

Union Loyalty and Strike Propensity

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ABSTRACT. Predictors of the propensity of union members to strike were examined by administering questionnaires to a group of 44 unionized university technologists and technicians in Canada. After union tenure was statistically controlled, union loyalty predicted strike propensity and inter-role conflict moderated this effect: Specifically, the relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity was significantly higher when inter-role conflict was low. Suggestions for future research on union commitment and on strike propensity are offered, and practical suggestions for enhancing union participation are identified.

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, and Spiller's (1980) study, there has been a considerable amount of research (Barling, Wade, & Fullagar, 1990; Fullagar & Barling, 1989; Fullagar, McCoy, & Schull, 1992; Gordon, Beauvais, & Ladd, 1984; Kelloway, Barling, & Fullagar, 1990; Klandermans, 1989; Thacker, Fields, & Barclay, 1990), theorizing (Fullagar & Barling, 1987), and reflections on the practical significance of union commitment for organized labor (Gallagher & Clark, 1989). Although most of this research has been focused on the multidimensional nature

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of union commitment, it might be argued from the perspective of labor unions that a focus on the antecedents and consequences of union commitment would be most useful: As Gordon et al. (1980) noted in their monograph, “. . . the ability of union locals to attain their goals is generally based on their members' loyalty, belief in the objectives of organized labor, and willingness to perform service voluntarily” (p. 480).

Several researchers have studied the outcomes of union commitment. In their study conducted in the United States, Gordon et al. (1980) showed that loyalty to the union predicted satisfaction with management, union, and job. Although in the predicted direction, correlations between these three outcomes and the other three dimensions of union commitment (willingness to work for the union, responsibility to the union, and belief in unionism) were less consistent. These findings have been extended in a longitudinal study in South Africa (Fullagar & Barling, 1989), in which loyalty to the union predicted participation in union activities, such as attending union meetings and voting in union elections 8 months later.

In Klandermans' (1989) study, the findings of Gordon et al. (1980) and Fullagar and Barling (1989) were replicated and extended with a Dutch sample. Klandermans showed that all four dimensions of union commitment predicted participation in the union and satisfaction with the union. In addition, all four dimensions predicted intent to withdraw from the union. This latter finding is important, because previous research (Gordon et al., 1980) failed to show such a relationship, presumably because of the restricted range in the measure of turnover (only 6.9% in the Gordon et al. sample had allowed their membership to terminate). In contrast, Klandermans (1989) showed that a measure of the intent to withdraw from the union predicts such withdrawal. This is important, because the size of the union is related to its strength (Barling et al., 1992) and, thus, its ability to meet its objectives.

One way in which unions can achieve their goals is by successfully lobbying for political candidates who support the objectives of their union, and union loyalty predicts both political action by the union (Fields, Masters, & Thacker, 1987) and membership support for political endorsement of specific political candidates (Thacker et al., 1990). Finally, in a separate context, Kelloway et al. (1990) tested a Canadian sample and found that union loyalty was a significant predictor of industrial relations climate over a period of 6 months. Consequently, in these studies, union loyalty was found to predict various types of participation in union activities.

Thus, researchers have focused on the extent to which union loyalty predicts several aspects of union participation (namely, participation in union activities, turnover intentions, and support for political candidates). One notable feature of union participation is the propensity to strike for the union. When union-management relationships are conflictual, for example, unions can achieve their goals by threatening to and actually going on strike. During

such stages of negotiation, union loyalty is critical: As Martin (1986) suggested, the success of a strike depends on the membership's willingness to cooperate in the strike action. The significance of the hypothesized relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity can be understood further from Gordon et al. (1980) in the comment that "membership commitment obviously affects the strength of the union, which is one internal organization factor that influences the power of the union to impose sanctions" (p. 497). Accordingly, in the present study, the focus was on one potential outcome of union loyalty that has not previously been addressed but is critical to the ability of the union to meet its objectives, the propensity to strike.

