual and qualitative interests (participative unionism) as well as the interests of workers in general (inclusive unionism)."

The essays in this volume cover a wide range of topics. A finding shared by all three contributions on the EU is that it offers many opportunities for involvement of the representative associations of trade unions, employers, or non-governmental organizations. Well-documented and stimulating presentations by Janine Goetschy (on social and employment policy), Michael Gold (on European works councils), and Jacques Monat and Thérèse Beaupain (on the Economic and Social Council) probe various aspects of the dialogue processes that have become trademarks of the EU and that the authors view as forms of democratic participation "beyond the usual tripartism."

Skepticism prevails in the contributions on new forms of work organization in the service society. Peter Leisink shows—taking the example of the communications industry—that organizing campaigns will be of little avail in recruiting new members unless the trade unions have updated their aims and *raison d'être*. Helmut Martens stresses that "a stable future for society requires stable institutional change in many of the key institutions of the old labour society." The trade unions' chances, according to this author, are good, but what remains doubtful is whether they can succeed in bringing about their own renewal. Christofer Edling and Ake Sandberg from Sweden ask whether management is really interested in democratic participation or whether it is more concerned to exercise economic and ideological control via new forms of work organization.

Democratic participation in sectoral restructuring is analyzed by Philippe Mossé, taking the example of the hotel industry, and by Thoralf Ulrik Qvale, who focuses on the petroleum industry. Worker participation in the reduction and reorganization of working time is the subject of contributions from Henri Pinaud and Anna Ponzellini. The collection is rounded off by contributions on central and eastern Europe

from Daniel Vaughan-Whitehead and on trade union education from Edward Zammit, Saviour Rizzo, and Joseph Vancell.

Democratic participation is the book's political message. Thirteen essays illuminate its extent, potential, and challenges. It is good that the authors argue rather than agitate. It is good also that these contributors, with their well-defended optimism, should give encouragement to all who are striving for a future characterized by social cohesion. I highly recommend this book.

Otto Jacobi

Head, Laboratorium Europa, Frankfurt  
Emeritus Professor of Economic  
and Social Policy,  
Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences

*The Future of Worker Representation.* Edited by Geraldine Healy, Edmund Heery, Philip Taylor, and William Brown. London: Palgrave, 2004. 325 pp. ISBN 1-4039-1759-0, \$69.95 (cloth).

This book largely arises from a wide range of employment relations research projects conducted under the *Future of Work* program funded by the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council. The editors, all of them experts in their respective fields, have put together a valuable collection of writings that cover many aspects of worker representation, from trade unions to local community coalitions.

The book's 13 chapters are divided into three sections. The critical first chapter, the editors' overview and introduction, asks how the "representation gap" caused by the decline in union membership might be met. The following eight chapters consider the prospects for trade union growth and renewal in diverse sections of the labor market. Finally, four chapters explore how non-union representation might assist those workers who currently find it difficult to access trade union support at work.

In outlining themes and issues for consideration of how unions might plug the "representation gap," the editors begin by contextualizing recent debates between those scholars who argue that union revitalization is key and those who advocate new or alternative institutions of worker representation. To provide a structural and theoretical framework for the book, they identify four models of union revitalization that

have been used in recent empirical analyses. The first, a “societal model,” is premised on the belief that unions must adapt if they are to respond to changes in society and the global economy. Using the reference points of post-industrialism/post-Fordism, adherents to this view have suggested that unions need to respond to these changes by developing “mutual gains” relationships with employers. Others falling within the general orbit of this model claim that new organizational venues, such as geographical communities, may be more fruitful for union organization than the traditional workplace now is.

The second model, referred to as “institutional,” encompasses two main views: that union revitalization depends on a successful adaptation to the immediate institutions of industrial relations, and that “union strategic choices are constrained by the wider institutional forms of co-ordinated and liberal market economies” (p. 9). Key to this model is Peter Fairbrother’s “union renewal” thesis (*Trade Unions at the Crossroads*, 2000), which asserts that the process of decentralization of collective bargaining may act as a stimulus to workplace unionism. The main argument is that this localized unionism can better reflect the immediate concerns of workers than can traditional centralized unionism, and can thus provide a stronger basis for the development of local activism.

