

Book Review

**Bob Barnetson (2018) *Canada's Labour Market Training System*.
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*Reviewed by
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Understanding the inner workings of Canada's labour market presents a number of challenges to scholars, union leaders, workers and activists alike. The constitutionally mandated right of provincial and territorial governments to enact legislation within their areas of jurisdiction (which include health care, education and workplace governance) often collides with the powers of the federal government (where national economic and immigration policy is determined, and thus impacts the direction of provincial policy).

This has resulted in a rather complicated interplay between the various levels of government in Canada. As such, trying to understand emergent trends in labour market training on a national scale can be a difficult exercise. Fortunately, in *Canada's Labour Market Training System*, Bob Barnetson offers a comprehensive overview of this interplay and provides readers with not only a solid foundation from which to build their own understanding of the book's subject matter, but an invitation to pursue future research on these same topics.

While the book is a bit weighed down by its use of pertinent acronyms at times, it was clearly written with reader accessibility in mind. Undergraduate students (the book's most likely audience) will benefit from Barnetson's polemical (yet contrarian) style, and the casual reader will find the book as engaging as it is informative. Barnetson's commitment to making the book accessible is further demonstrated by its free offering as a PDF download from the Athabasca University Press website, a welcome development for individuals grappling with the skyrocketing costs of post-secondary education.

The book's central argument is simple. Barnetson contends that the maze of inter-governmental legislation, rules and regulations that exist in Canada can be thought of as a political *system* that supports an employer-driven agenda. This agenda places the onus on individual workers to demonstrate their employability in an increasingly competitive labour market, a market where the state ensures an oversupply of qualified workers that can be used to artificially suppress wages (and thus increase the profitability of employers).

Among the most impressive features of this book is the sheer volume of information that is packed into its roughly 200 pages. The number of relevant books, articles, government reports and news stories that were consulted in the writing of this book speaks to the extent of Barnetson's subject-matter expertise, and the Glossary following the book's final chapter provides a very useful reference to guide readers less familiar with labour relations and public policy jargon.

What is particularly interesting about the book's approach is how the most abstract concept it grapples with is introduced in the first chapter. Following a brief discussion that highlights key differences between the terms "training", "learning" and "education" and a succinct description of class dynamics and labour markets in a contemporary capitalist economy, Barnetson outlines how the various stakeholders of Canada's training system reinforce the inequities of neo-liberal

capitalism. This is primarily accomplished through the fabrication of a narrative that claims a “skills shortage” is hampering the broader Canadian economy. Thus, a solution bandied about by employer groups and their allies in government is to enhance training regimes to ensure that workers have the knowledge, skills and attributes that will enable them to contribute to the Canadian economy.

This narrative is patently false, however, because, as Barnettson demonstrates in later chapters, changes to labour-market policy have resulted in an overabundance of skilled labour and a deliberate proletarianisation of employment. In other words, in Canada there is no shortage of skilled workers, but rather a *shortage of meaningful employment opportunities for Canada’s workforce to apply their skills and knowledge*.

Although the book’s discussions of community-based and workplace training are interesting in their own right, the most compelling evidence in support of Barnettson’s central thesis can be found in its weaving of immigration and government training policy in the book’s third chapter.

It is here in particular that Barnettson’s subject-matter expertise in immigration, labour relations and public policy are laid bare. He highlights links between Unemployment Insurance (later renamed Employment Insurance), income support benefits and labour-market training programmes (such as the particularly odious Canada Job Grant programme that places an increasing financial burden on provincial governments). Barnettson uses these links to show that workers are increasingly responsible for getting the training they need to make themselves more “marketable” (or risk losing supplements to their incomes in times of labour-market instability). As such, the primary goal of contemporary employment readiness programmes shifts, and is more focused on quickly getting the most “employable” individuals back into the labour market. This shift has occurred as a result of continuous consultation with “stakeholder” groups dominated by employer interests, and comes at the expense of those who need more support to find employment.

In addition, this chapter’s discussion of the exploitive nature of Canada’s immigration policy (and the inherently precarious status of temporary foreign workers who work in low-wage jobs) demonstrates one way in which immigration has been used by the Canadian state as a cudgel to drive down workers’ wages in areas experiencing prolonged economic growth. Less subject to critical analysis, however, is the extent to which the Express Entry programme allows for the migration of more “skilled” workers into the country (so long as they are “matched” with an employer). These developments not only constitute a partial privatisation of Canada’s immigration system, but also serve to place migrant workers in a position where they are highly dependent on their employers upon arrival in Canada (and thereby further skew the labour market in favour of employers).

Interestingly, although Barnettson does a reasonable job of highlighting how the number of economic migrants to Canada has changed over the years as a result of federal government policy, his analysis is missing a breakdown of wages (for migrant and naturalised workers alike). This is unfortunate, as data on the earnings of migrants to Canada could be utilised to simultaneously demonstrate the economic pull factors that make the prospect of working in Canada so attractive for migrant workers *and* Canada’s persistent immigrant wage gap. This juxtaposition could provide a more nuanced discussion on the impact of immigration policy on worker income levels in Canada, and ensure that Barnettson’s unfortunate assertion that the state is placed in a “conflicted” position with regard to immigration is not used to legitimise nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment that far too often lurks near the surface of public policy debates in Canada.

Furthermore, while an entire chapter of the book is dedicated to post-secondary and apprenticeship training systems, the book disappointingly does not touch on the proliferation of work-integrated learning components of post-secondary education. This is an unfortunate

oversight, as there is a well-documented rise in the number of programmes that now mandate unpaid work experiences as a condition for graduation. This phenomenon is the post-secondary sector's response to pressures placed on it by government and private-sector stakeholders to address the so-called "crisis" of graduate employability. It also conditions graduates to accept working for free as a necessary step to obtaining future paid employment, thus destabilising the labour market and putting further downward pressure on workers' wages.

In addition, the distinction between paid and unpaid student work experiences generally falls along gendered lines. "Feminised" professions such as Nursing, Social Work, and Education have to pay tuition for practicum courses that do not compensate them for their labour. As such, by focusing exclusively on apprenticeships in the skilled trades (most of which are paid and in male-dominated professions), Barnettson misses an opportunity to tie a hugely exploitive (and gendered) phenomenon into his discussions of human capital theory and the hidden curriculum of post-secondary education.

Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, *Canada's Labour Market Training System* is a compelling read and an important (and timely) contribution to our understanding of the Canadian state's approach to managing the domestic labour market. It provides a powerful rebuttal to the myth of the so-called "skills shortage" in Canada, and is an excellent resource that can be used in future efforts to resist and undo the damage caused by the neo-liberal policies of successive levels of government in Canada.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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