Recent research has shown that the relationship between union loyalty and participation in union activities is not uniform. Fullagar and Barling (1989) found that this relationship depended on members' perceptions of the union's instrumentality and race (a marker variable denoting occupational privilege). More specifically, the relationships between union loyalty and union participation was suppressed whenever members (a) did not view the union as instrumental in resolving their dissatisfaction and (b) were generally satisfied with their position of relative occupational and political privilege. Thus, in the present study, we investigated two variables that might suppress the relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity, namely, company commitment¹ and inter-role conflict.

At least since the early research on dual commitment to the company and to the union (e.g., Purcell, 1954; Stagner, 1954), concern has frequently been expressed that the interests of the company and the union are antagonistic. Since then, research in the United States has shown that under certain conditions individuals can indeed experience high levels of loyalty to the company and union simultaneously (Fukami & Larson, 1984). Because strikes may be seen as harmful to the company, individuals manifesting high levels of commitment to the union and to the company might experience considerable dissonance if a strike were contemplated or called. Consequently, we hypothesized that commitment to the company would suppress the relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity.

There are suggestions in the literature that gender moderates union experiences (Barling et al., 1992). For example, women express more attitudinal loyalty to the union than men do, but men participate more in union activities than women do (Gordon et al., 1980). However, the latter difference is not a function of gender per se; instead, just as Fullagar and Barling (1989) attributed any race differences in their study to the differential experience of

¹In their research, Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1982) refer to *organizational commitment*. However, following Barling et al. (1990), we prefer to use the term *company commitment*: Unions are also organizations, and the term *company commitment* is more correct and reduces the likelihood of confusion.

occupational privilege in the South African context, gender moderates the way in which people experience their social and occupational roles. Despite social changes, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of home-making responsibilities (Barling, 1990). Accordingly, they have fewer opportunities for participating in union activities if they are to fulfill both roles simultaneously (Cornfield, Filho, & Chun, 1990; Roby & Uttal, 1988).

One factor that reflects the way in which women (and men) simultaneously experience their work and family roles is inter-role conflict (Barling, 1990). The greater the number of simultaneous role demands from different domains, the greater the inter-role conflict. Focusing on this conflict rather than on gender is important: With greater demands on men for household participation, competition between union and home responsibilities will likely influence inter-role conflict for men and women (Cornfield et al., 1990). We predicted, therefore, that irrespective of gender, high inter-role conflict would suppress the relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity.

In this study, we chose to focus on strike propensity as the outcome measure for several reasons. First, the membership's willingness to strike is important to the union leadership in their ability to plan sanctions. Second, strikes remain infrequent events despite the attention they attract. Third, union leaders may be disinclined to grant access to researchers during times of crisis. Thus, predicting members' intentions rather than actual behavior allows researchers to maintain a focus on events that are important to the functioning and strength of the union. Fourth, because data in a meta-analytic study showed a substantial correlation ($r = .79$) between behavioral intentions to join a union and voting behavior, Premack and Hunter (1988) argued that intentions can serve as a plausible proxy for actual behavior. In this sense, strike propensity is similar to willingness to strike. We used the term *strike propensity* to remain consistent with Martin's (1986) study rather than to suggest any conceptual differences between the notion of propensity and willingness to strike.

Method

Subjects and Setting

The study was conducted in a university setting among the technicians' and technologists' union. Forty-three union members (41 men) ranging in age from 24 to 64 years (mean age, 41.79 years) participated voluntarily in the present study. They had been members of the union for an average of 11.49 years (range, 1–33 years) and employees of the university for an average of 13.93 years (range, 2–33 years). Members of this union had the right to strike and had a history of conflict with management.

Questionnaires

Union loyalty. We chose to focus on union loyalty rather than on global union commitment because most previous studies on union commitment have been focused on this factor (e.g., Barling et al., 1990; Fukami & Larson, 1984; Fullagar & Barling, 1990; Fullagar et al., 1992). In factor-analytic studies using the Gordon et al. (1980) union commitment scale and South African (e.g., Fullagar, 1986), Dutch (e.g., Klandermans, 1989), and U.S. (e.g., Ladd, Gordon, Beauvais, & Morgan, 1982; Tetrick, Thacker, & Fields, 1989; Thacker, Fields, & Tetrick, 1989) samples, union loyalty emerged consistently as the first factor. Accordingly, we used the nine items that emerged as the union loyalty factor in Fullagar's (1986) study. The reliability of this nine-item scale was satisfactory ($\alpha = .87$).

