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Unions, Equity, and the Path to Renewal

Edited by Janice Foley and Patricia Baker,
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In 2010, 2.2 million Canadian women belonged to a union for a unionization rate of 30.9%. By comparison, fewer than 2 million men belonged to a union, for a unionization rate of 28.2% (S. Uppal, "Unionization 2010." *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 11(10), 2010: 18-27). In spite of the fact that women are now the dominate sex in the union movement, Foley and Parker argue in their new edited collection, *Unions, Equity and the Path to Renewal*, that the voices of women, and the perspectives they bring, have been and continue to be marginalized and undervalued. The authors call for a wide ranging transformation of the labour movement – one informed by what is framed as a "feminist vision of unions as instruments of social justice" – if unions are to prosper.

The book is organized into four parts with twelve chapters. The introduction and several other chapters paint a picture of a troubled trade union movement in serious decline. Among the ails cited are: private sector unionism in serious decline, a large and growing low pay service sector that is mostly unorganized, a trend whereby youth seem disinclined to unions, along with an aging demographic that will mean many committed unionists may soon be retiring. What to do? Similar to most other commentators, the editors and most contributors to this book call for a total rethink of how labour in Canada is organized, along with a complete reassessment of its goals and priorities. What makes the message in this book different, is the suggestion that such a reinvigoration should be feminist-lead and driven.

The first chapter by Jan Kainer summarizes the positive contributions of women

trade unionists over the past few decades and suggests building on these initiatives is the way forward for a union movement in decline. As she notes on page 22, over the past couple of decades, feminist activists have helped to steer unions away from a strictly business unionism model toward a broader range of issues such as family leave, sexual minority discrimination, poverty and racism. She finds that one of most important contributions made by women has been the concept of organizing into separate committees. These women's committees are now well established in many unions, and she argues, have provided a location for women to find support, raise their consciousness, and articulate demands for change to male-dominated union leaderships.

The second section of the book is devoted to the equity struggle within the union movement from the perspective of people of colour. The three chapters in this section highlight the struggle black trade unionists have had to find equality within their unions. In Chapter 5, Marie Clarke Walker draws on her own experience, as well as the historical record, to assess labour's engagement with racialized workers. She finds a trail of ignorance and exclusion in relation to minorities in general, and Asians and Blacks in particular, and laments the continuing lack of momentum on racial discrimination. Nevertheless, she ends her assessment on an optimistic note, outlining ten practical strategies that labour might use to combat discriminatory practices and begin to close equity gaps. One example she gives is for unions to increase their educational efforts around social justice issues so that others better understand the issues and oppression that minority members confront.

The third section focuses on practices and structures that work against a broader equity agenda for unions. In Chapter 6,

Anne Forrest presents a forceful argument to support the transformation of labour from the industrial and sector based model that it has been since the mid-twentieth century, to an equity-centric model that would be responsive to the needs of women, youth, unemployed people, and racial minorities. But she cautions, industrial unionism has proven to be remarkably resilient, and change will not be easy. Forrest does not offer much in the way of potential solutions to this problem, but in the next chapter, Janice Foley develops a conceptual model to help explain how an enhanced equity agenda in unions might be achieved. Foley concludes with an indictment of current leadership. Drawing on two studies she undertook with a small group of activists, one in the early 1990s and the other in the early 2000s, she arrives at a model highlighting the variables that limit the impact of women in decision making and leadership, reasoning that current union leaders are the problem. She acknowledges that her assessment may be seen as harsh but that "the seemingly intractable nature of the equity problem and the disproportionate amount of power that resides within the union leadership and a small cadre of members suggest that the answer to the problem may lie there" (p. 135).

By way of contrast, in Chapter 8, Linda Briskin offers a more optimistic and positive take on union progress on equity issues generally and for women in particular. As with Kainer in Chapter 1, she notes the historically significant impact of separate organizing within unions by women, and the growing adoption of this model by other equity-seeking groups to bring about change. She concludes that "the last decade has witnessed a remarkable development of union policy on racism, homophobia, sexism"... and that even though these policies have not been fully operationalized, they have involved "widespread education and mobilization"

(p. 138). She also draws our attention to the recent trend toward cross-constituency organizing. Briskin views this development as one of the strongest indicators that the potential for union renewal along equity lines does exist, citing the example of an intersectional committee at CUPE-Ontario that has an explicitly feminist framework for explicating issues.

