

Review

The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite? By Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher. Lanham: Lexington, 2008, 270p. (cloth) ISBN 0739118137; (paper) ISBN 0739118145.

Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher's *The Laboring of Communication* examines the past, present, and future of labor organization in the field of communications. In the context of changing economic and technological structures, Mosco and McKercher ask what possibilities there are for a re-emergence of unions as a vital and vibrant cultural force? Though multiple social, economic, and political hurdles exist, the potential for unions to overcome these challenges and offer respite to communication workers the world around provides a powerful incentive to an exploration of labor issues. The authors write that *The Laboring of Communication* details the response of labor to changing conditions within the economic realm. It remains to be seen how successful this attempt will be going forward, but if one views this shift-toward-labor as a process, Mosco and McKercher have provided a great deal of forward momentum.

Neither refocusing academia on labor issues, nor coming to terms with the changes in unionization, is an easy undertaking. In order to conceptualize the forces at work in the laboring of communication, the book attempts to break down complex issues into more easily understood parts. From the historical development of trade unions to the shift to a knowledge economy to issues of gender, Mosco and McKercher systematically, and effectively, approach the question: "Will knowledge workers of the world unite?"

As is often the case in examinations considering historical development, the issues of change and continuity permeate the work. Chapter two, for example, theorizes the development of "knowledge labor," examining the historical trajectory of the idea and tracing its intellectual lineage into contemporary society. Using knowledge labor as a backdrop, Mosco and McKercher then move into a discussion of convergence – one of the central ideas in *The Laboring of Communication*. Technology, ownership, and labor convergence have become defining characteristics of the communication industry. Far from being a simple issue, however, convergence has eliminated jobs at the same time as it has opened up possibilities for more powerful labor organizations; it has broken down barriers between media entities, while at the same time eroding the ability of craft unions to maintain close control over content production. This treatment of convergence speaks to one of the strengths of *The Laboring of Communication* – throughout the work Mosco and McKercher avoid overly polemical approaches to changes in technology and the labor environment, preferring instead to take a more nuanced stance.

As convergence has brought together formerly disparate elements of the communications system, it has reopened a path to "One Big Union." This idea, addressed specifically in Chapter Five, posits that the social and technological changes brought about by industry and ownership convergence may allow for a convergence of labor power as well. The resulting

power of labor would encompass not just communication workers in the United States and Canada, but also in developing countries; areas traditionally under-represented (if at all) in labor unions. Another important area of change noted by Mosco and McKercher is in the very conception on unions themselves. The growth of social-movement unionism, a movement that sees unions as “including open memberships and a social agenda that seeks to bring about changes in the social, economic, and political realm,” (165) offers new opportunities for workers who may have previously been excluded from labor organizations. The precariat (precarious, part-time workers) and outsourced laborers are two of these groups that may have a new home in labor organizations. Mosco and McKercher’s inclusion of the precariat and outsource laborers are vital (yet often hidden) components in unionization speaks to the thoroughness and deftness that permeates *The Laboring of Communication*.

Despite the many changes facilitated by technological development and the passage of time, there remains a great deal of continuity in the world of labor and capital relations. Primarily, the resistance of capital to organized labor should come as little surprise. Cheap and disorganized labor is the *sine qua non* of advanced capitalism – the emergence of an activist and organized proletariat (or precariat) would strike a major blow to the forces of capital should it emerge. There are also a host of gender issues addressed in *The Laboring of Communication*. Chapter Three expounds on some of these, such as pay inequality, the historical under-representation of women both within unions and their leadership, as well as the traditional bifurcation of work and home life. While unions have gone a long way in increasing the working conditions of females, there is still some distance to go in making women co-equal partners in labor organizations themselves.

Regarding the unions themselves, there will also remain a constant tension between the power of “one big union” and the political and social agility (as well as focus) of smaller unions. Although inclusive unions may have larger political capital through sheer numbers, the open nature of these unions often dilutes local or specific issues that may be ignored in larger unions – such as the CWA, for instance, which was in many ways too big to focus on local or small-scale issues. Lastly, there is some level of continuity in outsourcing, although Mosco and McKercher do a fantastic job of conveying the complexity of this issue. Although outsourcing can be undertaken to strengthen management’s position with regards to labor (or even as a threat used to discourage labor organization), most outsourcing takes place within a home country. In the context of a knowledge and information economy, the similarity of cultures plays a critical role in outsourcing: “Which is one of the primary reasons why Ireland, Canada, and Israel have been key participants in the outsourcing industry.” (197) In addition, countries such as India are beginning to take a more active role in the process of outsourcing. Mosco and McKercher note that India’s ICICI Onesource Ltd. have advertised as a company providing both local and outsourcing services.

Taken as a whole, *The Laboring of Communication* is a well-written and extensively researched work documenting the historical condition and trajectory of labor organizations. From the internal struggles of the unions to the social, economic, and political forces that shaped their development, Mosco and McKercher detail how important these entities have been in shaping capital-labor relations. In particular, the historical research in the piece is

top-notch – it is both comprehensive yet accessible. This effort is helped greatly by the structure of the book: the chapters sequentially build the case, they break down the complex issues surrounding unionism into more digestible pieces. *The Laboring of Communication* concludes with two case studies, providing specificity to the arguments contained in the larger work and offering paths forward for the organization of labor in the communication field.

One shortcoming of the work is that in the tradeoff between depth and accessibility, often the author's err on the side of accessibility. This leaves some of the more interesting theoretical questions off the table. For example, how are the forces of convergence and shifts in the labor market related to larger socio-economic trends and theories of capital? This is, to be fair, nitpicking a fairly minor point. The extensive historical research, and indeed the goal of the book, does not lend itself to in-depth theoretical discussion. It is perhaps a mark of the success of Mosco and McKercher in achieving the goals of the book that it leaves one wanting a similar treatment of theory. In sum, *The Laboring of Communication* seeks to explore the changes and continuity of labor relations in the communications field, as well as provide paths forward for labor organization. To understand these issues, one would be hard pressed to find a better resource than *The Laboring of Communication*.

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