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Labour Conditions for Construction: Building Cities, Decent Work and the Role of Local Authorities, Edited by Roderick Lawrence and Edmundo Werna, Ames, Iowa: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 282 pp., ISBN 978-1-4051-8943-9.

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[See table of contents](#)

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of OHS workers representatives and access to time off for training. These and other measures could inspire the actual revision of the Québec Act respecting occupational health and safety, as those looking for regulatory improvements elsewhere, like the strengthening of requirements on the release of representatives to carry out their OHS functions at the workplace, right of access to information and protection from victimization.

The authors reflect on the problem of workers' representation in small enterprises, a subject the first author has dedicated much excellent work to. In the case studies, the best practices were observed in the larger workplaces, whatever the sector. In discussing this problem, the authors refer to the Swedish experience of regional health and safety representatives for workers in small enterprises, which is known as the most effective and now longstanding participative arrangement in OHS for small businesses. Recent reforms in some Australian States have been inspired by this experience. Other experiences are examined, as the authors state that "Future strategies to improve worker representation in OHS will need to embrace unionised and non-unionised workers. It will also need to enable *all workers* involved in an establishment's activity to be represented, whether as an employee of the firm or not, or as a contractor of the firm or of another business, and regardless of whether the person actually works at the firm's premises," referring among others to the case of the employees of contractors (p. 162). Finally, if the study clearly shows the important role trade unions play in supporting workers' representation, the authors underline the underestimated role OHS matters may play in union renewal initiatives.

This exemplary book reaffirms that OHS has to be understood in the context of the social relations of production and strengthens the evidence of the preventative role of workers representation (and not only "participation") in occupational safety and health at a time when the "safety is good for business" discourse is dominant, but promotes more underreporting than prevention measures.

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Labour Conditions for Construction: Building Cities, Decent Work and the Role of Local Authorities

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Construction has always lain at the heart of civilized endeavour, providing not only immediate needs such as shelter, water and heating but also the infrastructure for future growth and social improvement. In both the developed and developing world it remains a mass employer. This study, edited by Roderick Lawrence and Edmundo Werna, seeks to explore how the concept of "decent work," as enunciated by the ILO's Director General in 1999, is understood and acted upon within the developing world's construction industry. The central thesis of the study is that the success or failure of the ILO's endeavours will largely be determined by the attitudes of local government. In their introduction to the book, Lawrence and Werna argue that, with globalization, "both power and management have been decentralized to the local level almost everywhere." To explore this thesis, and commitment to the concept of "decent work," three case studies were undertaken – Bulawayo in Zimbabwe (by Beacon Mbiba and Michael Ndubiwa), Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (by Jill Wells) and Santo Andre in Brazil (by Mariana Gil).

The three cases studies that lay at the core of this book make for grim reading. As the concluding summary in the book's conclusion makes clear, the "concept of decent work was only known and applied in one of the three local authorities: Santo Andre." Even here, as Gil's case study observes, 80 per cent of the construction workforce was engaged in the informal economy with the City Council showing "no concern about formalizing these jobs or guaranteeing social protection of the workers involved." Things were bleaker in the other two cities, both of which were experiencing a process of general economic decline that was forcing more and more into the informal economy. Wells, in her study of Dar es Salaam, states that the construction sector had become a refuge for those displaced from other sectors of the economy, including retrenched public servants. In all three cities, underemployment

– and insecurity of employment – appears to be the norm. Everywhere, local governments were outsourcing work to private contractors who were, in turn, generally engaging their workers as “self-employed” sub-contractors. This state of affairs has led to a general deterioration in conditions of employment.

While this study usefully explores an area of work that is central to the lives of hundreds of millions it does suffer from some methodological and conceptual problems. The reasons behind the choice of Bulawayo, Dar es Salaam and Santo Andre as case studies are never explained. Presumably it has something to do with the ILO’s sponsorship of the study. If so, this should have been stated. Certainly the study would have benefited from the inclusion of case studies from the Middle East and Asia. Conceptually, the central thesis that local governments are becoming more important, both economically and in shaping employment relations, is unproven. Only four pages (pp. 60-63) are explicitly devoted to discussing this, and then only at a general level. Instead, it could be argued, that local government remains the weakest and most vulnerable layer of government with a slender financial basis. Significantly, the findings of two of the case studies (that of Bulawayo and Dar es Salaam) are at odds with the book’s thesis. Mbiba and Ndubiwa observe that, in Bulawayo, the local government has lost power and authority in recent years. To maintain tight control of the city the Mugabe government has appointed a “resident Minister” to whom the Mayor and the Council report. Financially, the city is “under threat” with residents, local businesses and even government departments unable to pay the property tax that sustains the government. In Dar es Salaam, as well, “decentralization” appears to have amounted to little more than the central government refusing to continue its previous support of local government services. This, as Wells observes, has forced local governments to outsource once core activities such as waste collection. These private providers, in turn, replace permanent council workers (with regular employment) with workers drawn from the informal economy, leading to a spiral downwards.

The book’s discussion of employment relationships within the construction industry could have been explored in greater depth. Construction work is categorized as low-skill work. As Gil and Werna state: “Construction work is often the only significant alternative to farm labour for those without any particular skill or education.” This statement is only partially true. Certainly, much of the work in construction is unskilled. But union activity in construction has historically been based on the highly skilled craft workers who have gone through an apprenticeship – electricians, plumbers, stonemasons, bricklayers, skilled carpenters. Industrially, these workers have seen the unskilled as their principal enemy, seeking to maintain a strict divide between unionized, high paid craft work and the low-paid, unskilled work done. Unfortunately, in the book’s discussion of working conditions and industrial relations within construction, this historic divide was not mentioned. Yet access to training, and apprenticeships, is the key to worker advancement within construction. Only by making such opportunities available to a greater proportion of the workforce can skills, wages, productivity – and the local economy as a whole – be improved.

While this edited collection may have some flaws (and what work does not) it remains a valuable resource for those interested in both industrial relations and living conditions in the developing world. The authors should be commended for their efforts, as should the ILO and the University of Geneva for their financial and material support of the project. As the study reveals, “decent work” unfortunately remains beyond the reach of most construction workers in the developing world. Hopefully the publicity that such work brings will go some way towards remedying the problems the book has identified.

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