

Labor Organizations and Collective Action

Evelyne Huber

In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism. By John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. 860p. \$95.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

This is an impressive book that sheds light on an important but poorly understood topic: Why do some organizations engage in solidaristic behavior to promote wider social justice issues, while others focus narrowly on the self-interest of their members? John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi bring a creative theoretical approach and a wealth of evidence to their careful comparative analysis of four different unions that exhibit these two different patterns of behavior. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Australian Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) are examples of unions that engage in political action for purposes not directly related to the welfare of the members, whereas the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and the International Longshore Union (ILA) are examples of pure business unions.

The basic argument is that the founding moments are crucial, especially for the formation of solidaristic unions: The political engagement of founding leaders shapes the organizational structures and the mutual behavioral expectations of the membership and the leaders. In order for these structures and expectations to take hold, the leaders need to be successful in protecting the welfare of their unions' members. Once the organizational structures become solidified and expectations are accepted among the founding generation, future members are socialized to accept them as well. Residential patterns with a high concentration of union members support socialization, as does extensive communication from the leadership in the form of union newspapers, films, member education committees, leadership training, and active participation by the top leadership in local and regional union meetings to convince members to buy into the larger political

commitments. Success in protecting union members' well-being remains essential for ensuring the survival of these organizational structures and expectations.

Future leaders will seek leadership positions in these unions only if they share the commitment to larger social justice issues and are willing to accept the restrictions embodied in the organizational structures. These unions have formalized policies regarding the organizational scope and leadership compensation, limited leadership compensation, and more extensive procedural controls before and after the mobilization of union resources. In contrast, in business unions, leadership compensation is less regulated and limited, compensation from the outside is common and is likely to reduce responsiveness to the rank and file, and the organization's scope of activity is more restricted. Limited leadership compensation and procedural controls to hold the leadership accountable (as in the case of solidaristic unions) foster closer relations between leadership and the rank and file and encourage more democratic internal procedures. These democratic procedures in turn legitimize leadership decisions and foster loyalty among members. They also put limits on leaders' latitude of action in the sense that leaders know that they have to lead by persuasion—that they cannot push political engagement beyond what the majority of members support.

What are the key implications and the limits of applicability of these theoretical insights? The authors identify the scope conditions of their theory as membership organizations with "heterogeneity in members' political beliefs; an organization whose principal goal is distinct from the political commitments some of them evoke; and, over time, increasing costs of exit from the unions" (p. 261). There is an ambiguity here: Do the scope conditions apply to a wide variety of membership organizations or to unions only? The discussion in the concluding chapter includes a wide variety of organizations (even states), but the last scope condition talks explicitly about unions. I would argue that this is correct—the theory applies to

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strong labor unions. Cost of exit captures the authors' consistent emphasis on industrial success or effective protection of the material welfare of members as a precondition of the ability of politically committed leaders to ask for solidaristic, other-regarding action from members. Other membership organizations could have their own cost of exit, such as loss of social networks and esteem. However, what the authors do not sufficiently emphasize are the conditions governing initial recruitment. Jobs are *the* recruitment tool for new members. The incentive of a union job with good benefits is precisely what many other unions and virtually all other civil society organizations are unable to offer. So, whereas Ahlquist and Levi make a compelling case that ideological self-selection is not what accounts for the other-regarding political mobilization of the members of the ILWU, and that membership in the union generates attitude change among members, we cannot expect the same from membership in other civil society organizations. Rather, ideological self-selection will play the pivotal role there, and the authors are explicit that they do not attempt to explain dynamics in these kinds of organizations (p. 261).

This special characteristic of strong labor unions goes a long way in accounting for the privileged place they have held as allies of left parties. As the authors point out, left parties in alliance with strong unions have been most successful in pursuing a broad agenda

of social change in an egalitarian direction. The Nordic social democratic party–union alliances provide the most compelling examples. Where labor movements have been weaker in terms of membership and political divisions, left parties have remained electorally weaker and their success in pursuing egalitarian policies has been more limited. Examples can be found in continental Europe, as well as in Latin America. Strong civil society organizations have the potential of becoming important allies of parties committed to social justice, but their ability to recruit previously uncommitted members and turn them into active supporters of such parties and causes is more limited.

Finally, what does *In the Interest of Others* teach us about quality social science research? Most certainly that a multimethod approach can be extremely fruitful and that skilled analysts need to know their cases. The research that has gone into this book is nothing short of awe-inspiring. The authors delve into the details of the founding struggles of these unions with extensive archival research and interviews with participants. When they probe into attitude change among members, they rely on minutes from union meetings, oral histories, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. The combination of state-of-the-art survey analysis with systematic analysis of qualitative evidence makes the book both compelling and eminently readable.