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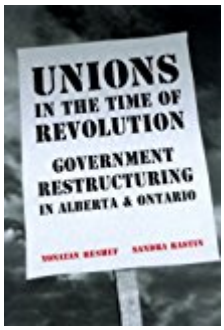
Yonatan Reshef, Sandra Rastin. *Unions in the Time of Revolution: Government Restructuring in Alberta and Ontario.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. xviii + 279 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-8753-9.



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The 1990s will be remembered as one of the most challenging decades in Canadian labor history. The decade began with the most significant period of economic contraction since the Great Depression and left thousands of Canadian workers, especially those in the manufacturing sectors, unemployed. If that were not bad enough, the movement towards freer trade and globalization, which began in Canada after the 1987 Canada U.S. Free Trade agreement, sent even more workers to the unemployment office, all in the name of "corporate restructuring," "downsizing," "global competitiveness," and "flexibility." Throughout North America governments followed corporate (especially multinational) capital's lead to "downsize" and "rationalize" public services and social benefits. As Yontan Reshef and Sandra Rastin highlight in their study, *Unions in the Time of Revolution*, public sector unions bore a significant brunt of governments' restructuring processes, debt reduction programs, and reduced investment in social services. Though Canadian governments at all levels engaged in such restructuring processes, two provinces led the way--Alberta and Ontario. The Conservative governments in these two provinces led, as the authors argue, "a blitzkrieg" on budget deficits under the guise of the Klein Revolution and the Common Sense Revolution (p. vii). Though the Klein and Harris revolutions created many enemies, their chief opponents were organized labor (both public and private sector) since these revolutions affected not only government approaches to and levels of service provision, but also the rights of unions to protect and promote the interests of their members. But as Reshef and Rastin argue, the form, content, and success of labor's collective action against the Klein and Harris revolutions could not have been more different. The central question of their study is why Alberta unions were so quiescent during the Klein Revolution while Ontario unions engaged in vociferous and often illegal protests against Ontario government restructuring programs.

To answer this question Reshef and Rastin propose a model of "union collective action," which they define as "a form of protest unions can employ to express their dissatisfaction with the government of the day" (p. viii). According to their model, unions are more likely to engage in

collective action when governments threaten their capacity to represent the interests of their members. Thus, they propose that union collective action is a "manifestation of a political rather than an economic discontent ... at the centre [of which is] not management's right to manage, and a limited collective bargaining agenda but rather a government's sovereignty and definition of the public interest" (p. viii). While this may be true, the separation of the political and economic is not as neatly divorced as Reshef and Rastin suggest; after all, Harris's Bill 7 was a general attack on the bargaining rights of all Ontario unions, public and private, and the government's attack on public-sector unions was seen by the business community as setting the trend for reasserting management's rights of control in private-sector collective bargaining. Why else would the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) have spent so much of its resources leading the Days of Action and the Strategic Voting campaign if the only targets of government legislation were public-sector unions?

To better understand the divergent response of Alberta and Ontario workers to government restructuring programs the authors begin by examining the political economy of industrial relations in the two provinces. As they argue, until the 1990s both provinces had "stable industrial relations systems," which had evolved gradually over time and experienced only sporadic conflict (p. 3). That, however, they note, is where the similarities end. Alberta's economy has been, and continues to be, driven by the primary sector, particularly the oil and gas industry and agriculture. This means that the province has Canada's lowest trade union density and some of the most employer-friendly labor legislation in the country. It also boasts the lowest minimum wage and the lowest per capita spending on social services in the country. In comparison, manufacturing drives Ontario's economy both literally and figuratively given the size and significance of the auto industry to the province's economy. This means that unions are far more prevalent in Ontario than in Alberta, even though, the authors point out, trade union density is not much higher in Ontario than it is in Alberta. Nonetheless, industrial relations policies in Ontario have tried to balance the interests of labor and capital so as to promote the province as a stable place to do business.

Politically, the two provinces, though governed for much of the postwar period by Conservative governments, are also very dissimilar. Since the 1930s, Alberta has been the bastion of political conservatism and has generally operated on the basis of a one-party state, whether that party has been the United Farmers, Social Credit, or the Progressive Conservatives. As the authors note, Alberta's conservativism manifests itself in a political culture that is cautious and conformist, and not one that might promote trade union or social radicalism, notwithstanding the widespread perception among labor historians that Western Canada, including Alberta, was the hotbed of labor radicalism prior to the Great Depression.[1] If anything, the study reveals that the old shibboleth in Canadian labor history of the "conservative east" and the "radical west" has been completely reversed in the modern era. In Ontario, even though Conservative governments governed Ontario for most of the postwar period, they were continually challenged by the Liberals and the New Democrats, who forced them to make significant concessions in labor and social policy. As the authors demonstrate, it was the obliteration, if not self-destruction, of the NDP after 1995 that allowed the Harris Conservatives to attack social and labor policy and generally rule far more ideologically than the "Big Blue Machine" that dominated Ontario politics from the 1950s to the 1980s.

