

**Labour Movements
Research Committee (RC 44)**

November 2003

Vol 2 No 3

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Mission

To encourage international research on labour movements, with a focus on their role both in industrial relations and in the political arena. Membership is open to any person engaged in research into Labour Movements or in Labour Movement activities.

Editor's Notes

Over the last couple of decades many scholars and other observers of the labour movement have written books and articles noting the fact that labour is at the crossroads. In the context of neo-liberalism, some saw the challenges as an indication that labour was facing a deep crisis from which it could not recover. One could not avoid being overwhelmed by a sense of gloom and doom and a fear that the labour movement (and labour studies) would forever remain stuck at the crossroads.

However, the contents of this edition of the newsletter suggest that labour may have found their way out of the crossroads after all. The piece by Carter reviews some of the research on union renewal efforts in Britain since the early 1990s. In addition, two academic conferences are being organised for 2004, one in Australia and the other in England. Also significantly, a book edited by Cornfield and MaCammon on revitalisation has just come out. (Earlier this year, the European Journal of Industrial Relations did a special edition [vol. 9, no. 1] on union revitalisation strategies in comparative perspective).

But while 'revitalization' and 'renewal' may be self-evident for scholars in the North, it is not always clear what these terms mean in the South. As Alexander's review of Von Holdt's book suggests, the South African labour movement is relatively young and is not subject to the same degree of oligarchic tendencies that animated the revitalisation debate. In addition to responding to the forces of neo-liberal globalisation, movements in the South are also trying to engage with the State and capital to deal with the legacy of colonialism, authoritarianism and apartheid. Thus the challenge of renewal or revitalisation in South Africa and the rest of the South entails more than simply trying to strengthen existing union organisations. There is a need to go beyond traditional union structures to explore imaginative ways of engagement with the unemployed, the 'new working poor', employers, governments, the new social movements and labour movements in other countries.

Lastly, the piece by Herod points to new and innovative directions for labour studies. Here is to hoping that the labour movement (and labour studies) is moving beyond the crossroads at last.

Sakhela Buhlungu

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In common with a large number of other countries, British trade union density has declined over the last two decades, along with confidence and influence. Density declined from nearly 55 per cent in 1980 to less than 30 per cent today. The decline started with the advent of a series of Conservative governments that marginalized unions directly through a series of anti-union laws and through a reversal of the hitherto practices of corporatism. Many of the experiences of unions in Britain have parallels in other countries, particularly those facing neo-liberalising governments and increasingly confident employers. The aim here is therefore not to rehearse the problems faced by British unions (see Gospel and Wood 2003), so much as to examine the debates and responses to the threat of continued decline.

Individual unions fought a number of large largely unsuccessful, defensive battles during the 1980s culminating in the defeat of the miners in 1985. There was mass support for the miners' struggle, but the support did not translate into widespread industrial action, and defeat further weakened confidence. The retreat was evidenced by the policy of new realism which ceded to the government the right to enact legislation without trade unions taking industrial action to oppose it (McIlroy 1997a), as well as the complementary encouragement given to unions to develop services to members (TUC 1988, 1989), increasingly regarded in the new lexicon as customers (Bacon and Storey 1996). The association of decline with Conservative rule also initially encouraged unions to believe that any incoming Labour Government would do much to reverse the balance of fortunes between capital and labour.

In the midst of this retreat and passivity, the possibility was raised that the very changes unions were experiencing would force them to adopt new forms and in particular recognise the need to concentrate on workplace organisation: in short the possibility of union renewal. The concept of renewal is most closely associated with the work of Fairbrother and it quickly became focused on the public and newly privatised sectors. Fairbrother (1994; 1996; 2000a; 2000b) stressed the increasing relevance of democratic, participatory and locally based forms of organisation, as employers in public sectors have moved towards enterprise bargaining and decentralisation. These movements centralised decision-making while decentralising responsibilities, ending the standardised conditions and benign environment associated with public sector employment, and leaving the centralised, bureaucratic forms of unionism, based on national collective bargaining, largely redundant.