The fourth section looks at equity and union renewal in other settings, including Australia, parts of Europe and the United Kingdom. It was not clear to me how three of the chapters in this section added value to the book, since there was no strong evidence the countries selected have surpassed Canadian unions on equity issues. However, Chapter 11 in this section, by Anne McBride and Jeremy Waddington, was the strongest in the book. These authors undertook a telling assessment of the potential for the union amalgamations and mergers that have been taking place in Europe to enhance the power base of women. As they note on page 215, mergers invariably "disturb vested interests," potentially creating openings for change, including shifts in gender politics. In several of the cases considered, they found women had been able to leverage a merger situation to help advance gender equality.

Overall, this book benefited from a combination of voices from union insiders and academics. As with all edited collections though, some contributions were stronger than others. A few chapters were too anecdotal and lacked empirical strength. A couple of overview charts (such as the one found on page 224 in relation to British unions), showing the current representation of women and minorities in Canadian unions and labour organizations in terms of reserved seats, senior officers, and committee representation, would have been useful adjuncts to assertions about the under-

representation of women and minorities. Taken as a whole though, the contributors do provide support for the idea that an effective union renewal strategy might use equity as a core part of its mission. As Foley and Forrest both note in their respective chapters, however, such a transformation sets a big agenda as it would tend to undermine long standing union practices, cultures, and traditions. More ideas about how to dismantle existing structures and implement change, if indeed this is possible, would have been welcome additions to the book.

My biggest fault with the book is that it lacked a concluding chapter. The book covered a variety of perspectives and views, and needed a strong wrap-up chapter to recap key points, integrate the message from the various contributors into a more coherent whole, help map a way forward, and draw our attention to signs of hope. Another fault of the book is that it failed to adequately draw distinctions between unions. As Linda Briskin signals in her chapter, some labour organizations have moved more than others toward an equity agenda, and these developments should have been articulated and noted in depth.

Recent evidence suggests the union movement in Canada is not in as rough shape as some of the contributors to this book suggest. There are signs of vibrancy and renewal in some labour quarters, and union membership actually increased slightly in 2010, to 30.9%, with full-time worker coverage increasing to 31.1% (Uppal, 2010). Still, there is overwhelming evidence that labour does need to change, and probably quite radically, if it is to survive and thrive. Foley and Baker's book offers one perspective on a way forward, and is worthy reading for those interested in how a revitalized union movement might be realized.

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Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities

By Linda McDowell, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 272 pp., ISBN 978-1-4051-5977-7 and ISBN 978-1-4051-5978-4

Working Bodies provides a powerful argument concerning change and continuity in the "new" economy. McDowell explains that a steep decline in manufacturing jobs in the western world, coupled with the increase of service jobs, has created both elements of change and continuity in the "new" economy. The increase in female waged workers, the centrality of work in people's lives, and the rise of neoliberal employment policies are all elements of change. With increased participation rates, the author argues, as in the case of the commoditization of services; dual-income middle class families turn to low-waged workers to provide services such as child and elderly care and house cleaning. However, rather than being a new phenomenon, service work has become waged work instead of un-waged labour performed by (mostly female) family members, in the home.

The author focuses on service work concerned with servicing the bodily needs of others through interpersonal interactions with customers. Emotional and embodied attributes, class distinctions and gender divisions of labour become central to the analysis. The empirical increase of service work, it is argued, necessitate changes in theorizing. Thus, the author provides an overview of sociological and feminist theories of the body and sexuality, embodiment and identity, drawing attention to associations made with femininity and masculinity, and hierarchies of suitability. In addition, the author incorporates labour geography theory: since embodied work takes place in the co-presence of both provider and client, place-tied servicing work is a key part of understanding segmented labour markets.

Chapter two develops an argument regarding continuity versus change in the