

Book Review

Pablo Pérez Ahumada (2023) *Building Power to Shape Labor Policy*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. ISBN 13:978-0-8229-4769-1 270pp. US\$55.00 (hardcover); US\$52.00 (kindle).

Reviewed by

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Building Power to Shape Labour Policy analyses the processes of labour policy change in neoliberal contexts, focusing on Chile. With a PhD. from the University of California and currently teaching at the University of Chile, the author, Dr. Pablo Pérez Ahumada, stands at the crossroads of labour and political sociology. The book, released by the University of Pittsburgh Press, ignites a crucial debate on the influence of social classes' collective action on transforming labour legislation. This review presents the main arguments of the book, celebrates its key contributions, and reflects on some questions it prompts.

The book arrives at a critical juncture when labour rights are facing significant challenges from productive restructuring and the dominance of neoliberal policies that prioritise deregulation and labour flexibility at a global scale. In the context of Chile, the book serves as an epilogue to a lengthy constitutional process that began with the social upheaval of October 2019. Despite promising substantial social and labour rights changes, this political process concluded in 2022 with surprising and paradoxical citizen support for the existing neoliberal status quo. Pérez's book hones in on the period preceding the social outbreak, when the Nueva Mayoría government's attempts to enact a substantial labour reform were unsuccessful. However, it offers theoretical tools to comprehend the persistent resistance of the neoliberal institutions inherited from the dictatorship in Chile, despite recent social mobilisations.

The thesis put forward by the author is that, more than economic resources or the alliances of the business world with political parties, the failure of labour reform attempts in Chile has been favoured by the organisational and mobilisation capacity of the Confederación de la Producción y el Comercio (CPC), the leading business association, and the correlative weakness of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT). While the latter has reproduced organisational practices and strategies that increase fragmentation within the world of labour, the former has generated solidarity among the business sectors that make it up and consensus on strategies to confront the most reformist governments.

This approach offers a novel theoretical perspective by emphasising the critical role of social classes' "associative power" in shaping labour policy, departing from the existing literature on the subject. Without ignoring the importance of other factors, such as authoritarian legacies, party ties, or social support for the ideas of the business class, the book argues that associational power plays a central role because it enhances and amplifies the effectiveness of these other factors. In other words, the more cohesive and robust the organisation, the more hegemony the class achieves over its ideas in society, the better links it builds with political parties, and the more chances it has of shaping institutions in its favour. Professor Pérez's theory, however, emphasises the relational

aspect of the problem rather than associative power *per se*. In other words, it stresses that the explanation for the continuity of neoliberal labour policy lies in the imbalance between the two organisations rather than in the resources or strategies each social class manages.

This approach has several advantages over other common explanations of labour policy. One is that it denaturalises the political power that business has in the country by accounting for the concrete organisational strategies that have allowed this social class to maintain its influence over time. Business power over public policy is not evident; it is built through individual and collective actions that can be traced. While this may seem obvious to some, the truth is that there are few previous studies on business organisations in Chile. The same thesis applies to workers. The weak influence of workers on national policy is not only the result of the actions of the business world or the lack of collective rights, as is often suggested in the literature, but also the inability of their organisations to generate internal cohesion.

Despite its critical assessment of workers' power, the book offers a glimmer of hope for labour activists by indicating that opportunities still exist to act and shift the power dynamic between employers and workers. By recruiting more members, promoting grassroots participation, developing strategic capacities, forging broad class consensus, and producing sustainable and efficient organisational structures, the CUT could increase its capacity for political influence. Against a deterministic discourse that sees the continuity of Chilean labour institutions as a mechanical reflection of global trends, Professor Pérez's book insists that local actors can mediate and shape reality.

Without explicitly intending to do so, the book opens up some questions that deserve to be addressed in greater depth in future research. In my view, the most significant aspect is the discussion of factors contributing to the fragility of workers' associative power. Beyond giving some clues, such as the tendency of the CUT leadership to reproduce the conflicts between political parties and the restrictions imposed by unfavourable legislation, the book does not examine in detail why workers unionise exceptionally in Chile and why, when they do, they confine themselves to a firm-level union without taking an interest in struggles at the national level. By focusing on the CUT, the book explains the weakness of organising from the perspective of this organisation. Still, it leaves aside the question of union participation and division in general, problems that also detract from workers' political influence. The question is relevant because, as statistics from the Labour Directorate indicate, most company-level unions are not affiliated with a higher union structure. In other words, the weakness of workers' associational power is a problem related to, but not limited to, the issues faced by the CUT. Understanding its causes requires a theoretical and empirical effort beyond the book's intentions. Still, it would undoubtedly strengthen the author's argument to explain the continuity of labour policy in Chile.

Rather than a weakness of the text, this question shows how the argument developed by the author stimulates debates that have not been a priority in the Latin American academy to date but may be of vital importance for national policy and the future of workers. For all these reasons, I want to end this review by strongly recommending reading this book. I believe this work will mark the discussion on labour policy not only in the academic world but also in the trade union and political world.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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