

Mary Margaret Fonow

Union Women: Forging Feminism in the United Steelworkers of America.

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Through well-strategized campaigns, women have gained jobs in the steel industry in the United States in the 1960s and in Canada at the end of the next decade. Based on extensive research in both countries, Fonow examines how women in these male-dominated workforces mobilized to challenge sex discrimination through their union, the United Steelworkers of America. For example, she documents how through the use of consciousness raising, mutual support and collective action, women challenged their union locals to pass progressive conference resolutions, to institute formal structures such as women's committees, and to launch campaigns such as the Canadian-based program against domestic violence. Fonow also combines the class politics of economic redistribution with the identity politics of difference to analyze the politics emerging from the disruptions of globalization. Her detailed yet engaging discussion of these issues makes the book of interest to union activists, students, teachers and researchers, and general readers.

The well-crafted book is organized around the origins, growth and changes in women's activism in the Steelworkers Union from 1974 to 2002. By starting with an analysis of gender and racial divisions in the steel workforce both during and after World War II, Fonow demonstrates convincingly how these divisions constrained union solidarity. Recalcitrance by employers in both countries motivated women to launch political and legal battles based on affirmative action provisions. Fonow demonstrates how once these court-based victories gave women access to jobs in steel mills, women quickly used the law in conjunction with grievance mechanisms to advance their economic interests. Based on a well-researched case study of Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel in Ohio, Fonow outlines the initial efforts to organize as feminists in response to experiences on the shop floor. Affirmative action opened the gates but did not decree the absence of sexist practices in the plants nor were similar structural locations sufficient to generate widespread union participation by women.

Fonow's insightful analysis shows how different conditions in the Chicago area generated a greater degree of union activism and a visible level of feminist activism. She argues that the struggle for basic rights in the workplace and for representation in the union accompanied identification with the women's movement and a collective identity as feminists. Throughout this discussion, Fonow pays special attention to differential conditions facing black as compared with white women steelworkers and how these circumstances led to the establishment of the multiracial Women's Caucus within the union.

By drawing comparisons between Canada and the United States and by including Mexico in her analysis of union response to restructuring, Fonow opens new chapters in the histories of labour and sets her book apart from other case studies of women in nontraditional jobs and of women in unions. These international comparisons enable Fonow to explore how gender consciousness and feminism are influenced by different political, economic and institutional contexts. She points out that during the 1980s and 1990s, Canadian women steelworkers and their unions led the way to transform

violence and sexual harassment into public workplace issues and in so doing refined what it meant to be safe on the job.

She also argues that Canadian activists are leading the way in forming international coalitions, citing the Humanity Fund as an important precedent. Her analysis of how women labour activists and feminists in Canada, the United States and Mexico are using union networks and resources to build international responses to the damaging impact of globalization and restructuring is a work in-progress. Fonow remains realistic in her account of these mobilizing efforts while recognizing that gains have been tempered in industry plagued with bankruptcies, plant closings and downsizing. The fascinating chapter leaves the reader eager to follow the future organizing efforts of U.S.W.A. and to engage with them to realize the radical potential of cross-border organizing.

Drawing on civil rights and human rights law and the momentum of the women's movement, women steelworkers legitimated women's rights as trade-union issues. In so doing, when women became steelworkers they not only transformed the male shop floor culture and discriminatory management practices but, as Fonow has shown, they also transformed a man's union. Fonow is optimistic that activism inspired by these women will provide the basis for new networks for social action and new opportunities for protest.

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