

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Defying Expectations: The Case of UFCW Local 401, By Jason Foster (2018) Edmonton: AU Press, Athabasca University, 195 pages. ISBN: 978-1-77199-5

Braham Dabscheck

Volume 73, Number 2, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1048577ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1048577ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dabscheck, B. (2018). Review of [*Defying Expectations: The Case of UFCW Local 401*, By Jason Foster (2018) Edmonton: AU Press, Athabasca University, 195 pages. ISBN: 978-1-77199-5]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 73(2), 398–399. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1048577ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2018

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

greater collective organization of industrial relations in reaction to intensified market pressures and worker dissatisfaction, while most other nations of the world have gone in the opposite direction of deregulation and individualization of employment relations. The success of this strategy, they conclude, is too imponderable to predict but critically hinges on the ability of unions to grow into more independent agencies for effective worker representation and voice at the enterprise and polity levels.

In early 2018, a year after this book was published, the nation's constitution was amended so China's President, Xi Jinping, could become ruler for life. An interesting question for the second edition of this volume, say a decade from now, is whether China can also go against the tide of history and successfully decentralize and democratize industrial relations while the national government, on a separate track, is (apparently) moving in the opposite direction of greater political centralism and control. China watchers will have to wait and see.

Bruce E. Kaufman

Professor of Economics
Georgia State University
United States of America

Defying Expectations: The Case of UFCW Local 401

By Jason Foster (2018) Edmonton: AU Press, Athabasca University, 195 pages. ISBN: 978-1-77199-5.

In the later decades of the Twentieth century, Canadian locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) enjoyed a 'cosy' non confrontational relationship with various supermarket stores and other employers in their orbit. Deals were completed by leaders with limited involvement and input from members. In the 1990s, industrial relations became more difficult for UFCW and its locals with the entry of low cost competitors which resulted in employers seeking to achieve give backs and more flexibility, such as the use of more

part time labour than hitherto. Local 401 of UFCW, based in Alberta, found that its 'top down' approach was ineffective in countering the now 'tougher' bargaining stance of employers. It suffered a major defeat after a 74 day strike against Safeway in 1997. One of the major problems it encountered was in knowing how to align itself with a changed workforce from traditional white Canadians to one which was younger, female, from a variety of ethnic/immigrant backgrounds and employed on a part time rather than full time basis.

Local 401's leadership realized that it would have to adapt or die. It began to experiment with new ways of operating. For a start, it believed that there was a need to increase the level of strike pay to ensure members would maintain picket lines and be able to pay their bills during, potentially, long and drawn out strikes. Strike pay was increased to approximately eighty per cent of normal pay. Next, it did not shy away from representing members from diverse immigrant backgrounds. Leaders engaged with these groups, 'found' their 'organic' leaders (or the 'organic' leaders found them), and explained and educated them in what Local 401 was about and the principles of unionism. In turn, these 'organic' leaders were used to educate fellow members of their respective ethnic groups and Local 401 devoted resources to providing printed material in different languages and dialects. They would also use photos and statements from representatives of these groups in their campaign literature to demonstrate to them and others how their interests and needs were uppermost in the campaigns being waged by Local 401.

Finally, and most importantly, the leadership of Local 401 devoted itself to interacting with its members at meetings and other occasions. Leaders spent much of their time on the road visiting members, rather than being holed up in the office. It treated all members with equal respect, as it sought to understand their problems and views, and

explain the reasons for the strategies that they were pursuing in various campaigns.

Within a few years Local 401 had transformed itself from a lazy 'top down' to a cohesive militant union with a highly developed and close relationship between the leadership, and rank and file. Throughout the twenty-year period of this study by Jason Foster, the leadership has been stable. It, and especially its president Doug O'Halloran, have been responsible for the transformation that has taken place. The role of leadership with Local 401 turns Michels' iron law of oligarchy on its head. Michels saw union and labour leaders using their position in the union as a stepping stone to advancing their careers into politics or 'bourgeoisie' society, more broadly, and being disinterested in the welfare of, and 'wasting' time with, members.¹ The leaders of Local 401, on the other hand, have devoted their careers to the needs and welfare of members. They have not had their eye on glittering prizes elsewhere. This is the major lesson to be learned from this case study of union renewal.

Foster successfully describes the processes by which Local 401 transformed itself into an effective and successful union. Unfortunately, however, his account suffers two overlapping problems. Foster seeks to engage in a series of broader discussions, or theoretical musings, concerning the transformation of Local 401. In doing this, he repeats again and again the events associated with this transformation to the extent that it becomes tedious and boring. He seems to have assumed that readers cannot remember what he has already told them. He needed to spend more time on how to effectively communicate his research findings and their significance.

A more important problem is his difficulty with theoretical discussions and knowing how to move backwards and forwards between specific and general concepts. For example, Foster maintains that the experience of Local 401 does not fit into current

theories of how unions reform themselves such as 'directed centralised action by *national* leadership in response to an analysis of a problem' (p. 128, emphasis added). In the first half of *Defying Expectations* Foster demonstrated how the leadership of Local 401 'responded' to the defeat experienced in the 1997 Safeway dispute. Should his use of the notion of *national* disqualify his or any notion of leadership? Decisions were made by leaders to transform the union; does it matter where they sit in the union structure? Does the issue become more complicated, given that UFCW delegated power to and allowed Local 401 to run its own affairs? His analysis and understanding of what happened becomes more confusing. On page 133, he says: "We cannot point to a particular point of crisis or a specific moment when a strategic decision was made to alter the basic philosophy or character of the union". This contradicts the significance he attached to the 1997 Safeway dispute.

What is a more than interesting case study of union renewal is marred by an inability to engage with theoretical insights and an inordinate amount of repetition of factual material.

Braham Dabscheck

Senior Fellow
Melbourne Law School
University of Melbourne
Australia

Note

- 1 Robert Michels (1959, first edition 1911) *Political Parties: A Sociological Analysis of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, New York: Dover Publications.

How Capitalism Destroyed Itself: Technology Displaced by Financial Innovation

By William Kingston (2017) Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 192 pages.
ISBN: 978-78536-773-1.

William Kingston's illuminatingly provocative *How Capitalism Destroyed Itself* is a bibliographically rich and historically