



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 5
Fighting Shutdowns

Article 3

1984

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Book Review: Concessions - and how to beat them

Abstract

[Excerpt] As the title of her book indicates, Jane Slaughter is not afraid to be didactic. This valuable handbook, written for secondary leaders and rank-and-file activists, not only provides a history and sum-up of the concessions experience through the Spring of 1983. It articulates a set of principles and strategies for "how to beat them."

Keywords

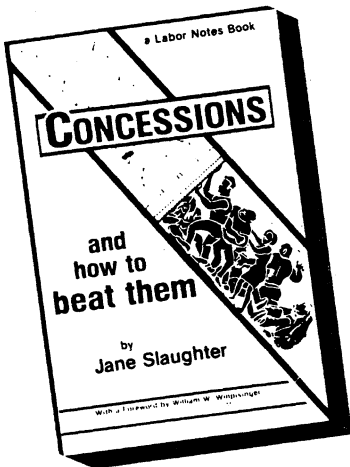
Concessions - and how to beat them, Jane Slaughter, book review

BOOK REVIEW

□ Jack Metzgar

Concessions— and how to beat them

by Jane Slaughter



As the title of her book indicates, Jane Slaughter is not afraid to be didactic. This valuable handbook, written for secondary leaders and rank-and-file activists, not only provides a history and sum-up of the concessions experience through the Spring of 1983. It articulates a set of principles and strategies for "how to beat them."

Whatever you think of Slaughter's analysis and principles, you've got to admire her cheek in addressing the problem. Concessions bargaining and what it means for the American labor movement is virtually a taboo subject

in official labor publications. As Slaughter herself points out, American unions do not criticize each other's contracts because that would be "interference" in the private affairs of sister institutions. But official silence on concessions, let alone on "how to beat them," is rooted in more than interunion politics and protocol.

The AFL-CIO and the leadership of most of the major unions are just not sure what to make of the new bargaining situation confronting them. Often, they are not even clear that concessions bargaining is necessarily a bad thing. Some of them see new possibilities for more cooperative relations with management. Some, as in the recent Steelworkers election, take rhetorical stands decrying concessions in the abstract while accepting them in practice. Many hope that their concessions contracts are merely strategic retreats that can be reversed once things return to "normal."

The bargaining environment has turned upside down in the past three years, and it is not surprising that union leaders and rank-and-file alike have been confused and disoriented by the corporate and

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government onslaught they've experienced. Wielding plant closings and contracting out in one hand and quality-of-worklife and "gain-sharing" programs in the other, corporations have grown increasingly bold and imaginative in forcing give-backs in wages, benefits and work rules that had come to be taken for granted. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration has systematically gutted the NLRB and OSHA and has set a union-busting tone that has found a frightening resonance in a distorted media and public opinion.

Twelve pages of Slaughter's book are given to a table which lists the basic characteristics of the various concession contracts over the past several years. The length of this list and the character of the concessions would not have been imaginable scarcely three years ago. Nothing in the post-World War II experience of unionists prepared them for what they face in the 1980s. And no one should have expected unionists to handle this altogether new experience without a lot of bumbling and confusion, and even a little outright dishonesty and self-deception.

Now, with the experience of the new environment widespread and deep within the labor movement, there is reason to hope that the next round of giveback demands will be handled more effectively. Experience teaches, and now unionists have had some.

But experience doesn't draw its own lessons. For that you need to gather that experience, analyze and interpret what it means, put it in a context and make some judgements—and some guesses—on your own. The lessons drawn have to be debated; the analysis, contended over.

That's why the official taboo on discussing concessions, and on critically evaluating various approaches to bargaining in the new environment, is so disabling. It's also why Slaughter's work is so important.

After surveying the history of concessions from 1979 to 1983 and noting the developing patterns in corporate demands and union responses, Slaughter takes up "The Economics Behind Concessions." She argues persuasively that "unionists cannot expect another long-lasting period of prosperity," and, therefore, they cannot "just roll with the punches of the business cycle and get back to bargaining as usual in the next upturn." Corporations have serious long-term problems, and they are trying to solve them by changing the rules of collective bargaining.

Slaughter then shows why even large-scale labor concessions will not help the corporations solve these problems. The United Rubber Workers' concessions at Uniroyal, for example, were worth \$54.9 million to the company; but this was less than one per cent of its total costs. More important to corporate management is the longer-run process of weakening union power and principles. They got off

to a good start on this during the period Slaughter surveys.

Slaughter's program for beating concessions, which takes up nearly half the book, is divided into a strategy for resisting concessions and one for going on the offensive. Though illustrated with examples from many different struggles, her program is more a general statement of principles than a "how to" recipe for winning.

Many of her prescriptions are standard fare—like organizing the unorganized, being prepared to strike, and revitalizing the union's internal life. Because she presents these in list form, she fails to develop a cogent explanation of how various actions reinforce and build upon one another. Readers who have been involved in concessions struggles where they've tried to apply some or all of these principles will be disappointed with Slaughter's apparent lack of appreciation for the complexity of real situations and for the importance of timing and imaginative tactics.

But Slaughter's statement of principles is valuable because it is comprehensive; it shows the importance of an overall labor strategy which integrates shopfloor power struggle, local and national bargaining, and the political fight for progressive social and economic policy. Besides, there is distressing evidence that parts of the American labor movement are in need of the kind of clear statement of principles Slaughter provides.

The book ends with a 20-page "Resources" section which lists reports, pamphlets, magazine articles, films and slide shows which are related to various aspects of Slaughter's subject. Organized by categories which make it easy for different kinds of readers to find material of special relevance to them, this section by itself is worth the price of the book.

The range and extent of resources being produced to aid unionists in their fight against the new corporate onslaught is itself evidence of a gathering strength and sophistication within the labor movement. Slaughter's *Concessions* is a substantial contribution to this gathering.

• *Concessions—and how to beat them* is published by Labor Notes, P.O. Box 20001, Detroit, MI 48220, 1983, 152 pp. \$4.50.