POLITICS 219:
WORK, WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS IN ADVANCED CAPITALISM

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Class: King 243, Tuesday and Thursday 1:30 – 2:45 pm.
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Introduction

Within advanced capitalist societies, the world of work has undergone a quite remarkable transformation in the course of the past quarter century. Some elements of work itself have changed as the workplace has seen the erosion of assembly line mass production by full-time “blue-collar” workers, and its replacement with “white-collar” and service sector jobs, and “flexible” production, performed by an increasingly insecure part-time and temporary workforce. Workers today are much less likely to be male and white, as women, minority workers and immigrants enter the paid workforce in much larger numbers. Trade unions, which were the primary class organizations representing and defending workers in the 20th century, have gone into eclipse almost everywhere. As union membership declines, employers have developed new forms of individual and collective representation for workers, and unions themselves have sought new strategies for survival.

This course explores the transformation of work, workers, and trade unions in advanced capitalist societies since the Second World War. Given the scope of the subject-matter, this course is something of a sampler, offering an introduction to a large range of topics, with some left out, and many more only briefly covered. The first third of the semester is broadly theoretical. We begin with a discussion of the nature of work, class and identity, power relations in the workplace, and the potential for collective action. Another third of the semester involves an examination of comparative industrial relations. We look at Britain, France, Sweden, Germany, Japan and the United States to see the differences in the way in which workers are organized, the relative success workers and unions have achieved, the different role played by the state, and to understand the reasons why particular national models of industrial relations develop. In the final part of the semester we examine the main changes in the economic environment – globalization, flexibility, employer hostility – which now face workers, and we look forward, asking how unions are responding to the challenges facing them, and whether we have come to the end of labor’s century.
Requirements

The primary requirement is that students do the assigned reading (of which there is about 150 pages a week) on time and be prepared to discuss it in class. Each student must write comments (anywhere from a paragraph or two to a page or two) on the readings each week. The purpose of the comments is to identify the main issues, questions and criticisms so that we can incorporate them into class discussion. Further explanation of this assignment is provided at the Blackboard web site for this course (at the “Assignments” tab). It should be read carefully. The comments are normally due by 6:00am on the day of class, and should be posted to the Blackboard “Discussion Board”. Occasionally students will make oral presentations about some of the readings. The written comments, oral presentations and class participation will be worth one-third of the grade.

Another one-third of the grade will come from an oral history project that will involve interviewing an individual about their job, authority relations, experience of collective action, and attitudes towards work, and writing up the interview. The written report is due immediately after spring break.

The final one-third of the grade will come from a short research paper (about 10-15 pages long), on a topic chosen by the student, due by Saturday May 18 at 11:00am. This research paper can be one of two types: i) an individual research paper chosen by the student; ii) a collective research paper, involving up to four students, on a topic chosen by the group. I would prefer that the research papers explore topics or countries that we have not had a chance to cover in class. In addition each student or group must hand me a one-page proposal for the research paper (the topic plus a preliminary bibliography) by Friday April 5. These are all requirements and late work will be penalized for reasons of equity.

Finally, there will inevitably be some changes to the course readings and assignments as the semester progresses which are not included on this syllabus. I will provide regular updates in the “Announcements” section of the Blackboard web site for this course. Always check the Blackboard site before each class. In the unlikely event that you miss a class, you should always check the web site in case I have announced something of importance.

Course Readings

There are no books to buy. All readings are available electronically on Blackboard, at the “Course Readings” tab. They are arranged alphabetically by first author. You can then read (and, if you wish, print) this material. Check page numbers carefully, so that you read the correct section of each reading at the correct time. In many cases I have had some sections of a book scanned in that you do not need to read, or that you read at different points in the semester, so do be aware of page numbers.
CLASS SCHEDULE:

February 5, 7, 12 & 14    Work, Class, and Working Class Identity


Ronald Fraser, “Politics as Daily Life” (pages 61-67) in *New Left Review* [2012].

[Showing of Modern Times.]

February 19 & 21    Power at Work


Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, chapter 1, sections 1-4 (pages 21-50).


Andy Friedman, “Responsible Autonomy Versus Direct Control Over the Labour Process,” (pages 43-57) in *Capital & Class* [1977].


[Showing of Fast Food Women.]
February 26 & 28, March 5 & 7  Industrial Relations, Trade Unions and Collective Action


Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism*, chapter 7 (pages 170-220).


British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA), “What’s the Point of Industrial Relations?” (pages 46-59) in Ralph Darlington, ed., *What’s The Point of Industrial Relations?* [2009].

Wolfgang Streeck, “Industrial Relations Today: Reining In Flexibility” (pages 1-21), *MPIfG Working Paper 08/3* [2008].


