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Recensions

Book Reviews

Paths to Union Renewal: Canadian Experiences,
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Unions in many countries face considerable uncertainty about their futures. Nonetheless, Canadian unions appear to have weathered the assault on membership levels experienced in many countries in relatively effective ways. As the title, *Paths to Union Renewal*, suggests, this book opens up important themes about Canadian union responses and initiatives in relation to the current political economy of trade unionism, referring to the recomposition and reconfiguration of trade unions, and their capacities to address the problems and situations they face.

The book aims to “document and analyze Canadian experiences with union renewal” (p. 16). It does this via a series of overview chapters, evaluating relevant debates. These contributions are complemented by a rich cluster of case studies, focusing on what is actually happening in particular unions; these case studies are mainly written by participants and those engaged in struggles to refocus their trade unions. Addressing themes such as membership participation, mobilizing youth, and building and exercising collective capacities, these studies identify a range of critical questions about trade unionism today. Further themes in many of the contributions relate to campaigning, leadership and education. The result is a well-written, engaging and important book, which should stimulate debate and become a key point of reference in both

academic and practical debates about union renewal.

The book has four parts to it, reflecting the implicit framework of analysis: Union Renewal and the State of Unions in Canada; Case Studies on Union Renewal; Unions and Community: Campaigns and Organizing; and Leadership Development and Education. While these parts can be dipped into, opening up strands of debate, it also pays to read the book as a whole. The reader will gain an interesting account and explanation of many of the key processes of union renewal.

The first section provides an overview of union renewal and details of specific features associated with the renewal process. Kumar and Schenk provide a comprehensive introduction to renewal and union organizational change. They discuss the contested definitions of renewal, noting that there is a broad consensus in the literatures on union renewal and labour revitalization, focusing “on those *changes over which the union has some direct control and therefore ability to change and act in new ways*” (pp. 35-36). Building on this idea, they highlight a set of specific challenges unions face, drawing particular attention to union democracy and education (pp. 34-42). This initial essay is complemented by focused contributions covering union density (Jackson); innovation (Kumar and Murray); the role and place of women in these processes (Yates) and

globalization and renewal (Lévesque and Murray). In their varied ways, these four essays open up on the necessary debate about the complexity, unevenness and possibilities of union renewal processes. Significantly, they also draw our attention to questions about leadership, education and democracy.

In Part Two, a series of case studies puts content onto these more general analyses. A range of industries and sectors are covered, across the public and private services. These studies address different clusters of workers. There is an examination of different aspects of unionism. The result is an overview of the challenges faced by unions and their varied responses. These cases open up the range of questions facing unions today, highlighting various, and sometimes contested, approaches towards renewal. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), for example, pursues an approach “of increasing the union’s bargaining strength by increasing density in workplace sectors where the union already exists” (p. 155), while other unions pursue ‘multifaceted’ approaches in either non-unionized or very poorly unionized areas, such as hotels and related industries (see Chapters 7 and 11). Such differences are grounded in different material and ideological realities and exemplify different forms of unionism, themes that must be at the heart of debates about the future of unionism.

In the last two sections, these themes are broadened out, examining forms of ‘community’ unionism (Chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16) and reviewing questions relating to leadership development and union education (Chapters 17 and 18). Unfortunately, there is often a lack of clarity about what is meant by ‘community’ unionism, an increasingly important and common aspiration for unions. It usually means alliances between unions and other organizations/activists in the locality. Equally importantly, and a notable feature of many of the studies in this section and the previous one,

there is an interesting and noteworthy focus on the significance of education and research in the processes of renewal. In the final section, themes already addressed in the two previous sections, specifically leadership and education, are explored further.

This book is an important contribution to debates about union renewal. It has the merit of providing a mix of conceptual clarification and empirical elaboration. I have one overall reservation about the book. Like many related books, there is no conclusion or epilogue. This is not trite concern, because it is important that there be a final stand-alone assessment of the collective analysis presented. Such a conclusion most likely would have said something about union democracy. Too often, this is a forgotten dimension or is subject to rhetorical flourishes, often to establish the author’s political and intellectual credentials. Democracy is critical for renewal and indeed, it could be argued, is a condition for renewal. Additionally, there is the question of union education. While unions always have had a concern with education, often as training, and socialization, education is now itself experiencing a renewal. Addressing education suggests queries about form, mode of delivery, content, focus, follow-up, and integration. It goes back to the theme of how experience opens up questions about the broad challenges facing all of us in an increasingly internationalized and globalized world. Both themes are addressed, but unevenly and at times tentatively.

Overall, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on unions, and union renewal in particular. After the desultory offerings of those who see an end to unions, or an on-going containment of unions, this book opens up possibilities and prospects. So, read it and debate it.

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