In what is probably one of the most controversial arguments in the book, Reshef and Rastin claim that it was not the Tories who politicized labor relations in the province, but the NDP government under Bob Rae. Here they point to Bill 40, which shifted the balance of power towards labor by banning replacement workers, giving new

unions first contract arbitration rights, and allowing unions to picket on private property. The Rae government also gave the right to strike to agricultural workers, and, more importantly, to all non-essential public-sector workers. Such changes were hardly revolutionary in Canada, as similar rights had been granted in Quebec by the Parti Quebecois government in the 1970s and 1980s. However, given the uproar the election of the NDP had caused within the Ontario business community, such legislation was going to be viewed as extremely controversial, especially during a period of economic recession and readjustment. Nonetheless, their argument seems to be a case of "blaming the victim." Though they do not state it explicitly, they suggest that the Rae government should have pursued a more cautious approach to labor relations knowing that future non-NDP governments would not only have undone their reforms, but would use them to dismantle much of the postwar compromise. And yet, as their own study reveals, the Harris government did not overturn a key piece of NDP labor reform that gave public sector employees the right to strike, even after public sector unions launched aggressive anti-government campaigns and strikes to derail his Common Sense Revolution.

Chapter 2 examines the contexts of the Klein and Harris Revolutions. As the authors note, both premiers adopted aggressive policies to deal with growing budget deficits brought on by the economic recession of the early 1990s and by the federal government's offloading its responsibilities for social services and health programs. Part of their strategies, the authors argue, was simply pragmatic: something had to be done about rising debts, ballooning deficits, and falling revenues. Nonetheless, they do argue that the way both Klein and Harris attacked these problems drew heavily upon neo-conservative ideologies that first emerged in the United States and Great Britain during the Thatcher and Reagan eras. However, they note that Klein's Revolution was far less ideologically driven than Harris's Common Sense Revolution. In particular, they point to Klein's reluctance to openly challenge labor's sacred rights of collective bargaining. As a result, there was little overt union opposition to Klein's massive cuts to health, education, and social welfare budgets, nor to his restructuring and privatizing of much of the public service and enforced wage reductions on those who remained. Conversely, despite his populist image as the golfer from North Bay who was only trying to return Ontario to a state of normalcy and "common sense" after the destructive and revolutionary "Rae Days," Harris was far more ideologically attached to a neo-conservative agenda. As the authors argue, Harris believed that if Ontario unions had fought their own NDP government so vociferously over the Social Contract, then they would "likely doubly resist his revolution" (p. 29). Expecting that organized labor would try to derail much of his Common Sense Revolution, Harris took a page from Margaret Thatcher's book and directly confronted organized labor through hostile legislation and complete exclusion from the policy arena. To the authors, the difference between a pragmatic Klein and an ideologically driven Harris explains a good deal of the difference in the responses of Alberta and Ontario unions to similar policies of government restructuring.

Chapter 3 presents the authors' conceptual framework for collective action. According to Reshef and Rastin collective actions by unions occur primarily as political rather than economic strategies and occur when unions feel that they have no other alternatives available to represent the social, political, and economic interests of their members. To them, union collective action is defensive, ad hoc, and largely spontaneous in nature. It is used to protect such things as job security, wages, benefits, and working conditions, and is intended to seek a return to or maintain the status quo, rather than to advance a new agenda. While government action to erode unions' vested interests is probably the most important cause of union collective action, Reshef and Rastin propose

that it is not the only reason why unions will engage in such action. According to them, unions must be sufficiently organized, possess strong leadership, and have good communication networks and strategies necessary to move their members towards actions that may have no bearing on their immediate interests, such as their standard of living. Finally, for union collective action to occur, Reshef and Rastin argue that a fourth factor must come into play--cognitive liberation--or the belief among union members that their situations are unjust and can and must be changed through collective action. This is what historians, particularly Marxist historians, would call the development of class consciousness, which in the words of E. P. Thompson occurs "when some men, as a result of common experiences..., feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs."[2]

