

Sudbury New Crisis or Continuity with Globalization?

Dieter K. Buse

Volume 64, automne 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt64re03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Buse, D. K. (2009). Sudbury: New Crisis or Continuity with Globalization? *Labour / Le Travail*, 64, 209–214.

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Sudbury: New Crisis or Continuity with Globalization?

Dieter K. Buse

David Leadbeater, ed., *Mining Town Crisis: Globalization, Labour and Resistance in Sudbury* (Halifax 2008)

Homer Sequin, *Fighting for Justice and Dignity: The Homer Sequin Story, An Autobiography* (Sudbury 2008)

Gilbert H. "Gib" Gilchrist, *As Strong as Steel* (Sudbury 1999)

Hans Brasch, *Mining Then and Now in the Sudbury Basin* (Sudbury 2007)

Globalization is an often misused concept, although David Leadbeater's edition employs one version appropriately. Partly the error stems from thinking that globalization is a recent development, despite globe-wide interchanges since at least the late 18th century, even if some continents' interiors remained relatively untouched until the 20th century. And since the broader spatial reach of corporations has done little to overcome social inequalities and provincial mentalities, the much-touted benefits of globalization are questionable. Indeed, the global practices of most hegemonic states and corporations have tended merely to continue the excesses of labour exploitation and military incursions of the colonial era, exemplified by the use of child labour (Nike among many) and the American/British/Russian unilateralism in diplomatic and military adventures. Even in fields such as health or scientific knowledge, the present supposedly global world has witnessed mostly increasing international disparities. That does not, of course, prevent countries that have large global enterprises from having huge pockets of poor health services and low education, as Canada's Native population and the average American's understanding of the world illustrate. Many elements of the latter type of globalization are well presented in Leadbeater's edited case study of Sudbury. One

special aspect is that, while keeping to the normal conventions of an academic publication, this book is authored by a mix of economists, health researchers, union leaders, female mine workers, community activists, teachers, and scholars.

Leadbeater's study addresses the problems of globalization in the form of economic exploitation of one region to benefit primarily distant entrepreneurs and shareholders. The consequences for Sudbury are illustrated very thoroughly in diverse areas from health to incomes, and from women's work to union struggles. The introductory observation that one of the richest resource centres of the world has received remarkably little in return for having those riches exhumed and refined is buttressed by a multitude of graphs and statistics. This is the best summary, perhaps for any major city in Canada, of social circumstances based on national, provincial, and local documentation. The snapshot is sharp, but the picture may not be what some boosters of the region will want publicized. However, none of these economic and social findings detract from the region's superb geographic and aesthetic attributes (lakes, rocks, and trees quite removed from the stereotype promoted by the Canadian media) and its multitude of physical offerings (golfing, hunting, fishing, hiking). Further, this book exemplifies the continuing struggle to make something humane of the place despite all odds. Finally, in terms of diverse groups participating and contributing, Sudbury already has a remarkable history of efforts at community building. This has been well traced for one ethnic group by Oiva Saarinen in *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A Historical Geography of the Finns in the Sudbury Area* (1999).

Fourteen essays follow the lengthy, informed introduction (one-seventh of the text) which sets Sudbury within its historical development as a single-industry, two-company town. The economy started to be diversified only during the late 1970s. That led to a second dependency, namely on government monies in addition to the mineral market. This theme is taken up directly in John Closs' essay on unions in the public sector. He shows how they grew as publicly-funded institutions (taxation centre, Science North, cancer centre, new college and higher education expansion) and challenged mining and refining as the main employment providers by the late 1980s. During that decade, 3,500 public sector jobs were added to the Sudbury economy. But they were affected by the cutbacks of Mike Harris' neo-liberal government during the 1990s when 1,920 similar jobs were eliminated. Closs offers a solid continuation of the argument made by this reviewer in a chapter of *Sudbury: Railtown to Regional Capital* (edited by Carl Wallace and Ashley Thomson, 1993). In addition to the slow reversal of public sector union members, the decline of the unionized industrial labour force continued through rationalization, technological innovation, and outsourcing. Rick Gyllis' detailed study of strikes at Falconbridge in 2001 and 2004 demonstrates the era of globalized contract negotiations: use of scab labour, imported thug-like security, and out-of-town negotiators. The impact of both Harris' welfare cutbacks and a new style of

negotiation, which leaves less money in the places where the resource extraction and work occur, is registered by Don Kuyek, who provides the background to a woman's suicide after her mistreatment by welfare and judicial bureaucracies. The decline of public civility is reinforced as he reviews the company's legalistic attacks on strikers. Denis St. Pierre examines the *Sudbury Star*, the workplace that had the most strikes (six) in the last two decades, because out-of-town owners such as Conrad Black and Osprey Media reduced staff and benefits.

