
Swift, Jamie 2003. *Walking the Union Walk: Stories from CEP's First Ten Years*. Ottawa: Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, 198 pages.

When I was first asked if I would like to review a history of the CEP union, I thought I would be dealing with a standard institutional analysis of the origins and recent history of the newly merged union of communications, energy and paper workers. I was intrigued because I have always wondered about the events and chemistry leading to the coming together of these three rather diverse unions, two with historic roots in industrial unions in resource-based industries, and one with a longstanding craft orientation in communications services.

I am still not sure what brought them together or how the merger took place, because that is not what *Walking the Union Walk* is about. Only a brief three page box inserted in chapter one deals with the merger, and then only its process, not with its causes or chemistry. The real content of the book is revealed in the subtitle, *Stories from CEP's First Ten Years*. Indeed it is a book of 'short stories' describing the various struggles, disputes and campaigns waged by a self-described 'militant trade union' composed of workers from several industrial sectors. In no particular chronological order, they are stories of *the media union*, *the telecommunications union*, *the energy union* and *the paper union* - joined together with a "collective commitment that goes beyond any particular industry" [p. vii].

This certainly is the explicit message that is the common thread uniting these anecdotal accounts of defining struggles in the CEP's first decade. Writing in a casual, easy to read style, Swift describes these events, much of it through the words of the workers, union reps and activists that took part. These words came from interviews that Swift collected in his travels across the country in search of the real stories of the new union. A partial list of the disputes and campaigns that he chronicles includes organizing in the oil sands country in anti-union Alberta, the off-shore oil rigs of Hibernia, and a chocolate factory in Vancouver; fighting plant closures at mills in Quebec, British Columbia and New Brunswick; shorter hour campaigns and strikes in Ontario, New Brunswick, Quebec and British Columbia; defending company-wide bargaining and job security, combating concessions and contracting out across the country, fighting for pay equity in the famous dispute with 'Ma Bell'; confrontations with Conrad Black's newspaper empire and the establishment of a worker owned replacement newspaper in Castlegar; and numerous other strikes and organization campaigns

in all three industrial areas represented by the CEP.

Several innovations stand out in these vignettes taken from the daily life of the union over the past ten years. One is the willingness of the CEP to take on issues beyond the union's specific jurisdiction, such as the campaign to help victims of industrial disease in Sarnia and the 'chemical valley' in Hamilton, to defend medicare, public ownership of Sask Tel and Ontario Hydro, or to develop a sustainable forestry policy and a program to combat global warming. What this illustrates is the 'social union' face of the CEP, a face that has increasingly come to differentiate many Canadian unions from their American counterparts.

A second feature of particular interest was the use CEP made of the Solidarity Fund in Quebec in combating some mill closures. But perhaps the most striking example of innovative action by the union was its political response to the globalization of capitalism and, in particular, its establishment of the Humanity Fund to support union organizing in Mexico and the South. For the CEP, Swift writes, "it is a matter of solidarity not guilt. For CEP, the Humanity Fund is a way of dealing with globalization, of forging a link between workers both North and South" (p. 182).

While the disputes and campaigns Swift tells us about in *Walking the Union Walk* are mostly success stories, some were not, such as the strike at the Calgary Herald or the occupation of the Thorold paper mill in opposition to its closure. But they could be considered partially successful in that "employers and banks were again reminded that this was not an organization that would roll over and play dead when confronted with a challenge" (p. 66). It is this 'reminder' that gives the union the power to protect its members in the daily struggle for control of the workplace.

This underlines what I think is the real, though only implicit, message of this book. It gives the lie to the frequent claims by employers and their neoliberal and rightwing allies that, while unions may have been needed in the past, they are no longer needed in the modern, beneficent workplace of today. The stories in this book make a strong case for the argument that unions are, in fact, even more necessary now to protect workers' welfare and rights in the face of the growing global reach of corporate power. I would go even farther and say that strong unions and a high union density are necessary to maintain even the limited democracy that we now enjoy as corporations increasingly move to take control of governments – but that is only just hinted at in *Walking the Union Walk*.

This is not an academic, or balanced, account of the first ten years of the CEP, nor is it intended to be. It sets out to publicize and popularize the struggles and campaigns of the 'new big kid on the block', the CEP, and to inform its members coming from very different union cultures of the central values holding the union together. In this respect, it should be a valuable tool in building solidarity within the CEP, particularly if it is widely read by younger and newly organized workers.

I would think, however, that it could be a useful academic tool in labour studies courses by providing case studies of industrial conflict where the primary focus is not on disputes over pay and benefits but rather over a wide range of issues from health and safety, working hours to international trade treaties. It gives a much more engaging description of 'what do unions do' than most text books. Indeed, it would be ideally suited for secondary school social studies programs on contemporary society, specifically to give students who will soon be entering the labour market an education on why unions are necessary in today's global economy. But for that reason, one can be sure that the powers that be will do everything they can to keep it out of the school system. Let us all hope that they do not succeed.

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