Advocates of the third, “organizational,” model believe that union structures and government are in need of reform to allow multiple and often competing voices to be heard within unions, and they argue for removal of barriers to participation. In many ways this model is linked to the final model—the “actor” model, which focuses on the characteristics of union leaders and activists. Adherents of mobilization theory (John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, 1998) fall within this category, as do those arguing that the identity and representativeness of activists are key in creating effective leadership in trade unions.

Discussions of these models are followed by consideration of the “replacement thesis,” whereby it is argued that unions have become deficient vehicles of representation, and the “complementary thesis,” which advocates a widening of trade union activity, working with labor community coalitions to rebuild widespread support for challenging the excesses of capitalism.

By thus neatly summarizing the past two decades’ main debates regarding union renewal, the opening chapter sets the scene for the em-

pirical chapters that follow. Those chapters, which I can only sketch here, range greatly in focus, from the question of why membership is so low among software workers (Jeff Hyman et al.), to the difficulty of organizing in call centers (Peter Bain et al.), to trade union responses to non-standard work (Edmund Heery et al.), to the challenge of union/management partnerships (Andy Danford et al.; Sarah Oxenbridge and William Brown).

Of particular interest is the research by Geraldine Healy et al., who describe the experiences of minority ethnic women in trade unions. In highlighting the gender and racial barriers to union participation, these authors bring to the fore an under-researched area in industrial relations in general and in the study of trade union renewal in particular. Many of the black and minority ethnic women interviewed by the authors were committed union activists who, because of the “double disadvantage” they faced, often turned to social and cultural networks, not just for support, but also as a means to build union membership. The authors demonstrate that these workers represent a largely untapped potential for union renewal, and that scholars and activists have much to learn from a more nuanced understanding of gender- and ethnicity-based injustices in the workplace.

The chapters dealing with non-standard (that is, non-union) worker representation will be equally interesting to those searching for answers to how unions can reach the 70% of U.K. workers outside the union movement. For example, for help in understanding the way these workers access support when they have problems at work, the reader is provided with examples of the role played by employment agencies as “intermediaries” between their clients and the workers they place with them. While the authors (Jan Drucker and Celia Stanworth) are not advocating a replacement role for trade unions, their research uncovers significant evidence that leading employment agencies *do* play this role on behalf of the workers they place, and they argue that this is a result of the erosion of trade union influence. Similarly, the Citizens’ Advice Bureaux (the CABs, comprising a national charity) have seen a massive increase in employment-related inquiries with the decline in influence of trade unions. Brian Abbott says that CABs are not seeking to replace trade unions—indeed, they often refer clients to them—but notes that there is an opportunity to expand areas of co-operation in order to “provide workers with greater protection and an enhanced voice in the workplace” (p. 263).

The book concludes with a report on the adoption of a living wage campaign in London's East End. Many readers will be familiar with such campaigns in U.S. cities, but this is the first attempt to adapt the model to U.K. circumstances. The author (Jane Wills), who has worked closely with the campaign since its formation in 2001, chronicles and analyzes the successful formation of a community coalition (TELCO) of faith and community groups, but also highlights the difficulty of persuading some unions of the benefits of long-term coalitions. Furthermore, she writes of the real challenges faced by unions in trying to organize low-paid and subcontracted workers: "The old workplace-focused models of trade union organizational practice and structures are ill-suited to the service sector, where workers are spread across a number of sites" (p. 279).

This book presents a wealth of knowledge of recent developments in union renewal theory, backed up by sound empirical studies from some of the United Kingdom's most prominent scholars. The book's strength lies in its diverse opinions, which in other hands could have resulted in a disparate collection, but here have been deftly integrated through a succinctly presented analytical framework. That same framework should continue to be instrumental to scholars considering the future of worker representation.

