

The current economic downturn has provided a further opportunity for companies to shed more unionized workers or to hamstring unions with tiered contracts and the constant threat of layoffs. In this context, it appears likely that only a minority of workers will have continued access to the traditional “good” manufacturing job while the overwhelming majority will be displaced to service sector employment or to a kind of marginalized manufacturing work characterized by much smaller workplaces, little or no unionization and insecure employment. These smaller manufacturing plants are clearly more vulnerable to relocation to cheaper labour markets. In the growing absence of good unionized jobs secured by a massive workforce, the working class and its communities will in all likelihood be fundamentally altered.

Dorothy Smith and Stephen Dobson have raised an important issue in terms of the erosion of working-class skill sets—skill sets that traditionally grounded familial and community relations and were an important source of self-worth. Hopefully, researchers will pick up on this important cross-over between paid and unpaid work and community and explore its connections to both commodification and the rise of corporations such as Home Depot.

Finally, although the proposed alternative futures are desirable, they seem far removed. Recent events, such as the decision to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board, the lack of an effective, co-ordinated reaction to US Steel, the almost complete absence of effective responses from any level of government to the closure of industries, the blatant bullying by Caterpillar Corporation and, overall, the growing gap between haves and have-nots suggest a troubled path to progressive social change.

Camfield, David. 2011. *Canadian Labour in Crisis: Reinventing the Workers' Movement*. Halifax: Fernwood. ISBN 978-1-55266-416-2. Paperback: 19.95 CAD. Pages: 160.

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In *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, David Camfield offers a bracingly honest and accessible look at the labour movement’s current impasse. Grounded in the conviction that working people’s movements are central to greater social and economic equality and the development of human capacities beyond that envisioned by profit-driven capitalism, Camfield argues that union renewal, the “attempt to energize the movement in its current form” is not enough. Rather, “sweeping changes that would reinvent the movement” are called for (6-7). Combining overviews of academic literature and political commentary

with interviews with movement leaders, staff and activists – impressive for such a short volume – Camfield gives voice to many labour activists’ frustrations with unions’ inability to halt a long-term process of decay. He also seeks to articulate the means of the movement’s reinvention.

Camfield goes beyond the union renewal literature’s typical empirical indicators – sinking or stagnant union density or organizing rates – and provides an unflinchingly comprehensive (if dismal) picture of union decline. The union movement is revealed to be a very sick patient indeed. In the workplace, unions’ bargaining power has been diminished. Although the “union advantage” – the premium in wages and benefits union members earn compared to their non-union counterparts – has been maintained, it has actually become a source of resentment for many workers outside union structures. The decline in unions’ economic power and public esteem combine to make organizing new members exceedingly difficult. Instead, unions frequently pursue already-organized union members, whether through mergers or inter-union competitions, to cope with membership (and hence financial) crises. In the political sphere, despite much energy put into lobbying and electoral mobilization of various kinds, unions’ influence over policy decisions has waned, even where labour-friendly governments are in power. Other forms of extra-parliamentary political action are also on the decline. Add to this the atrophy of internal democratic life, a crisis in membership participation, and the narrowing of debate and contestation within unions, which makes the search for effective solutions all the more difficult.

Camfield’s diagnosis of this breakdown in unions’ capacities for resistance and socio-economic transformation has five elements, a complex of unfavourable external conditions and the consequences of choices made in both the past and the present. First, beginning in the 1940s, an exceedingly narrow conception of unions’ mandate, constituency and strategic toolkit was institutionalized in both law and union practice, marginalizing other modes of worker self-organization and the potentials they carried. Second, the broader social and cultural supports for vibrant, politically informed, pluralistic and solidaristic working-class communities have eroded. Third, radical changes wrought by the neoliberal restructuring of late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist accumulation and state regulation severely undermined the material basis of 20<sup>th</sup> century union forms. Fourth, left organizations outside the unions, both socialist and social democratic, have also weakened since the 1970s, no longer able to organize internal union opposition or sustain inter-union activist networks. Finally, union leaders have made poor choices at crucial moments when responding to these negative political-economic conditions. Many union leaders and staff remain “doggedly loyal” (85) to bureaucratic “responsible unionism”, have opted to contain resistance where it has emerged, and thus have exacerbated the above problems and accelerated the process of decay.

