
Walking the Union Walk is not a scholarly book. And although it is written in an accessible, chatty style, it is not really a journalistic book either. Rather, this is a commemorative text, commissioned and co-published by one of Canada’s most interesting trade unions, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), to mark its 10th anniversary. As such, it should be viewed by scholars interested in understanding the link between labour and communications as a resource text rather than as a fully rounded examination of the CEP.

The CEP was created in 1992 in an extraordinary three-way merger among the Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada, the Canadian Paperworkers Union, and the Energy and Chemical Workers Union. The result is one of this country’s largest private-sector unions, with 150,000 members. Most work in what might broadly be construed as the communications sector, from telephone workers to typographers, from journalists to broadcast technicians, from the people who produce newsprint to those who produce the energy that runs the presses. CEP embodies—and, indeed, helped to define—the concept of labour convergence, an idea that has seized the interest of communication workers’ unions in Canada and the United States. In an era of accelerated corporate concentration, growing cross-media ownership, and sweeping technological change, unions see labour convergence as both a defensive move and an opportunity to take advantage of the new workplace environment.

Like most semi-official histories, this book is noteworthy both for what it includes and for what it leaves out. It offers a series of portraits of struggles CEP members have faced with employers ranging from Abitibi, Canada Lafarge, and the CBC to Purdy’s Chocolates. Author Jamie Swift quotes CEP officials as estimating that during the five years from 1996 to 2001, almost 35,000 CEP members were on strike at some point, costing the union more than $100 million in strike pay, special strike funds, and appeals (p. 7). Underlying the recounting of these struggles is a curiously cheerful leitmotif that presents the strike as bargaining tool and union-building institution; at times one can almost hear “Solidarity Forever” playing in the background. For example, Swift describes the 100-day work stoppage at Manitoba Telephone System in 1999 as “a fine summer of picketing, picnics and parades” (p. 51), then lists a slew of happy picket line events, from Hawaiian Days to pancake breakfasts to compiling a cookbook. He quotes picket captain Diane Shaver as saying the strikers spent four hours a day on the picket line and the rest of the day with their kids. According to Shaver, “For an awful lot of them it was the best summer they ever had” (p. 51).

To its credit, the book deals with unsuccessful strikes and lockouts as well as successful ones. Of the failed Calgary Herald dispute, Swift writes: “On one level it was a defeat, and a bitter one at that.” He adds, “But it was also another sign that in the first few years of its existence CEP would not back down in the face of intransigence or intimidation by employers, no matter how big or powerful” (p. 144). Perhaps. Many of the journalists who were forced to give up their jobs after a bitter winter on the picket line might see it differently.

 Strikes, though dramatic, represent breakdowns in the collective bargaining system. In other words, they are not the day-to-day lived experience of most union members. CEP is much more than a union that lives from strike to strike. In his foreword to the book, Brian Payne characterizes the organization this way: “a union that is proactive inside and outside the workplace; a union that isn’t just talking the talk but walking the walk” (p. vii). Swift describes a number of CEP campaigns and policy initiatives, such as the demand for more
ecologically sensitive forestry practices, the fight for shorter working hours, and the pres-
ervation of public broadcasting. CEP has also been active in the anti-globalization struggle
and has reached out to workers in Latin America through its Humanity Fund. Though the
reporting on some of these activities is briefer than it might be, the initiatives fill an impor-
tant place in the book, as they do in the daily life of the union.

For labour historians, perhaps the biggest disappointment in the book is the skimpy
attention paid to how the CEP came to be in the first place. Union mergers are complex
deals, based on protecting what each partner sees as its core needs and constituency while
calculating the advantages in belonging to a larger unit. Three-way mergers like the one
that created CEP are exceptional, and the inside story of the negotiations that led up to it
must have been fascinating. But readers of Swift’s book will not learn much about them; the
merger negotiations are dealt with in a couple of pages and told in generalities. Swift pays
equally scant attention to how CEP came to prominence as a media workers union. This
occurred through a series of breakaways by Canadian locals or branches of international
media unions (such as the Newspaper Guild, International Typographical Union, NABET)
who found their way to the CEP, one by one, as their compatriots in the U.S. and other parts
of Canada merged with other unions, mainly the Communications Workers of America.
These departures and mergers reshaped the Canadian media labour landscape in the 1990s,
leading in some areas to remarkable labour power and in others to inter-union rivalry. Swift
plays up the former and more or less ignores the latter. And that’s a pity, because he is a tal-
ented storyteller and has a good story to tell.

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