

## Compte rendu

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*United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism*, by Ileen A. DEVAULT, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004, 244 pp., ISBN 0-8014-8926-1 (paper).

par Anne Forrest

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She builds up a social accounting statement of Concert's investments to find out the value added created for union members and local communities by Concert's investments. Social accounting is important in the evaluation of collateral benefits. Concert Properties' study is a good example of how difficult it is for unions to connect private and social levels of action because Concert must be financially viable in order to promote social investment. The intricate thing is then to combine business with collective objectives through governance rules. In this perspective, the author calls for future research into the governance of social investment organizations such as the *Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Québec* or labour-sponsored investment funds.

Social accounting also sheds light on the role of public policy for the success of social investment. The Concert initiative would not have been possible without the municipal government of Vancouver which found the land for development and leased it on a long-term basis. Without taking into account induced and indirect effects of the activity created by Concert, all governments have experienced a net loss in terms of tax revenues. But, the loss becomes a gain when Isla Carmichael uses multipliers to evaluate induced and indirect effects of Concert's spending. It is, therefore, highly important to undertake a broad accounting perspective to measure the benefits of social investment. It is important to notice that accounting for social investment rests on important

assumptions about employment and value added multipliers because these are derived from input-output analysis within which public policy parameters are central (the unemployment rate, labour costs and many aspects of the employment relation).

Social accounting, as described in the book, is a first step towards a set of accounting principles for stakeholders. It is important to notice that labour intensive production, low heterogeneity of working conditions and a stable labour legislative framework are important assumptions for social accounting.

The idea of *Pension Power* is symptomatic of the demise of the fordist governance, which has led unions to interfere with capital management, a sphere originally devoted to employers and financiers. That's why there still exists a debate among unions about social investment, opponents considering that social investment may justify the private regulation of pension funds and financial sector leadership.

*Pension Power* is a book which concerns practitioners and scholars of industrial relations as well, in the new era of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development. The debate about *Pension Power* raises a larger one about the sufficient conditions to restore the balance between capital and labour in order to improve social conditions for workers.

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***United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism,***

by Ileen A. DeVault, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004, 244 pp., ISBN 0-8014-8926-1 (paper).

*United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism* by Ileen A. DeVault is an investigation into the place of women in the American trade union movement in the years following its formation.

Although she discusses the Knights of Labour, her particular interest is the AFL. Her inquiry "involves the ways in which the unions that made up the AFL came to encode gender into their

very structures. In fact, I argue that the hallowed words ‘craft unionism’ came to be read as ‘male’ perhaps even more than they were read as ‘white’” (p. 4).

DeVault comes to this conclusion from her analysis of women’s participation in 40 cross-gender strikes – strikes in which both women and men participated – in the boot and shoe, clothing, textiles, and tobacco industries between 1886, when the AFL was formed, and 1903, when the AFL created Women’s Trade Union League. These years offer wide scope for investigation as these industries accounted for 86 per cent of the women employed in manufacturing and both 1886 and 1903 were high points of strike activity. To her credit, DeVault makes visible the breadth of this unrest by including strikes in smaller cities and in regions outside of the industrial heartland, not previously studied.

The author’s perspective is institutional. On page 6 she describes herself as a “new institutionalist,” that is, someone who has “returned to take a new look at the development of unions and that ultimate expression of working-class consciousness, the strike.” The “new” here signals the influences of women’s labour history and social history. Her project is to “bring the insights about community, race, ethnicity, gender...back into consideration of workers’ attempts at institution-building.”

I came to this book not as a labour historian but as someone trained in “old” institutional industrial relations in the 1980s, and subsequently self-retrained in feminism. For me, then, *United Apart* is attractive because of its focus on the growth and development of labour institutions in relation to women and women issues. The issues discussed in the book – how and why women workers organize, the forces for and against collective consciousness across the gender divide, and the relative lack of formal union organization among women in the early

years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – are issues I think and write about.

What DeVault concludes about the centrality of gender bias in the structures and functioning of the AFL and its affiliates is not new. It is well established that the AFL’s privileging of skilled workers was integral to the organization’s worldview. By its measure, working-class men deserved to share the rewards of American prosperity simply because they were men. But only some men were so entitled. The AFL championed the claims of American-born white men over immigrants and blacks who were judged inferior by nature, as well as by their unskilled status. DeVault’s accounts of the AFL’s interaction with women strikers reaffirms this interpretation. But she oversteps her evidence (and the historical record) when she argues that AFL craft unionism “came to be read as ‘male’ perhaps even more than they were read as ‘white’” (p. 4). This is too broad a conclusion to draw from a study in which race is a secondary theme.

What is new and significant in *United Apart* is the breadth and depth of the historical strike record assembled by DeVault and her research team. *United Apart* represents a monumental investment of time, effort, and patience. And the results demonstrate beyond question that women were engaged workers, committed trade unionists, and brave strikers. If the myth of women’s passivity as an explanation for their low rates of unionization is still alive in the academic community, it is dispelled by the trajectory of these 40 strikes. The women in this book were determined strikers who often participated in numbers that exceeded their proportion in the work force. They had their own workplace issues which, by virtue of the strict job segregation by gender of the era, were “women’s issues.” But their experiences of work intensification and low wages were not unique to women in the economic depression of the 1890s.

