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# Phil Taylor and Sian Moore, Cabin Crew Conflict: The British Airways Dispute 2009–11 (London: Pluto Press 2019)

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**Phil Taylor and Sian Moore, *Cabin Crew Conflict: The British Airways Dispute 2009–11* (London: Pluto Press 2019)**

THE YEAR FOLLOWING the release of industrial relations scholars Phil Taylor and Sian Moore's book has been the most traumatic in the aviation industry's century-long history. The COVID pandemic has rendered daunting financial losses for airlines and significant job losses for their employees, including for the cabin crew at British Airways (BA), whose industrial actions in 2009–11 are the focus of Taylor and Moore's work. One element that stands out from today's news headlines is BA management's ruthless approach to cost-cutting via labour force reductions. In June 2020, the company threatened its unionized employees, including flight attendants, with a "fire and rehire" policy, in which those fortunate enough to be re-hired would lose the salaries and seniority-based benefits won through collective bargaining. While most of BA's competitors found a more collaborative path forward, BA's threats were labelled even by a multi-party parliamentary committee as a "national disgrace." (Simon Calder, "British Airways' Response to Coronavirus Crisis a 'National Disgrace,' say MPs," *Independent*, 12 Jun 2020)

Taylor and Moore's *Cabin Crew Conflict* helps readers understand why British Airways has answered the tragedy of COVID with such cruelty. As their work details, for more than two decades, BA has aspired to bring its labour costs closer towards parity with Europe's low-cost carriers by defanging its unions, especially the British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association (BASSA). These efforts took on more urgency in 2008, when company executives first formulated plans to scale back the higher pay and benefits enjoyed by the airline's senior cabin crew represented by BASSA, a move which precipitated the 2009–11 conflict.

As *Cabin Crew Conflict* deftly details, the two years of on-and-off negotiations, strike balloting, and 20-plus days of strike actions ended in a divisive stalemate: BASSA was not strong enough to secure all of its desired terms, but BA also failed to undermine BASSA's representation of most Heathrow-based cabin crew. The subsequent compromise did, however, contain a significant caveat in favor of BA: while BASSA members largely retained their wages and benefits, management created a new pool of cabin crew at the Heathrow base. Every new hire as of 2011 would be a member of the so-called "mixed fleet," working separately from BASSA members and earning only about half as much. In the current COVID crisis, BA is effectively demanding that BASSA members now accept the "mixed fleet" contract, one which senior crew decried in 2011 as a "horrendous contract that we should have nothing to do with." (124)

*Cabin Crew Conflict* was written at a time when BASSA rightly regarded the 2011 stalemate as a qualified victory. Not only did the union fend off hostile media attacks, negative court decisions, and neglect from Gordon Brown's Labour Party to protect most pre-existing contract terms, but BASSA's strike actions also rendered a more unified and emboldened membership. That said, *Cabin Crew Conflict* does not aspire simply to "deliver a definitive judgement on whether BASSA 'won' or 'lost' the dispute with British Airways." (151) Instead, Taylor and Moore submit that the BASSA-BA conflict is a valuable case study for assessing "the effectiveness of union strategy and tactics in a neo-liberal era in which workers face belligerent employers." (1) To do so, the authors juxtapose the BA-BASSA dispute with the 1984–85 National Union of Mineworkers strike, whose failure in the face of the Thatcher government's opposition ushered in both new legal restrictions on strike activities and an era of

growing labour futility in an increasingly Conservative Britain.

Significant differences exist between these respective strike actions, which is precisely the authors' point: one was a nationalized economic sector and the other is deregulated; one a heavy-industry labour force and the other safety professionals and customer service workers; one a group of workers who interacted with each other on a daily basis and the other a highly mobile workforce with limited familiarity amongst coworkers. Also important is that the miners were heavily white, heterosexual men – the traditional archetype of a British labourer – while flight attendants are racially and nationally diverse, majority female, and with a heavy representation of LGBTQ members – a group of workers “stereotyped as middle-class, Middle England, union-lite ‘trolley dollies.’” (17) In sum, the authors argue that the BA-BASSA conflict of 2009–11 exemplifies how unions must update their strategies for a new moment, when an increasingly diverse array of service-oriented workers asserts their needs “in the face of the intense inter-firm competition, the relentless cost-cutting and the perpetual restructuring that are characteristic of the era of neo-liberalism and global deregulation.” (16)

