



The labour geographies of education: The centralization of governance and collective bargaining in Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Labour geography has yet to pay full attention to the experiences of public sector workers and their employer (the state). This article addresses this lacuna and provides some insight into the labour geographies of public sector workers through an empirical analysis of the centralization of governance, employment relations, and collective bargaining in Ontario, Canada's publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools. This case demonstrates how one particular group of public sector workers – teachers – and their unions located and exercised agency in the arenas of politics and collective bargaining through a rescaling of their activities from the local to the provincial level. The paper also argues that the rescaling of politics and collective bargaining is problematic. Questions remain regarding whether or not Ontario's teachers were able to increase their aggregate bargaining power through centralization or merely transferred agency and authority from one scale to another. Moreover, the paper engages with the fast-developing geographies of education literature, and is consistent with an outward-looking approach that links education to wider political and economic processes. In so doing, it extends the scope of the geographies of education to the employees of publicly-funded schools and their administrative bodies, and suggests value a theoretically- and empirically-informed dialogue between geographers interested in education and those interested in labour.

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1. Introduction

Public sector workers represent the single largest group of employees in the world. They are also the target of contemporary efforts at political economic reform qua fiscal austerity and budgetary restraint in Europe and North America. Yet with few exceptions, labour geography pays little attention to public sector workers. This paper helps address this gap through an empirical analysis of the rescaling and centralization of policy, governance, and employment relations in publicly-funded elementary and secondary education in the Canadian province of Ontario. In so doing, it speaks to recent debates in labour geography that call for a better conceptualization of worker agency (Lier, 2007; Castree, 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011), and similar to Jordhus-Lier (2012), argues that understanding the agency of public sector workers represents a critical next step for the sub-discipline.

The paper also engages with the fast-developing geographies of education literature in which authors such as Hanson Thiem (2009) and Holloway et al. (2010, 2011) have opened a productive dialogue that situates publicly-funded education closer to the core of human geography. This is important considering that education lies betwixt and between the spheres of capitalist and social reproduction and constitutes an increasingly critical determinant of

where and how individual regions or states fit into global production networks based on the quantity and quality of labour power made available to (potential) employers (Coe et al., 2004). The paper also extends the scope of the geographies of education to teachers, their unions, and the school boards or state entities that employ them. In this sense, it is consistent with Hanson Thiem's (2009) outward-looking approach that situates education within broader political and economic processes.

Anglo-American governments have developed policy agendas that prioritize education as an essential tool to promote lifelong learning, adaptability, investment in social capital, and economic activity for individual and societal well-being (Jenson and Saint Martin, 2006). While some consensus exists regarding the importance of education policy, the implementation of these agendas varies significantly across and within nations. This is characteristic of the highly localized and variegated nature of neo-liberalism as conceptualized by authors such as Brenner et al. (2010) and Castree (2010). For example, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair long promoted education as an economic policy designed to produce competitive advantages and address class-based inequality (Holloway et al., 2011). In the US, recent rhetoric suggests a need for widespread education reform and often vilifies teachers' unions as the primary barrier to necessary changes. This is particularly evident in the popular documentary film *Waiting for 'Superman'*. In Canada, and Ontario in particular, education (which is the

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jurisdiction of individual provinces) is also at the forefront of public policy. However, the same pressure towards widespread reform and vilification of teachers' unions is not as prominent as in the US. Ontario's publicly-funded education system – in which teachers are unionized exclusively – is regularly ranked amongst the world's best (OECD, 2010). This success is partly due to the policies of a centrist provincial government that has held power since 2003 with the help of a strategic voting lobby initially led by the unions representing teachers, building tradespersons, and autoworkers.

