



Labor Confronts Austerity: An Introduction

Labor Studies Journal
2014, Vol. 39(1) 5–8
© 2014 UALE

Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0160449X14530689
lsj.sagepub.com

Stephanie Ross¹ and Larry Savage²

Organized labor and working people around the globe are experiencing sustained political and economic attacks from governments of all political stripes. From the global economic forces precipitating an international race to the bottom, to capital's ability to tame those few governments willing to reject neoliberal imperatives, to the disorganization of unions and division and resentment within the working class, unions around the world are under attack. Throughout the European Union, hundreds of thousands of workers have had their wages frozen or have been thrown out of work to pay for an economic crisis not of their making. In the Global South, International Monetary Fund-imposed austerity measures continue to foster anti-union labor law reforms and dramatic reductions in public spending in the name of "flexibility" and global competitiveness, despite their inability to spur sustained economic development. In much of Asia, including China and Bangladesh, unprecedented and militant strike actions and protests have erupted in response to increased unemployment and intensified exploitation at work that have resulted from employer responses to the global economic crisis. In the North American context, strategically capitalizing on the electorate's economic anxieties, the Tea Party movement's stunning electoral success in the 2010 midterm elections and the election of a Conservative majority government in Canada in 2011 have set the stage for an all-out legislative attack on unions. In Wisconsin, ironically the first state to allow public-sector collective bargaining, and in Michigan, the cradle of American industrial unionism, the recent adoption of anti-union "right-to-work" legislation has justifiably set off alarm bells for workers' organizations far and wide.

While attacks on the labor movement are certainly not new, the most recent round of austerity measures, unleashed in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 Great Recession, has been especially challenging for union members. In its simplest form, austerity

¹York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

²Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Larry Savage, Centre for Labour Studies, Brock University, 500 Glenridge Avenue, St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1, Canada.

Email: lsavage@brocku.ca

involves those measures designed to reduce public spending, as a response to the negative effects that economic recessions have on public finances. Typically, those measures include cuts to public services, privatization and contracting out, and reductions to public income supports (like pensions) and the wages of public-sector workers. While austerity measures may balance budgets, their wider economic effects are troubling: they have deepened the crisis of un(der)employment, depressed economies further, and reinforced already massive inequalities in income and wealth.

Moreover, the way these measures are framed masks the reason why state finances are in crisis, namely, as the result of states using public resources to bail out the financial sector after their ever-more-risky investment strategies finally collapsed. The economic crisis that ensued from this massive loss of (paper) value necessitated stimulus from governments seeking to keep the economic system functioning and prevent a global depression. However, those who have benefitted the most from these measures have now exempted themselves from the burden of paying off the resulting state debt. Instead, the distribution of the burdens of the economic fix disproportionately harms working-class people, their jobs, and the public services on which they rely. Conversely, increased taxation, either on corporations or wealthy individuals, is a priori ruled out as a solution to the fiscal crisis of the state. In that sense, austerity, as it is currently constructed, is not an economic necessity but rather a political choice that reflects the class power held by capital and its representatives to shape the world to their own benefit.

There is a direct link between the imposition of austerity measures and attacks on labor rights. Unions, both as institutions of collective bargaining and in their political role as representatives of workers' broader social and economic interests, are barriers to austerity measures that impose costs on the working class. In the public sector in particular, repressive legislation stripping both bargaining rights and organizational security is necessary to break union power in ways that global competitive pressures have done to many private-sector unions. Measures designed to block union political spending, whether on electoral campaigns or social justice causes, are direct attacks on the labor movement's capacity to mobilize against capital's political interests and representatives and to pose alternatives. To make matters worse, already declining union density has meant that unions have become increasingly distant from the very working class that gave them birth, making them vulnerable to accusations that unions are simply out for themselves, especially when they seek to defend their collective agreements through strike action.

Given this hostile political and ideological climate in which, rightly or wrongly, unions are seen as defenders of sectional rather than the general interest, the question of new and effective political strategies and tactics to combat austerity is all the more urgent for the labor movement. It is within this context that contributors to this special issue of *Labor Studies Journal* and other labor educators from across North America presented their research at the United Association for Labor Education conference in Toronto in March 2013 as part of six panels focused on labor's strategic response to austerity. Panelists represented a wide range of different approaches, produced rich and varied research aimed at clarifying some of the obstacles facing unions, and explored the various routes open to the labor movement in its efforts to confront austerity.

