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Written as an ‘act of solidarity’, Workers’ Playtime seeks to intervene in a field of practice defined by ‘a battle between capital and labour’ [13]. There is some irony, then, in the authors’ adoption of the corporatist term ‘strategic ventures’ to describe their four case studies. But the theatre groups studied here have each had to develop ‘adaptive practices’ in forging partnerships with labour organizations battling the ‘explicit anti-Labour program of the New Right, which transforms nations into markets and labour into a global workpool’ [9]. Don Bouzek of Canada’s Ground Zero, for instance, shows that ‘an activist artist can appropriate the entrepreneurial models of market capitalism to generate self-employment while at the same time working and enacting a radical politics of community and resistance’ [203].

Filewod and Watt provide a fine-grained analysis of the complex history of labour-arts relations in Britain, Canada and Australia. Historical lines are traced via the Second International of 1889, and on through fragmented socialist counter-cultures of the twentieth century. Informed particularly by a grim post-1960s narrative of de-unionization and rationalization, the study finally encounters ‘social unionism’ - a contemporary form of labour consciousness animated by concerns such as environmentalism, gender equity and ethnicity.

Following two introductory chapters, the book provides its detailed case studies. Each strategic venture ‘wrestled with the notion of working-class culture, and mostly found it elusive or even illusory’ [241]. Prevailing attitudes of labour organisations to
artistic works have typically been indifferent; indeed, union bureaucracies often have a deep investment in ‘the fundamental alignments of class and ownership in Western society’ [243]. Founded in the early 1970s, Britain’s Banner Theatre melded the interactive informality of folk club performance with the ‘Actuality’ montage form developed by Charles Parker in a legendary series of BBC ‘Radio Ballads’ in the late 1950s. Such authenticating dramaturgical strategies are apparent in each of the case studies, helping to realize the instrumentalist imperatives of this type of work. Melbourne Workers’ Theatre ‘happened at the high tide of the [Australia Council’s] Art and Working Life program’ [136], achieving considerable success in workplace-based theatre during the 1980s. Ground Zero, ‘a hybrid of fringe theatre and small business’ [165], was the first Canadian company to form continuing partnerships with organized labour, particularly through its Health Care projects in the early 1990s. Finally, the annual May Day celebration in Darwin exemplifies how ‘cultural work can make connections with community groups on the edge of the [union] movement, and thus assist in the formation of the “coalitions of resistance” upon which political activism will rely in “New Times”’ [239].