These causes of discontent were the common ground on which women and men united.

DeVault's investigation reveals a great deal of grass-roots cooperation across the gender divide. Women were shopfloor strike organizers who both initiated stoppages and urged co-workers to support on-going strikes. On strike, women's fund-raising efforts were central to the longevity of the work stoppage, and meant that women were often the most visible face of a strike in the community, but never in formal leadership roles. On occasion, a maverick arose whose determination to put "women's issues" at the centre of the struggle was considered a nuisance by the official, male, AFL leadership. But even this degree of recognition was rare. The problems of women strikers were invisible to the AFL whose leaders sought to rouse community support by detailing the suffering imposed on the, presumptively male, striker's wives and children.

DeVault's study of cross-gender cooperation demonstrates that unskilled women and men in this era were willing and able to see common cause. Most of the strikes examined in *United Apart* involved uprisings of previously unorganized workers whose incipient union-consciousness could not be sustained. AFL fixation on their own members in particular, and skilled workers in general, meant that these strikers – women and men alike – were often exhorted to victory but rarely assisted in ways that would have made a difference. Financial aid for the mass of strikers was the exception, according to DeVault. Even when the strike involved AFL unions, the Federation paid strike support to members only. Yet, time after time, it was lack of funds that drove workers back to work in defeat.

I applaud DeVault's decision to ground her analysis in the broader strike record. In Appendix 1, she describes the

extraordinary effort required to identify and reconstruct the events of lesser-known strikes. Given these constraints, her attention to the contributions of individual strikes is commendable. With so many strikes and so much historical detail, it would have been easy to strip the stories down to their essentials. Yet, this approach has its difficulties. I found it impossible to manage so much information. Many of the strikes were used to illustrate themes in more than one chapter. But even with these helpful reminders, I could not keep track of 40 different story lines.

The fact that few of the strikes analyzed in *United Apart* resulted in a win for the strikers makes this book a depressing read. DeVault reminds us that successful strikes tended to be short, and so left little written record. This was both a relief and a disappointment. In the face of so much hardship and so little success, it was hopeful to know that these experiences were not the whole. The disappointment arose when I realized that I still didn't know whether cross-gender cooperation contributed to strike success. This can be inferred from the decision of the AFL leadership to create the Women's Trade Union League; however, the book ends without analyzing this organizational outcome. How and why the WTUL resulted from this period of struggle is not explained. For a book that focuses on labour institutions, this is a weakness.

I am unable to decide whether the benefits of broadening the analytical frame to these 40 strikes outweigh the difficulties that result. Working within the women's labour history and social history traditions means DeVault is constantly making the story more complex. In principle, this is a good thing. It is far from a full account when the analysis focuses on the workplace to the exclusion of family and neighbourhood, or the industrial heartland to the exclusion of strikes in smaller cities and less industrialized regions, or gender and class to

the exclusion of race relations. Yet, any one of these complications would have been a challenge for DeVault, given the number of strikes and the limited

information available for many of the strikes she investigates.

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***Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream,***

by Janice FINE, Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 2006, 316 pp., ISBN 13-978-0-8014-4423-4.

This important book fills three gaps in contemporary labour studies. First, author Janice Fine places American worker centres in their historical context. Next, she draws a map of immigrant worker centres across the US at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, managing to provide breadth as well as depth of critical analysis. Finally, she uses in-depth studies of workers' centres to expose the contemporary mis-fit between the structure and practice of unions and the marginal, precarious, immigrant and often invisible working class of the US' informalizing economy. But the picture she draws is neither hopeless nor leftier-than-thou. The abundant campaign and case study material includes stories of creative worker centre-union partnerships whose successes offer pointers for the future.

Workers' centres are community based mediating institutions that provide support to and organize among communities of low-wage workers. The study begins by locating workers' centres in terms of the historic void they filled. The waves of immigrants who came to the US at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "the golden era of immigration," were served by a rich range of immigrant service institutions. Many of these have disappeared or wizedened, including trade unions, fraternal organizations, political parties representing ethnic constituencies and settlement houses. Contemporary immigrant workers' centres have arisen, she argues, to fill the gap left by the decline of the traditional web of immigrant service institutions. But while the

need for labour market organizations for immigrant workers remains pressing, the contours of employment have changed in fundamental, structural ways. Does Fine address this question? Yes. Her study of workers centres is both a portrait of a new form of worker organization in itself, and a window into the ways in which traditional unionism must change if it is to speak to and for the new American working class. Although she does not use this concept, Fine is, in reality, documenting the rise of a "network society" of workers' rights organizations in the face of the shrinking effectiveness of labour market regulation by legally recognized institutional actors. What is the shape of capital and industry the new network faces? *Worker Centres* does not treat the question in depth.

In 2005, there were 137 workers' centres in the US, of which 122 are defined as immigrant workers centres. The study focuses on 40 of these, with in-depth research on nine. Three waves of development for the centres as a whole are identified. The first wave, in the late 1970s, was led by African-American activists, Chinese immigrants in California and New York City, and Chicanos along the Mexican border. Arising out of the crisis of deindustrialization which hit the US manufacturing sector in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these centres were often critical of the narrowness of vision and lack of energy of organized and established trade unions.

The second wave spans the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, and focuses on