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Contract and Commitment : Employment Relations in the New Economy

edited by Anil VERMA and Richard P. CHAYKOWSKI, Kingston : IRC Press, 1999, 354 p., ISBN 0-8888-6520-1.

In the context of a globalizing business order, spurred on by advances in information technology, the question of whether collective bargaining can survive and continue to deliver results that are both equitable and efficient, or whether Canadian industrial relations must undergo a fundamental break with past practices looms large. These are the big questions that are posed in this eleven chapter edited collection that examines the extent and dynamics of workplace change and shifting managerial/union relations in leading Canadian corporations.

A quick glance at the table of contents will give readers a sense of the appeal of this book — a veritable who's who of Canadian business that includes such names as Inco, Stelco, Alcan, Bell-Canada, General Motors, Canadian Pacific, Petro-Canada and Canada Post. Each of these firms pursues its workplace relations in tandem with the presence of one or more unions and each has experienced a significant jolt, whether in the form of a profitability crisis (Stelco), changing regulatory environments (Bell, CPR), intensified global competition (Inco, Alcan, GM), or a shift in legal status (Canada Post, Petro-Canada). The book has been organized around a case study approach in order to examine changes in managerial strategy and trade union response at trend setting businesses. Although this design also invites a comparative approach that the editors putatively provide in their conclusions, and that readers may bring to their assessments, the individual contributions seldom make use of explicit comparisons, even where this might prove illuminating.

The opening chapters, an introduction by the editors, and a second chapter by Betcherman provide a broader context for the essays that follow. For

Verma and Chaykowski we have witnessed major changes in the industrial relations environment — globalization and the advent of a knowledge based economy — but much more hesitant transformations in the Wagnerist, job control type of industrial relations that were authored in the immediate post-World War II era. The question is what sort of changes will be pursued in the future, since the current situation is viewed as unsustainable in the longer run. Will businesses follow a “low road” trajectory that targets labour costs as the main vector for realizing competitive advantage, or a “high road” of skilled, flexible and high-value added production? The theme of the “two roads” thesis re-emerges in several of the other contributions to this volume. Betcherman, for example, examines the results of previous employment surveys to classify firms into traditionalist, participation based, or compensation based operations and analyzes the determinants of which option a firm pursues. He questions whether a “high road” strategy can be pursued in the context of relentless pressures to rationalize (i.e., downsize) and produce immediate (quarterly) results and raises the possibility that both roads may be plied simultaneously, through the constitution of core and peripheral work forces, although one may also ponder the sustainability of such a radically polarized labour market.

Subsequent chapters survey these themes across the various companies. By and large the editors' contention that change has been management led and has only indirectly modified existing industrial relations structures are borne out. In other words managers have first acted in those realms in which they have undisputed authority such as employment levels, investments in new technologies

and product markets, and managerial reorganization itself. For the most part, and only in the few exceptions where these issues directly tread upon labour/management relations have unions become involved in restructuring processes.

The extent of corporate downsizing in all of the cases examined in *Contract and Commitment* is stunning. In a number of instances this has entailed reorganizing labour processes. Chaykowski details how job classifications have been collapsed and flexibility across trades and between trades and operations has been attained at Inco. While downsizing has coincided with "jointness" as opposed to militancy, it is also the case that some of the venues for joint labour/management dialogue date back to the early 1970s and this complicates the analysis of social change at this company. Here the analysis might have benefited from a more detailed discussion of the interactions that come into play when systems of CWS (job classifications) and Loss Control, which this company employs, come up against pressures for change.

Frost and Verma cover similar ground in their examination of Stelco and the creation of operator/maintenance and maintenance/operator positions. This discussion is enriched by a comparison of the change process at two locals with very different workplace cultures — Hilton Works and Lake Erie operations. They also show how Stelco's decision to radically decentralize into individual business/product units had a dramatic impact on collective bargaining. This managerial decision effectively ended a system of pattern bargaining at Stelco, with Hilton works in the lead, and brought on the new era of enterprise bargaining within each single operation

