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We Are the Union: Democratic Unionism and Dissent at Boeing

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We Are the Union: Democratic Unionism and Dissent at Boeing

BOOK REVIEWS

We Are the Union: Democratic Unionism and Dissent at Boeing. By Dana L. Cloud. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2011. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03637-8. \$55 (Cloth).

Stories of rank-and-file union activism and union democracy need to be told. Inside firstperson accounts of how workers engage their own unions to both confront employer abuse and transform internal union behavior are invaluable texts. In We Are the Union: Democratic Unionism and Dissent at Boeing, Dana L. Cloud provides readers with the authentic voices of workers struggling to be heard. She should be commended for the effort. Writing a labor history of union workers who do not control their institution's resources is at best challenging. Recounting a history of workers who are not in positions of governing power can be quixotic. Such accounts can also inevitably collapse into vulgar dualistic stories of good and bad union types. Unless constructed on mountains of well-documented evidence of corruption—like the books written about reform in the Teamsters' and the United Mine Workers unions—manuscripts of union reformers can easily fall prey to simplistic morality plays. Unfortunately, Cloud is only partially successful in avoiding this characterization. But this is no small feat to pull off; and every book written thus far about union reformers has relied on Shakespearean characterizations. At least Cloud honestly admits that she writes, "from a position of solidarity with their [the dissidents] purpose and struggle (p. xiv)." Doing so is both a strength and a weakness of the "advocacy story" she tells (p. xiv). More on that later—but first let's summarize the substance of Cloud's story.

The book covers the years of 1989 to 2008, focusing its narrative around the 1995 national strike by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) against Boeing. In Cloud's account, a tentative contract negotiated and endorsed by the union leadership, which was then rejected by the membership during the strike, triggered a rank-and-file rebellion. Workers had steadily grown more primed for a fight after experiencing a decade of company health and safety violations, outsourcing of jobs, increased demands for cuts in pensions and insurance, and disparate treatment of union members based on race and gender. The company created the necessary conditions for worker resistance; however, the dissenters felt it was the union leadership that had permitted a coarsening of the working conditions. The union had become complicit in Boeing's strategy to reduce the workers' share of the value they created. Union leaders had in effect become "Boeing managers" (3). Feeling pinched between a powerful global company and a union leadership that had too often agreed to concessions, the reformers determined that "to get to Boeing" they "first had to take on the union" (3).

In the end, the dissidents achieved a better contract by taking on both Boeing and a "union leadership, sluggish in its bureaucratic history and leery of a fight, prepared to take concessions" (preface). In itself that is news worth writing about. But of more value is the attention Cloud gives to how the spark of reform and rank-and-file movement is lit. Cloud's testimonies from workers, who felt empowered on and off the shop floor by fighting for what they deserve, are important contributions to the union revival literature. The author holds deep convictions that unionists can build a stronger labor movement and that "reform groups agitating for greater union democracy, accountability, and militancy are crucial to the fight to restore the power of unions" (p. 3). But a more thought-provoking contribution is the unraveling of the difficulties that the union reformers had in sustaining a productive presence beyond the 1995 strike. Cloud is at her most instructive when she painfully discusses the burdens of a "loyal opposition" compelled to use conventional if inadequate means of educating members who "aren't demanding all that much" (p. 139).

As noted earlier, however, the author's work is heavily dependent on interviews she conducted with representatives from the three groups of self-declared union activists. Although the oral histories do provide the readers with an intimate lens into the emotions, values, and psychological motivations of the reformers, they also leave the story vulnerable to counterinterpretations and voices. Cloud's sympathy and admiration for the reformers is understandable, but her portrayal of the protagonists and their antagonists is probably too dichotomous.

It is as rarely true that union dissenter groups are unconditionally committed to union democracy, as it is that all members of an Administrative Caucus are opposed to union democracy. At times Cloud's juxtapositions feel like stereotypical depictions of good and evil. But neither quality is simple for human beings operating in insanely difficult circumstances. While the book's portraits of union reformers and leadership do include the traits Cloud points out, they are usually incomplete and subsequently, less satisfying.

Additionally, while thousands of workers went out on strike and voted three times until they finally got a contract they wanted, we don't know how they felt about the IAM leadership. As Cloud admits, winning elections was not something the reformers could muster. Nor can we conclude that the strike militancy was an action against the leadership or even related to the rank-and-file's feelings about the leadership. In 1995 Boeing provided more than enough reason for workers to want to beat up on the company; and in the past the workers had demonstrated their collective resistance, apparently without the encouragement of dissidents. The point is, we know what Cloud's truly admirable interviewees thought about the leadership and the meaning of union democracy, but that is all we know. Perhaps what the reader does not know may hold a clue to why the reform movement dissipated.

A strong point of Cloud's storytelling, however, is that she wants to prioritize an unfiltered voice of the reformers. Surprisingly, she does this by providing a chapter-long, edited transcript of an interview conducted with the central figure of the book—key reform leader Keith Thomas. Thomas is a compelling and appealing union activist. In the interview, he offers a very instructive and frustrated "postmortem" on why the union democracy movement at Boeing declined. His comments about the lack of member interest in having a real voice in how their economic lives are determined are as biting as they are reflective of the many views held and expressed by union leaders. Ironically, in raising serious doubts that American workers actually want something more and are willing to struggle against their employers to get, Thomas sounds like the "labor bosses" he excoriates.

Despite how his negative opinions clearly and repeatedly disappoint Cloud, he may be correct. She appears to be alternately arguing against him and pleading with him about the possibility of a reform caucus transforming the labor movement. He's consistently doubtful; she's hopefully insistent. But when the conversation shifts to a critique of the labor leaders, as it does very often, Cloud takes on a far different posture and gives Thomas free reign. Thomas is scathing in his criticisms of union leaders. He refers to them as "the straw bosses of old that never went away" (p. 168); and that is one of the nicest things he says. All of this is fascinating to read and deconstruct. Thomas obviously has reason to be bitter, negative, and deeply skeptical about rank-and-file unionism and union leaders. Cloud provides the reader access to an authentic informed voice, but she cannot help but give more volume to certain sounds than others. I'm not sure what to make of all this. The long-form interview is an unusual exchange to see played out in a labor history story, but the author liberally relies on the approach. Thomas's interview is similar in form to other big chunks of oral history that appear in the manuscript. Cloud did build her text primarily around what reformers told her, and she is, after all, a communications professor. If she were writing as an historian, she might have positioned her interviews within a narrative that placed their meaning in a larger context. She might have also lent some explanation to the comments and offered documentary sources to either confirm or refute the speaker.

In the end, Cloud allowed a relatively few earnest, passionate, and subjective points of view to stand above all others as the defining arbiter of her thesis. Her methodology is risky but not without an intimate degree of realism. Where possible, worker voices need to be central to the history that's written about them, no matter who writes it. Despite some reservations about the book's analysis, it contributes to the volume of reporting about workers who, since the 1980s, have genuinely embraced the values of the labor movement, while pushing against the limited visions of their union leadership.

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