



COMMENTARY

One opportunity of antiwork: Bringing unions (back) to the I-O table

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In their article, Alliger and McEachern (2024) advocate for establishing alliances with unions and a better understanding of the psychological character of organized labor. For them, unions are one option to adjust unjust power dynamics in industrial society and to better understand the antiwork perspective that seems to be gaining traction worldwide. In this commentary, we expand on the considerations regarding research and collaborations with unions. In addition, we extend Alliger and McEachern's argument beyond the US, where the prevalence and nature of labor unions is different. Furthermore, we highlight already existing and missing research and initiatives in this regard and outline some first steps to enhance cooperation among trade unions and I-O psychologists.

Research on labor relations within I-O is very scarce (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). Less than 2% of articles published in *Personnel Psychology* and *Journal of Applied Psychology* between 1963 and 2007 focused on labor relations, and these figures have probably changed little since then. Hence, the indifference of I-O to labor relations, and as such to unions, has been known for a long time. Using a historical analysis, Zickar (2004) offered several reasons for this indifference almost 20 years ago, highlighting I-O psychologists' reluctance to acknowledge power dynamics between management and employees, a point emphasized by Alliger and McEachern. These historical reasons, such as limited access to data, limited financial incentives, or psychologists' negative attitudes toward unions, have also not changed in the past 20 years and still explain I-Os indifference to labor relations topics.

Despite this general indifference, a small body of research does exist on unions from an I-O perspective. Alliger and McEachern name a few examples in their focal article such as research on union participation from Tetrick et al. (2007) and several studies from Mellor focusing for example on socioeconomic statuses as antecedents for union interest (Mellor, 2016; Mellor & Golay, 2017). These examples all relate to research conducted in the US. I-O research, however, also exists from Canada (Barling et al., 1991; Barling et al., 1992; Kelloway & Watts, 1994), South Africa (Fullagar & Barling, 1989), Spain (Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2012, 2020), Poland (Grzymala-Moszczyńska et al., 2021), and Sweden (Sverke & Kuruvilla, 1995), as well as several studies comparing countries across Europe (De Witte et al., 2008; Goslinga & Sverke, 2003; Sverke & Goslinga, 2003). There is also some work regarding unions developed in non-Western countries, such as South America (Perelman, 2022), China (Chan & Snape, 2013), and other Asian

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countries (Lee et al., 2019)—however, mostly not from I-O psychologists. It is hence evident that unions play a role in work around the world and thus need to be addressed in I-O research globally, which should also include cultural and legal differences regarding union organizing.

Potential research topics

Despite the number of articles mentioned above, psychological research on unions is still rare and as such offers plenty of avenues for future research. Alliger and McEachern suggest conducting research on benefits of union membership and on who is most likely to join a union. Building on Barling et al. (1992) psychological approach to union membership could be promising in this regard. Further research should link current trends in I-O such as gig work or remote work to unions and how they are affected by these changes in the world of work. Additionally, research could further address the role of unions regarding occupational safety and stress. Although many I-O psychologists likely think of unions as mostly addressing pay and benefits, labor unions have played a key role in certain industries, such as mining, in promoting and enforcing health and safety standards. In Europe, union safety representatives have the task to promote a satisfactory work environment and protect employees from risks at work (Walters & Wadsworth, 2017). All involved parties, that is individuals, organizations, and society, benefit from such satisfactory work environments in that individuals are healthier (Day et al., 2014), organizations receive better quality in services or products (Cooper & Bevan, 2014), and society profits from less sickness and more participation in communities. Over the last years, it has however become more difficult to recruit union safety representatives, which could also be addressed by I-O researchers and practitioners.

Another important aspect relates to the resistance of management against union organizing, which is mostly prevalent in but not limited to the US. This resistance could be studied using a system justification perspective. System justification theory states that people are generally motivated to keep the current status quo, even if this status quo disadvantages people (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Managers might be aware of their privileges and the existing inequality compared to workers and might thus be willing to defend the current status quo to avoid losing privileges or reducing inequalities from which they profit in some way. Furthermore, the question could be addressed why more employees do not resist and protest against the current status quo as they are the ones being disadvantaged by it. Again, system justification motivation could be one possible explanation for this (Jost et al., 2012). In addition, political ideology could also help to explain attitudes toward unions and union membership as first data reveal large intercountry variability in the relation between union membership and political ideology (Grzymala-Moszczynska et al., 2023).

