

REVIEWS

Chapkis, Wendy and Enlow, Cynthia (Eds), *Of common cloth: women in the global textile industry*, Edited Amsterdam, Transnational Institute, 1983, 141 p. Price: \$13.50.

Of Common Cloth is a timely, informative and fundamentally inspiring book. It is one of the more tangible products of an exciting meeting of 26 women researchers, trade unionists and activists from Europe, North America and the Third World which took place in October 1982 at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. The women met to exchange experiences and information on the global textile industry and the reader they have produced captures their subject in statistics, photographs, anecdotes and historical and theoretical analysis.

The two major themes addressed in *Of Common Cloth* are the internationalisation of textile production and the relationships between patriarchal oppression and capitalist exploitation. The authors approach these topical issues from historical and empirical angles, and their eminently readable text presents complex arguments in a style sufficiently digested and illustrated as to avoid the turgidity of much of the current literature in these areas. After a brief introduction by the editors which explains the background to the book and provides snippets of personal insight into the participants of the original conference, Diane Elson's "Nimble Fingers and Other Fables" leads off with a broadside upon the myths that surround women workers. Their greater manual dexterity, lack of technical skill, lesser need for wage earners and industrial docility are all held up for scrutiny and are found wanting as adequate representations of women's work and domestic experience. In this first essay the apparent differences and conflicts of interest between First and Third World workers are also critically examined from a socialist feminist perspective. Right from the beginning a strategy of international support for one another's struggles is proposed.

The support offered in this book takes the form of information, documentation of shared experiences and evaluation of strategy. On the information front Margherita Gloster, Martha McDevitt and Amrita Chhachhi present an up to date analysis of restructuring in the global textile industry. The major firms are identified and their international strategies concerning technological change and division of labour are outlined. Margaret Bradley adds some colour to this economic picture by tracing the structure of the international jeans industry and the global organisation of industrial relations between its employers and workers. A personal perspective is presented by Cynthia Enloe in her piece "We are what we wear — the dilemma of the feminist consumer" in which she connects the act of buying a new pair of jeans to the failing eyesight, low pay or brown lung of women in distant lands whose labour produced them.

Judy Lown and Helen Chenut provide an historical overview of the mechanisation and industrialisation of textile production drawing upon a wide range of international examples. They demonstrate how pre-industrial patriarchal structures of economic control and authority were intermeshed with the nature of women's proletarianisation in the textile sector. Chenut's vignette on reactions to the introduction of the sewing machine in the latter half of the nineteenth century adds a fascinating glimpse into the social nature of technology. In a short piece Beth Bulatao records the way in which the Philippines textile industry was destroyed by international competition from factory produced goods only after the secrets and patterns of local craft production had been pirated by foreign industrialists.

The issue of industrial legislation concerning women workers in the Indian textile industry is taken up by Amrita Chhachhi. Here the ambiguities for women workers surrounding male unionists' demands for limits on the length of the working day and the "living" or "family wage" are highlighted with verbatim comments from workers and organisers alike.

The current conception of Third World women workers as docile and compliant is challenged by a number of the authors, but so is the notion that working women if militant can automatically be represented by the traditional demands of unionism. Elson argues that when young women escape to the factory to avoid the domination of fathers and brothers only to be controlled by male managers and supervisors they swap one subordinate position for another. In the documentation of particular struggles by organisers Patricia Marin and Cecilia Rodriguez, Marilee Karl and Choi Wan Cheung, Theresa Rankia and Wendy Chapkis, the constraints and strengths of traditional industrial strategies for the protection of women workers are questioned and new directions are posed. In particular the writers draw attention to the way in which sex and race can be used to divide the workforce and render it impotent in the face of a highly organised international industry.

One of the main limitations upon women's resistance to exploitation is the burden placed upon them by their domestic role. As Swasti Mitter and Anneke van Luijken point out, a large and growing number of textile workers still work at home in isolation from their sisters. Moreover, for all women "The Double Day", as Susan Joeekes and Isa Baud call it, is a reality and the strain of dual responsibilities — one waged, the other unwaged, makes industrial militancy in the traditional sense unrealistic. Yet action is necessary, as work related health problems for both homeworkers and factory workers are a serious issue, especially since the production of synthetic fibres has brought workers in touch with poisonous and carcinogenic substances. Paulene Jackson calls for protective legislation extending across gender and national lines so that toxic working conditions cannot be shifted from one country to another.

The breadth of issues touched upon in this book is wide indeed, as I have tried to illustrate. The articles mentioned are backed up by a Statistical Appendix which provides a snap-shot of employment and working conditions in the textile industries of eight major nations, and a Resources Appendix which lists articles, books, audio-visual material and groups concerned with the themes addressed. All in all *Of Common Cloth* is a unique synthesis of basic information, strategic discussion, graphic representation and distilled argumentation from which academics, activists and students alike have something to learn. As a testimony to the insights of feminism and the practical commitment of women across the globe to changing their lives and their future it is an inspiration.

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Hill, John, *From subservience to strike: industrial relations in the banking industry* St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1982, x and 275 p. Price: \$49.95.

This is an important case study for students of white collar industrial relations. It is a history of the Australian Bank Employees' Union (ABEU) and of industrial relations in the private banks of Australia, seen mainly through union eyes. The ABEU is one of the largest unions of bank employees in the world; a significant force in banking, with industrial clout, some political influence and a high media profile. The book records in detail the emergence of an effective organisation from the unlikely breeding ground of abject passivity typical of clerks in paternalistic bureaucracies.

