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Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943-1950 by Peter MCINNIS, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, 258 pp., ISBN 0-8020-3563-9.

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Recensions

Book Reviews

Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943-1950

by Peter McINNIS, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, 258 pp., ISBN 0-8020-3563-9.

In *Harnessing Labour Confrontation*, Peter McInnis takes the reader back, once again, to the pivotal years at the close of the Second World War when so much of Canada's industrial relations regime was shaped. He resurveys old ground, but does so with a wealth of research material that encourages the reader to reconsider popular assumptions about the era. While he introduces his book as a study in industrial legality, it is, in fact, a much broader look at the forces that interacted during Canada's conversion from war to peacetime production, showing once again why industrial relations can only be fully understood in terms of political economy.

McInnis documents the debate about Canada's future that took place during the eight years between the strike wave of 1942-3 and the back-to-work legislation of 1950. He employs the concept of "orderly decontrol," showing how those in power relinquished a measure of control in order to remain in control with a regime that brought historically antagonistic forces of labour, capital and the state together in the interest of conflict resolution and productivity.

He reconfirms that working people truly believed the end of the War would bring a new world in which their collective sacrifice would be rewarded by peace, prosperity and democracy. The buoyancy of the labour market and

growth of the labour movement during the War are nicely contrasted to the postwar crisis, as war-related jobs ended, and workers left the armed services, creating a huge reserve army of labour. Women, in particular, experienced the negative effects.

He describes labour's vision for Canada's as one based on industrial democracy, extending all the way from the workplace to the top levels of a state, which was itself modeled on the powerful administrative machine that intervened in all aspects of society during the War. Labour's experts would work with federal and corporate experts in government and tripartite councils to achieve centralized control, with master contracts and "pattern bargaining."

For a while, the idea of an expanded (though subordinate) role for labour through mature, well-administered, responsible organizations looked possible, but the moment soon passed. By the time the Liberals won the 1945 election, McInnis shows it was clear that "North America had been saved for capitalism," and the time "for flattery of labour" had passed. From that time, labour won hardly a single concession, as industrialists reasserted their prerogative over the workplace, and put an end to government's "collectivist meddling." Such postwar policies as C.D. Howe's "double depreciation" allowances, allowed corporations to rebuild their

manufacturing facilities at public expense, while workers were treated to wage controls and lectures about the need to look beyond their “short term interest.”

The reader is left with the conclusion that there was very little of a “compromise” in the “Postwar Settlement.” The manipulative genius of W. L. M. King and his cronies, and in particular, the vision of “teamwork” and “co-partnership” elaborated in his 1948 treatise, *Industry and Humanity* was vigorously promoted through wartime labour-management committees, “suggestion plans,” government boards, publications, and the National Film Board.

McInnis’ chronology of legislation leading to P.C. 1003 in 1943 and the Industrial Relations Disputes and Investigation Act (IRDIA) of 1948 details the emergence of an industrial legality based on the assumption that labour and capital shared a basic equality of economic power, and that class conflict could be assuaged by “antagonistic co-operation.” It entrenched the obligation of recognition and collective bargaining on employers, balanced by a peace obligation on the union, and these combined with the chilly hand of the Cold War to serve their purpose. Strike activity dropped dramatically, as the violent confrontations following WWII were replaced by the “legal strike,” with both sides looking to the state for solutions. Furthermore, the 1948 Act left labour issues predominately to the provinces, to compete with each other on the basis of labour costs. The back-to-work orders that ended the railway strike of 1950 illustrated, once again, that like all “Peace Pacts,” this one depended on the power balance that originally produced it.

My difficulty with *Harnessing* is not so much with its description as with its evaluation of the process whereby unions became incorporated into a new legal regime. Although McInnis credits unions with a good fight against the treachery of politicians and their corpo-

rate friends, when all is said and done, his story line follows the popular narrative, in which an increasingly bureaucratized union movement agrees to a “Faustian deal” in which (predominantly male) leaders abandon key demands in return for representation at the table—a “whiff of power.” Incipient worker militancy is encapsulated in a complicated legal system of structures and procedures, promoting obedient, productive behaviour, and consent to the management function of the employer, and the police functions of the state. “Spontaneous self-activity” is replaced by complex, routinized collective bargaining structures and procedures that pose no threat to capital’s essential property rights, and workers are seduced by the lure of material prosperity—or at least, material consumption, and semi-permanent job security—backstopped by a social safety net, and freedom from state sanctions.

