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Title	The ideology of union busting
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Publication Date	2006
Publication Information	Dundon, T., Cullinane, N. and Harney, B. (2006), The ideology of union-busting, International Union Rights Journal, August, vol.13 (2), pp5-6
Publisher	International Union Rights Journal
Link to publisher's version	www.ictur.org
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2093

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The ideology of union-busting

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Introduction

You can disregard the many buzzwords and fashionable fads of the so-called modern world of management. Things like 'mutual gains', 'cooperative production regimes' or 'partnership packs' is often a ruse to the disguise true intentions that exist behind most non-union employer actions. Many of the worlds largest multinationals, both American and non-American owned companies are avowedly anti-union. The likes of Walmart, Amazon, McDonalds or Disney do not oppose union representation just for pragmatic or business reasons: they do so because they have an inherent revulsion towards the idea of sharing power through with worker representatives. It is this same ideological distaste of unions why so many smaller firms also go to great lengths to remain union-free. In this short summary review we trace the roots of ideological hostility towards unions, and consider its manifestation in contemporary situations. By looking at managerial hostility through the lens of ideology, some implications for future union organising trajectories can be noted.

Tracing management ideology

Management ideology is a slippery and tricky concept. It's about very deep seated values and attitudes that stem from history. Importantly, these values often masquerade as something new or sophisticated when they are not. In fact, the

objective has always been to demand, with a degree of authority and legitimacy, the unquestioning obedience of workers. Even the eloquence that is the American Declaration of Independence (1776) is a deception. When Thomas Jefferson etched in stone those immortal 'inalienable rights' to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness', apparently this implied a union-free form of happiness. Jefferson, himself a Virginia slave-owner, unleashed on the modern world an ideological legitimacy which continues to serve the interests of owners over-and-above those of women, the poor and disenfranchised groups in society.

With the subsequent development of defined property rights, the underpinnings of a master-servant relationship found its way into the employment contract. As such, employers purchase the capacity of people to work, and with this emerged an inherent assumption about the ownership of the service (not the person). But for many employers, the distinction between purchasing a service from workers, and that of owing them, can be a very thin line. In simple terms, the ideology of management essentially rests on a core assumption of ownership, and despite the plethora of human resource management techniques, it is this perceived notion of ownership that preoccupies many managers. As there is no manager who ever likes to be questioned, the roots of ideology extend

to form a much broader discourse that seeks commitment while maintaining control, and searches for obedience through acquiescence. Increasingly, managerial ideologies now dominate the lives of most citizens around the world, both inside and outside their place work with a 24/7 culture of flexibility and servitude.

From its constitutional legitimacy to the expanding markets of business schools and consultancy gurus, ideology is an attitudinal subscription that is awkward to pin-down with precision: indeed, such ambiguity is itself part of the managerial armoury in asserting some sort of divined 'right to manage'. From Henry Ford's '\$5 dollar day' to Harvard Business School's model of 'soft' HRM, ideology engenders a system in which trade unions are viewed as an unwelcome enemy. Consequently, any attempt to infringe upon an employer's presumed 'right to manage' is met with suspicion and hostility. The rights of workers to band together and form a trade union, or even the hint of any desire to participate in work-related matters, is considered a threat to management and is met with an array of employer resistance strategies. In those infamous words of Margaret Thatcher: 'the miners strike cannot be settled. It can only be won'.

The miners union may have lost that strike in Britain; however it exposed both the power and fragility of managerial ideology which has a tendency to wax and wane over time. The power of management ideology is its persistence, variability and its disguise. It can also be fragile. At times the articulation of a given managerial ideology has had to accommodate, somewhat begrudgingly, the legitimacy of unionism and incorporate the collective voice of workers in corporate decisions. Equally important is the capacity for ideology to emerge in new strategies, such as mutual gains or collaborative partnerships.

This is important. It is the ideological branding of managerialism through consumer taste and political dogma that becomes all-pervasive and all-powerful. In effect, ideology re-surfaces and re-asserts itself by shaping consumer demand and altering the expectations of workers. Managements' ideological bent frequently finds support from the institutions of society: government bodies and state agencies, the media, business schools and the judiciary. Under what is now known as the 'Washington Consensus' to economic management, unions are viewed as an unnecessary evil whose only purpose is to restrict the independent operation of the market. The claim is made as though markets are somehow neutral and objective in the first place, when they are not. Remember Enron! This sort of ideological branding and linguistic discourse is further endorsed by popular ideals of so-called 'good human resource management' espoused from leading experts and consultants. Apparently, no one wants to stand in the way of progress and modernisation, although it is progress interpreted for and by elite and dominant groups in business and society. Thus many of the so-called modern and progressive corporations, inspired by a vision of caring and self-confident management systems, are all non-union companies. However their success is not non-unionism: it is the power of a very slippery and pervasive ideology that disseminates a message that unions are somehow anti-modern and bad, and corporate America is progressive and good.

