

Conference Summary
“Research on Union Organizing Conference”
June 6, 2001
Economic Policy Institute: Washington, DC

In attendance:

14 policy people, 34 academics (professors and graduate students) and 20 union staff. Anyone who is interested can get a full list of participants and their contact info from Larry Mishel at EPI (lmishel@epinet.org).

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

I. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON ORGANIZING

Kate Bronfenbrenner:

In the early 1990s there were many limitations on the kind of research out there. It has changed now, but there are still limits. She creates five categories of organizing studies:

1. Workers attitudes towards unions: 1979 study that showed women and minorities most likely to vote yes. Freeman and Rogers study, What Workers Want, was controversial because the questions weren't framed well, but it provides good insight nonetheless.
2. Election studies: focuses on who votes yes and why. This is very labor-intensive research, with small 'n.' One infamous study showed workers' prior attitudes determine election outcomes, but Bronfenbrenner's own work shows that union and employers actions matter. Many of the data used in these studies comes from surveys and is collected after an election, so many respondents may not answer honestly.
3. Organizational studies: focus is on employers and unions. This work compares across organizing differences. This is a big hole – not much research here
4. Time series: focuses on the effect of changes in labor law, economy, policy, etc on union density. This research is generally too macro, it doesn't show election outcomes at the micro level. It also has produced conflicting results, in that it doesn't show that union organizing fell and that is what reduced union density.
5. Bargaining unit studies: this research generally uses NLRB data to study unfair labor practices. But Bronfenbrenner argues that we need bargaining-unit level studies. These studies are labor-intensive and it is hard to get the data. We also need more research on non-NLRB campaigns
6. Case studies: focus on what employers do. For example, Milkman and Wong's study on immigrant organizing. The problem is that this research often does not specify what the union did wrong, and researchers don't study campaigns that lost. Also we need case studies from the point of view of workers, not researcher.

II. Conference participants broke into small groups and described their own research on organizing

III. Plenary with labor and policy people (Paul Booth – AFSCME, Larry Cohen – CWA, Phil Kugler – AFT, Enid Eckstein – AFL-CIO’s Voice @ Work Project, Jonathan Hiatt – AFL-CIO, Sarah Fox – EPI and formerly of the NLRB)

- a) What research on organizing would be most useful to them
- b) Identifying the existing holes in research on organizing

1. No votes:

- a) expand our current understanding of them
- b) what motivates people to vote no
- c) whether neutralizing employers makes a difference

2. Management behavior during organizing drives:

- a) what bosses do during organizing drives
- b) why does their interference matter
- c) how can we neutralize them
- d) do contract outcomes differ when management actively intervenes
- e) specify whether certain kinds of ULPs tend to negatively impact organizing drives

3. Workers’ predispositions and attitudes about unions.

- a) Whether workers’ predispositions affect organizing outcomes
- b) Workers’ attitudes about unions versus workers’ associations

4. Documentation of the “organizing state of affairs”:

- a) extent of organizing activity – scope, location, success rates
- b) specify the demographics and location of potential members (as specified in the Wagner Act)
- c) research the number of workers not covered by the NLRA and publicize this
- d) whether the current number of organizers employed in the field is insufficient

5. Comparative studies – between union, firms, sectors

6. Technology:

- a) how technology is being used by unions
- b) how it influences organizing outcomes

7. More research on non-NLRB organizing efforts

8. Focus on changing labor law

- a) reposition workers’ right to organize as a fundamental human right

Discussion centered around the differences between focus group and polling data versus rigorous qualitative data about workers experiences, beliefs and attitudes. Some participants questioned unions’ reliance upon attitudinal surveys, suggesting both that

this method was very problematic methodologically and that it had a tendency to be proprietary research.

IV. Evaluate existing research: strengths and weaknesses and defining priorities for future research

How to fund and facilitate new research:

- Open up union data for researchers to use
- Dissertation grants funded by the AFL-CIO
- Sloan foundation – get data w/ their support
- Union based institutions
- Policy think tanks that unions give money to
- GAO – study union coverage question

Potential Topics for future research:

- Lit review by themes
- Unions and welfare-to-work
- New forms of unions
- Organizing contingent workers
- Impact of unions on quality of work
- Internal political problems in labor movement
- Research on specific campaign tactics
- Transformation of unions during organizing drives
- Union response to world trade/globalization
- The changing nature of work
- Changes in workers' attitudes as a result of unionization
- State and local research: legislation, policy

Discussion:

Importance of taking the time to do our own data collection, not just relying on existing survey data. This makes research on organizing more interesting, pushes the field further, etc.

Kate Bronfenbrenner argued that we must move away from the consultancy model, and that we should not do more proprietary research. We need to teach grad students that you can't do this kind of research, and that it does not good for the labor movement. Be sure that you retain your editorial and intellectual authority when working with unions, while at the same time keep them engaged in and involved with the project.

Get graduate students involved in this work. Bring them to similar conferences, introduce them to your colleagues, define labor and organizing to include non-traditional union worker organizing efforts and organizations. Reach out to a DIVERSE group of students. Let them play a REAL role in faculty research projects.

V. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Build Upon Existing research networks

Mike Belzer: Building Trades Center for Worker Rights.

There is an Economic Research Network in the center. The center assembles funding from NIOSH for research on unions and safety. Their research model is quasi “in (union) house”. The network meets twice year and get small grants to write up their research. The center sponsors the Network and pays for travel costs. Proposals are refereed, in order to insure credible research.

Ruth Milkman: Institute for Labor and Employment.

CA state legislature appropriated money to create this new institution – the money was raised as part of an effort coordinated by friends of labor both within and outside of the University. The goal of the ILE is to build trust and develop research agenda shared by the labor movement and academe. What they are doing: union census (including independent unions for The State of CA Labor publication that will parallel The State of Working America; CA union leadership school (pilot program w/ SEIU); Student internship summer program (30 graduate students, 20 undergrads, work on organizing campaigns and create constituency among the students on campus); academic working groups on the following topics: the new economy, new unions, new immigrants.

How to convene academics and labor movement:

- Some felt that we should use current organization such as UALE, ASSA, etc to hold research on union organizing meeting. But there was some opposition to this. First, not everyone goes to these meetings. Second, many of these meetings are very long as it is, not a good idea to have people stay an extra evening.
- The meetings between labor movement and academics should be a forum to present ideas about future research. So that the unions can give feedback on what would be most useful to them. This way the academics have autonomy but unions have some control.
- Create listserve as a clearinghouse of information. Best if it is a monthly e-mail sent out to everyone – a newsletter via e-mail.
- Need to think seriously how to keep up participation by union researchers and organizers. It depends a lot on where we hold the meeting (another reason not to connect it to an academic conference).

How to facilitate more research:

- Need to raise more money so we can collect more data. At least make it easier to raise money for data collection.
- Hide “labor” part of research when apply for grants (there was considerable disagreement about this strategy)
- Provide money to contingent faculty to do research. \$3-5000 would free them from one class to do research.

- Fund graduate students in order to create new labor scholars. Focus on them rather than tenured faculty. E.g. Sloan foundation gives money for dissertation, EPI has a graduate student fellowship. Grad students are cost effective. Plus, their research is refereed by dissertation committee, so they are independent.
- Role for mentoring. Help out students who don't have faculty that do union research
- SUNY Stonybrook has a dissertation lecture series on class issues. Students from other schools receive funding to come participate if they are invited by another grad student. We should create a similar lecture series on union organizing.