There is much to support this view, of course. However, one could just as easily subscribe to another narrative, the “social democratic explanation,” while retaining the view that managers and politicians are guided by control imperatives. It is at least as legitimate to view many of the elements of the new industrial legality as bona fide “gains,” for which workers fought—even if they would not overcome the inequities and exploitation in capitalist relations of work.

The “incorporation thesis” underlying McInnis book has unfortunately become a tidy, all-encompassing explanation, which seems to long for a state of nature, in which spontaneity and the other “instincts” of the noble worker predominated. Organized labour’s interest in a “peace formula” is understandable, as struggle in the streets can only be of lasting interest to those who do not have to actually engage in it. By the same token, rumours of labour’s buy-in to a mass production/mass consumerist society based on sufficient income

distribution, leaves one wondering what the preferred alternative model of consumption or distribution might be.

In fact, the view that the achievements of the postwar period represent gains for the working class is the only way I can make sense of the determined assault on worker rights that began immediately after the War. Is it possible that McInnis, like so many other students of this period, misinterprets the tendency of the ruling class to fight "even the slightest incursion into their power and control," as evidence that the workers' struggle itself was somehow misguided?

Justice Rand may have been overly optimistic in 1946, when he declared the dawn of a new regime in the workplace. However, he was not completely wrong,

if instead of focusing on the betrayal, one focuses on the substantive and procedural rights unions delivered in the face of savage opposition and neo-conservative rollbacks.

McInnis criticizes revisionist accounts for allowing recent assaults on trade union rights to unduly influence interpretations of past events, reproducing determinist models of historical narrative. His book may be replicating some of these stories, however, which like the fabrications of Eco's Baudolino, have been repeated so often that they are now taken as given. If nothing else, it draws attention to the gap that separates academia from the shop floor and the working class it studies.

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Rural Dimensions of Welfare Reform

sous la direction de Bruce A. WEBER, Greg J. DUNCAN et Leslie A. WHITENER, Kalamazoo, Mich. : W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2002, 498 p., ISBN 0-88099-239-5 (pbk), ISBN 0-88099-240-9 (alk.).

En 1996, les États-Unis ont fondamentalement transformé leur système d'aide sociale, en adoptant la réforme la plus imposante que ce pays ait connue depuis l'institution par F. D. Roosevelt, en 1935, du système de protection sociale. Or, ce bouleversement en profondeur des programmes catégoriels d'assistance sociale (en particulier les transferts financiers aux familles monoparentales et l'aide alimentaire du programme *Food Stamp*) s'est effectué sans réflexion préalable sur la diversité spatiale des régions, dont le clivage urbain-rural est une dimension essentielle. Par la suite, la recherche et les débats sur les conséquences de la réforme de l'aide sociale ont surtout porté sur les populations urbaines, quand bien même 60 % des familles pauvres et presque la moitié de l'ensemble des allocataires de l'aide sociale habitent hors des centres urbains (p. x). C'est donc pour combler

cette lacune de la méconnaissance des dimensions rurales de la réforme de l'aide sociale que cet ouvrage a été réalisé. Y ont été réunies une partie des contributions présentées lors d'une conférence tenue en mai 2000 et organisée par le Service de recherche économique (*Economic Research Service*) du ministère fédéral de l'agriculture, la *Joint Center for Poverty Research* de l'Université Northwestern et de l'Université de Chicago et l'Institut de recherche sur la politique rurale (*Rural Policy Research Institute*).

L'ouvrage est structuré en cinq grandes parties. Dans la première d'entre elles (chap. 1 à 3), sont présentés des éléments de cadrage nécessaires à la compréhension du contexte particulier des débats américains sur l'aide sociale en cette période d'après-réforme. Les auteurs y analysent les effets des