Every year, I try to assign a book or other reading material that will spark debate and create emotion in a graduate-level class I teach, “Contemporary Issues in Human Resource Management.” I picked up a copy of Betrayal: How Union Bosses Shake Down Their Members and Corrupt American Politics by Chavez and Gray, hoping it might be an interesting book to create class discussion. That being said, I approached the review of the book primarily from the perspective of the potential of using it in a class for pedagogical reasons.

A number of things should probably be said upfront about Betrayal. First, to clear up any potential mistaken identities (as unlikely as that might be), the lead author is Linda Chavez, the Fox News political analyst and former George W. Bush nominee for Secretary of Labor, not Linda Chavez-Thompson, the executive vice president for the AFL-CIO. Second, this book does not claim to be and is not an impartial, objective look at union financing or its relationship to the Democratic Party. It has a strong and forceful conservative outline and agenda. Third, from a pedagogical perspective, although there are many examples of specific union behavior, the book is written mainly from a macro/policy viewpoint.

Chavez and Gray begin their book with a very effective example of how the nation would react if Halliburton spent millions of corporate dollars (all the money arguably belonging to the shareholders of Halliburton) and used thousands of its employees (all remaining on the Halliburton payroll) to help reelect George W. Bush. In return, Halliburton would have veto power over the Republican national platform and agenda. The result would not be pretty. The authors argue this is exactly what is happening in America right now, except the situation detailed above is an accurate description of the relationship between the Democratic Party and Big Labor. Certainly, anyone who follows politics, unions, or labor relations in general has a rudimentary understanding that Big Labor strongly supports the Democratic Party. However, I had no idea of the extent of that relationship. I was somewhat shocked by many of the facts in the book. Regardless of one’s political leanings, this book will be an eye-opener in many respects. Your right eye will likely open more than your left though. Betrayal provides details as to exactly how labor unions have taken over the Democratic Party, why this has happened, and what the results for the country and its political process are.
As I write this review, the country is in the midst of a presidential election between Republican nominee and current President of the United States George W. Bush and Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry. By the time you read this review, the election will be over (assuming they aren’t still recounting the hanging chads). The book is effective in presenting a case as to what exactly John Kerry and other Democratic candidates get in terms of union support on the election trail. Take the National Education Association (NEA) as an example, and keep in mind this is an example of only one union (albeit the largest). The NEA will give the Kerry campaign the full use of more than 1,800 “uniserv” directors, who are charged with “managing all political activities in their area.” This political workforce is larger than both the Republican and Democratic National Committees combined. Each NEA representative will become a political operative during election years and spends around $600,000 on political activity annually. There is a minimum of one of these directors in every single congressional district in the country. This example is just the tip of the iceberg.

One estimate has unions spending $800 million on Democratic candidates in the 2000 election, although much of this will be in the unreported form of labor, mailings, phone banks, and other campaign activities. The AFL-CIO publicly announced a campaign effort of $44 million for John Kerry’s presidential bid in early 2004. Although there are many things that one could see wrong with this situation, one of the biggest issues is that union members are paying for this whether they like it or not. Unions take in $17 billion a year in dues, which are supposed to be spent on collective bargaining and contract administration. It would be nice to know where all this money actually goes. However, unions aren’t legally required to report the majority of their finances, and recent news headlines show that unions like the AFL-CIO will go to great lengths to keep it that way. The ironic thing is that unions were some of the main and loudest proponents of Sarbanes-Oxley. The book lists a number of examples and sources trying to calculate exactly what percentage of union dues actually goes to collective bargaining. The simple fact is that no one actually knows. One of the few examples we do know about comes from a court case, Communication Workers of America v. Beck (1988), where the courts found that only about 20% of collected union dues went toward collective bargaining.

Chavez and Gray argue that it might be a little more morally acceptable (although still not legal) if union members actually desired to have their money spent this way. However, this is not the case, since 80% of union members prefer their dues not be spent on politics. Unions are supposed to be representative of their membership, yet 90% of all union dues spent on politics go to Democrats, even though 40% of union members actually vote Republican. The authors attempt to explicate how unions hide these activities from their members. Why are unions so intent on pushing a strong liberal agenda? There are many reasons, but one of the stronger arguments presented in the book is that the only place where union ranks continue to grow is inside the government. Government employees now account for 46% of all union members, and 40% of governmental employees are union members. A Democratic agenda leads to more government employees, which equates to more union members, which equates to more union dues. That makes it sound a little more simplistic than it is, but the point made in the book is clear.

When talking about the effects of unions on the political process, the book outlines numerous instances of politicians switching positions on major issues after receiving support from various unions. Not surprisingly, the two politicians hit particularly hard are Senator John Kerry and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Kerry is noted as consistently voting for numerous free trade agreements, including NAFTA, prior to receiving the AFL-CIO’s endorsement for president and then espousing the exact opposite views during his presidential campaign. Hillary Rodham Clinton (labeled a “coward” in the book) is lambasted for changing her views on education reform, among other things, including
favoring teacher competency testing while she was leading reform in Arkansas and then reversing course in order to get the support of the United Federation of Teachers while running for the Senate in New York.

An entire chapter of the book is devoted to former President Bill Clinton, his union ties, and the effects these ties had on his presidency and those around him. Other chapters are dedicated to the topics of teacher unions, union corruption, the negative effects of unions on the economy, and what the authors call the “legalized terrorism” of union violence. All in all, it is a thorough thrashing of union leadership and the stagnating effect these leaders are having on our country. John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, is mentioned in almost every chapter of the book, as is his membership in the Democratic Socialists of America. All chapters have some strong points, but by the end of many chapters, the reader starts to think there have to be some facts left out of the picture. The authors provide citations for all the information they present, but, needless to say, not all the references are of the same quality.

As a professor teaching a human resource management class, one of the goals I have in assigning readings or books is to challenge students to think from a different perspective. The class I was considering this book for is in a firmly established Masters in Human Resource Management program. I can’t think of a time when the makeup of the class has been “liberal” or even slightly “pro-union.” The alternate perspective for this class is to recognize what unions can mean to employees and the emotional buildup that can occur during elections, negotiations, strikes, and other areas of labor relations. Given this, I would not choose to use Betrayal in this type of class. However, that does not mean that the assignment of Betrayal would not be useful for other classes for different reasons. If I were teaching in a significantly more pro-union atmosphere or even in a more public policy–oriented class, I would think much more strongly about using this book to shake things up a bit.

For anyone teaching a class in a more pro-management environment who wants their students to look at different perspectives and create class discussion on labor/management issues, I can recommend two books I think would be more worthwhile. Martin J. Levitt’s Confessions of a Union Buster is a fascinating look at the life and actions of a successful (but students tend to think very arrogant) “union buster.” The book is written from a very pro-union perspective and details all the unethical things that Mr. Levitt did while leading organizing campaigns for various companies. However, perspectives from both the union and company side of the campaigns are apparent, which makes for interesting class discussions. Julius Getman’s The Betrayal of Local 14 (1998) chronicles the United Paperworkers International Union’s unsuccessful strike against International Paper in the late 1980s. The book effectively brings out the painful struggles that can occur during a labor strike and the effect of the strike on the participants, the company, and the entire community. It also provides interesting insight into the relationship between local unions and their national representatives. Both books give vivid, real-life accounts of union/management relations and are written from a more pro-union viewpoint while presenting a look at both sides.

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REFERENCES