The authors' choice of language and methodology, as in the example above, obviously represents an industrial relations/school of business paradigm that many historians might find a bit jarring at times. Indeed, the authors even admit themselves that "some may consider [a] development model of union political collective action to be tedious, abstract, and perhaps too academic" (p. ix). Certainly the constant reference to how particular events and ideas fit their model impedes the flow of the "story," causes a great deal of unnecessary repetition, and at times makes their whole argument seem somewhat forced. Moreover, they never sufficiently define or justify their use of the term "collective action" and how it might differ from simple union action, since both the OPSEU strike and the Days of Action are both considered to be "union collective actions." Here they seem to imply that collective actions are ones that mobilize the rank and file and the leadership, as well as ones that reach across union lines and down into the wider community to deal with wider political and social issues. Thus the terminology often appears as jargon rather than a clear and concise definition of union protest. In their defense, however, most industrial relations research tends to avoid the wider political implications of the collective bargaining process, something that their study, thank heavens, does not do. Moreover, they restore modern labor unions to the ranks of social movements, and do not treat them automatically as narrowly economistic creatures. This shift in focus is extremely pertinent since organized labor has increasingly become alienated from key centers of power in the state and civil society during the post-Fordist era.

Reshef and Rastin use chapters 4 through 7 to test their model and methodology through a number of case studies from the Klein and Harris Revolutions, including the 1995 OPSEU strike, Ontario Teachers' illegal walkout in the fall of 1997, the Days of Action campaign, and the CAW-sponsored "strategic voting" campaign during the 1999 Ontario provincial election. As one can see from the above list, the authors primarily use the actions of Ontario unions as the litmus test of labor collective action. The overwhelming message of these chapters is that Ontario unions engaged in collective action to protest the Harris Common Sense Revolution, while Alberta labor generally remained on the sidelines as spectators to the Klein Revolution. Here they flesh out their argument through these case studies that Ontario unions engaged in collective protests because they clearly felt threatened by Harris's aggressive and often punitive approach to labor relations. In contrast, Ralph Klein avoided labor protests because he did not provoke Alberta unions by attacking their ability to represent their members' interests. In short, he followed the old adage of letting "sleeping dogs lie." In return, the vast majority of Alberta unions awarded him the fabled allegiance of "man's best friend." The authors point to a number of instances where chief members of the Klein government refused to provoke a confrontation with the province's unions by such things as Right-to-Work legislation. So long as Klein stuck to

what one union representative called "the small things" (wages, etc.) Alberta union members were unlikely to take their disagreements with him to the streets like Ontario workers.

Though Reshef and Rastin point to Klein's non-confrontational approach as the key to understanding Alberta labor's response, they also outline a number of other important factors that led to its acceptance of the Klein Revolution. For one, Alberta public sector unions, unlike their counterparts in Ontario, did not have the right to strike. While some unions engaged in illegal walkouts, they were sporadic, short-lived, and not well organized. They highlight the failure of the 1995 illegal walkout by laundry workers in Calgary area hospitals to spark wider protests over the Klein Revolution. Though the walkout was illegal it gained a great deal of public support which forced Klein to back down from his "no-blink" approach to government restructuring. Nonetheless, Alberta unions were both unable and unwilling to capitalize on this moment of weakness to transform their protests into something akin to the Ontario Days of Action. Moreover, as the authors found, the Klein Revolution was generally popular with Albertans, including many rank and file unionists in the province. Finally, they note that Alberta workers and their unions were too worried about losing their jobs and their members to mount any opposition to the government that had the ability to legislate the wage and service reductions and other anti-labor legislation. According to Reshef and Rastin, Alberta labor had the unenviable choice of "living on its knees or dying on its feet" (p. 152). Nonetheless, Alberta unions largely weathered the storm of the Klein revolution and more recently have been mounting challenges to the government as revenues have permitted a limited program of "reinvestment."

While Reshef and Rastin find it quite easy to explain Alberta labor's quiescence, they have a much more difficult time explaining exactly what Ontario workers and unions accomplished by their collective protests against the Common Sense Revolution. On the one hand, it is clear that Ontario unions, both public and private, were successful in moving their members, many of whom had never taken to the picket lines before, to engage in bold and risky protests against a hostile government. On the other hand, Reshef and Rastin's study demonstrates that time and time again the "collective action" of Ontario unions did little to impair the Harris Tories' ability to govern the province. The only victory of note, they claim, was OPSEU's ability to gain successor rights in the privatization of government services. Nonetheless, as they observe, such a victory only slowed the speed of the Harris revolution; it did not derail it by any means. In fact, good portions of chapters 4 through 7 focus on the ways that collective action did more to divide and weaken Ontario's house of labor. They point specifically to the teachers' strike in the fall of 1997 and the deep divisions and mistrust that developed between elementary and secondary schoolteachers. But most importantly they point to the way the failures of the Days of Action and the Strategic Voting campaign divided the OFL between unions who supported the collective protests led by the CAW and those, the so-called "pink unions" led by the Steelworkers, who sought a less flamboyant political strategy of trying to rebuild the NDP. According to Reshef and Rastin, the Days of Action did more to demonstrate the impotence of Ontario's unions than it did their strength. These sporadic protests, they claim, lacked a specific agenda and united message, and thus did little to move the government to respond to them. Despite putting 250,000 people on to the streets of Toronto in the fall of 1995, the Harris government let protestors blow off some steam and quietly went back to governing the province on Monday morning as if nothing had happened. Finally, the authors also point to the failure of the strategic voting campaign headed by the CAW to dislodge the Harris Conservative government in the 1999 provincial elections. Indeed, they note the irony of the CAW

