

Labor Organizations and Collective Action

A discussion of John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi's *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism*

In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism. By John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. 336p. \$95.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi's *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* develops a new theory of organizations through a comparative analysis of two activist labor unions (the International Longshore and Warehouse Union in the United States and the Waterside Workers Federation in Australia) and two unions that focus only on pursuing member benefits (the Teamsters and the International Longshoremen's Association in the United States). Integrating the study of labor politics, social movements, social capital, and the political economy of group organization and mobilization, the book addresses a wide range of political science concerns. We have thus invited a range of political scientists to comment on the book as an account of labor politics and as a broader account of the logic of collective action.— Jeffrey C. Isaac, Editor

Brooke Ackerly

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The Interest of Others is about how workers use unions to advocate for their short term economic interests (favorable contracts) and their long term political interests (the relative power of workers). In a multi-method study, John Ahlquist and Margaret Levi use a formal model to guide their interpretation of historical documentation, interviews, comparative cases, an original survey, spatial data, and a rereading of the data in certain classic texts in the sociology of labor unions (e.g., Kimeldorf 1992). The project is an interesting revisit to a history that will be familiar to most scholars of unions. However, the framing of the behavior of unions that invest in the long-term political interests of workers as puzzling says more about the authors and their anticipated audience than it does about the behavior they observe (pp. 5, 185, 185 *fn* 2, 198, 219). For labor advocates, the ability to achieve economic interests depends on shifting the relative power between laborers and employers. How to pursue long term political interests has been a foundational and

recurring topic within and among labor organizers and those who study them. In these authors' retelling, the strategic achievements of workers' increased power relative to corporations (and governments) are "unexpected benefits" (p. 230). The book is put forward as offering an alternative explanation for, rather than a development of, the theoretical arguments of most labor rights-based scholarship even while referencing the observations of scholars of labor and coming to conclusions similar to theirs.

The art of the book is in the authors' reconciliation of two competing narratives about unions – that their leaders exploit workers and that they mobilize workers, not only in their own interests, but also *in the interests of others*. In their formal behavioral model union leaders extract rents, either income or "side payments" in the first instance or "adulation and power" in the second (p. 23). In the service of this art, the *political struggles and political lessons* of the history of labor unions such as the cold war politics of the first half of the twentieth century, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, and the merger of the AFL-CIO in 1955 are understated.

The authors have two lines of argument and use different data to explore each. The first studies the "interests of others" as "political rents" to leaders in "activist" unions and specifies the conditions under which we would expect

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to see leaders and members acting in the interests of others. The second studies the development of “commitments to a larger public good” through changes in beliefs and the role that leadership plays in that process if governance institutions constrain leader power and support internal democracy. Both are ways of thinking about the conditions of leadership, governance, successful coordinated action, political context, and economic context that are conducive to the development of an expanded sense of “community of fate” by workers and their organizations’ (p. 2). The latter argument is consistent with and contributes to scholarship on labor advocacy and effectiveness.

Workers striking in the “interests of others” is not surprising or puzzling, but rather reflects one dominant view of successful labor strategy among many workers and unions throughout Ahlquist and Levi’s period of study. Recently, such commitments have been behind union support for the rights of domestic workers around the world (ILO Convention 189), garment workers in Bangladesh, the Ogoni people in Nigeria, and immigrant labor. Ahlquist and Levi highlight a guiding slogan of the ILWA: “An injury to anyone is an injury to all” (p. 79). This is also an organizing principle of the service workers (SEIU)¹ and steel workers (USW).² Workers know about the major initiatives of other unions and workers around the world and this knowledge is enhanced by union membership, as Ahlquist and Levi show. In addition, experience reinforces the value of and commitment to these strategies. This experience comes from work environment (working together on the docks), community building (meeting in union halls, living in neighborhoods), and success (the coast-wide strike of the ILWU or the citywide strike of the Minneapolis IBT), as Ahlquist and Levi show. An enlarged sense of community of fate has been part of union strategies to organize across employers, across industries, and across the globe throughout the history of worker activism. The surprise is that Ahlquist and Levi characterize activism in the interests of the larger conceptualization of community as a rent to leaders, when their own interviews, other actors, and other scholars characterize it as necessary for changing the relative power of workers and employers.