This verdict has been challenged by those who continue to believe in the necessity of a more centralised trade union strategy. McIlroy, for instance, contends that more strategic centralization, unintentionally strengthened by legislation requiring balloting before industrial action, may herald a new phase of union development under the more effective control of a national leadership. More pertinently, he states that this direction 'stands in sober, well-researched distinction to those who have, for almost a decade, asserted that union recovery may be occurring through a process of democratic "participative" renewal in the workplace, in opposition to "bureaucratic" trade unionism' (1997b: 105). Heery, similarly, has been supportive of more centralised responses to the difficulties unions face. This support is evidenced by his uncritical account of the new unionism of the GMB (Heery 1996), which amounts to an endorsement of a responsive servicing model; his characterisation of the development of managerial unionism in Britain since the Second World War (Heery and Kelly 1994); and in his evaluations of the TUC's part-time workers' campaign (1998) and attempts to introduce an organising culture into Britain (Heery 1997; Heery et al 2003) (for more detailed discussions of these issues, see Carter forthcoming).

What on the surface appears to divide the proponents of centralisation and local participative forms of unionism is the means to achieve union renewal, whereas in fact the argument reflects very different

views of the very nature of trade unions. It has become increasingly clear from research in the United States that any perspective of union renewal will have not only to embrace a combination of radical tactics at local level (Bronfenbrenner 2003) but also will have to take into account the factors that explain the internal transformation necessary for their adoption (Voss and Sherman 2000) and this latter necessitates the support of national unions for changes. In both areas, evidence of transformation in Britain is as yet weak. A number of studies have cast doubt on the extent of local change (Colling 1995; Carter and Poynter 1999; Carter forthcoming) and where national unions have been ostensibly committed to organising, the weaknesses of change strategies has meant that the organisational results have been disappointing (Carter 2000; Wills 2003). Michael Crosby of the ACTU's *Organising Works* programme made the following frank observations about British practice:

'new organisers tend to be locked up in external organising units and somewhat divorced from what the rest of the union is doing. Organising is about much more than putting resources into growth and getting a few new members. It is in fact a profound change in the way that every part of the union does its business' (Crosby 2002).

The sense of crisis that engulfed the movement in the early 1990s, and which led to the TUC's New Unionism with its strong strand of organising, has waned somewhat with the election of the Labour government. The statutory recognition clauses of the Employment Relations Act (1999) have focused attention on winning voluntary recognition without the need for industrial action. While this has had some success, with estimates of over 600 campaigns for recognition, covering 440,000 workers between 1997 and 2002 (Gall 2003), recruitment continues to fail to keep pace with the creation of new non-union jobs and the loss of unionised ones through the shrinkage of manufacturing. Moreover, there is evidence of employers using weaknesses in the legislation to frustrate recognition or to encourage a subordinate form (Oxenbridge et al 2003).

With victory for a number of new leaders in major unions and signs of trade union disenchantment with the fruits of a Labour government, the prospects for organising are not necessarily bleak. At present, however, it is not clear the extent to which differences between the old and the new leaders are restricted to the degree of opposition to government policies. The idea of social movement unionism and strategies for changing the nature of trade unions and organising are as yet given little prominence.