The manifestation of non-union ideology

The manner in which non-union ideology manifests itself is varied and complex. At enterprise level, there are a diverse number of union-busting strategies. The most explicit is often found in the blatant intimidation of workers that strives to instil a fear (real or otherwise) of managerial reprisals for possible unionisation. Through the use of 'captured

audiences' union drives are ambushed as managers (along with their contracted union-busting consultants) propagate the negative implications of potential unionisation. For example, an Amazon internal website provided supervisors with a battery of techniques to instil fear into employees who even thought about the possibility of union representation. The company handbook portrays unions as destructive enemies bent on dragging Amazon into a prolonged strike. This is the more visible form of an ideological distaste of trade unionism. Extreme employer behaviour of this sort is not confined to a few examples. Check out <http://www.walmartworkersrights.org/> for an entertaining exposé of Walmart's union-busting tactics.

Less aggressive forms of ideological hostility are manifest in attempts at stonewalling certification requests. The use of ideology serves a benign legitimatisation of management intent to frustrate union recognition. This finds expression in an array of techniques ranging from management insisting on the need for a ballot despite evidence of high membership, refusing to reply to union letters or finding an excuse prevent union officials gain access to the company. This ideological position has been particularly noted in instances where recognition campaigns face a long gestation period through various statutory mechanisms: in the US the Labor Relations Board can be a very drawn out affair for workers and unions, as is the case in Britain with the Employment Relations Act 1999, or in Ireland under the Industrial Relations Amendment Act 2001.

At other times, the ideology is deployed in what appears to be a far more neutral approach. The language and actions of managers are particularly important here. Companies proclaim they are not anti-union but are non-union because that's what their employees prefer. But it is never employees

who articulate this message. This form of ideology can be categorised as 'substitution': managers utilise various sweeteners, pay above average wages and provide good terms and conditions to actively remove any triggers for union representation. Typically, the strategy is underpinned with sophisticated employee voice mechanisms which reinforce managements' claimed 'right to manage'. The ideology can also be seen as supporting a workplace culture based on friendly and personal relations to engender loyalty to a very specific and non-union corporate identity. The dominant non-union ideology at IBM and Hewlett Packard for instance is such that workplace relations are designed to minimise any build-up in tension from accumulated grievances. A great deal of attention is devoted to the 'individual' employee as a way to eschew any notion of collectivity or solidarity among workgroups. The ideology portrays an image of like-minded individuals all working towards the same goals and all sharing from corporate performance. Yet despite the attraction of a warm and friendly culture, non-union voice does not include any *de jure* sharing of power or authority.

Overlapping ideologies

While there is distinctiveness about each of the ideological preferences summarised above (e.g. suppression and fear, or stonewalling and substitution of unionisation), they all reside on the same principles: avoiding unionisation while maintaining control. Often the ideology of suppression becomes readily apparent in the so-called sophisticated non-union companies when workers 'step out of line'. A stream of research into some of the so-called 'good' human relations employers has found a readiness to remove a velvet glove to reveal a more aggressive iron fist of anti-unionism. Indeed, in the non-union firms that seek to employ sweeteners, there are often simultaneous instances of hostile behaviours towards workers.

For example, the multinational retail chain, Tesco, has a union-management partnership forum in Britain, yet at the same time advertises for a US Chief Executive with experience of union avoidance. The point is that apparently different ideological standpoints can and do co-exist in the same firm, with union avoidance strategies varying greatly. Occasionally these involve elements of sophistication and paternalism, while in other situations the so-called good human resource practices incorporate more aggressive suppressionist tendencies.

Summary and conclusion: the implications for union organising

This brief review of ideology has pointed towards its prominence in understanding managerial hostility towards trade unions. By considering employer behaviours and actions through the lens of ideology, a deeper undercurrent can be revealed that is often

hidden beneath a rubric of paternalism and sophisticated non-union employee voice. Unpicking managerial ideology and assessing its impact on both national and international trajectories of union organising poses new challenges and issues. For a start, a basic awareness of managerial ideology provides a platform upon which to counter-mobilise managements' inherent distaste of collective representation. It may also expose some of the so-called modern and progressive managerial practices as equally powerful union resistance strategies. Union organisers may then target potential members by contesting specific managerial values and intentions in a given situation. Finally, given the prevalence and growth of non-unionism, the necessity of a robust union organising model that has the ability to challenge ideologically-opposed employers seems much more preferable to campaigns that seek employer approval for certification.