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Book Reviews

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Stuart Tannock

Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, paperback £22.95, 246 pp.

■ Reviewed by Tony Royle, *Nottingham Trent University*

In recent years the fast-food industry and similar low-paid service work has finally started to receive some serious attention from the academic community. This book follows a number of publications which have started to focus on the issues of work organization, work orientations and labour relations in this sector (see, for example Leidner, 1993; Reiter, 1986; Royle, 2000). Of course this sector has also been the focus of broader and other kinds of analysis such as Ritzer's (1993) thesis on McDonaldisation, Watson's (1997) cross cultural analysis of McDonald's in Asia and Schlosser's (2001) 'Fast-Food Nation'.

This volume focuses on the fast-food and food service sectors in the USA and Canada and in particular examines the issue of youth employment and the problems of organizing young workers in this sector. It is based on an ethnographic study of workers in three large US supermarket chains in one city and fast-food workers employed in one large multinational in one Canadian city. Whereas workers in the supermarket chains had a relatively high level of union membership (about one third) the fast-food workers were almost entirely non-union. Because of the difficulties of gaining access for this kind of work the author used union contacts to gain access to employees but also spent a great deal of time informally interviewing workers whenever it was possible to do so. The author is quite rightly unapologetic for this approach in view of the likely employer opposition to such research and especially as the focus of the book is the experiences of young workers and the relations between them and the unions and not on the opinions and experiences of management.

The author focuses on youths in terms of their specific and temporary occupational identities and the 'stop-gap' jobs they take on. Tannock argues that there is a continuing age-based prejudice against young workers. Indeed he suggests that not only North American employers, but also North American governments and trade unions have abandoned young workers and in some cases actively discriminated against them. He cites the example of the arguments about the minimum wage and whether or not there should be a lower level wage for young workers. He states that

'conservatives' argue that young workers do not really 'need' wages because they can depend on their parents and are therefore not 'real workers'. As he points out however, more and more college students are becoming buried under mountains of debt especially since the real value of the minimum wage in the USA has fallen considerably since the late 1960s. At the same time the private sector loan industry is making handsome profits at their expense. Furthermore whilst North American youths occupy the lowest paid, lowest status dead-end jobs, their employers are some of the continent's largest and most powerful corporations and they are growing fat on the labour of young workers. Indeed for industries such as fast-food the 'indispensable ingredient' for success is the 'systematic exploitation' of large pools of minimum wage youth workers.

The same kinds of arguments can of course be applied to the issue of employee representation, that food service sector workers do not need representation because they have little commitment to their employment and that they will soon move on to something else. However, it may be a move into another low paid, stop-gap job, as Tannock points out. Youth work has an image problem which is compounded by such concepts as the 'storm and stress' adolescent, an employee who is 'naturally' alienated from his/her work by a lack of maturity normally associated with the state of adolescence itself. They do not care about their jobs so why should anyone else? As Tannock points out, however, this overlooks the nature of these stop-gap jobs. In many cases it is the only form of employment open to young workers. Besides, surely the temporary nature of such work should not mean that these workers should have no rights to either a decent level of remuneration or rights to independent representation?

Tannock therefore argues strongly for the intervention of unions to try to improve the lot of fast-food workers and suggests that where unions are stronger, such as in supermarkets, much can be achieved. However, he recognizes that there is a very low level of unionization amongst the young in Canada and the USA, making them particularly vulnerable to management prerogative. His conclusion is that young workers are interested in having their rights represented and cites the large number of small (yet usually unsuccessful) attempts to unionize fast-food sector jobs in North America. He argues that this is not down to a lack of interest amongst employees but rather to sophisticated union-bashing management techniques applied by employers, something which my own and other studies largely verify (Royle, 2000; Royle and Towers, 2002). The author suggests that American unions (particularly the AFL-CIO) are increasingly trying to reach out to youth workers through a number of different programs. However, he also admits that unions have been partly to blame by favouring older workers and seeing young workers as a threat to older workers' wages and conditions. Finally, he argues strongly for a change in policy to promote the rights of young workers and to do away with age discrimination, and that contemporary research must include the concepts of 'age' and the 'life stage' in order to develop a better understanding of temporary and contingent work.

The book provides some useful insights into the problems of youth work and the problems of trying to unionize young workers. Perhaps it does overlook the fact

that many of the people employed in fast-food and supermarket work are not always young employees in other countries (Royle, 2000). In this sense there may be a slight tendency to over-generalize on the basis of North American experience. Nevertheless, this is a welcome contribution to the literature on employment and labour relations in the service sector. It is well-researched, interesting and informative and it raises some important questions, not only about low paid employment and the treatment of young workers, but also about the future of the labour movement as a whole.

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Chris Grover and John Stewart

The Work Connection: The Role of Social Security in British Economic Regulation

Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, xiv + 233 pp.

■ Reviewed by Matthew Cole, *University of Bristol*

The Work Connection traces a history of British in-work and out-of-work social security policy from the patchwork implementation of the 'Speenhamland system' in the early part of the 19th century, to New Labour's current policies. Theoretically informed by the French Regulation School, *The Work Connection* argues that such income maintenance policies constitute particular social modes of economic regulation that are congruent with changing capitalist accumulation regimes. The role of government is therefore taken to be that of the husbandry of income maintenance policies, such that the transitions between different modes of capital accumulation are managed without significant challenge to the fundamental capitalist order. Furthermore, a sophisticated sensitivity to the symbiotic interplay between capitalism and patriarchy is maintained throughout the book. The role of the family in transmitting the values and disciplines appropriate to entering the capitalist labour market within governmental and academic discourse is explored in some depth. So,