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Cutting
Edge
Research

LABOUR GEOGRAPHY

Andy Herod

Department of Geography, University of Georgia, USA

The notion of “Labour history” seems an easy concept to grasp. The notion of “Labour geography” seems less so. And yet, in the past few years, there has been a growing field of “Labour geography” emerging, stimulated by a cross-fertilisation of ideas between economic and political geographers on the one hand and industrial relations scholars and labour historians on the other. Influenced primarily by neo-Marxist and post-structuralist approaches to thinking about space, “labour geographers” have sought to argue that society and social relations are fundamentally spatial in nature and that this spatiality has significant consequences for the ways in which workers and others live their lives and engage in political praxis. Rather than seeing the economic and political landscape as simply the stage upon which the more serious action of social relationships unfolds –an approach which conceives of space and the geography of capitalism as merely a passive reflection of society– labour geographers have shown that the construction of spatial relations is a highly political act which has significant implications for the ways in which social praxis is articulated. Put another way, labour geographers argue that the spatial context within which social relations are constructed and political decisions made has tremendous leverage over those relations and decisions, whilst the ways in which the economic and political landscape is itself made can enable or it can constrain social actors’ possibilities for praxis. Class (and other social relations) are spatially constituted, labour geographers would argue, whilst space is a social product riven with class (and other) social conflicts.

The origins of such an approach can be seen in the work of a number of Marxist geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith, and Richard Walker who, in the 1980s, sought to understand how the geography of capitalism was made and how this geography was an integral part of the ways in which capitalism as a social, political, and economic system operated (see Harvey’s 1982 *Limits to Capital* and Smith’s 1984 *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* for more details). Whilst these authors pushed social theory in new and exciting directions, their approaches tended, however, to focus very much on the activities of capital and how capitalists are compelled to make economic landscapes in particular ways if they are to ensure that accumulation –and hence the reproduction of capitalism itself– is to occur. In the 1990s a newer generation of economic geographers drew on such works but also sought to push the argument further through an analysis of the ways in which *workers’* lives were spatially embedded and what this meant for how they and their organisations sought to shape the geography of capitalism (and even non-capitalism) and the spatiality of social relations in particular ways. Meanwhile, within industrial relations, industrial sociology and labour history a

number of writers (such as Bradon Ellem, John Shields, Eddie Webster, Rob Lambert, and Jeff Cowie, amongst others) were increasingly grappling with thorny issues concerning the importance of space and place in capital-labour relations. The confluence of these two streams of thought about space and workers has led to a number of cross-disciplinary publications in the past few years, including a special issue of the Australian journal *Labour and Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work*, 13.2: 5-17 on “Industrial Relations Meets Human Geography: Spatialising the Social Relations of Work” and a forthcoming (Fall 2003, no. 64) issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* on “Workers, Suburbs, and Labor Geography”. **A number of other publications also provide insights into this growing area of research, including:**

Bradon Ellem and John Shields: (1999): ‘Rethinking “regional industrial relations”: Space, place and the social relations of work’. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 41.4, 536-560.

Andrew Herod, Jamie Peck and Jane Wills (2003): “Geography and industrial relations”. In Peter Ackers and Adrian Wilkinson (eds.) *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*, pp. 176-192. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

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Ron Martin, Peter Sunley, and Jane Wills (1996): *Union Retreat and the Regions: The Shrinking Landscape of Organised Labour*. Jessica Kingsley: London.

Jamie Peck (1996): *Work-Place: The Social Regulation of Labor Markets*. Guilford: New York.

Jane Wills and Peter Waterman (eds.) (2001): *Place, Space and the New Labour Internationalisms*, pp. 103-122. Basil Blackwell: Oxford.

Jane Wills (1996): Uneven Reserves: Geographies of Banking Trade Unionism, *Regional Studies* 30, 359-372

Key to all these works is the argument that social life cannot be understood devoid of its geographical context. But, more than that, labour geographers argue that it is essential to take space seriously as a theoretical category and to see how space and spatial relations are malleable within the ebb and flow of social praxis –indeed, that it is necessary to talk about *spatial* praxis when considering capital-labour relations and industrial relations. Understanding space and spatial relations as being socially produced and socially producing is imperative theoretically if we are both to truly understand why particular social actors engage in certain types of political praxis in particular places and times, and if we are to imagine creating more just societies. This latter project of developing political praxis that can help bring about more just societies, I and fellow labour geographers would argue, is as much a geographical as it is a historical one.

