Document généré le 17 juil. 2025 09:34

Labour
Journal of Canadian Labour Studies
Le Travail
Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes

Robert B. McKersie, A Field in Flux: Sixty Years of Industrial Relations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019)

Jeffrey Hilgert

Volume 93, printemps 2024

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112050ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2024v93.031

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Hilgert, J. (2024). Compte rendu de [Robert B. McKersie, A Field in Flux: Sixty Years of Industrial Relations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, *93*, 375–377. https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2024v93.031

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2024

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

of public historians to share significant stories of labour and working class histories being told in a range of local and regional public history institutions from across the continental United States. It would have been illuminating to know what the editors and authors think about how the history of labour and working people is treated in the National Museum of American History and other national museums, which might have had greater appeal for a non-American readership. That said, this compelling collection of essays deserves to be read by all public historians and should be read by labour historians wherever they may live and work. This is because the erasure of working class and labour history in public representations of the past is a global occurrence and this book not only serves as a call to action, but it also points the way forward.

David Dean
Carleton University

Robert B. McKersie, *A Field in Flux: Sixty Years of Industrial Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019)

A Field in Flux is Robert McKersie's retrospective of his career as a professor of industrial relations. His memoire provides the reader with interesting background and context to his major research works. It spans the years 1954 to 2018 and recounts personal stories about his experiences and ideas as an academic in the field of industrial relations. While a book of this genre might not at first glance be significant to labour studies, it is an interesting read for people seeking to better grasp and historicize industrial relations theories from the second half of the 20th century. The chronological narrative, the author's stature as a prestigious scholar at the center of the IR discipline in the United States, and his long career at four influential universities together give the reader insights into the nature and development of industrial relations theories.

Readers will be reminded of McKersie's major works: *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* (with Richard Walton, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* (with Thomas Kochan and Harry Katz, Ithaca: ILR Press 1986), and *Strategic Negotiations* (with Richard Walton and Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press, 1994). McKersie is associated with the post-war behavioral turn in labour relations theory, the concept of integrative bargaining which gave rise to the concept of interest-based bargaining, and the introduction of strategic choice theory in industrial relations. Other research projects are also described along with a number of appointments to public bodies and as a mediator of labour disputes. Alone these points make the book notable and interesting.

Chapter 1 and 2 explain his early life and education. The son of a schoolteacher and a postal worker, he served in the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps and did three years active duty in the US Navy completing an undergrad degree in electrical engineering at the University of Pennsylvania then starting an MBA and a doctorate at Harvard Business School. Benjamin Selekman influenced him to study labour with the concept of a balance of power. He opted for Bob Livernash as his dissertation advisor on a comparative study of wage payment systems. As the "West Point of Capitalism" HBS offered three intellectual currents to study trade unions, Selekman's acceptance of unions, the human relations group, and John Dunlop's systems theory.

The next three chapters discuss his major academic appointments. Chapter 3 is about his work at the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business

from 1959 to 1971. Chapter 4 is about his time at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell from 1971 to 1979. A long Chapter 5 (over one-third of the book) is about his work from 1980 to 2018 at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These chapters give particular insights into the intellectual history of postwar US industrial relations theory and how IR scholars reacted to the surge of employer anti-union animus from the 1980s onward.

It was at the University of Chicago that McKersie and Walton developed their behavioral theory of labour negotiations. George P. Schultz, Secretary of State in the Reagan administration, was a faculty member at the Graduate School of Business and served as dean. Schultz developed an influential model for the study of industrial relations that McKersie adopted at Chicago. As with earlier IR scholars at Wisconsin under John R. Commons, the faculty in IR were to identify as economists and approach IR as "problem-based" but "not a discipline in itself." Very close relations with this the "mother discipline of industrial relations" were encouraged (38-40) and this meant deep connections to the Department of Economics and its emerging philosophy known as the Chicago School of Economics with Milton Friedman promoting the virtues of free-market economic principles. It was from this academic setting where the behavioral theory of labour negotiation emerged. The book thus documents early linkages between these two theories. The aim of the Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiation, McKersie explains, was "to describe behavior at the [negotiating] table" (53) versus the context. This was seen by some scholars as an "unwelcome departure" (54) from earlier IR traditions focused on the institutions shaping labour, particularly partisans of the Wisconsin School that prioritized a focus on historical knowledge.

