

NEW VOICES IN LABOUR STUDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

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There is wide recognition that labour movements in advanced capitalist countries are in crisis. This crisis, a product of neoliberal economic restructuring, has witnessed the growing influence of multinational corporations, the rise of precarious employment, the privatization of public services, and the disciplining of organized labour through restrictions on workers' rights. Labour studies scholars are in a unique position to offer suggestions to transcend this impasse. They are clearly sympathetic to the goals of the labour movement, but independent enough to give a clear-headed assessment of past strategy and future possibilities.

On March 20-21, 2009, The Centre for Labour Studies at Brock University and Local 4207 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, representing Part-Time Instructors, Teaching Assistants, Marker-Graders, and Lab Demonstrators at Brock, co-hosted the New Voices in Labour Studies conference. This represented the third instalment of the New Voices conference, which had previously been hosted by Trent University in 2006 and McMaster University in 2007. The goal of the conference was to foster reflection and discussion on new developments and research within the field of Labour Studies as encountered by academics, activists, and leaders of union and social movements. In keeping with the tradition of the two previous conferences, the 2009 conference provided the "new voices" of Labour Studies an opportunity to present their research and work through a series of panels. The conference attracted an assortment of new scholars, PhD candidates, and post-doctoral fellows, from across North America. The conference also welcomed senior Labour Studies scholars as panel chairs and panel discussants. In that regard, the participation of Tom Dunk, Norene Pupo, Bryan Palmer, Mark Thomas, Stephanie Ross, and Peter Graefe were integral to the success of the conference.

Conference participants came from a wide-range of academic disciplines including Political Science, Sociology, History, Geography, Education, and of

course Labour Studies. The diversity of conference participants speaks to the fact that Labour Studies has broadened into a genuinely interdisciplinary scholarly field. Yet, despite this range, almost all of the papers offered conference participants a similar lesson: Workers in Canada are more vulnerable today than at any other time in the postwar period. Five articles based on conference presentations are featured in this special issue of *Just Labour*. The range of topics in this volume gives an indication of the breadth of the conference presentations overall.

In their respective contributions, Andy Hanson and Susan Braedley, argue that teachers (in the case of Hanson) and firefighters (in the case of Braedley) have effectively used their status as “professional” workers to strategically advance their collective interests in an era of neoliberal economic restructuring. The gendered nature of these jobs has also played a central role in shaping their collective interests. In “Achieving the right to strike: Ontario teachers’ unions and professionalist ideology,” Hanson offers us a telling historical narrative of the pernicious effects of gendered work and the associated moral regulation in the field of public education. Hanson argues that union leaders ultimately turned to the contested ideology of professionalism to mobilize their membership and win the right to strike. Susan Braedley’s paper, “A Ladder Up: Ontario Firefighters’ Wages in Neoliberal Times,” shows us very clearly how firefighters use public perceptions about the masculinity and bravery of firefighters to propel them past other public sector worker in terms of wages, benefits, job security and respect at the bargaining table. The vaunted position of firefighters was recently demonstrated in the media coverage of the Toronto municipal workers’ strike in the summer of 2009 where garbage collectors were not seen as entitled to the same deal negotiated by firefighters just the month before.

Bradley Walchuk’s very current discussion of migrant farm workers in Ontario highlights the particular vulnerability of that group of workers vis-a-vis employers and the state, thus prompting farm workers and their advocates to press their demands via the judicial system, with decidedly mixed results. In “Ontario’s Agricultural Workers and Collective Bargaining: A History of Struggle,” Walchuk makes a convincing case for the limitations of the “rights-based” approach to labour organizing and encourages a return to direct action and political mobilization.

Susan Spronk’s article, “Water Privatization and the Prospects for Trade Union Revitalization in the Public Sector: Case Studies from Bolivia and Peru” on water privatization and union renewal in Bolivia and Peru reminds us that organizing and politics are indivisible union activities. Spronk spent an extended period of time in those countries and conducted 24 interviews with trade unionists and community activists and offers a unique perspective on the union response in each country. Workers in Peru entered into a “deep-

coalition” with anti-privatization activists while in Bolivia they did not. It may be instructive to see if Spronk’s explanation translates to the Canadian case where we see a strong strategic alliance between CUPE and the Council of Canadians in the anti-privatization movement.

Patricia Chong's engaging article, “Servitude with a smile: A re-examination of emotional labour,” expands on Arlie Hoschild's pioneering research on emotional labour by using insights from feminist intersectionality to meld race into the concept of emotional labour. Chong navigates us through the literature on emotional labour and shows us that race, class and gender shape the specific representation of this labour. The jobs that Chong talks about: flight attendant, exotic dancer, call centre worker require workers to nurture the needs and desires of their clientele. Chong accentuates the intersection of race, class and gender through notions of exclusion and subordination. This adds an additional level of indignity to the performance of wage labour and implicates all of us in this subjugation.

On the surface, it is difficult to identify universal themes running through the individual contributions assembled in this special issue of *Just Labour*. However, there are some common threads. Most notably, we see attention placed on public sector workers and workers who are in particularly precarious work. In some of these studies of the world of work, unions are given a circumscribed role in the advancement of job characteristics. For instance, it’s not altogether clear that migrant agricultural workers will be much better off as union members, nor will the gendered nature of emotional labour disappear in organized workplaces. More positively, the articles show the importance of genuine solidarity amongst sectors of the working class. It is this feature of solidarity among the working class that will promote social justice not only on a local level but in a global context. For instance, Walchuk writes about organized labour fighting for the rights of migrant agricultural workers and Spronk looks at the possibility of deep coalitions between labour unions and other social movements. The sooner we realize that we are in the fight together regardless of our wages or the colour of our collars, the more focused we can be on creating a truly people-centered agenda.

We hope you will read and engage with these articles, which represent the continuation of what we anticipate will develop into a “New Voices” tradition. We also hope this special issue of *Just Labour* will inspire you to reflect on new developments and research projects in the field of Labour Studies.