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Conference

**UNION RENEWAL?
"NEW INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, NEW UNIONS"**
Noosa, Queensland, Australia
3-6 February 2004

For several years now union movements, particularly those in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, have been grappling with issues of union renewal, organising and structural and cultural change in a bid to reverse union decline that had seemed almost inexorable in four of those five countries. With signs that the worst may be over, a common theme to developments in these countries has been shifts of varying intensity towards 'organising' approaches amongst some or many unions. Now is a good time to evaluate the changes unions have been attempting to make, the barriers they face both internally and externally, the successes and failures they have had, and the challenges they still face.

The Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ) is hosting its annual conference with the overall theme of "**new economy, new industrial relations?**" With the creation of the union renewal stream, we are encouraging practitioners as well as researchers to discuss their experiences, findings and recommendations.

Information about the conference is on the conference web page at

<http://www.gu.edu.au/school/irl/airaanz2004/>

Information about submitting papers, including formatting requirements, is at

http://www.gu.edu.au/school/irl/airaanz2004/call_for_papers.html

Submission deadlines are 4 November 2003 for refereed papers and 5 January 2004 for non-refereed papers. If you are contemplating submitting a paper in the union renewal stream and would like to take part in a panel discussion, are just thinking of coming, have any suggestions, or would just like to be kept informed of further developments, please reply to me at D.Peetz@griffith.edu.au and we can keep in touch. Early bird registration costs \$A530 for members and \$A590 for non-members. At the time of writing the latter was equivalent to about 350 Euros, \$US400, \$C540 and 240 pounds sterling. So, as you can see, it represents excellent value! Discounts are available for students, retired people and for one-day registrations.

There will also be lots of opportunities to present and hear papers on other topics.

Other streams of the conference include:

- Asian industrial relations
- Teaching industrial relations
- Labour and community
- The politics of research in industrial relations
- Public sector industrial relations

The AIRAANZ conference convenors are Peter Brosnan (P.Brosnan@griffith.edu.au) and Michael Barry (M.Barry@griffith.edu.au). If you have administrative questions about the conference you can contact Julie McGregor, the Conference Manager, on j.mcgregor@griffith.edu.au (Tel: +61 7 3875 7477; Fax: +61 7 3875 7177).

Call for papers

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Industrial Relations in Europe network (IREC) Conference 2004

Governance issues in shifting industrial and employment relations

Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands
26 -28 August 2004

Call for papers addressing the themes and issues of the following workshops

- The eastward Europeanisation of industrial relations?
- Potential and limits of national level socio-economic governance.
- Management of diversity in labour markets and employment relations.
- Public sector reform and the reform of employment relationships
- e-HRM/e-IR: a new approach to managing and regulating employment relationships?
- IR and HRM: a critical assessment of ideological and theoretical rifts and/or shifts

Important dates

Deadline for submitting abstracts to the Conference Secretariat: 20 February 2004

Confirmation of accepted papers: 15 March 2004

Deadline for submitting papers: 1 July 2004

The conference fee (including conference materials, conference dinner, lunches, tea, coffee and drinks) will be EUR 275 (until 1 May 2004).

Further information on the programme, the list of hotels and so on will be provided in due time on the conference website: <http://www.usg.uu.nl/onderzoek/conferenties.html>

Conference organiser and RC 44 member: Peter Leisink, Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University. <mailto:p.leisink@usg.uu.nl> Any requests for information can be made to the Conference Secretariat. Mail to: Bas de Wit at B.deWit@usg.uu.nl

ISA Worldwide Competition for Junior Sociologists

The ISA announces the fourth worldwide competition for junior scholars engaged in social research. The winners will be invited to participate in the **XVI World Congress of Sociology in Durban, South Africa, July 2006**. The winners' papers will be considered for publication in English, subject to editorial decision and revision, in the ISA's journal *International Sociology*, or in another ISA publication.

