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Labor Film Shelf: Collision Course

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Labor Film Shelf: Collision Course

Abstract

[Excerpt] The ongoing battle between Machinists District 100 and Eastern Airlines is one of the most scrutinized labor-management struggles in recent U.S. history. Publications ranging from Labor Notes to The Harvard Business Review have covered it, and Labor Research Review #4 was devoted exclusively to it — the first major coverage of the subject.

Keywords

Collision Course, Machinists District 100, Eastern Airlines

Labor Film Shelf

Collision Course

Available for rent or purchase in video or 16mm film from: California Newsreel, 630 Natoma Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.

The ongoing battle between Machinists District 100 and Eastern Airlines is one of the most scrutinized labor-management struggles in recent U.S. history. Publications ranging from *Labor Notes* to *The Harvard Business Review* have covered it, and *Labor Research Review* #4 (now out of print) was devoted exclusively to it—the first major coverage of the subject.

The story is a microcosm of the crisis in American labor relations: Beset by poor management and deregulation, Eastern demanded massive concessions from its Machinists, flight attendants and pilots. District 100 President Charles Bryan emerged as the leading anti-concessions unionist and spearheaded an innovative deal in late 1983 giving the workers four seats on the board of directors, a 25% stake in the company, access to the books, and incentives to recover the concessions, in return for 18-22% wage cuts.

The next 18 months witnessed a remarkable flourishing of worker control at Eastern. Lower-level management was substantially reduced, the Machinists succeeded in recovering work that had been contracted out, and a new culture of "shopfloor entrepreneurship" took root, producing record profits for the carrier. But the deal collapsed in late 1985 when the airline's excessive debt and downward pressure on fares caused a new crisis. The non-labor members of the board reverted to hard-ball, demanding new 20% wage cuts or else Eastern would be sold to union-buster Frank Lorenzo's Texas Air. Standing by CEO and ex-astronaut Frank Borman, the board refused Bryan's offer to take the cut if Bor-

man would resign, so the sale went through (and Borman soon retired).

That's the book version. Now comes the movie—*Collision Course*, co-produced and distributed by California Newsreel, a major progressive film house. The documentary's images are a terrific illustration of the issues. Here is the stiff-necked Borman, with his Nixonesque tics as he addresses the workers on video about "all the honesty I can muster in your eyes." Here is shop steward Leo Romano running Eastern's operations at Boston's Logan Airport without any supervisors even on duty. Here are baggage handlers and engine mechanics bragging about how proud and involved they had become in their jobs. Here is Bryan lamenting that "the culture we created was wiped out in one night."

Providing commentary on the episode are author Robert Kuttner and Professor Robert Cole. As Kuttner summarizes, the deal unravelled, despite the remarkable rise in productivity and profits, because Eastern's management always viewed labor as a "junior partner," always subject to new concessions. Indeed, in one interview, Borman likens the workers to children and chides labor leaders for naively wanting to "keep the children happy."

More broadly, *Collision Course* deftly illustrates the shift in American labor relations inevitably caused by the end of our post-war dominance of the world economy. It argues that the inefficiencies of adversarial-style relations could be absorbed by dominant oligopolies then, but that new competition from Europe and Asia, plus deregulation, now make it imperative for labor to seek co-determination in corporate affairs in order to defend living standards.

Ultimately, this film serves as a kind of Rorschach image for unionists facing the "cooperation" debate. Those inclined to experiment with co-determination and worker ownership will see a positive example of worker control which is certain to grow, and which was only snuffed out because of some intransigent personalities. Those opposed to anything smacking of collaboration will point to the story's end, the sale to Lorenzo, and write off the 18-month honeymoon as a dangerous message that clouds true class issues.

Take your pick, but *Collision Course* is an outstanding record and teaching tool about a pivotal episode in American labor relations.

—Greg LeRoy

Workers Education Local 189



To the Readers of Labor Research Review,

In exchange for a monetary agreement to have two issues of *Labor Research Review* sent to our members, Workers' Education Local 189 has been given this page—for a message of import and encouragement.

Workers' Education Local 189 is a union for those who work in labor education—for unions, colleges and universities, community organizations, and other labor activist groups. Local 189 was founded in 1922 by the staff of Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, and was chartered by the American Federation of Teachers. The local has been independent since 1976, but still carries on the traditions of Brookwood from such illustrious former members as A.J. Muste, Roy Reuther, and Phillip Taft.

The local has two national meetings each year; it also charters area/statewide chapters, which meet more frequently. As a membership organization, we pay dues and elect officers to run our union. We employ a part-time executive secretary to assist with numerous activities, including the publication of the *Directory of Labor Education* and a regular mailing service for materials, job listings, and the exchange of ideas and opinions.

Although we often take stands on important public issues, our basic purpose is to provide professional support to labor educators as employees. Recently we have renewed discussions about job security in our field of work. One specific case involved a university labor educator whose classes were boycotted by an international union for not presenting its position on free trade. In another, a free-lance labor educator in a jointly-funded training program had classes cancelled; the major difficulty in this case was determining the employer of record, and who thus controlled the classroom curriculum and content.

Can absolute standards be set for the job rights and academic freedom of labor educators when their employer is a union, a university, or often a combination of the two? And who sets the standards for professionalism: the employer, the educator, or some combination of both? We would welcome your ideas in this continuing discussion.

For more information about Workers' Education Local 189, and a membership application, please write to me at the address below. If you're interested and involved in labor education, you'll be glad you did.

Regards and solidarity,

Anne C. Green, President

Workers' Education Local 189

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