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Recension

Book Review

Unions and Workplace Reorganization

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Why were unions created? What is their function, purpose or *raison d'être*? According to the British scholar Alan Flanders: "The first and overriding responsibility of all trade unions is to the welfare of their own members. That is their primary commitment; not to a firm, not to an industry, not to a nation. A union collects its members contributions and demands their loyalty specifically for the purpose of protecting their interests as they see them, not their 'true' or 'best' interests as defined by others" (Alan Flanders, *Management and Unions: The Theory and Reform of Industrial Relations*, London: Faber and Faber, 1970, p. 40). Employers, if they had the choice, would rather negotiate with their workforces "individually", free of the encumbrance of having to deal with unions. As Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter note, in the volume being reviewed here, "Employers want a union-free environment, not cooperation with unions. Where they cannot (yet) get rid of unions they attempt to depower and coopt them" (p. 200).

The "purpose" of unions, their relationship with members and employers (and, to a lesser extent, organs of the state) are the subject matter of Bruce Nissen's edited volume *Unions and Workplace Reorganization*. In the last two decades or so, in response to globalization (as virtually any book published in industrial relations these days tells us), firms have found it increasingly difficult to compete on interna-

tional markets. Firms, across the globe, have experimented with various forms of workplace reorganization in attempting to enhance flexibility/productivity, reduce costs and maintain/improve profitability and market shares. Such changes have been alternatively characterized as post- or neo-Fordist, employee involvement, lean production or management by stress. Lee Baliet has said of such changes that: "Paradoxically, workers and unions increasingly have found their employers offering a 'kinder and gentler' workplace, with one hand while turning the screws of wages and benefit concessions, downsizing, outsourcing and plant closures with the other" (p. 159).

Focusing on the United States of America, unions have been unsure about and/or have not developed any union-wide, peak level policy position on how to respond to such workplace changes. Some unions chose not to become involved in such ventures, while others were more prepared to enter into partnerships. Whether or not unions had developed a policy response at the national level, locals found themselves caught in the net of reorganization by employers determined to initiate, or force through, changes. In 1994, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) published *The New American Workplace: A Labor Perspective*, which is reproduced in this volume as chapter two.

In the report, the AFL-CIO acknowledges that it has not done enough in the past in helping unions respond to workplace changes initiated by employers. In rejecting Taylorist work systems of the past, the AFL-CIO makes a call for "partnerships based on mutual recognition and respect." The report also calls on employers to recognize collective bargaining, "the principle of equality" and acknowledge that they and workers have conflicting interests (p. 48, 49). The report also says there needs to be "a fundamental redistribution of decision-making authority from management to teams of workers" (p. 45).

Unions and Workplace Reorganization provides an evaluation or critique of the AFL-CIO's policy document and recent developments in American workplace relations. Nissen has drawn together contributions by academics and practitioners/activists, and examines developments in the public sector (following President Clinton's Executive Order No. 12871 of 1993 calling for union management partnerships) as well as the private sector. The respective chapters fall into three categories. The first are those that argue that unions have no choice but to become involved in the negotiation of workplace change. To not do so is to abandon members to the kindly entreaties of employers. Second, there are chapters which provide more flesh to the bones of the AFL-CIO report; presenting check-lists and/or outlining strategies designed to involve and protect members interests while simultaneously enhancing the organizational base and growth of unions. There is a degree of overlap between these two categories of chapters. The third group of chapters is those that criticize the practice of previous workplace changes, inadequacies of the AFL-CIO report and call for a more democratic, forceful, aggressive style of unionism. Such writers criticize unions for selling members' interests down the

river, and robbing members of any effective voice to counter the "adverse" consequences of such changes. Unions here are simply viewed as hand-maidens of employers in implementing harsh totalitarian systems of work organization.

Reviewers of edited volumes live in fear that respective contributions/chapters will vary enormously in terms of quality or depth of analysis and/or that the editor had not been able to exercise discipline over various contributors — some of whom may be long term associates or friends. This is not the case with this volume. Nissen is to be congratulated for producing a high class volume of readings on various issues currently confronting American unions. All of the chapters are of a high standard drawing on a combination of recent theoretical and empirical work. A major strength of *Unions and Workplace Reorganization* is the way in which Nissen has combined different groups of authors in highlighting different perspectives on the issues, methods or strategies confronting American unions.

Despite the differences that exist between different contributors — some of which can only be described as fundamental — on their attitudes towards workplace reorganization, the AFL-CIO's report and future responses, they all seem united on the need for greater participation and involvement of members in more democratic unions. They all desire unions which are more in tune with the needs and wishes of members. As Alan Flanders observed over a quarter of a century ago: "The first and overriding responsibility of all trade unions is to the welfare of their own members... not to a firm, not to an industry, not to a nation".

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