

It’s About the People, not the Packages: Cory Runstedler and the Labor Hardship Index

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On Feb. 25 the Humans Rights Institute at the University of Connecticut hosted another seminar in their “Why Human Rights Matter” seminar series. Cory Runstedler, a PhD candidate in political science, presented his research on the Labor Hardship Index (LHI), a quantitative measure on workplace hardship.

In a presentation titled “It’s about the people, not the packages,” Runstedler discussed what factors affect the labor rights of warehouse workers in the United States and Canada and presents the LHI as a quantitative measure of those factors. Having worked inside warehouses in both countries, Runstedler has a unique viewpoint on what issues warehouse workers are facing and the hardships they face in an overlooked area of research.

“No one’s paying attention to the warehouse workers in the supply chain,” Runstedler said.

Despite existing research on labor violations in the national and local scale, Runstedler said there isn’t much research on the “subnational” level, which is where LHI comes in. Runstedler argued LHI is an effective way to look at labor issues — specifically those in the transportation/warehousing sector — at this level.

Runstedler introduced four key debates for which he has hypotheses for: Does the ratification of international labor laws matter? Does enforcement of state laws matter? Do laws and the severity of those laws matter? Finally, do workers’ voices matter? The focus of this talk was on whether workers have a say on labor issues.

Going into his research, Runstedler hypothesized that ratification of international labor laws doesn’t matter, but tougher enforcement, stricter laws and unionization lead to lower LHI, which in this case is good for workers.

When choosing countries to apply this index to, Runstedler chose the United States and Canada, since both are industrialized, developed countries that serve as a role model in terms of labor laws to other nations. Runstedler mentioned how compared to the global average of worker violations, the United States performs inferior to the average while Canada perform better, so he’s interested in seeing how this difference came to be.

As for the focus on the warehousing sector, Runstedler called the sector an under-examined yet crucial cog in supply chains that was sorely missed when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. In his research, Runstedler focused on those who were physically moving products and created the LHI to measure the hardships of those kinds of workers.

Using data from all 50 states, as well as Washington D.C., and all 10 Canadian provinces — spanning the years 2003-

2023 — Runstedler compiled the four components that make up the LHI: Wage hardships, full-time/part-time ratio (PT/FT), workplace injuries and workplace fatalities.

The first two components are economic pressures on a worker, which measures a warehouse workers’ wage against the average, and the ratio of

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full-time to part-time workers, respectively. The last two components are safety pressures, which are equally weighted to account for differences in worker populations between states and provinces.

Next, Runstedler showed his findings. Looking at the LHI for all sectors, he explained that the U.S. LHI score is lower than Canada’s but has a long tail at both ends; signifying that there are states who have significantly better and worse labor hardships than the average Canadian province. When the focus shifts to LHI in transportation and warehousing,

the outlook is even worse for the United States.

When tracking the changes in each of the four components, Runstedler described how the PT/FT ratio is lower in Canada — there are more full-time than part-time workers — than in the United States, which saw a spike after the 2008 recession, according to Runstedler.

Injuries and fatalities have been steadily decreasing in the United States, but wages in both countries have stayed stagnant in comparison to the average.

When tracking unionization, Runstedler deduced that higher unionization today could lead to significant changes and lower hardship in the future. But in warehouses, unionization has no effect on lowering hardship. Runstedler explained how advances unions make don’t lower hardship overall, as there are other issues that need to be dealt with.

Runstedler concluded that labor hardship is structurally persistent, since it isn’t “cured; it only lessened slightly,” and while unionization shows positive association in the broader economy, the same effects aren’t seen in warehouses.

During the question and answer portion of the talk, someone asked why warehouses still unionize if it has little effect on their hardships. Runstedler argued that unions give a voice to workers against management.

“Workers want unions so they can be treated as human beings at work,” Runstedler

said.

When asked what other sectors Runstedler hopes to apply the LHI to, he mentioned construction and forestry as potential new sectors of research, given their hazardous work conditions and the inclusion of workplace injuries and fatalities as components of the LHI.

When asked about the potential future of warehouse robots, Runstedler argued that as the United States and Canada are slow adopters to the technology, it won’t affect the LHI in the present. Runstedler has also interviewed workers who said they aren’t afraid of being replaced by robots, who they believe can remove menial warehouse tasks.

Jack Turecek, an eighth-semester civil engineering major and human rights minor, was appreciative of Runstedler’s previous experience in warehouses and how that influenced his research.

“They had a lot of first-hand insight that not a lot of people would be able to emphasize,” said Turecek.

Turecek also admired how the LHI gives a framework to improve upon a worker’s quality-of-life.

“[it] aims to encapsulate all those different components into one quantitative measure, so it’s easier for people to understand where some of those improvements, or lack of, are located in the United States and Canada, across different sectors and states,” said Turecek.



Cory Runstedler, a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Connecticut. He recently presented his research on the Labor Hardship Index.

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