The broad pattern is not out of line with that of white collar unions in the UK and New Zealand as well as in Australia. Such unions were generally formed, or experienced a leap in membership, after World War I, remained static until after World War II, when there was another leap in membership, followed by further stability until another phase of rapid development during the 1970s.

Organisations of bank employees in the UK, Australia, and in New Zealand were formed in 1918 and 1919. The Australian organisations used the framework of industrial law there to register as unions, and to prosecute salary cases in the industrial courts. In doing so they accepted guidance by people outside banking who knew the industrial relations system. In New Zealand, despite the apparent general similarity of the machinery it was not used, perhaps because of the relative depth and maturity of the respective institutions within the industrial relations field. New Zealand bankers remained content with a guild.

Also specific to Australia is the complexity resulting from the Federal Constitution. Early attempts at a federal organisation failed, and each state except Tasmania had a bank union, although the Australian Bank Officials' Association (ABOA) in Victoria held a federal registration, with Tasmania as a branch. It took 40 years for the federal registration of the ABOA and its superior leadership to prove decisive in producing the federal body of the same name, now the ABEU.

According to Bain (1970) a bureaucratic environment is a pre-requisite for the formation of a white collar union, in conjunction with a material issue such as a fall in real incomes.* (Bain of course does not have regard for the statutory establishment of unions, as is the case in New Zealand.)

The Australian bank unions fit this theory as to inception. Bain also maintains that, following recognition, economic considerations play a part in the future maintenance of the union. This is less clear from the data presented in the Australian study, unless it means that the employee group, having established a union, then treats it as a necessary insurance against generalised economic threats, regardless of the specific performance of the union. The history of the Australian unions through the twenties and thirties is one of ineffectual and incompetent performance in their salary activity. Despite this, union density remained relatively high (over 60 percent).

There is still much to clarify about the continuation and survival of white collar unions. Current developments on the ground in New Zealand seem to support the importance of the relationship between bureaucracy and survival. Strangely, given the presumed temper of bank staff, conservatism, in the sense of a unitary philosophy of employer/employee relations did not pay off in the competition between state unions.

In the post-war years the Labour party in Australia placed the nationalisation of the banks on the agenda. All the bank unions, except the Melbourne-based ABOA, campaigned actively for their employers against this policy. The ABOA leadership however maintained that their task was the protection of employee interests and not the defence of any specific form of ownership. Their independent stance won support and brought members of the South Australian State Bank into the fold.

But the real founding father of modern unionism in banking was the forceful R.D. (Barney) Williams, Federal Secretary during the fifties. Williams got bank officers successfully to apply techniques of publicity, pressure and mass action against their employers for the first time and his example founded a tradition which still governs the attitudes of the union.

This study is a write-up of a Ph D thesis, by definition not a "fun" read, but painstaking, with its material well marshalled and set against a background of wider political history. There is little comparative reference however to contemporary developments in Australian industrial relations. A serious student can pick this up elsewhere, but I did miss a clearer analysis of wage movements in the banking industry. Despite the few specific wage claims by the unions before World War II, tables of wages indicate a steady movement which presumably had some other basis. This needs evaluation in relation

* There is also a useful summary of Bain's theories, and other commentaries on white collar unionism in Hyman and Price (1983).

to the developments in the unions.

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References

- Bain, G S (1970) *The growth of white-collar unionism* Oxford, Oxford University Press.
 Hyman, R and Price, R (1983) *The new working class? White-collar workers and their organisations* London, Macmillan.

Farnham, David and Pimlott, John *Understanding industrial relations* (second edition) London, Cassell, 1983, xvi and 500 p. Price: £8.95.

After some initial confusion over the fact that the title tends to obscure the subject matter (it is British industrial relations that the authors are really talking about), this book settles down to a firm and no-nonsense approach to its subject. The approach is traditional and institutional with considerable stress upon functional description. The primary purpose of theory as the authors firmly proclaim is to act as a means whereby the perception of social reality that constitutes the working world of industrial relations may be improved. Thus when theoretical modelling becomes the focus of the authors attention, it is always with one eye on the practical questions involving such central matters as job regulation.

The style of the work is concise as is inevitable in an introductory text, with the various topics listed in paragraph sequence. It is here that some danger lies, since the value of the text as a compendium of factual information could well be lost if the student perceives of the information it contains as series of segmented items. While there are strong central themes in the study, teachers working with first year students would be required to employ skill filling in some details which are limited by brevity, and linking the mass of detail that the book contains into a coherent and continuous teaching sequence.

There are also some major occasions when the need to balance detail with brevity overbalances. A most glaring example is chapter sixteen, when the most fundamental question of the influence of Thatcherism upon institutional tradition is dealt with in an extremely cursory manner which is rather speculative.

It is this type of problem that leads to a perhaps unfair comparison of this text with the more recent work by Bain (1983) and his colleagues, which places events since Donovan in a more dynamic macro political framework, in which the usurpation by government of many functions carried out traditionally by the parties, is a central theme.

In summation, this is a useful text for students who have a specific qualification-based need for factual information as a function of practice. Its weaknesses lie in its failure to communicate the fact that the last 5 years in British industrial relations have been marked not simply by institutional changes, but by fundamental shifts in power relationships, and by the emergence of a central and regulative role for government. It is a theme that the authors might have approached with more enthusiasm and mutual profit, from their reader's point of view.

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References

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