*Jane Holgate*

Department of Geography  
University of London

### **Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions**

*Growing Public: Social Spending and Economic Growth Since the Eighteenth Century.* By Peter H. Lindert. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Volume 1: *The Story*. xvii, 377 pp. ISBN 0-521-82174-6, \$65.00 (cloth); 0-521-52916-6, \$24.99 (paper). Volume 2: *Further Evidence*. x, 230 pp. ISBN 0-521-82175-4, \$70.00 (cloth).

For nearly four decades economists have been telling us that there are no free lunches; in other words, every silver lining has a cloud. One of the favorite applications of the "no free lunch" principle is to the issue of welfare/social spending. Economists contend that the safety net

resulting from tax-funded government spending on welfare, old-age pensions, health insurance, and the like comes at the high price of slower economic growth. The notion that welfare spending is harmful to the economy is quite old. David Ricardo maintained that "the clear and direct tendency of the [English] poor laws . . . is not, as the legislature benevolently intended, to amend the condition of the poor, but to deteriorate the condition of both poor and rich" (*Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, 1817). One of the major conclusions reached by Peter Lindert, in his important and timely two-volume study of the evolution of social spending over the past two centuries, is that economists have greatly overstated the costs of the welfare state. Indeed, the empirical evidence suggests that "the net national costs of social transfers, and of the taxes that finance them, are essentially zero" (p. 29). It would appear that free lunches do exist, for reasons that I will discuss below.

Lindert's discussion of the costs and benefits of the welfare state is only one part, albeit the most eye-catching part, of this wide-ranging work in comparative economic history. Volume 1, written for non-specialists, presents "The Story"; it is tailor-made for upper-level undergraduate courses in economic and social history, public policy, and welfare economics. Volume 2 presents "Further Evidence," including the regression results that underlie the findings presented in the first volume, and eighty pages of appendices. Graduate students and scholars studying the welfare state will want to read this volume in conjunction with Volume 1. For those who want to probe even deeper, most of the underlying data are available on Lindert's home website at the University of California, Davis.

After two introductory chapters laying out "patterns and puzzles" and major findings, Volume 1 is divided into three parts, covering "the rise of social spending" (Chapters 3–7), "prospects for social transfers" (Chapters 8–9), and the effects of social spending on economic growth (Chapters 10–12). Chapters 3 and 4 examine the role played by poor relief in Europe and America before 1880. Lindert shows that publicly financed poor relief (welfare) was quite small in all countries before the late nineteenth century. The reason is simple—political voice was concentrated in the hands of the elite, who had little interest in taxing themselves to help others. Moreover, there was not a simple linear relationship between the share eligible to vote and social spending. The extension of the

The future of work. Special report from The Economist. You've seen the news, now discover the story.Â The retail renaissanceThe future of shopping. Special reports - Mar 13th 2021. Not since the Industrial Revolution has shopping been in such upheaval, writes Henry Tricks. The future of shopping: The return of one-to-one commerce. The marketplace: E-commerce profits may become harder to make. The merchants: The rise of the rebel brands. The travelling salesmen: Independent retailers may choose multiple sales channels. The food stall: The importance of "omnichannel" strategies. Mass craftsmanship: How to know what customers want. People: Shop assistants and the retail renaissance. The future: W The future of work signifies the opportunity to evolve our workforces and workplaces. This evolution is being shaped by two powerful forces: the growing adoption of artificial intelligence in the workplace, and the expansion of the workforce to include both on- and off-balance-sheet talent, often referred to as the open talent continuum.Â The future of work could create more good jobs, if organizational leaders are able to evolve their jobs by crafting them to make the most out of their employees' inherent nature to be social creatures and creative problem-solvers.<sup>12</sup> Artificial intelligence, and augmented reality technologies may allow more good jobs to be created as work begins to leverage the essentially human qualities of social and critical skills. This report on the future of work after COVID-19 is the first of three MGI reports that examine aspects of the postpandemic economy. The others look at the pandemic's long-term influence on consumption and the potential for a broad recovery led by enhanced productivity and innovation. Here, we assess the lasting impact of the pandemic on labor demand, the mix of occupations, and the workforce skills required in eight countries with diverse economic and labor market models: China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.