An important comparative dimension is added by Evan Edinger, who examines Inco's environmental mining practices at Sudbury, Voisey's Bay (Labrador), Soroako (Indonesia), and New Caledonia, expanding Jamie Swift's findings in *The Big Nickel: Inco at Home and Abroad* (1977). The struggles related to pollution, land claims, and treatment of locals with regard to hiring, health, and housing could have been buttressed by more consideration of Sudbury at the beginning of the 20th century, when farmers and the landscape in this area were treated similarly to what has been happening during the last two decades in nickel mining developments around the globe. Reinforcing the disregard for locals is a chapter about extensive racism in Sudbury that Roger Spielmann presents in a reflective, sometimes ironic, manner. Few people, including Sudburians, would have known that the local mining wealth came at least partly from Aboriginal lands, until some Natives initiated a multi-million-dollar law suit to obtain a share of the riches taken out of lands from which they were evicted.

Many of the chapters relate to health and basic rights, such as food and children's opportunities for a decent existence. K. V. Nagarajan provides a very detailed accounting, employing comparative statistics, of the health status of northern Ontario. In nearly every category of disease prevalence (mortality, cardiovascular, cancer, respiratory, suicides, injuries, drinking, and smoking), service providers, and facilities, Sudbury is "being left behind" (145). Kate Tilleczek seconds Nagarajan in her examination of the "Failing Health of Children and Youth in Northern Ontario." She points out that the kind of social science data pioneered at the end of the 19th century, namely "outcomes by social class or ethnicity is often not kept" (150). Despite that, she demonstrates the "absolute deterioration" (152) of children's health. Carole Suschnigg points to one source of health problems, inadequate food, in her examination of food bank usage and poverty rates, related to welfare incomes and costs. However, she also underscores the effect of food distribution through multinational corporations.

Two essays focus on Franco-Ontario. One by Donald Dennie explores the contradictory realities: "on one hand, it is difficult not to see the reality of social classes, of francophone workers; on the other hand, there is an official discourse about Ontario francophones that is at odds with this reality" (195). He notes that the middle-class media omit talking about the former, including overlooking the commemoration of miners' deaths though many were

francophone, but give much space to symbols of identity and social institutions. Francois Boudreau also draws on his own experiences, on a local school board, to underscore the way that the middle-class francophone elites remain enmeshed in an authoritarian and traditionalist outlook (even in relation to publicly funded, non-Catholic schools) that fosters privately practicing French culture as opposed to public engagement. These chapters illustrate the continuity of issues facing francophones by confirming Sheila Arnopoulos' presentation of their situation in *Voices from French Ontario* (1981). On schooling in general, Ruth Reyno reviews the effect of the Harris era conflicts with teachers' unions about workload and restructuring education. Shifting the curriculum towards corporate interests and forcing parents to pay for extracurricular activities were among the "reforms" fought against via strikes, boycotts, and retirements.

The "democratic deficit" Boudreau finds on school boards is also evident in one of the largest unions, the United Steelworkers Local 6500. Bruce McKeigan writes of "rise and decline" starting with the drop from 18,000 members in 1975 to less than 4,000, though production continued to increase. But the main story McKeigan tells is about the dynamic group under Dave Patterson, who challenged business unionism after the long strike of 1978, in which women and citizens' groups strongly supported the union. Patterson was elected as union president, and McKeigan details much insider knowledge on the struggles that were influenced from union headquarters to remove his group and to restore business unionism. This eventually resulted in bitter infighting and uncontested elections that undercut union democracy. A personalized account about being a woman in a predominantly male workplace substantiates part of McKeigan's perspective. Cathy Mulroy recounts her 30 years beginning in 1974, a time when "The company didn't want women there, the men didn't want us there, and their wives didn't want us there" (261). With great verve she paints pictures of union leaders as "men in suits" who feared the precedent of her pregnancy, the problems of being seen with workmates, and the difficulties of grievances. Tellingly she concludes with advice, including to young workers, "Get off your ass – make changes" (274).