Richard W. Hurd and Tamara L. Lee open the issue with a survey of state-level responses to American Legislative Exchange Council-inspired anti-union legislative reforms. Hurd and Lee situate their article in the broader context of debates concerning labor movement decline and prospects for union renewal in the United States. On the one hand, they make the case that public-sector unions' relative institutional success rendered them ill prepared to respond to the most recent round of legislative attacks but, on the other hand, argue that the intensity of right-wing attacks has fostered unprecedented unity and coordinated responses among public-sector unions, including solidarity across rival labor federations. Despite some high-profile losses in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana, and some continuing challenges in making the internal transformations that will further deepen unions' organizing capacity, the U.S. labor movement did fend off much of the anti-union legislation proposed between 2010 and 2012. Hurd and Lee note, however, that the anti-union offensive is unlikely to abate soon, and therefore the labor movement must continue to address its internal weaknesses if it is to fend off a new round of legislative attacks.

Solidarity is unquestionably key if unions hope to defend workers' interests in the face of state-sanctioned austerity measures. However, dwindling levels of union density and the longer-term decline in working-class wages and living standards have made it much more difficult for unionized workers in general, and public-sector workers in particular, to defend their collective agreements and their rights to dignified and secure work. This fragmentation of working-class power is highlighted in Joseph Varga's article on right-to-work-laws in Indiana. Varga argues that the "precariatization" of the working class has contributed to a long and slow "process of dispossession" of both their rights and material levels of security, weakening union solidarity and labor's capacities to resist further anti-union incursions on workers' rights. Varga's contribution effectively demonstrates that, while austerity measures have been imposed in response to what could arguably be considered manufactured crises as part of a long-term ideological plan to embed neoliberalism in the everyday lives of workers, the labor movement's responses to these attacks have been, more often than not, short term and ad hoc. Varga argues that unity within organized labor is not enough; instead, the labor movement must find ways to connect its defense of union rights with the broader defense of working-class communities and living standards. While mobilizing workers—both union and non-union—around this broader agenda will be no easy task, Varga makes the case that it will be a necessary part of reducing organized labor's political isolation and rebuilding its economic power.

While unions unquestionably face an uphill battle in the struggle against austerity, there do exist glimmers of hope. Bruce Nissen's compelling case study in this issue demonstrates how the applied research arm of the Center for Labor Research and Studies at Florida International University and the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy worked with the university's faculty union to expose "administrative bloat," bolster the union's bargaining position, and successfully fight back against austerity measures at Florida International University. Nissen's contribution underscores not only the need for applied research but also the importance of coalition building and effective member education and communication in efforts to mobilize union members against employer offensives.

The way that unions communicate their message is also taken up by Mark Thomas and Steven Tufts in a provocative piece that examines the relationship between austerity, populism, and union strategy. Thomas and Tufts locate the rise of populist politics in the negative (albeit uneven) effects of neoliberalism on institutionalized forms of working-class power. Where discontent with the status quo is growing, but there are few effective vehicles to organize and express that discontent, both right-wing and left-wing variants of populism gain traction. However, Thomas and Tufts also argue that populist pro-union messaging and strategies, which have gained more attention in the wake of the Occupy movement, have important limits and contradictions, not least of which is in their misidentification of those who hold real economic power and why. Developing their argument using case studies of the Occupy movement in Toronto and the Christian Labour Association of Canada, Tufts and Thomas expose both sides of the populist coin and ultimately conclude that labor's retreat to populism is indicative of its growing institutional weakness.

While the articles in this issue deal with very different dimensions of labor's struggle against austerity, they all offer meaningful insights for labor researchers and educators concerned about questions of strategy. As in previous eras, new political identities and strategic repertoires are often forged in moments of heightened struggle and conflict as workers and their organizations struggle to cope with new circumstances. It is our hope that this issue will stimulate discussion and critical debate about the role unions must play in challenging austerity, enhancing the collective power of workers, and ultimately building a society and an economy based on principles of equality and social justice.

Author Biographies

Stephanie Ross is an associate professor of work and labour studies and a co-director of the Global Labour Research Centre at York University.

Larry Savage is an associate professor and the director of the Centre for Labour Studies at Brock University.