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The Broken Table: The Detroit Newspaper Strike and the State of American Labor,

Chris Rhomberg.

Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2012, 398 pp., ISBN: 978 0 87154 717 0

Through an impressively researched and detailed analysis of the 1995-2000 Detroit newspaper strike, Rhomberg's, 'The Broken Table', provides important insights into the prevailing condition of industrial relations in the USA and the diminishing ability of organised labour to bargain effectively with employers. The strikes genesis, prosecution and aftermath, provoke Rhomberg to argue that in a U.S. context, the conceptual tools that social science currently uses to analyse and understand collective bargaining and strikes are now deficient.

Rhomberg's central thesis is that in the sphere of industrial relations the ability of organised labour to defend itself, is undergoing an historic change. Rhomberg categorises this period as a 'signal disjuncture', where, in the sphere of industrial relations, competing institutional paths are colliding in a transitional period prior to a critical juncture. These two paths are those of the post war labour accord embodied in the New Deal and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and a neo liberal post 1980 corporate dominion. Through a 'radical deinstitutionalisation' of unions, the terrain of labour conflict has fundamentally changed. New Deal arrangements have increasingly given way to 'an ascendant anti-union regime'. Unions are finding it increasingly difficult to 'reassert solidarity'. Whereas unions still arrive at the bargaining table looking for a deal, management looks to 'get rid of the table'.

Traditional strike theory based on economic and political organisational perspectives is, Rhomberg contends, now deficient as it does not take into account sufficiently the contemporary face of corporate America; a right wing judiciary, the role of civil society and 'historical environment'. For unions, every strike has become one of recognition rather than simply over wages. Unions, the book argues, have had to return to organising methods that resonate with their civic ecology and that harmonise with social movement unionism. This strategic turn to metro-unionism, reflects the institutional limits of the post war accord, where the judicial straightjacket of the NLRB has insulated unions from their communities and depoliticized the response of organised labour to industrial restructuring. In the context of urban decline and restructuring, unions need to find new or differing configurations in their local civic environment.

In order to rectify this theoretical shortcoming, Rhomberg posits an analytical framework based upon three dimensions: the roles of the economy, state and civil society. It is necessary to invoke all these dimensions and to bring civil society back into strike theory in order to explain the nature of strikes and how and why they occur within a particular historical period and locale. As a conceptual progression, this echoes the call by Kaufman (2008) for a return to an 'Original Industrial Relations Paradigm'. In order to explicate his analytical framework, Rhomberg periodizes strike activity in the USA from 1890 until the present.

The book is structured around the strike, the struggle between a coalition of white collar, craft and manual workers and an alliance of newspaper firms, and its timeline. Following an introductory chapter that lays the basis for Rhomberg's theoretical framework, Part I explains the financial and corporate structure of the newspaper industry in the USA and Detroit; the labour process of newspaper production; the extent and significance of the connection of organised labour to civil society in Detroit.

Part II provides an account of the institutional context of labour in the USA. In these chapters the nature of the legislation that regulates collective bargaining and frames the ability of unions to strike is explained. The characterisation of strikes as either over economic or labour rights issues, the ability of employers to declare a bargaining impasse and replace workers striking over economic issues, underpins and curtails the ability of unions to bargain or strike. (For those unfamiliar with the legislation that frames collective bargaining in the USA, a short explanatory appendix would have been useful). In Part II Rhomberg also explains in detail the 1995 contract negotiations from which the strike emanated and the extent to which management developed its strategy and tactics for dealing with and defeating a potential strike many years before contract negotiations began. Management's attention to detail was extraordinary, involving private security firms and covert arrangements with local police. Management was determined, seemingly at any price, to push through reduced costs, increased productivity, major change to the organisation of work and greatly diminished union influence.

Part III of the book deals with the strike. Discussion is structured around a number of analytical themes. These are the mobilising strategy of the unions and managements response; law enforcement and picket line violence; the roles of civil society and the state; the end of the strike and its ramifications for organised labour. The total resolve of management and the raw power of the state that were ranged against the unions resonates with the 1985 UK miners' strike and are a reminder of the limitations of solely industrial organisation.

In Part IV and the concluding section of his book, Rhomberg draws together empirical data and theory and returns to the theme developed in Part I, that conventional theories of strikes and collective bargaining are no longer adequate for analysis and understanding of labour relations and conflict in the US post war (NLRA) accord epoch.

It is surprising that the work on strikes of commentators such as Richard Hyman (1972; 1989) and others writing in the same tradition but from the perspective of the UK, who extend analysis of labour conflict in the direction that Rhomberg suggests, has not been employed. These commentators have identified the impact of deindustrialisation on the (extended) space in which labour conflict is enacted and the coercive pacification of labour required by rejuvenated neo liberalism.

In conclusion, this is an important book and essential reading for scholars and practitioners alike. A clear strength of the book lies in the ability of Romberg to combine a compelling, at times spellbinding, story based upon impressively detailed and catalogued research within a

clear conceptual framework. Its relevance extends beyond the USA and those living and labouring in liberal market economies. The pressure of international finance capital and its industrial progeny on coordinated market economies makes the lessons, in essence about democracy and the ‘civil right of collective bargaining’, provided by the Detroit strike of transnational significance.

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