

In the mid-1980s, LO launched what they called the ‘solidaristic work’ policy, according to the authors integral with the then trendy conception of a grand transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. The strategy sought for an alternative to Japanese and American ‘lean production’. That such an alternative did exist, and was well developed within Sweden at the Uddevalla and Kalmar assembly plants, is a germane theme the authors do not explore at any length (on this see Sandberg, 1995, 2013). As the authors conclude this chapter – the final one solely addressing the Swedish experience – ‘the logical ambit of anti-liberalism was never fully consummated in policy’ because the party leadership balked at key policies at key moments. The result has been a kind of ‘stalled implementation’ (my words) of socialist possibilities, alongside a neo-liberal policy thrust.

This is a very rich book, a veritable treasure trove of ideas, and the occasional ageing reference only reflects the length of time the project must have taken to bring to fruition. The themes it addresses are very salient to the current challenges faced by social democracy, and the book is highly recommended to anyone interested in these issues, which do seem to be assuming greater prominence along with greater interest in Scandinavian policies in Australia (Scott, 2014). At over 430 pages of oftentimes challenging content, readers get their money’s worth.

References

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Steve Early, *Save Our Unions: Dispatches from a Movement in Distress*, Monthly Review Press: New York, 2013; 334 pp. RRP: USD 19.95

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It is hard enough to be an active unionist in Australia. It is very much harder in the United States. Unions have to go through convoluted processes to earn the right to represent any group of workers. When they earn that right, they often have to contend with extraordinary efforts taken by employers to ‘decertify’ the union. The regulator, the National Labor Relations Board, is constituted to favour employers over workers. Many states have ‘Right to Work’ legislation that has the effect of making it even more difficult for unions to bargain collectively. Although American unions have millions of members, only 7% of private sector workers are organised. This is the context of the book by Steve Early, a former union official and long-term commentator on union affairs.

Steve Early’s book is subtitled *Dispatches from a Movement in Distress*. On one level, it is series of war stories of organising, and union ‘reform’ stories involving the aristocracy

of the American Labor movement: Mine workers, Teamsters, Electrical workers and Auto workers who are the major casualties of the de-industrialisation of the USA. Even the mighty Teamsters have fractured in recent years. The book then traces the decline of strike activity generally in the USA, noting the shift towards shorter protest strikes and the propensity of employers to make greater use to lockouts to force concession bargaining. Another section of the book discusses the tactics for organising in the 'long haul', including 'salting' workplaces with 'inside' organisers and tentative steps to use connections with international unions to resist multinational companies headquartered in Europe.

One of the most revealing sections of the book is the role of health care in collective bargaining. Obama's Affordable Health Care Act notwithstanding, unions have long had to contend with the propensity of employers to use the threat of cutting often quite extensive health care provisions in order to force concessions in other employment conditions. The absence of a Public Health Care Insurance system (the 'single payer' model) is one of the key political obstacles facing unions. Early documents reveal the struggles that health sector union have had with care-giving organisations. Under the banners of Wellness programmes, ostensibly designed to improve workers' health in the workplace, workers now pay for health insurance that has been hitherto the sole responsibility of the employers. He instances the Daughters of Charity Health Care System forcing its employees, with the agreement of the union, the much vaunted Service Employees International Union (SEIU), to pay 25% of their monthly premiums for health insurance that had been paid previously in total by employers, together with increased out of pocket expenses for visits to doctors and prescriptions. One of the most highly organised occupational groups, teachers, have not been immune from this trend. In 2012, the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) was forced to return to work after a 17-day strike and accept a contract that froze insurance rates. A CTU official saw this as the 'thin edge of wedge' of a general decline of benefit conditions in the historically better organised public sector.

Early, a former telecom union official, then provides a case study on the concerted efforts by Verizon to reduce employment conditions through concession bargaining and a systematic attempt to marginalise unionised workers. He, however, sees some hope arising from that experience: local officials and activists are now seeking to increase membership and organise to defend past gains. The problem is that concession bargaining in itself makes it difficult to recruit union members when the perception is that it gives away long established working conditions.

The sixth section of the book discusses union leadership that he says is a gerontocracy even if it had been leavened in recent years with more leaders who are women and people of colour. First, national leaders tended to be well paid, far in excess of the people they represent. Second, there is not much of a career structure for younger union officials. There is logjam at the leadership level within unions, and a general absence of positions for former union officials in the corporate world or public sector organisations. While unionists (particularly teachers) are the foot soldiers for the Democratic Party, there is not much in the way of cross over between the party and unions, unlike Labour parties in other English speaking countries. The overall effect of this is membership disempowerment. Yet, the leadership of the union movement relies on Democrat Administrations to provide benefits for workers. Obama supports the right to organise and an increase in the minimum wage, but has been unwilling, or unable, to deliver any further benefits for

working people (although apparently there are few workers in the USA: the rhetoric seems to be about the amorphous ‘middle class’).

The final section of the work is on a struggle in Vermont. This state has sent the only declared socialist, Bernie Sanders, to the Senate for 20 years. The ‘Green Mountain State’ was once a Republican stronghold. Nevertheless, it is still a battleground where the Tea Party is well organised, as well as supporters of Obama’s health care reforms and more progressive elements that want a single payer public health system. Sanders’ backers, the Vermont Progressive Party, hold seats in the state congress and fill many local offices. There was a live political debate in the state about a single payer system leading to its facilitating legislation in 2011, but it has not been implemented on the grounds of cost. Nevertheless, it is model for a yet to occur debate in the rest of the nation where the Republicans are bent on winding back the hated ‘Obama care’.

At various places in the book, Early has a swipe at the SEIU, the second largest union in the USA. The SEIU has been represented as the face of modern American organising model unionism. Early provides instances where, in his view, the SEIU forced concessions on the part of the workers it was representing. Most of his comments are directed at Jane McAlevey, a Las Vegas Local 1107 organiser and self-styled ‘left wing troublemaker’, who in Early’s view managed to alienate both the Local leadership and eventually the national officials of the SEIU from whom she accepted preferment. He contests her claims about the extent of union membership growth, but credits her with some successful contract campaigns. He, however, calls her ‘a progressive prima donna, a labor type that is all too familiar, just as likely to be male as female and not really the best leadership model’ (pp. 245–246). She broke federal law by interfering with the leadership of the Local, at the behest of national officials, who in end forced her to resign. She was in Early’s view an individualist not a builder of collective effort. He nevertheless suggests that the SEIU attracts a lot of progressive idealists from outside the union, who have little time for the efforts of local officials from the shop floor. Moreover, whatever claims the SEIU can make to be a new model labour organisation, it is becoming at the centre as bureaucratic and potentially as ossified as much of the American union movement. It is not possible to test these views here, although McAlevey (2012) has written her own account of her career with the SEIU and Early reports she has contested his account.

Early is an arresting writer. It is rare enough for former union officials to write much more than self-aggrandising memoirs. Anyone interested in unions and, in particular, the survival of American unions will find this view written from the inside, written for the outside, worth a close reading.

Reference

McAlevey J (with Ostertag B) (2012) *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*. New York: Verso Books.