There are several reasons why the particular case of Ontario's publicly-funded education system is intriguing. First, the ability of teachers' unions to mobilize and leverage political resources through strategic voting campaigns in order to make gains at the bargaining table and in the performance of publicly-funded schools demonstrates the potential for worker agency beyond the workplace or local community. Second, the state-led centralization of collective bargaining starkly contrasts the broader trends towards the employer-led decentralization of collective bargaining described by industrial relations researchers (Katz, 1993; Bamber et al., 2011). Third, the centralization of governance in Ontario's publicly-funded education system has been carried out by successive provincial governments (of both the left- and right-wing variety) since the 1990s. This diverges from prominent geographic accounts of state rescaling (Jessop, 2002; Brenner, 2004) and echoes Cox's (2009) call for more empirical analysis of this subject beyond Western Europe. However, the case of Ontario is problematic itself, as the shift in governance from the local to the provincial scale concomitantly concentrates power and decision-making amongst bureaucrats, politicians, and union leaders in the provincial capital of Toronto. Fourth, and importantly, the paper examines the interaction of education with neo-liberal agendas (broadly conceived), by demonstrating how Ontario's teachers and their unions not only resisted substantial assaults from right-wing governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but emerged more financially and politically powerful than before. This highly specific case provides evidence contrary to the conclusions made by Jordhus-Lier (2012) that equate neo-liberal state restructuring with political disempowerment. Those interested in advancing a publicly-funded education system that includes teachers and their unions as legitimate partners are also likely to find value in the analysis herein.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The first section conceptualizes the agency of public sector workers through the lens of labour geography. Featured prominently here is the work of Jordhus-Lier (2012). The second section examines the evolution of employment relations and collective bargaining in Ontario's publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools from 1944 to 2003. The third section presents a case study of the rescaling of collective bargaining in Ontario's publicly-funded schools since 2003. The fourth and concluding section situates this case study within broader debates regarding worker agency and the relationship of education and neo-liberal political agendas. This section emphasizes the role of teachers-as-workers and their potential influence on the political and socio-economic landscape.

2. Towards a public sector labour geography

Recent sub-disciplinary reviews recount the evolution of labour geography since the term was coined by Herod (1997a, 1997b) in the mid-1990s (Lier, 2007; Castree, 2008; Rutherford, 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Lier (2007) suggests several reasons why geographers have become more attentive to workers, unions, and employment relations. First, economic restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s sparked debate about how to redress an emerging power imbalance that favoured capital over labour. Second, a

growing frustration existed in the social sciences regarding the failure to properly address the agency of actors other than capital and the state. Third, and lastly, economic geographers – despite working in the Marxist tradition and viewing the plight of labour sympathetically – tended to focus their analyses on firms while neglecting the role and agency of workers and unions in shaping the political economic landscape.

Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011, p. 212) distinguish four 'thematic strands' of labour geography that have emerged since the 1990s: the analysis of worker agency exercised through collective organization in blue-collar industries (Herod, 1997a; Holmes, 2004) and urban service sector work (Tufts, 1998; Wills, 2005; Savage, 2006); the regulation and segmentation of labour markets (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Peck, 1996); the intersections of employment and identity, with a particular focus on gender (see McDowell, 2009); and the role of the landscape in shaping labour market and employment relations outcomes (Mitchell, 1996; Mann, 2007; Ekers and Sweeney, 2010). Two general positions regarding the future of labour geography are also evident. One suggests value in advancing labour geography as a political project (Tufts and Savage, 2009). Another prioritizes the construction of precise concepts and analytical boundaries in order to enhance the value of any eventual political project (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Despite these debates, several commonalities are espoused by most labour geographers. These include left-leaning approaches to the politics of labour, a 'cellular' structure with 'relatively few conversations across the various [thematic] approaches and with each [theme] being more strongly tied to debates and literature outside the discipline of geography' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011, p. 212), and the conceptualization of labour as an agent whose actions are consequential.

Locating opportunities to exercise worker agency is a foremost concern of labour geographers. Although the aforementioned reviews call for more thorough conceptualizations of worker agency, they also note that a great deal of progress has been made since the 1990s. Worker agency is understood to be relational, seldom autonomous, shaped by both economic structure and political processes, and involved in a dynamic process of interaction, conditioning, and development (Bergene et al., 2010). The exercise of agency by workers and unions is also understood to be part of a 'learning process' based on 'trial and error' whereby effective strategies develop over time and in specific contexts (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010, p. 33). Economic structure both limits and facilitates worker agency, particularly in relation to their ability to withdraw purchasing or labour power, thus halting or reducing processes of capital accumulation. Worker agency can also be exercised through associational power, which can prove particularly effective in political arenas (Webster et al., 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011).

The associational agency of unions and their ability to employ multi-scalar collective bargaining strategies to rally support and mobilize resources are central to the analyses of many labour geographers. The rescaling of collective bargaining has been of particular interest to labour geographers, primarily in regard to the strategies of resistance mounted by private sector unions in the face of employer-led decentralization (Herod, 1997a; Holmes, 2004; Sweeney and Holmes, in press). Labour geographers tend to associate reduced worker agency with a shift in bargaining power away from unions and towards employers and the state. However, industrial relations scholars such as Traxler et al. (2001) provide useful and nuanced analyses that demonstrate how centralization can be invoked by employers as a strategy to neutralize union activity at the scale of the workplace and by the state to manage highly contentious or politically important sectors. They also note that centralization can provide employers with an advantage in that they are generally better able to control their members or divisions than unions are able to control their local

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