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Laboring for Rights: Unions and Sexual Diversity Across Nations

edited by Gerald HUNT, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999, 302 pp., ISBN 1-56639-717-0 and 1-56639-718-9.

For the majority of industrial relations academics whose training and research keep us focused on the classical problems of labour-management relations, *Laboring for Rights*, edited by Gerald Hunt, offers a decided, and much-needed, shift in perspective. This book provides readers with information, much of which will be unknown to most readers, about the extent of "bridge-building" between the lesbian/gay and union movements in a wide variety of countries. It is a first attempt to document what organized labour is doing in relation to lesbian/gay issues. Hunt speculates that this silence "may speak to a reluctance on the part of scholars of industrial relations to be associated with issues involving sexuality" (p. 1), and I would agree. In my experience, the industrial relations community has been reluctant to rethink the boundaries of its disciplinary inquiry so that subjects such as gender, race, and sexuality—now mainstream questions elsewhere in the social sciences—remain under-investigated in the study of labour-management relations.

Methodologically, *Laboring for Rights* is a standard industrial relations text. Most of the chapters are case studies using familiar historical and/or institutional analyses of interview, survey, or archival data; one chapter uses discourse analysis. Somewhat less conventional is the remarkably wide range of countries considered. In addition to North America (two chapters about Canada

and three about the United States), Europe (two chapters about England, one about Germany, and one covering France, Germany, Britain, and The Netherlands in the context of the European Union), and Australia, there are chapters about Hawaii, the South Pacific, and South Africa—that is, countries at many stages of industrialization with marked differences in the size and importance of the union movement. Certainly, I learned a great deal, but, predictably, much of the detail did not stick. There is so much information, in chapters that vary considerably in the extent to which they provide analysis as well as description, that most readers will be drawn to the countries of particular interest to them. For this reason, I recommend, as well, the very helpful introductory and concluding chapters in which Hunt situates lesbian/gay-union activism in the political economy of the last twenty-five years.

The underlying premise of the book is that lesbians, gays and the labour movement are potential allies in the struggle for social justice. This hopeful assumption, which is only partially affirmed by the case studies presented in the book, challenges the union movement to overcome its past. In his introductory chapter, Hunt argues that the workplace became an important site of activism for gays and lesbians in the 1980s and 1990s because of the centrality of paid work in most people's lives and because lesbian and gay workers

continue to experience discrimination on the job in unionized as well as non-union workplaces. Not fully addressed in the book—or anywhere else in the industrial relations literature—but lurking in the background is the history of unions as strongholds of heterosexual male privilege. Created by and for men, one of the root purposes of traditional union policies and practice has been to promote the interests of the working-class “family man.” As champions of the male-led “normal” family, unions rarely spoke up on behalf of lesbian and gay workers when they were demeaned and dismissed/evicted by employers or co-workers. *Laboring for Rights* tells us that many unions in many countries are no longer satisfied with these out-dated behaviours and are pushing the envelope. Canada is one of the success stories. The chapters by Hunt and Peterson tell us, on the one hand, that many unions—including some of the most conservative—now formally embrace lesbian/gay issues within their human rights initiatives and, on the other, that union legal challenges to institutionalized heterosexual privilege have been instrumental in securing same-sex spousal benefits for Canadian workers.

What propels unions into this unlikely arena of struggle? With so diverse a group of case studies, conclusions are necessarily tentative. Yet, seemingly common to all countries in which lesbian/gay activism has emerged within the trade union movement is a common starting place. Many contributors draw attention to the fact that union activism around the issue of sexual diversity originated in white-collar, public-sector unions. The generally higher level of education of workers in this sector combined with the climate of professionalism required in many white-collar occupations are thought to produce a more tolerant work environment. It may also be that proportionately more lesbians and gays are employed in these

settings; however, this is difficult to know because so much depends on workplace politics which make it more or less likely for lesbians and gays to “come out.” That urban locals/branches are more likely to produce lesbian and gay union activists is consistent with the history of lesbian/gay activism in all its forms.

A second connection appears to be the link between activism on behalf of lesbians and gays and other equality struggles. Unions in which support for the rights of lesbian and gay workers has been most evident also tend to be unions with higher than average percentages of women workers and sites of feminist politics. It is unions with a strong orientation towards social unionism that have taken the first steps towards internal reform and demonstrated a willingness to enter into political alliances with social movements other than labour. Another way of describing this same phenomenon is that unions with more democratic practice (that is, unions in which local and national leaders have supported rather than opposed the self-organizing of women and people of colour into caucuses that perform the role of organizational change-agents) are more likely to be locations of support for and action on behalf of lesbian and gays workers’ equality claims.

The third theme is the pragmatic connection to same-sex spousal benefits. Applying the principle of equal pay for equal work, some unions have been willing to take up the cause of lesbian and gay workers paid less than their heterosexual counterparts because they are denied family benefits. This has been a significant point of connection in Canada and the United States where health and other benefits are provided by employers. But this is likely the easiest of steps for unions to take because it requires labour to do no more than it ordinarily does: ensure the equitable application of collective agreements. On other issues such as anti-discrimination

legislation and same-sex marriage, less directly tied to the bargaining agenda, unions in almost all of the countries discussed in *Laboring for Rights* have been less than reliable allies of the lesbian/gay movement.

Laboring for Rights is an important and useful book because it broadens the common understanding about what unions do and why. Conventional analyses of these issues tell us a great deal about the extent to which unions have improved wages and enhanced job security for the "average" worker but tend to do so with little attention to workers whose voices and concerns have been apart from the norm. Academics unthinkingly adhere to a "majority rules" model of union democracy which is both out of synch with the realities of today's workplaces and contrary to the more complex legal obligations imposed on

unions and employers in Canada and elsewhere. This book is also timely because, Hunt argues, we are witnessing the end of the post-Second World War social contract, which privileged white men and positioned the heterosexual family as the moral and economic building block of society. While these shifts are commonly thought of as losses for unions and working people, critics of the gender, race, and sexual biases inherent in post-war attitudes and policies see potential for growth, change, and greater egalitarianism for the union movement as it struggles to remain relevant. Demands for inclusion as equals by lesbian and gay workers could lead to significant reforms in thinking and practice if embraced by union movements.

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