[Showing of Final Offer.]

March 12 & 14  British and French Industrial Relations


Chris Howell, “Women as the Paradigmatic Trade Unionists?” (pages 511-543) in *Economic and Industrial Democracy* [November 1996].


Anders Hayden, “France’s 35-Hour Week” (pages 503-542) in *Politics & Society* [2006].
March 19 & 21  Swedish Industrial Relations


April 2 & 4  German and Japanese Industrial Relations


April 9 & 11  United States Industrial Relations


Loic Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration” (pages 41-60), in *New Left Review* [2002].

Paul Frymer, “Race, Labor and the Twentieth-Century American State” (pages 475-509) in *Politics & Society* [2004].

Michael Piore & Sean Safford, “Changing Regimes of Workplace Governance” (pages 299-325) in *Industrial Relations* [2006].

**April 16, 18, 23 & 25** The New Political Economy of Work

David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, chapter 9 (pages 141-172).


Barbara Ehrenreich, “Maid to Order” (pages 85-103) in Ehrenreich and Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman* [2003].


[Showing of *Out at Work* and *Degrees of Shame*.]

**April 30 & May 2** Employer and Union Strategies the United States

John Logan, “The Union Avoidance Industry in the United States” (pages 651-675) in *British Journal of Industrial Relations* [2006].

Carola Frege and John Kelly, “Union Revitalization Strategies in Comparative Perspective” (pages 7-24) in *European Journal of Industrial Relations* [2003].


Paul Osterman, “Community Organizing and Employee Representation” (pages 629-649) in *British Journal of Industrial Relations* [2006].


[Visit by Monica Bielski Boris, Assistant Professor, School of Labor & Employment Relations, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on April 30.]

**May 7 & 9**

The Crisis and Future of Work and Labor


Bob Black, “The Abolition of Work” (pages 1-11), unpublished manuscript.

How To Do The Weekly Reading Comments Assignment

This assignment is not complicated, but it is easy to misunderstand. The purpose of these sets of comments is threefold. **First,** I want to know that you have read the assigned material ahead of class so that I can structure the class on the assumption that we have a shared starting point, and so that we can set about discussing the reading rather than having me simply lecture on it. The class is reading-driven because I am trying to expose you to a wide range of different viewpoints and approaches to the topic, and that requires that I do everything I can to encourage you to do the reading. **Second,** I need to know ahead of time if some part of the reading was consistently misunderstood so that I can concentrate on going over that material in class. It is often the case that one author or piece of reading is open to multiple interpretations, and if several students interpret it differently from me, we will need to discuss that. I may be expecting you to get something from the reading when you in fact take away something quite different. There may also be language and concepts that you don’t understand, so the written comments are an opportunity to let me know what you would like me to explain in class. **Third,** your reaction to the reading plays a central role in helping me decide how to organize class discussion. I am particularly interested in which readings resonated with you, and why, and which readings you found weak, irritating, ignorant, or whatever, and why. The critiques of the readings are the best place to start a class discussion – and it means I can call on you to explain your reaction.

What does this mean for the comments you write? It means that, at a minimum, I want the comments to demonstrate that you did the reading. That means a brief summary of the main themes and arguments presented in the reading. You can do this by writing a paragraph on each reading, or by drawing out some themes and using your comments to illustrate how each reading addressed those themes. You do not need to summarize and/or discuss every reading if you do not want to. I want a sense that you have done all the reading, but if you found some of the readings particularly insightful or heinous, then, by all means, focus on them in your comments. Do identify terms or concepts that you would like me to go over in class. Finally, along with your summary and questions, please offer comments, critiques and reactions to the readings. Again, you can do this for every reading, or just a few; you might organize your comments around a general critique of the readings for that week, or point to surprising similarities or differences.

The “product” should be written comments ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. They should be posted to Blackboard at the ‘Discussion Board’ tab by the deadline listed on the syllabus. Please write and post your comments before reading those of other students in the class. I want your reactions to the reading, not your reactions to the comments of other students. You are welcome to respond to student comments after posting your own.

Here is how I grade the comments. I DO NOT make comments on them. If you post comments that demonstrate that you have done the reading, or the great bulk of it, regardless of the quality of those comments, you get one point. If you post no comments, or your comments appear to be about reading for another class, you do not get a point. On rare occasions your comments may be so impressive that I give you two points. In the past this has been true for only about 10% of students each week, and it only happens for comments that go well beyond summary and questioning to offer insightful reaction and critique. You can check that I read and graded your comments by going to the Blackboard gradebook each week. I’m also happy to meet with you to give you some further feedback on your written comments.