

Book Review

Gibbs, H., Leach, B. and Yates, C. (2012) *Negotiating Risk, Seeking Security, Eroding Solidarity: Life and Work on the Border*. Halifax: Fernwood. ISBN: 978-1-55266-527-5

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Against the promises of integration, this most timely book encapsulates the stark realities of the North American economic transformation over the last 20 years: almost everyone relying on a wage to survive is worse off. The increased facility of capital to move across borders has given strength to the threat of relocation, while the power of capital (both real and conjured) has worked to transform people's lives in negative ways. At its core, the transformation has meant a loss of worker control, not only over jobs and employment conditions, but also over the conditions that previously fostered essential communities of solidarity.

Negotiating Risk, Seeking Security, Eroding Solidarity captures vividly the magnitude of this transformation among workers in the automotive parts industry in four communities in Canada (Brantford, Guelph, Stratford and Windsor) and in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. The authors' objective is to explore how capital mobility has affected people's experience of work in these communities and, in turn, how changes in workers' material conditions have disrupted the basis upon which solidarity is lived and exercised (p. 14).

The depth brought by Gibbs, Leach, and Yates to the discussion is in no small measure the result of their understanding of solidarity, one that 'pays closer attention to the materiality and social relations of gender, race, home, family and community' (p. 3). It is these lenses that provide a framework for uncovering the meaning of uncertainty and risk, and their impact on workers' experiences, particularly for women. Extensive interviews with workers in the two countries studied provide evidence for assessing the consequences that the compound impact of changes in labour markets, levels of social protection, new management strategies and the reorganization of production has produced on workers' concrete opportunities to foster communities of solidarity. The book's main argument is that these changes have transformed negatively the relationships that once supported social and solidarity bonds among workers, their families and their broader communities.

In the introductory chapter, the authors lead readers through key concepts and lay out candidly the methodological decisions that inform their findings. They also explain the inclusion of Ciudad Juárez in their investigation. While there is obviously some imbalance in the breadth of the study in the two countries, comparisons between Canada and Mexico allow the authors to draw later on some critical lessons about workers' capacities to resist the power of employers. The overarching theoretical approach is further expounded in Chapter 2, where the shifting realities of the auto parts industry are set in context. Importantly, also, the discussion in this chapter presents an excellent case for the need among researchers to consider a broader set of variables in order to understand workers' responses to restructuring. In particular, the authors convey the centrality of state policy in demarcating the impact of capital accumulation strategies through the extension, or

restriction, of some form of social protection. Chapter 3 describes the way in which these factors have shaped the automotive industry and the lives of workers within the 5 communities in the study.

The following three chapters make the case for the authors' views about the conditioning factors for worker solidarity. First is the sphere of production (Chapter 4) and the particular disciplining power that contemporary forms of work organization exercises on workers. The threat of relocation and job loss appears as a major component in the ever-shrinking universe of possibilities workers contemplate in trying to respond to the demands of work and family. As the authors show, the calculation has a particularly pernicious side as one of the most prevalent outcomes has been the focus on personal options that foster a culture of competition among workers and the individualization of the work experience. As workers themselves recount, they blame each other for sluggish productivity as they fear productivity problem increases the likelihood of capital moving away in search of more adept workers. And just in case the occasional 'For Sale' sign on the lawns of factories (p. 57) didn't convey the message about their own prescindibility loud enough, we learn of one Canadian employer who went to the trouble and expense of taking some workers on a factory tour in Ciudad Juárez so they could witness first-hand their 'competitors' in Mexico manufacturing the same auto part with similar levels of quality but for much lower wages (p. 55). Competition among workers has also been the outcome of a whole range of corporate strategies, such as productivity bonuses, and public display of the names of those whose production has supposedly lowered quality standards. The tensions these strategies generate among workers are palpable in the climate of conflict workers encounter frequently in their workplaces. The pressure has been even bigger for women and racialized groups. These problems have tended to consolidate larger structural processes of segmentation and fragmentation of the labour force.

Moreover, as Gibbs, Leach, and Yates document, the pressures workers experience at work also affect them in their own homes and extended communities. This sphere is the subject of Chapter 5, where the authors argue convincingly about the several negative impacts of increased risk and insecurity on families in general, and on women more particularly. Experiences of mounting pressure at work, the isolation with which workers must deal, and the erosion of other social support mechanisms, very often translate into declining wellbeing, family conflicts and, not surprisingly, anger and violence. Violence manifests itself in various ways in the life of the workers portrayed, but clearly the most daunting experience is that of women in Ciudad Juárez, who have endured the constant fear of following the fate of hundreds of others who have been disappeared or murdered, many on their way to or from work in the maquiladoras (p. 91). Reductions in public spending and services have curtailed seriously the possibilities of escaping from the deteriorating conditions of labour markets. The problem is even worse for workers in Mexico, a country where, as in Canada, state provisions have diminished, but a country also starting from a much smaller base. In both nations, vanishing safety nets have affected the capacity of families to function as nurturing environments. Nonetheless, families have been called upon to play an even more primordial role in the reproduction of workers' material lives.

The new demands of work and labour markets have implied for many families the need to relocate. The sphere of worker mobility is the subject of Chapter 6 and the discussion is central in understanding one of the most pressing issues confronted by workers in the communities studied. For the workers interviewed, mobility might take several forms, from commuting long distances every day, to relocation in other communities within a particular national region or across national borders. The most negative experiences come, once again, from Mexican workers, for whom mobility implies very often not only internal migration (over one third of the population in Ciudad Juárez comes from other states in Mexico [p. 99]) but also the dangerous, costly, and often only

fleeting attempts at cross-border migration into the US. Through a narrative framed in the notions of mobility and immobility (p. 98), the authors provide deep insights into the impact of relocation on the lives of workers and their families. However, while the discussion here is illuminating, it considers only marginally and indirectly the role that immobility for workers plays in also conditioning the shape of labour markets. Strategies of labour control do, in fact, include the creation of an uprooted and transient working class, but in some situations it involves, as well, trapping people in inescapable situations of poverty.

Changes in the everyday realities of work have made it much more difficult for working classes in Canada and Mexico to respond to the demands of employers, but resistance to the impositions of capital has not been eliminated. In the final chapter, Gibbs, Leach and Yates map out not only the shape of resistance under these trying new circumstances, but also provide a critical assessment into what might account for the ability of workers to retain the level of solidarity required to confront employers. One of the key determinants in the capacity of workers to contest capital is the existence of some form of organization that can channel anger in a constructive way. Unions are a primordial site for organizing, of course, but they must be independent and transparent in their functioning. The trajectory of unions in the maquila sector in Mexico can be used as the most obvious example of unions that are not an instrument for the defense of workers' rights. Another major variable is the foresight of working class organizations to increase understanding and awareness among workers of the complex set of factors that determine the reality they confront in their workplaces. Finally, and not surprisingly, the longer and closer the relationship between the workplace and the community, the higher the chances of workers calling upon solidarity bonds among themselves and between them and the larger community to advance their demands.

There are fundamental lessons that can be derived from these observations, and we can only hope the analysis so clearly presented in *Negotiating Risk, Seeking Security, Eroding Solidarity* will be a contribution toward the reinvigoration of a much needed discussion about the role of unions and education in the charting of the next chapter in working class solidarity in struggles for social justice. Because it is also very clearly organized and argued, it will be a very effective learning tool in the classroom. This is indeed a first-rate study on work and working conditions in North America that will be of great value to students in the field.

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