Similar dynamics of corporate decentralization, combined with massive job loss are recorded in admirable detail in several other chapters. In some instances

such as Bélanger outlines at Alcan, Verma details at Bell-Canada, and Taras and Ponak describe at Petro-Canada, these shifts provide the basis for enhanced jointness between the companies and the unions involved. Generally, the analysts in this volume view this as a positive outcome in that it avoids worst case scenarios such as even greater employment loss or closure. Where it has not occurred, as in the cases analyzed by Coates and Downie on Canadian Pacific Rail and Fudge on Canada Post, industrial relations grid-lock has been followed by union defeats. In order to avoid this scenario, unions are viewed by the editors as having a new role to fulfil that is focused on skill acquisition and training for employment security as opposed to job security, as well as on developing a greater sense of business acumen to allow them to participate as knowledgeable partners in the change process. As the editors put it, "A more proactive involvement of labour in such matters holds the prospect of not only helping the business, but also of generating greater labour buy-in that is, ultimately, necessary for the success of workplace change with the enterprise" (p. 352).

An intriguing outlier to this dichotomy of buy-in/jointness versus gridlock/defeat is to be found in Kumar's analysis of the CAW and GM. Here the union has not "bought in", but has resisted changes that could be viewed as detrimental to its membership. When change has been unavoidable, the union has brought its own autonomous agenda to the table and has successfully negotiated several novel quid pro quos as the price for change.

Often in edited collections the contributions will be of uneven quality. This is not the case here. Each chapter is of uniformly high quality in providing a rich background history of the corporation and union(s) in question before proceeding on with an overview survey of current developments. It does seem,

however, that in order to answer the questions that the volume commences with more than an extensive overview of developments in key corporations is called for. There are, for example, debates around the authenticity of a new knowledge based economy and the new training and skill sets that may (or may not) accompany it that need to be canvassed. Additionally, the issues of trade union "buy-in" to such agendas as multi-skilling, team organization, and continu-

ous improvement require a nuanced multi-dimensional and critical analysis that is often missing in this volume. The extent of corporate downsizing, as depressingly recounted in chapter after chapter, demands nothing less.

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Franchir le mur des conflits

par David S. WEISS, traduction de Jean BOIVIN, Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1999, 277 p., ISBN 2-7637-7650-7.

Ce volume présente la traduction française réalisée par le professeur Jean Boivin, du Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, du volume *Beyond the Walls of Conflict* de David S. Weiss publié en 1996 chez Irwin.

Avant d'aborder le texte de David Weiss, il faut souligner que Jean Boivin ne s'est pas limité à un travail de traduction. La préface qu'il signe met en relief la spécificité et l'utilité de la contribution de David Weiss. Boivin rappelle en effet que ce dernier est un praticien et qu'à ce titre son expérience et son approche sont marquées par le réalisme à l'égard des attentes et des conditions d'implantation de ce qu'on appelle le plus souvent la négociation « raisonnée », mais qu'il qualifie de négociation plus appropriée de négociation basée sur les intérêts. Il s'agit bien d'un nouveau mode de règlement des différends et non pas d'une nouvelle mode. En effet, ce type de négociation constitue essentiellement une démarche axée sur la résolution de problèmes.

En plus de la préface du traducteur, la version française comporte une première annexe où l'on retrouve deux conventions collectives pour lesquelles les parties ont utilisé la nouvelle approche, soit une convention chez Bell Canada et

une autre à Abitibi-Price d'Alma. Une seconde annexe présente deux études de cas. Le premier cas porte sur une intervention de l'auteur dans une usine de Northern Telecom à North York où la négociation basée sur les intérêts a été utilisée pour permettre la survie de cet établissement dont on avait annoncé la fermeture. La présentation décrit le potentiel mais aussi les contraintes et limites de la nouvelle approche. Le second cas, préparé par Jean Boivin, porte sur la transformation des relations du travail à Hydro-Québec mais ne traite pas spécifiquement d'une expérience de négociation basée sur les intérêts. Il s'agit surtout des conditions et des écueils vécus par les parties dans leur cheminement vers la construction et, peut-être, la fin d'un partenariat patronal-syndical.

Weiss s'inspire des principes et de l'approche développés par Roger Fisher et William Ury dans leur ouvrage classique *Getting to Yes* (traduit sous le titre *Comment réussir une négociation* aux Éditions du Seuil) mais va plus loin dans la mise en œuvre et l'adaptation de ces principes à la négociation des conventions collectives et des autres problèmes surgissant lors des relations patronales-syndicales. En effet, Weiss opérationnalise et articule de façon concrète une