

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Smith, Doug 2000. *Consulted to Death*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 155p.**

*Consulted to Death* has many a harrowing tale to tell of - negligence, corporate greed, of human suffering and death. But to this reviewer, the most disturbing part of this excellent little book comes amid the story of the infamous Holmes Foundry in Sarnia, Ontario. The Holmes chronicle is bad enough. In the Caposite Plant, asbestos levels were 6,720 times above the present standard (and twenty-eight times the standard when government inspectors first examined it in 1958.) For years, and especially after the plant was closed in 1974, former workers have dropped like flies of the myriad diseases asbestos causes (and which asbestos companies *knew* it causes *long* before it became common knowledge.)

But somehow one gets inured to accounts of worker health and safety woes (and therein lies a shocking problem.) Only the most horrific events, or direct experience, or accounts that somehow fly in below one's compassion fatigue radar have the power to agitate anymore. So massive is the carnage in industry that, sorry to say, one begins, if only for mental self-preservation, to discount the actual *workers* themselves, as being complicit in their own peril. That is why the following paragraph sneaks up on the reader:

“The wife of a plant engineer had mesothelioma [a rare cancer of the

lining of the lung whose only known source is asbestos exposure], a disease she likely contracted from her husband's clothes. Another woman's husband had actually appeared in advertisements promoting Holmes' products. This woman too had mesothelioma, a disease her husband had brought home with his paycheque.”

These are truly examples of what sociologist Martin Meissner has called “the long arm of the job,” a bony arm that reaches up and grabs not only workers but their spouses and children as well.

The author, an independent Winnipeg journalist who has written on labour topics before (including an excellent biography of the United Electrical Workers Canadian leader, C.S. Jackson), explores the double standard we all have when it comes to occupational health and safety. He compares the demise in 2002 of a 14-year-old boy in a construction accident, which was buried in the inside of *The Globe and Mail* with the collateral death of a young boy in a biker-war-related bomb blast in Montreal. The latter was on the front pages for days and the government modified the criminal code to facilitate the prosecution of gangs. “One death was an accident,” writes Smith, “one a horrible crime: much of the difference comes from the fact that we are prepared to tolerate deaths from a profitable construction industry.”

Indeed, old ideas die very hard; especially the assumption that by

agreeing to work under unsafe conditions, workers freely choose to accept those conditions. The average risk of workplace injury is extremely high - one in ten. Smith cites iconoclast Harry Glasbeek, formerly of York University's Osgoode Hall Law School, showing just how ridiculous this assumption should be. Glasbeek asks us to imagine 50,000 people invited to fill the Toronto Skydome to attend a free event where they would receive a hot dog for their efforts. The only catch is that at halftime a crazed gunman would run onto the field and fire his gun randomly into the crowd, injuring *only* 5,000 spectators. Some would receive only superficial wounds, some would be wounded seriously, and some would die. Nobody of sound mind would take this offer seriously. Yet we assume that workers accept the same odds *voluntarily*, forgetting how little choice they really have.

Glasbeek is one of several almost unsung *heroes* of the Canadian occupational health and safety movement deservedly celebrated in Smith's book. Others (an index is irritatingly missing in this book) include: Jim Brophy, head of the Windsor, Ontario Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW); Stan Gray, formerly of the Ontario Workers' Health Centre and workplace activist extraordinaire; Cathy Walker of the Canadian Auto Workers Union (who points out that there are more game wardens in Canada than health and safety inspectors); Bob DeMatteo of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (whose union represents the decimated ranks of inspectors under

Ontario's Mike Harris) and Karen Messing, of the University of Quebec at Montreal, tireless researcher into women's occupational health.

But the one personality who really dominates the book and the scene, both practically and ideologically is University of Saskatchewan professor - Bob Sass. As director of the Saskatchewan government's occupational health and safety program during the 1980s, Sass developed, legitimized and popularized the "three worker rights": the right to know of health hazards; the right to be consulted (in joint committees with management); and the right to refuse unsafe work.

But more recently Sass has submitted his own pioneering work to a withering critique and this forms the spiritual kernel of Smith's book. Some or all of these rights have metamorphosed into their opposites. Sass insists that they were, after all, *weak* rights, not strong ones, rights that have turned on workers and union activists.

The right to know, for instance, was touted as an important worker tool because "knowledge is power." But, Sass reminds us, this obscures the raw truth that "power is power," or the golden rule that he who has the gold makes the rules. Until workers have real power in the workplace to actually change their work, knowledge of health hazards is a hollow gift.

As for the right to consultation, Smith proffers abundant evidence that workers are "consulted to death." Because governments refuse to appoint enough inspectors, the internal responsibility system (which wags have dubbed the "eternal responsibility

system”) purports to be a substitute. But Smith shows health and safety committees (even in Ontario, where workers have the legal right to caucus on their own) have been rendered virtually impotent by their diabolical bipartism.

The right to refuse also has proven itself not the tiger employers once feared and fought but a mere pussycat. Studies of actual work refusals and the government investigations that follow show a tendency by the inspectorate to rule against the refusers if the situation is deemed normal for the industry and if the workers or the union are deemed to be troublemakers.

Sass makes the outrageous claim that he is no longer a proponent of the three rights. According to Smith, this is like “the Pope saying he’s got doubts about the Trinity.” But what Sass is saying is that worker health and safety rights have been submerged by the cacophony of rights that proliferate in North American society.

“The short answer,” writes Smith, “is that, far more than most people would care to admit, the real workplace health and safety decisions are made on the basis of how much safety we can afford. Workers’ health is still for sale...Workplace health and safety committee members are well aware of the fact that no one will treat them like heroes if their proposals lead to job losses or a plant shutdown.”

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**Black, Errol and Jim Silver 2001.**  
***Building a Better World: An Introduction to Trade Unionism in Canada.* Halifax: Fernwood Books, 189p.**

*Building A Better World: An Introduction to Trade Unionism in Canada* is what other texts are not – it is unabashedly pro-union. Although the book is even-handed, it does not pretend to be non-partisan. The first two chapters set the stage for some interesting arguments developed later on in the book. For example, chapter one poses a question about why trade unions resort to extra-parliamentary politics and coalition-building. This question is addressed quite thoughtfully in chapter five. Chapter two introduces the differences between social unionism and business unionism. And, again, chapter five expands on these important distinctions.

There are two strands to this book. One strand examines the structure, the role and the history of trade unions. This part is done in a workman-like style that gives information and helpful definitions to readers new to the world of unions. The history section is brief yet still touches on contemporary issues that affect labour such as Alternative Budgets and Free Trade. Though the historical section was informative, much of it could be found in depth in other sources.

Of the two strands – the structure and history versus the politics of trade unions – it is the latter which is the more interesting. Authors Errol Black and Jim Silver have managed to remind readers about longstanding debates and even to pick at some scabs that have marred