Company commitment. For the purposes of this study, the nine-item short form of Mowday, Steers, and Porter's (1979) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire was completed by all respondents. This short-form questionnaire comprises all the positively worded items from the full 15-item questionnaire. There is ample support for the reliability and validity of the short form: The short and long forms of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire are significantly correlated, and test-retest reliability over 2 to 4 months is significant, as are correlations with external criteria (see Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). In the present study, the internal consistency (α) of the nine-item scale was .86.

Inter-role conflict. Kopelman, Greenhaus, and Connolly (1983) designed a questionnaire to measure "the extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with the pressures that arise within another role" (p. 201). Their scale proved to be reliable and valid; subsequent research has further demonstrated its construct and discriminant validity (Barling & MacEwen, 1988). In this study, the internal consistency of this scale was again satisfactory ($\alpha = .95$).

Propensity to strike. Using Martin's (1986) study, we generated a nine-item questionnaire to assess the willingness or propensity to strike. Responses to each item were based on a 5-point scale ranging from *likely to strike* (1) to *highly unlikely to strike* (5); 3 indicated an unsure response. The question "How likely would you be to strike . . ." prefaced the nine items (e.g., "if you felt your workload was too heavy?" or "if it would support your union and they believed a strike was necessary?"). This scale yielded a reliability (α) of .93.

Procedure

Preliminary telephone calls were made to approximately 140 members of the local union to request their participation. Seventy-nine (59%) agreed to have questionnaires mailed to them at their home addresses. Forty-five of these 79 subjects (57%, 32% of the initial calls made) subsequently returned the questionnaires in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. Subjects were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires, to keep participation anonymous.

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all study variables are presented in Table 1. Like past research (e.g., Barling et al., 1990), union loyalty was significantly associated with union tenure. Accordingly, union tenure was controlled statistically in all analyses involving union loyalty.

Before computing a multiple regression analysis to assess the effects of union loyalty on strike propensity, we tested two assumptions of multiple regression (namely, the absence of multicollinearity and linear relationships between predictor and outcome variables); for both, results were satisfactory. After controlling for the effects of union tenure, we found that union loyalty significantly predicted the propensity or willingness to strike ($\beta = .77$; $p < .01$; 38.39% of the variance was accounted for).

To investigate the possible moderating influence of company commitment and inter-role conflict, we computed subgroup analyses, in which the sample was dichotomized on the basis of the median score on the hypothesized moderator. Partial correlation coefficients (controlling for union tenure) between union loyalty and strike propensity were computed for the two subgroups, and a moderator effect was determined to be present if the two correlation coefficients differed significantly. This approach was justified be-

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	41.7	10.41						
2. Union tenure	11.4	6.67	.39**					
3. Union loyalty	30.2	8.28	-.17	-.27*				
4. Company commitment	25.7	10.54	-.02	-.03	-.04			
5. Inter-role conflict	19.3	9.54	-.11	.12	-.17	.06		
6. Strike propensity	26.36	11.24	-.07	-.10	-.57***	.21	.13	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

cause both hypothesized moderator variables were uncorrelated with the predictor and outcome variables (Zedeck, 1971), and despite the relatively low sample size, this procedure was justified in this study because the minimum number of subjects per group ($n = 20$) was exceeded (McCall, 1980). By using this procedure, we found no suppressive effects for company commitment ($Mdn = 24$): The partial correlation coefficients between union loyalty and strike propensity did not differ across high, $r(19) = -.68$, and low, $r(18) = -.61$, levels of company commitment ($z = 1.14, p > .05$). However, we found a suppressive effect for inter-role conflict ($Mdn = 17$). There were significant differences ($z = 3.1, p < .01$) in the partial correlation coefficients (after controlling for union tenure) between union loyalty and strike propensity for respondents low, $r(18) = .70, p < .01$, and high, $r(19) = .50, p < .01$, in inter-role conflict.