Strategies for bridging the gap

Recently, we have seen initial initiatives to raise awareness about unions and labor relations among I-O psychologists. Both at the Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and at the Congress of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology, panel discussions related to the topic of unions and I-O were conducted (Levey et al., 2023; Vesper et al., 2023). These are hopefully the starting point of increasing research interest in unions and their role at the workplace.

I-O psychologists should thus be encouraged to start working with(in) organized labor and address open research questions, as suggested by Alliger and McEachern. Examples for such research can be found from Mellor who actively reaches out to unions and develops research projects together with them to ensure a mutually beneficial project (e.g., Mellor, 2023) or

Martínez-Iñigo who also closely cooperates with unions in Spain (Martínez-Iñigo *et al.*, 2020). These can be seen as examples of how to build alliances with unions and start working within labor. Additionally, addressing unions and not only employers could also further help to address the science–practice gap as research on and with unions allows to tackle practically relevant issues and directly test theoretical assumptions.

We would also encourage researchers to incorporate union issues and general labor relations aspects into their teaching to make future I-O graduates (both researchers and practitioners) more aware of these aspects. In 1988, Barling already addressed the blind spot of labor relations in teaching I-O (Barling, 1988), and little seems to have changed since then. One way could be to teach students to make the labor case next to the business case, as suggested by Alliger and McEachern. Further options could be to invite unionists to classes to allow students to interact with unionists early on and get to know their perspectives or to at least address the dearth of research on labor unions in class and point out the current indifference among most I-O researchers to students.

In addition, we encourage I-O psychologists interested in labor research to collaborate with more labor-focused researchers who are located in other academic disciplines. For example, in the Labor Employment Relations Association (formerly the Industrial Relations Research Association, an association that promotes the academic study of labor unions and relations), 2023–2024 board members located in academia are found in various departments and schools: Labor and Employment Relations, Sociology, Human Resources and Labor Relations, Law, and Business. I-O psychologists might profit by looking outside of psychology departments and business schools to find collaborators with more experience working with labor unions.

Bringing trade unions back to the table of I-O psychology is a task as complex as it is worthwhile, involving many forces, both for and against. Past efforts have had limited success. In line with the principles of the research topic itself, the achievement of effective and fruitful cooperation between I-O psychologists and trade unions cannot rest exclusively on the shoulders of a more or less small bunch of researchers if it is to succeed. Instead, it is necessary to foster an ecosystem in which research flourishes and I-O psychologists can develop their careers as scientists and practitioners—an environment that attracts trade unions and where cooperation can develop. It is beyond the scope of this comment to describe all the characteristics of such an environment. The following are some first lines of action.

First, as in any other field of I-O psychology research, the presence of research funds is a necessary condition for attracting researchers. The study of trade union organizations in themselves and in their relationship with companies is rarely included in calls for funding. It is well known that the absence of a topic in research calls has a disincentive effect equal to or greater than the motivating effect of its presence. Reintroducing trade union organization as a fundable research topic would act as a powerful attractor for researchers.

Second, for better or worse, another key element for the survival of any researcher is publications. The inclusion of trade union organizations in the “aims and scope” section of the main journals for I-O psychology and actively seeking for contributions on the topic (e.g., special issues) would help to bring researchers closer to the subject and “restart” a languishing research field.

A third element to promote the approach of I-O psychologists to trade union organizations has to do with their training process. As Alliger and McEachern point out, training programs on I-O psychology and trade unions are scarce. Coordination among academia, professional associations, and trade unions would allow the development of an agenda of joint interests offering future researchers and practitioners the knowledge and competencies to manage some of the trade unions’ goals.

Last but not least, trade union organizations should be willing to incorporate I-O psychologists in their technical teams. Generally, the presence of I-O psychologists is marginal, being underrepresented in favor of other professionals (e.g., lawyers, sociologists, economists,

or political scientists). In a two-way relationship, I-O psychologists must show trade union organizations their capacity to contribute to union organizations' objectives in a complementary way. I-O psychologists would benefit by initiating a conversation with local labor leaders.

In sum, we hope our commentary encourages some researchers to start research on and with unions. We highlighted some existing research from different countries and added to future research avenues mentioned by Alliger and McEachern. We hope that highlighting some first initiatives such as the recent panel discussions at SIOP and EAWOP conferences and positive examples of researchers will motivate further I-O researcher to incorporate unions in some way to their research and teaching.

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