What strategies to take has been an axis of political tension within worker movements dating at least to the political context of Lenin’s *Where to Begin?* (1901) and *What is to be Done?* (1902). Posed at a time when workers had very little relative power and revisited after Taft-Hartley, these questions are critical today in the face of global capital and labor. Ahlquist and Levi do not answer them; they offer a behavioral model of why some unions answer them certain ways.

In their model, the extent to which a union is operating in a *context* of expanded community of fate is random (p. 187) and exogenous (p. 30). Workers do not

behave as if they think their context is random and exogenous. They seek to change it. We could make certain aspects of context endogenous to the model by including two variables: the range of aligned partners (such as human rights organizations and environmental groups) and the power of non-aligned stakeholders (such as employers in other industries, governments of other countries).

This difference in the models’ specification affects the interpretation of the data and leads to more expansive predictions. For example, with globalization, the power of employers relative to workers has changed, as employers are able to credibly threaten to move production of parts or all of the supply chain to other countries. As Ahlquist and Levi agree, “A concerted attack on unions’ ability to attract and retain members is taking place among those advanced industrial polities where market competition is uncoordinated, that is, relatively unconstrained (Hall and Soskice 2001)” (p. 263). Such attacks occur in the global south as well. In this political economy, Ahlquist and Levi’s model predicts that those unions with communicative leadership, accountable governance, and reasonable success in delivering economic benefits for their members should have a broader sense of community of fate. The expanded model I propose adds a strategic prediction: With accountable union governance and continued pressures to reduce worker power relative to employers and governments, unions can be expected 1) to continue to broaden their “community of fate” by organizing across employers, across industries, across countries, and by expanding their membership, and 2) to diversify their methods for working with actors whose efforts are allied with theirs.

The *data* support the predictions of this alternative model. Unions broaden their communities of fate. For example, as mentioned above, unions have supported the ILO Convention for domestic worker rights and the right of the Ogoni people to hold Shell Oil responsible for human rights violations in Nigeria. Further, unions have expanded their partners to include other informal workers, social movement actors (in their garment worker activism) and other entities that work for worker rights, human rights, and environmental rights around the world (Simons, Herz, and Kaufman 2010).

Although Ahlquist and Levi show that rent extraction *could* explain union leader behavior, the theory is a weak competitor against the theory of worker collective action through strategic alliance building manifest in the last century of worker organizing (e.g. Cornfield and McCammon 2010). The book encourages all of us to learn not just economic lessons about the import of long-term political power in short-term economic negotiations, but also political lessons that are as ethical as they are strategic: we are members of a community of fate whose boundaries seem increasingly difficult to perceive in the global political economy.

Notes

- 1 SEIU (Service Employees International Union) is one of the largest labor unions in the world, “an organization of 2.2 million members united by the belief in the dignity and worth of workers and the services they provide and dedicated to improving the lives of workers and their families and creating a more just and humane society. . . . SEIU has a long history of working to ensure that U.S. corporations are held accountable for transgressions of worker and human rights, regardless of where such violations occur.” (Simons, Herz, and Kaufman 2010, #7479).
- 2 The 1.2 million members of United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union (USW) are North American. “The USW has been active in helping to prosecute ATS and TVPA cases arising from abuses against workers in Colombia, Argentina, Turkey and Nicaragua and believes that these laws are critical in protecting labor rights throughout the world.” (Simons, Herz, and Kaufman 2010).

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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 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

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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.