Discussion

Our findings extend previous research on union loyalty in several ways. A significant positive relationship between union loyalty and the propensity or willingness to strike demonstrated a significant link between union loyalty and participation in regular union activities (Fullagar & Barling, 1989; Gordon et al., 1980), a form of participation not previously considered in this context. Research has also shown that union loyalty is associated with the political activities of the union (Fields et al., 1987; Thacker et al., 1990), which also reflect regular activities of the union.

In contrast, by showing a significant correlation between union loyalty and strike propensity, the findings of the present study suggest that union loyalty may foster union strength. Specifically, when unions consider calling for a strike, support by the rank and file membership is critical to their success. Because union loyalty is a significant predictor of the propensity or willingness to strike, information of practical significance to the union leadership is advanced, as is the conceptual understanding of union loyalty. Beyond the nature of the outcome, the strength of this relationship is also noteworthy: Even after controlling for the influence of union tenure (see Barling et al., 1990), we found that union loyalty still predicted 38% of the variance in strike propensity. Because in most previous research on the predictors of striking, behavioral and psychological predictors have been ignored or de-emphasized (Nicholson & Kelly, 1980), our research advances the knowledge of the psychological predictors of strike activity.

Our results also suggest that the relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity was significantly lower when inter-role conflict was somewhat low. On a conceptual level, this extends Fullagar and Barling's (1989) findings that external factors (perceived union instrumentality and occupational prestige in their study) moderate the influence of union loyalty on var-

ious aspects of union participation. It would behoove future researchers and practitioners, therefore, to consider explicitly the fact that the influence of union loyalty is moderated by other factors. On a practical level, awareness of the moderated relationship that emerged in this study could be beneficial to union organizers. If enhancing participation in union activities is a goal of unions, it would be the union's own advantage to provide support structures (e.g., child care) that enable the membership to fulfill their union duties while simultaneously fulfilling family or parental obligations.

Contrary to our hypotheses, commitment to the company did not moderate the relationship between union loyalty and strike propensity. This finding is consistent with other research showing that work-related factors exert less of an influence on union activities, and vice versa, than is widely believed. A number of examples can be cited. Bigoness and Tosi (1984) showed that organizational commitment did not predict voting behavior in a union decertification election, although perceptions of the union's instrumentality did. In other studies, organizational and union commitment were shown to have different predictors and outcomes (Barling et al., 1990; Fukami & Larson, 1984; Fullagar & Barling, 1990). Finally, Kelloway et al. (1990) found that union factors predict union commitment far more effectively than work-related factors do.

The results here suggest some directions for future research on union loyalty. First and foremost, dimensions of union commitment other than loyalty should be examined. Most of the earlier research on the antecedents and outcomes of union commitment have been focused primarily on union loyalty (e.g., Barling et al., 1990; Fukami & Larson, 1984; Fullagar & Barling, 1989), but more recent research suggests that the outcomes of the four dimensions of union commitment differ (Kelloway et al., 1990; Klandermans, 1989). Specifically, although union loyalty predicts attitudes toward the union (e.g., industrial relations climate; Kelloway et al., 1990), the willingness to work for the union significantly predicted participation in union activities. Moreover, after the willingness to work for the union was controlled, union loyalty was not found to be a significant predictor of union participation (Kelloway et al., 1990).

Future research might profitably be directed toward the differential effects of the four components of union commitment. Our knowledge about the outcomes of union commitment would be enhanced considerably if, as in the present study, the outcomes selected for study were especially pertinent to the strength of the union and its ability to achieve its goals. Confidence in any findings that emerge from this program of research would be strengthened considerably if larger and more diverse samples are studied and if longitudinal data are used.

In conclusion, our findings appear to advance our understanding of union loyalty. First, a significant and substantial correlation with a variable of some

importance to the ability of the union to achieve its goals was identified. Second, inter-role conflict was shown to moderate this relationship, and the results of this moderator effect may be of some practical benefit in ensuring the participation of union membership.

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