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[Review of the Book *We Can't Eat Prestige: The Women Who Organized Harvard*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] In 1988 the fifteen-year campaign to organize office and laboratory workers at Harvard University ended with an NLRB election win. *We Can't Eat Prestige* is the most comprehensive examination to date of this compelling story, offering new detail and sufficiently bold assertions to re-ignite a smoldering debate about what this victory means for the future of unions. The author is a highly regarded journalist with thirty years of experience reporting on labor issues. Predictably, the book is extraordinarily well written, weaving a fascinating story of the union's evolution.

Keywords

union, organizing, Harvard, office workers, clerical workers, labor movement

Disciplines

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Comments

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We Can't Eat Prestige. By John Hoerr. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. 280 pp. ISBN 1-56639-535-6, \$29.95 (cloth).

In 1988 the fifteen-year campaign to organize office and laboratory workers at Harvard University ended with an NLRB election win. *We Can't Eat Prestige* is the most comprehensive examination to date of this compelling story, offering new detail and sufficiently bold assertions to re-ignite a smoldering debate about what this victory means for the future of unions. The author is a highly regarded journalist with thirty years of experience reporting on labor issues. Predictably, the book is extraordinarily well written, weaving a fascinating story of the union's evolution.

Hoerr asserts that the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) became a "unique local union," one that was consciously constructed to manifest a "feminine model of trade unionism." These conclusions are reserved for Chapter 15, and to appreciate their basis it is essential to explore with Hoerr the events, organizations, and personalities that ultimately shaped the HUCTW.

The story begins in 1973 in the university's Medical Area. Inspired by the women's movement, lab assistant Leslie Sullivan initiated a newsletter for hourly employees. It contained "more information about employment at Harvard than Harvard itself had ever disseminated." A nascent women's group attracted new participants, and a year later a militant core announced a union drive. Affiliation with District 65 followed, and Sullivan was hired to coordinate an organizing campaign. The long, tumultuous relationship between Harvard's white-collar workers and organized labor had begun.

The book goes on to trace the case history in rich detail through two NLRB election losses in the Medical Area in 1977 and 1981, then the five-year effort for a campus-wide unit that established the HUCTW as bargaining agent in 1988. Sullivan coordinated the first campaign, "with District 65 contributing only a distant muttering of advice." For the second effort funding was provided for an additional organizer, and Sullivan selected Kristine Rondeau, a young research assistant in the Medical School. After the second loss Sullivan moved on but Rondeau stayed. When the UAW decided to sponsor a third organizing campaign in 1983, Rondeau was selected to lead it.

Hoerr describes the "singular style of organizing" weaved together by the Rondeau orga-

nizing team. Based on the conviction that Harvard's white-collar workers did not feel oppressed, the idea was to concentrate on building a community. This was accomplished by using one-on-one organizing techniques so that each worker would feel "connected" to the union. The organizing did not emphasize issues, but promised (vaguely) to provide a voice. Rather than appealing to anger, the union talked of improving the university and adopted the slogan, "It's not anti-Harvard to be pro-union."

Building relationships and a sense of community where there was no real enemy proved to be a slow process. A 1985 UAW report concluded that the campaign was "not progressing fast enough." Subsequently Rondeau became embroiled in a bitter confrontation with UAW Regional Director Ted Barrett. The reader will get a rare inside look at the difficulties that arise when an aggressive and innovative staff member decides to pursue her own agenda against the preferences of the parent union. In this case the Rondeau team took the unusual step of seceding and the HUCTW was born.

For over a year the HUCTW survived on a meager budget while competing with a new group of UAW organizers. In January 1987 an affiliation agreement was signed with AFSCME largely on Rondeau's terms: AFSCME provided a substantial subsidy, but Rondeau exercised total control over the organizing. The UAW soon withdrew, and the HUCTW prevailed by a bare margin in the 1988 representation election, winning 50.7% of the vote.

The book concludes with a description of the HUCTW's "unique labor agreement." Hoerr interprets the initial negotiating process as a continuation of the union's organizing style. Deliberations were extensive, and decisions were reached by consensus. The result was a contract devoid of rules, with no grievance procedure but rather the outline of a collaborative approach to solve problems. Although success in providing an effective forum where workers can influence decisions "has been limited by the resistance of top-level Harvard administrators," the HUCTW retains its commitment to "peaceful resolution" of problems and to a focus on "being happy." Thus the decision to reject a strike during difficult negotiations in 1992 is portrayed as demonstrating "a feminine kind of strength."

Although this book has clear plusses, there are also serious shortcomings. When dealing with the specifics of the case, it excels. Unfortu-

nately, when Hoerr strays from primary source material to discuss union strategy, labor history, labor law, or feminist theory, he reveals limited familiarity with complex subjects. A penchant for journalistic approximation will trouble many labor relations academics.

For example, Hoerr accurately describes the strategy followed by the Harvard organizers, but his attempt to place it in a broader context falls short. He counterposes the Rondeau approach with one credited to "men organizers": "Traditional methods included passing out flyers and setting up large meetings to see how many would show up." Those familiar with union organizing will recognize a straw man. By 1988, there was virtual consensus among successful organizers (men and women alike) that a one-on-one approach was the best option in the private sector. Harvard is a valuable example of one version of that option, but it is not a unique exception to the norm as argued.

A related drawback is the author's open bias. Hoerr consistently embraces Rondeau's interpretation, no matter how peculiar. For example, the legitimate concerns of District 65 and the UAW regarding budgets and performance of staff are presented as onerous and unwarranted intrusions into the affairs of the Harvard organizers. Conversely, AFSCME's blank check approach (eight years after the election, fifteen HUCTW staff remained on the national payroll) is mentioned only in passing. If lessons are to be drawn from the Harvard case, these issues of trade union administration must be analyzed dispassionately.

Even the book's ultimate conclusion, that the HUCTW represents a unique feminine model of unionism, is not subjected to serious scrutiny. Experienced organizers understand that white-collar workers prefer to solve problems through discussion rather than confrontation; this is not a feminine issue *per se*. Furthermore, female unionists in repressive work environments often embrace militant tactics. Even clerical workers at universities have engaged in spirited strikes. Hoerr never explains why the HUCTW approach is "feminine" while the behavior of other female unionists implicitly is not.

In spite of these weaknesses, this is a valuable book, especially for those interested in the internal operation of unions. Hoerr's account gives us an intimate look at how Rondeau and associates go about their work and how they view the outside world, includ-

ing the institutions that underwrite their activities.

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