One essay examines the fluctuating state of the cultural scenes in Sudbury, from Mine Mill's alternative offerings (ballet, folk music, film showings, and summer camps with sculpture and theatre in the 1950s) to elite, limited attempts to replicate what other centres have. Laurie McGauley shows the efforts that grew out of the "hardscrabble ground" where little monies were left after the companies had hauled profits away. Then she shows the special creations that did emerge, such as Northern Lights Festival Boreal (Canada's longest continuous folk festival), francophone theatre, poetry, and chanson, Aboriginal theatre and crafts groups, as well as her own Myths and Mirrors Community Arts. To illustrate Sudbury's cultural world, the editor has sprinkled poems between chapters and at the end reprints Stompin' Tom Connors' ironic and realistic *Sudbury Saturday Night*.

A few other studies and memoirs should be mentioned in the context of Sudbury's working world. Hans Brasch has tried to summarize the technological and work pattern changes to mining during the last 30 years. He provides a well-illustrated text that should be read in conjunction with Wallace Clement's *Hardrock Mining: Industrial Relations and Technological Changes at Inco* (1981). Brasch earlier penned chronicles on the Steelworkers as well as his own life. In this book the photographs are special. Brasch prints many from his personal collection, often taken surreptitiously at the workplace.

Two influential Steelworker leaders have published memoirs. Gib Gilchrist served as staff representative at Elliot Lake before being asked to transfer to Sudbury during 1964, the era of raiding Mine Mill. His account reflects a strong anti-Mine Mill outlook. Though assertive about the "achievements" of the Steelworkers, only the ones in health and safety are demonstrated in any depth for the uranium mines at Elliot Lake. Bits of Gilchrist's life are mixed in with lists of office holders. The celebratory book contains some significant information on Steelworkers' aims and political alliances, but its organization is haphazard, jumping among events and years. By contrast, Homer Sequin, whose life trajectory as a poor francophone was quite different than Gilchrist's, and one of those who unstintingly dedicated his energies to health and safety issues, offers a chronological autobiography. The result is a readable story of a French family struggling to survive in an English environment, of sports substituting for uncaring schools, and of a father's drowning forcing a youngster of sixteen to work underground. The father had been active in the Mine Mill struggles for unionization, and Sequin's account does not repeat the myths by which Steelworkers justified their raids as Gilchrist does. Indeed, he later made efforts to work with Mine Mill leaders to forge tactical alliances against the companies. Though his perspective would challenge McKeigan's account, he does reveal union infighting and settles a few personal scores. His book contains solid information on the struggles related to health and safety, especially regarding sulfur dioxide inside the plants at Sudbury and radon at Elliot Lake, plus silicosis at both. However, he adamantly defends international unions headquartered in the United States. Ironically, Sequin experienced the power of the French global state's reach when trying to help unionize New Caledonia. The book would have been improved by editorial assistance.

To put the present situation in the longer perspective of boom and bust cycles and union struggles, these books should be read in conjunction with the studies mentioned above plus such collections as *Hard Lessons: Mine Mill in the Canadian Union Movement* (edited by Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suschnigg, and Dieter K. Buse, 1995). Soon after Leadbeater's edition appeared, the price of nickel dropped from \$24 to \$4 a pound, and again mines have begun to close and layoffs are underway in Sudbury. Will this recession be any different than the previous ones during the mid-1970s and early 1990s? Has globalization changed the main pattern of boom and bust or the controls from outside the community, or any other pattern of resource centres at

the periphery impacted by metropolitan crises, or does it merely reinforce the continuity of economic ups and downs during which the populace's social and health situations are not much improved by the ups? The question remains open, but the historical record suggests that crisis and resistance has been the norm over the long process of globalization for resource economies.