Given the depth of these problems, Camfield rightly argues that revitalizing existing (deeply flawed) union practices, is insufficient. Initiatives of “reform from above”

simply reinforce rather than challenge the underlying causes of the movement's problems. Instead, the movement's reinvention will require initiatives "from below" to turn it in a more democratic, militant and radical direction. Camfield reviews what he terms "seeds of hope": concrete practices evident in various parts of the workers' movement – both inside and outside unions – that, if expanded and generalized, could form the basis of such a reinvention. He emphasizes initiatives that aim to deepen union democracy and support the emergence of member-activists who not only more truly reflect the diversity of the working class but are also capable of undertaking organizing initiatives independent of unions' leaders and staff. Ultimately, Camfield argues that unions must adopt a commitment to mobilize and organize the entire working class, not only its unionized elements, to fight in all the arenas that shape working-class life, not just the workplace, and to generate an anti-capitalist and anti-oppression working-class politics.

Despite the powerful analysis of the movement's problems and necessary solutions, there are contradictions, particularly over how the capacities for such thoroughgoing change are to be generated. One of the book's strengths is its use of Richard Hyman's nuanced understanding of bureaucracy as a set of social relations of dependence on expertise, the pedagogical effects of which are felt by both leaders and members, who internalize bureaucracy as common sense. This usefully moves us away from simplistic nostrums that leaders are always to blame for every misstep or "betrayal" and helps us understand the systemic reproduction of union habits. However, members are seen as the source of radical transformation, though they are no less bound up in bureaucratic mentalities than leaders. Many members share with their leadership counterparts a vested interest in the status quo of union life. Their economic insecurity also undermines their willingness to resist. A union activist quoted here indicates that "a lot of people don't want to cause waves in the workplace so they don't enforce the collective agreement" (10). If that's so, why should we expect members to be more willing to engage in direct action, a more confrontational act than filing a grievance? The prescription of "reform from below" does not fully explore the conditions needed for members' confidence to be regenerated, and the role that progressive union leaders with access to resources will have to play in that process.

Similarly, it isn't clear what kinds of structures are necessary to rebuild working-class power. There is an implicit preference for localism here, even though Camfield acknowledges some of its limitations. For instance, he decries the way collective bargaining structures fragment workers' power, and yet mega-locals, which were created (at least in part) to address such fragmentation, are "beyond hope of democratization" (61). The decline of pattern bargaining is seen as part of the roots of unions' problems, yet Camfield calls for local autonomy and members' democratic control over bargaining. There is an unresolved tension here between the scale of workers' power and the conditions that allow for members' meaningful democratic control. Undoubtedly, most

collective bargaining processes should be significantly democratized, but this is no simple matter. Indeed, local autonomy framed as “democracy” often reinforces fragmenting dynamics as members retain control over their bargaining agenda in their workplace, and refuse obligations to broader collective identities and interests. What then is the way forward? The book could have paid greater attention to such difficulties.

Despite these caveats, this book is required reading for working-class activists throughout the movement. Every union education department should adopt *Canadian Labour in Crisis* for immediate reading by their own leadership and activist cadres. Many will find the content uncomfortable, as it challenges deeply held assumptions on which lifetimes of activism have been based. And yet, as attacks on the remnants of working-class power continue to mount, this book will spark a necessary debate over what the labour movement must do to remain a relevant force for social transformation.

Webber, Jeffrey. 2011. *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. ISBN: 978-1-60846-106-6. Paperback: 21.50 CAD. Pages: 281.

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For those on the left, it has become common sense to think of the current governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and sometimes even those in Brazil and Argentina as presenting alternatives to neoliberalism, and perhaps even capitalism itself. To some degree, this is understandable. Many of these countries witnessed impressive mass popular movements and uprisings that articulated a significant challenge to neoliberalism in the region. These included the 1989 Venezuelan uprising known as “el Caracazo,” the Argentine uprisings in 2001–2002, and the water and gas wars in Bolivia between 2000 and 2005. In all of these cases, new governments promising a break with neoliberalism were elected into office, and in Bolivia and Venezuela the phrase “socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century” would soon enter everyday discourse.

However, more than a decade into Latin America’s “pink tide,” is it still possible to characterize the governments of Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales and others as presenting a challenge to neoliberalism or capitalism? Was it ever correct to depict these governments in such a manner? Addressing the case of Bolivia specifically, Jeff Webber answers these questions with a resounding and controversial no. Webber’s central argument is that the Morales government is pursuing an agenda of “reconstituted neoliberalism,” betraying many of the demands and aspirations of the popular movements that elected the MAS