Carmen Sirianni

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In the Interest of Others sets out to understand why some organizations, formed to further the instrumental interests of a specific group, are able to take actions, at some cost and risk, for a greater good extending beyond this group (typically defined in terms of broader social justice norms). The book is quite brilliant in terms of the rigor of its analytic argument and its use of a variety of methods to test and further revise core assumptions. I cannot do justice here to the complexity of Ahlquist and Levi's arguments, nor to the degree to which they (and their team of graduate and undergraduate research assistants) have thrown new light on several major cases in trade union history that constitute the main empirical evidence. This evidence spans over a century and includes comparative case study research across two continents and several paired cities, archival research, contemporary survey data, and qualitative research. The book is itself a major achievement of collective (research) action to which anyone working on these kinds of questions ought to pay special attention.

The core of the argument, in highly stylized form, goes something like this: Organizations—and especially certain kinds of trade unions—can develop the capacity for repeated action (games) on broader public goods over relatively long periods of time if they have leaders with strong normative and political commitments (formed especially in early struggles), do not seek excessive monetary leadership rents (salaries, perks, payoffs), and develop governance structures that are participatory (with *ex ante* and *ex post* accountability), deliberative (through various media of communication), and tolerant of dissent. These factors permit leaders considerable leeway in asking membership to take risks—to ask for political leadership rents—such as losing a day's pay in a sympathy strike, spending time in jail for a politically motivated boycott, or taking positions (e.g. criticizing free trade) that seem to go against members' own material interests. In doing so, leaders have the potential to expand considerably the "community of fate" (p. 2) in which organizational members imagine themselves entwined. Leaders can do this, to be sure, only if they first secure industrial success.

The two cases that best exemplify this dynamic are the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), on the west coast of the U.S., and the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF, now merged into a larger federation) in Australia. Their governance structures and strategic choices over time are contrasted with the International

Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) in the U.S. and the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), in east coast American ports, both much narrower in terms of goals. The ILWU and the WWF each had formative struggles in their early histories where highly politicized leadership—by Communists, socialists, Laborites, and/or anarcho-syndicalists—proved especially important to securing the industrial power of the union, establishing broad norms of solidarity with workers and other social movements beyond sector or nation, and institutionalizing participatory governance structures.

My main concerns with this book center on its claims of applicability and relevance beyond a relatively narrow band of civic associations and even unions. Ahlquist and Levi, to be sure, have anticipated certain limits and provide a useful conversation with other analytic traditions. But let me put on the table a few salient concerns. First, few existing unions and, likely, few emergent ones, meet the conditions of contingency highlighted in the analysis, such as strong left-wing political founders and current leaders, gang work systems, dense ties to proximate neighborhoods around the docks, nepotistic hiring practices that strengthen family and neighborhood networks, and extraordinary leverage in the national economy and global supply chains. Some of these conditions were modified over time, but nonetheless lend strong path-dependence to the analysis. Second, the model does not seem to extend very well to the production and legitimation of a whole host of other public goods, such as those provided by teachers unions that have to engage multi-stakeholder publics of taxpayers, employers, and parents; health care unions that have to manage collaborative relationships across very diverse skill sets and professional identities in the interests of affordable and effective care (Kochan, et al. 2009); or largely female clerical and technical worker unions that also have to manage complex service relationships on an everyday basis, as in the case of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (Eaton 1996). Forging the kinds of global solidarities that are so impressive in the ILWU and WWF is critical. But the challenges of producing, distributing, and legitimating public goods, which are so central to democratic national and local polities and which will likely come under even greater strain as we attempt to democratically manage adaptation to climate change, are not especially well clarified by the cases and core concepts of *In the Interest of Others*. Finally, while Ahlquist and Levi provide a wonderful analysis of the governance structures of the ILWU and WWF in terms of rents, dissent, and learning, and while they recognize that other organizations might generate "functional alternatives" (p. 262), it is less clear that their core analytic pillars contribute much to broader theorizing on participatory governance (Fung 2004; Sirianni 2009; Weber 2003).

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