McKersie, sold on the "Schultz model" (46) of industrial relations, brought these ideas to Cornell University in the 1970s. Like the earlier Wisconsin School graduates who made the New Deal happen in practice, the new model remained wedded to public engagement. But the postwar reorientation on a Chicago School foundation meant that public engagement was as labour and management "neutrals" and so there was a persistent concern about not "getting totally captured" by either management or labour unions. (105) This led to "a highly complicated relationship with the labor movement" (80) as unions critiqued faculty wage studies, research on productivity in the public sector, and the lack of support for the ACTWU boycott of the anti-union J.P. Stevens. This chapter gives a concrete accounting of the rough relationship between trade unions and IR research and service in the academy when based upon a Chicago School disciplinary positivism.

Arriving at MIT at the start of the 1980s, McKersie launched a major research project on the transformation of US labour relations. Reagan's firing of 11,345 air traffic controllers is discussed. The PATCO strike was "indefensible" and "suicidal" (111) and the response set the tone for labour relations for decades. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation provided "significant funds" (113) for five years for the *Transformation of American Industrial Relations* project. The project challenged John Dunlop's IR systems theory and used a strategic choice framework to explain the changes taking place in labour relations. Complementing this view was a renewed interest in McKersie's earlier 1965 behavioral theory with the rise of interest-based bargaining. These ideas, decoupled from Wisconsin IR historicism and Dunlop's IR systems frameworks, allowed for the grounding of labour

https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2024v93.031

negotiations theory in a "generic" framework of negotiation and conflict management. This led to a number of projects including involvement in Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiations and involvement with labour-management partnerships.

One interesting account as "negotiation became a 'discipline'" (140) is from 2007 at the height of the post 9-11 War on Terror. The George W. Bush administration became interested in how McKersie's theories "could be a useful approach for understanding interrogation." He writes "the reality is that every interrogation is fundamentally an interaction between parties with different interests, and that certainly meets the initial qualification to be a negotiation." (141) The author and Dick Walton met with individuals who had worked for the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Naval Criminal Investigation Service to study interrogation techniques. "No members of our group advocated abusive interrogation techniques" although *Strategic Negotiations* was used "as a way of thinking about the interview process and the techniques that might be used for building a relationship and eliciting actionable information." (142) This short account encapsulates the ethical-theoretical pitfalls of Chicago School-based IR theory and the challenge with both its decontextualized universalism and its wonky fact-value configuration.

The book concludes with reflections on the labour problem and whether management opposition to unions is rational and serves the best interests of the firm. Readers will appreciate this book as a historical work on US industrial relations theory in the 20th century. Labour scholars will find it of interest on the development of behavioral theories of labour negotiation.

Jeffrey Hilgert
Université de Montréal

Rob McKenzie and Patrick Dunne, *El Golpe: US Labor, the* CIA*, and the Coup at Ford in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 2022)

In January 1990, when the maquiladora industry was still in its infancy, a gang of thugs sporting Ford badges and uniforms attacked a team of unionized workers at the Ford Assembly Plant of Cuautitlán, leaving nine men injured and one of them dead. Located in the Estado de México, a Mexican state near the national capital of Mexico City, Cuautitlán remains a pillar of the modern automobile industry. In *El Golpe: US Labor, the CIA, and the Coup at Ford in Mexico*, retired US labour leader Rob McKenzie and professionally trained historian Patrick Dunne reconstruct the hidden history of the 1990 assault on Mexican workers in Cuautitlán. Drawing on US periodicals, archival materials, oral interviews, and secondary literature, McKenzie and Dunne conclude that the CIA likely orchestrated the attack. In the process, they reveal a larger story of collusion between the US labour movement and the CIA in Latin America.

Why did Ford operatives or their affiliates attack the Cuautitlán workers? To answer this question, McKenzie and Dunne examine the inner workings of the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), a secretive organization founded in 1961 in response to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. By connecting the dots between seemingly disparate players, they show that the AIFLD enjoyed substantial material and moral support from both the CIA and the AFL-CIO. They further argue that these organizations successfully conspired to overthrow multiple leftist governments in Central and South America, specifically in British Guiana, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, and (less successfully) Nicaragua. After cutting its tenth on these countries, McKenzie and