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Workers, Firms and Unions

Part 1

Industrial Relations in Transition

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Book synopsis

The book examines changes in workers’ attitudes towards their managements and unions in electronics plants in eleven countries, capitalist and (ex) socialist between 1984 and 1996. The book is based on original field work in the same or comparable plants at both dates. The book shows the inter-relations between global competition and national industrial relations systems. The first part examines changes in capitalist countries (Germany, Italy, France, Japan, Finland and Sweden), the second part examines socialist and ex-socialist countries (China, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia). In all countries workers identify increasingly with the interests of lower level management and in most countries are highly critical of trade unions.

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About the author(s)/editor(s)

The Editors: The editors are mainly industrial sociologists. Roderick Martin is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the University of Glasgow. He formerly taught at Oxford and Imperial College, London.
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Unions raise wages of unionized workers by roughly 20% and raise compensation, including both wages and benefits, by about 28%. Unions reduce wage inequality because they raise wages more for low- and middle-wage workers than for higher-wage workers, more for blue-collar than for white-collar workers, and more for workers who do not have a college degree. How much unions raise wages, for whom, and the consequences of unionization for workers, firms, and the economy have been studied by economists and other researchers for over a century (for example, the work of Alfred Marshall). This section presents evidence from the 1990s that unions raise the wages of unionized workers by roughly 20% and raise total compensation by about 28%. A worker cooperative is a cooperative owned and self-managed by its workers. This control may mean a firm where every worker-owner participates in decision-making in a democratic fashion, or it may refer to one in which management is elected by every worker-owner who each have one vote. Worker cooperatives rose to prominence during the Industrial Revolution as part of the labour movement. As employment moved to industrial areas and job sectors declined, workers began organizing and controlling. Workers in unions have the power to negotiate for high-quality benefits, such as health insurance, retirement, paid sick leave, and family leave. Union employers, compared with similar nonunion employers: Contribute 56 percent more toward workers’ retirement. Enterprise-level bargaining also increases conflict between workers and their companies, since unionized firms may have higher labor costs than their competitors. Workers’ free speech rights are constrained by laws that restrict their right to strike to improve pay and conditions especially when they are dealing with outsourced work, since workers may only strike against their direct employer. Trade unions provide an organisation for workers to have joint representation with their employers. Trade unions have several functions: Represent workers with regard to pay and working conditions. Bargain for higher wages with the possibility of going on strike to target higher wages. Co-ordinate with firms to implement new working practices and negotiations with workers. Trades Unions in a Competitive Labour Market. In a competitive labour market, wages were W1. If a trade union successfully bargains for a higher wage of W2, then employment falls to Q2. This situation can lead to real wage unemployment of Q3-Q2.