Junior Scholars are under 35 years of age on May 1st, 2005. In case of joint or multiple-authorship, this rule applies to all authors. Participants should hold a Master's degree (or an equivalent graduate diploma) in sociology or in a related discipline. Candidates must send an original paper that has not been previously published anywhere. Focusing on socially relevant issues, the interpretation or analysis must show a sociological orientation. Empirical research papers must go beyond descriptive reporting of results to broader, analytical interpretations.

Papers should arrive before May 1st, 2005. Pre-selected finalists will receive Merit Award Certificates, four-year membership to the ISA, and an invitation to participate in the XVI World Congress. The ISA, however, cannot guarantee to cover their travel costs. All authors thus pre-selected will also be invited to participate in a one-week seminar prior to the Congress. Out of the pre-selected finalists, a Grand Jury chaired by the ISA President Piotr Sztompka, will select up to five winning papers. Their authors will be immediately invited, all expenses paid, to participate in the World Congress. In case of multiple-authorship, the subvention will have to be shared.

For further information and rules of the competition: <http://www.ucm.es/info/isa>

Call
for
papers



THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD: Political Economy Research Centre in association with Political Studies Association Labour Movements Group, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, and the Institute of Work Psychology, University of Sheffield.

**Labour Movements in the Twenty First Century: Employment, States, Capital, Trade Unions & Social Movements
1-3 July 2004, Sheffield, United Kingdom.**

Speakers: David Coates – Wake Forrest, USA
John Kelly – London School of Economics, UK
Robert Taylor – London School of Economics, UK

The anticipated trajectories of both communist and social democratic labour movements have been displaced by the apparent triumph of neo-liberalism. The collapse of the communist states has undermined an important element of the impetus behind twentieth century labour movements. Social democratic labour movements have struggled to maintain bargaining structures, welfare states and effective engagement with party systems. In many developing and transition economies, organised labour continues to confront legal constraints and repression. The emergence of international institutions raises new problems and opportunities for labour movements. The purpose of this conference is to explore the condition of labour in the twenty-first century.

The organisers invite proposals on four themes:

1. Theorizing Labour: the concept of labour
2. Regulating Labour: strategies of states
3. Exploiting Labour: strategies of capital
4. Protecting Labour: strategies of organized labour

Conference organising committee:

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Prof. Stephen Wood, Chief Editor, *British Journal of Industrial Relations* – s.j.wood@shef.ac.uk

Please Note: Abstracts to be half to one A4 page in length; submitted electronically (either by email attachment or via posted disk; preferably in word format); full name of author(s), email address (es) and institutional address (es) to appear at top of abstract. Email abstract to s.mccolm@sheffield.ac.uk or post to Sylvia McColm, Political Economy Research Centre, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TY, United Kingdom.

Conference Schedule:

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| Period for submission of abstracts | 26 February 2004 |
| Decision on abstracts and conference booking forms despatched | 20 March 2004 |
| Conference booking form and fee to be received at PERC | 21 April 2004 |
| Deadline for electronic submission of papers (and finalised abstracts*) | 3 June 2004 |
| Papers to be posted on website (password protected) by | 10 June 2004 |
| Conference dates | 1-3 July 2004 |

**Hardcopy booklet of abstracts to be distributed at conference - papers and abstracts to be available via the conference website in advance of the event. <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~perc/labourconf/>*

Conference Fees¹:

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| Business, Consultancies and Local and National Government | £320 |
| Universities, Colleges, NGOs etc | £190 |
| *Postgraduate students and other reduced places | £120 |

*NB there will be a limited number of reduced fee places at the conference for participants from developing countries and for postgraduate students. For details, please apply to Sylvia McColm

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“Karl von Holdt has delivered a *tour-de-force* on the dilemmas of challenging the old South Africa and building the new. I have not read such a powerful analysis of post-apartheid reconstruction, seen from below through the eyes of trade unionists, nor such an exemplary use of the extended case method to turn the transition literature on its head”.