strategy; after lambasting the NDP for moving to the right, it was now asking its members to do the same. In fact, in some cases, it was asking union members to vote against the party they were members of and who employed them! But as Reshef and Rastin conclude this section, such a result was predictable according to their model because successful collective action relies heavily on leaders to control the actions of their members. Once their members entered the polling booths, leaders had no way of ensuring how they exercised their right to vote.

It should be noted here that Reshef and Rastin do not claim that collective action was a complete waste of time and resources for Ontario's unions. However, they do note that the successes are much harder to measure. The Days of Action certainly boosted the fortunes and experience of many community and social advocacy organizations, and strengthened labor's ties with these organizations. In addition, strikes by OPSEU and by teachers gave them a sense of accomplishment and solidarity that carried over into later protests and strikes against the government, so the inability of their strikes to extract major concessions from the government was not a complete waste of time and resources. On other hand, though they do not come out and say so directly, Reshef and Rastin seem to imply that the Days of Action and particularly the Strategic voting campaign did indeed represent a waste of union resources. Indeed, the fact that Oshawa, a city dominated by the CAW and a long-time stronghold of the NDP, has elected Conservatives twice in the last decade reveals that there may be a critical disjuncture between the values of union leaders and the rank and file, and that the gap might just be widening.

Reshef and Rastin believe that their research confirms the validity of their model of collective action. They conclude that union collective action originates from hostile government behavior and policies and is "an ad hoc defensive behavior that unions organize to protect themselves" (p. 185). Furthermore, it is employed only when traditional avenues of resolving such conflicts have been rendered futile by a hostile government. But what about the effectiveness of union collective action? Can union collective action change the policies of hostile governments? Most of the evidence Reshef and Rastin present seems to indicate that unions had almost no effect on government restructuring policies, no matter whether they protested vociferously in the streets or accepted them with little more than a whimper. Indeed, the study probably has more concrete lessons for government than it has for labor, namely that government restructuring plans should be implemented quickly and that hostile legislation is the most effective way to overcome attempts to derail or delay such plans. This is, however, exactly what organized labor needs to do. Perhaps after picking through the bones of Reshef and Rastin's conclusions, organized labor can learn more from what failed than from what worked. That possibility makes this study a necessary read for all those interested in reinserting issues of social and economic justice at the top of the public agenda.

On a narrower focus what is the value of Reshef and Rastin's study to H-Canada readers and to Canadian working-class historians? The problem I found in both reading and reviewing this book as a historian is that the authors do not spend much time grounding their study in Canadian labor and working class history, or in the history of collective bargaining in Canada. To be fair, their study was never intended or purported to be a history of either topic. Even so, a wider historical perspective may have put some of their arguments in a different light. For example, as Leo Panitch and Donald Schwarz have argued, trade union rights and freedoms, and social policies won during the postwar compromise have been under attack for quite some time.[3] Their work certainly questions the "stability" of the industrial relations climate that was in both Alberta and Ontario before the Klein and Harris revolutions, or even the Rae NDP government. Seen in this light,

government retrenchment in the 1990s seems less revolutionary and more part of the evolution of a more "coercive" approach to collective bargaining and social policy. Nonetheless, the book does have much to offer historians, particularly the interviews with rank and file union members. Here, future historians will get a sense of the diversity of rank and file reactions, not only towards the Klein and Harris Revolutions, but, equally important, towards their own union's responses. For this reason alone Rastin and Reshef's study will occupy a prominent place on this historian's bookcase.

Notes

[1]. On the extremely contentious debate over "Western Exceptionalism" in Canadian labor history see David Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (June 1977): pp. 154-157; and especially the epilogue to his revised edition of *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike*, rev. ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). On western radicalism in the pre-depression period also see Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). For a counterview that disputes the "radical west"/"conservative east" paradigm see Gregory Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): pp. 11-44; and more recently the essays in Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-25* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998). See my review of Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada 1917-1925*, H-Net Reviews (July 1999), at http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=24931932664207.

[2]. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 8-9.

[3]. Leo Panitch and Donald Schwarz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* (Toronto: Garamond, 1993). See also Bob Russell, *Back to Work: Labour, State and Industrial Relations in Canada* (Toronto: Nelson, 1990); and Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001). Curiously, Panitch and Scharwz's work (and others that have argued in the same vein) is absent from the book's bibliography.

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