In detailing this account of neo-liberal labour action, the authors deftly cover both the macro-level economic pressures that brought about the conflict and the micro-level experiences of individual BASSA leaders and members who engaged in the strike. The 60-plus interviews conducted while assembling this work have rendered a view of BASSA's motives and actions that is both thorough and also strikingly personal. In this sense, *Cabin Crew Conflict* fills what the authors identify as a hole in industrial relations scholarship: a dearth of studies that “have placed at their centre the dynamics of strikes and the meanings of

action as expressed by those workers directly involved in them.” (5)

While the book's strengths far outweigh its limitations, there are two authorial choices that limit the study's contribution to understanding labour conflicts in the neo-liberal moment. The first has to do with the exclusion of voices from people outside of BASSA's committed rank and file, as the authors neglected to interview anyone who was not a BASSA member participating in the strike. They made this choice, even while they aptly chronicle how BA's flight attendant corps has been carved into distinct groups through the years: even before the forging of the “mixed fleet” in 2011, they were divided between Heathrow- and Gatwick-based crews, between Heathrow's Worldwide and European fleets, between those represented by BASSA and by rival flight attendant unions, between those who elected to join BASSA as dues-paying members and those who did not, and between those BASSA members who struck and those who crossed the picket lines. The absence of these other voices renders a study that is, in certain places, unchecked in its adulation of BASSA's actions. This absence also limits the book's value as a guide for future labour action in the neo-liberal age, when union leaders must at least understand, even if they cannot always appease, rival perspectives that abide amidst their workplace colleagues.

An additional encouragement for scholars inspired by *Cabin Crew Conflict* is to wrestle more vigorously with the implications of a neo-liberal workforce that is so profoundly diverse. As regards just gender and sexuality diversity, Taylor and Moore frequently point to the ways that women and LGBTQ members alter traditional union practices, including, for example, how BASSA's picket lines were enhanced by “stewardesses in Chanel sunglasses” and a steward “in bright pink

wellies, waving his flag,” both of which helped impress journalists as “one of the most glamorous picket lines they’d ever seen.” (111) However, as scholars such as Ryan Murphy, Kathleen Barry and myself have established, including such diversity into a union is a two-way street. It requires not only that women and LGBTQ workers find class solidarity, but it also necessitates that unions accept women’s rights and LGBTQ rights as essential workers’ rights. A fuller account from Taylor and Moore of how BASSA struggled through the years to ultimately support gender-based and sexuality-based workplace needs – and how they continue to struggle to iterate such demands today – would greatly enhance this book’s efforts to educate union organizers seeking to adapt to the neo-liberal moment.

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**François Bonnet, *The Upper Limit: How Low-Wage Work Defines Punishment and Welfare* (Oakland: University of California Press 2019)**

*THE UPPER LIMIT* offers a new perspective on an old problem. Namely, how to account for the “amazing variation in how different countries arrange welfare and punishment.” (1) Or, to borrow an example from this book, why there are violent riots in Brazilian prisons and saunas in their Finnish equivalents. Some scholars have sought to account for this kind of variation by exploring the events, decisions, and actors thought to be responsible for such exceptional outcomes. And others have pointed to broad social, political, and cultural shifts in late-modern societies that predispose nations towards penal and social policy convergence. Against these two assumptions, François Bonnet offers a structural explanation of

how and why punishment and welfare vary across nations and over time.

In particular, this book develops a theory of punishment and welfare that is grounded in the Victorian concept of *less eligibility* wherein “the living standards of the lowest class of workers determine the maximum generosity of the welfare state, and punishment is to make a life of crime less attractive than a life of collecting welfare benefits, if they exist.” (119) The conditions of the lowest paid working class, then, structurally determine the upper limit of welfare’s generosity and punishment’s humanity. So, in countries like Finland where minimum wages are quite high there is room for a more generous approach to welfare and a humane approach to punishment. Whereas in places like Brazil, where the poorest survive through the informal economy and are under constant threat of violence, the upper limit is too low to allow for anything but sparse relief and harsh punishment. That said, the theory of less eligibility says nothing of where the upper limit should be, but rather seeks to illustrate the structural coherence between the living conditions of the lowest paid workers and a given country’s mix of social and penal policies.

Irrespective of the particulars of time, place, and context, all societies are suggested to be ordered by the principles of less eligibility because they must all grapple with “what to do about poverty and crime and how to balance compassion for the poor with the interests of capitalists.” (26) Positioned in this way, this book indeed offers “a theory of unusual range.” (4) To put this theory to the test, Bonnet seeks to explain the United States’ peculiar mix of punishment and welfare since the 1960s and, in particular, the rise of mass incarceration that has long captured the attention of criminologists and sociologists alike. Mobilizing equal