Michael Burawoy, University of California, Berkeley, USA, author of *The Politics of Production and Global Ethnography*

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Review by Peter Alexander

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Karl van Holdt, former editor of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, has produced a lucidly written and theoretically challenging book, which, in time, will doubtless come to be regarded as seminal. Based on his doctoral dissertation, it blends the strengths of serious scholarship with the best of activist journalism. At one level, this is the story of one factory and one township in the years that led up to and immediately followed South Africa’s transition to democracy. On this plane, von Holdt’s choice of subject matter, the pace of his narrative and the simplicity of his style, make this a damned good read. It is accessible to workers as well as intellectuals, showing that academic writing does not have to be dull and lifeless to be scholarly. At another level, the author raises important issues about the internal dynamics of the part that workers played in the overthrow of apartheid. Von Holdt reveals the messiness of relationships between different groups and individuals within the factory, and how these were further complicated by township politics.

The book covers the period before and after the transition. But von Holdt – rightly – places greater emphasis on the impact of the 1994 elections. These he says ‘constituted the *moment of democratic incorporation* of the black working class (analogous to but more dramatic than the winning of the franchise in the capitalist societies of Europe)’.

He follows this assessment with what is, probably, his key conclusion, one that he contrasts to arguments made by, for example, Michael Burawoy and Dunbar Moodie. ‘*Hegemony*,’ he declares, ‘is established at the political level, in the relations between classes and between

classes and the state, rather than in everyday relations in the workplace.’ This significant judgement – shared by this reviewer – has important implications. It means, for instance, that we cannot have a meaningful industrial sociology if it is separated from political and historical sociology.

Assuming that von Holdt is correct, it suggests a *possible* flaw in his account. External influences do appear but there is no overview to help us comprehend the local events described in his book. However, the relationship between the workplace and the state is seen as dialectical. So, for instance, he is interested less in the ‘ dynamics of workplace order’ , and more in analysing the ‘ chaotic transition’ , the ‘ disorder’ that paves the way to the establishment of new structures. This approach leads von Holdt to a further significant conclusion. In response to Eddie Webster and Glenn Adler, he argues that what South Africa is experiencing is not a ‘ double transition’ – i.e. democratisation coupled with globalisation – but a ‘ triple transition’ . In addition to the first two components, there is also ‘ a deeper and broader process of social transformation: a multitude of struggles, compromises and pacts best understood as a process of internal *decolonisation* and *reconstruction* of society’ .

Moreover, von Holdt disputes aspects of ‘metropolitan sociology.’ This is clearest when he considers ‘social movement unionism’, a concept developed by radical writers (notably Peter Waterman) to capture the essence of unionism that developed in South Africa, South Korea, Brazil and elsewhere, which emphasised, for instance, democracy and mass mobilisation.

According to von Holdt: ‘Where the [existing] literature assumes social movement unionism is primarily class-based, this study finds an amalgam of popular and class identities . . . woven together by a discourse of national liberation struggle . . . [and] there was a failure of democratic practices to empower all layers of workers equally.’

Embedded in the book are some examples revealing the implications of nationalist discourse. Before 1994, workers saw themselves as alienated from and united against ‘ A white man’ s factory in a white man’ s country.’ But, the country is no longer owned by the whites, and some aspects of the factory have been deracialised.

Von Holdt's book is a sympathetic, yet brutally honest, account of the strengths and weaknesses of working class action against apartheid. It must be read by any student who wants to understand industrial, political or historical sociology and contemporary transition politics. It is also a model of ethnographic research that blends theory and empirical detail. And, it commends itself to a wide range of range of readers interested in the South African condition.

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LABOUR REVITALISATION, August 2003

with contributions by Asian, European, Latin American, and U.S. authors

Edited by Dan Cornfield and Holly McCammon

<http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/work/volume11.htm>

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