

Stuart Tannock

Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace

Temple University Press, 2001, 246 pp.

\$US 22.95 paper (1-56639-854-1), \$US 69.50 cloth (1-56639-853-3)

Youth at Work presents the results of a project originally conceived by Stuart Tannock as a study of school-work transitions that was subsequently transformed to investigate issues surrounding the unionization of youth workers. The author found that despite the presence of union representation for the youth workers in his study (fast-food employees working in a Canadian city and grocery store employees in an American location), the initial step into the job market had not changed to any great degree from his own experiences years earlier. Youth workers continued to hold low pay, low status, dead end positions (what Tannock referred to as “stopgap” employment positions). He had expected to find improvements in the youth labour market as a result of collective bargaining but instead he found only the hope that unionization would lead to large scale change in the future.

In the first and second sections of his book, Tannock discussed youth work and working conditions in a general fashion, using the stories of the employees to bring out points of concern or satisfaction with their jobs. These sections also dealt with the prevalent social attitude that youths were not ‘legitimate’ workers: they were generally seen as either “happy teen” workers out to earn spending money (thus not *needing* a ‘good’ job) or as “alienated youth” workers, without the drive and sense of responsibility to handle regular employment (thus not *deserving* of a ‘good’ job). As such, youth workers were effectively invisible so that governments felt no pressure to change labour policies and employers had no incentive to alter a system that, for them, produced greater profits. This left only unions as a possible source of salvation for young workers.

However, as set out in section three of the book, the history of union mistreatment of youth members makes the future unionization of young employees problematic without a change in perspective to see youth workers as valuable members of their organizations. Tannock found some indication that change would be possible in the fact that youths generally reported disliking their jobs and resenting management policies. Such attitudes would make young workers ideal recruits for the union movement, but he also noted that some dissension existed between workers, based primarily on perceptions respecting the role that age and gender played in determining working conditions. For example, older workers were seen as receiving better jobs than the young, and male and female workers were placed in different positions within the companies based on their sex.

Despite the dissension between these employees, Tannock’s confidence in unionization was bolstered by the fact that one of the two unions in his study had managed to overcome age discrimination between its members and counter the lack of interest in union matters among young workers. Thus, where the grocery store union continued to focus on wages, benefits and job security (issues primarily important to older workers), the fast-food union made a deliberate attempt to attract young workers to meetings and put them into positions of power. This union also developed policies that dealt equitably with stopgap workers, such as ensuring that both union dues and benefit packages were prorated to the number of hours a person worked rather than depending on

their status as full or part-time employees. However, even this union did not completely abandon principles that benefited older workers, for example when a contract that made hours of work more predictable was negotiated, provisions were included that enabled employees to claim particular work shifts based on seniority. Priority thus went to long term workers although stopgap workers also benefited from fixing their schedules, allowing them to plan child care, social activities and hours of work at other jobs in advance. In short, Tannock suggests that the example set by the fast-food union, although imperfect, proved that unionization could be an effective means of altering the work experience for young people everywhere as collective power could ensure that their concerns would receive equitable attention.

Overall, Tannock's study offers an interesting glimpse into the world of youth employment and provides a different perspective on what many would see as a 'rite of passage' for youths in western society, namely, surviving employment in a bad job before moving on to better opportunities. The glimpse was sobering as it revealed that these jobs are the foundation of multi-billion dollar financial empires, that the systematic exploitation of youth workers will likely continue, and that conditions will not improve without a struggle. More disconcerting is the thought that more and more jobs are being shifted to the 'stopgap' norm every year. Thus, one should hope that Tannock's unionization solution proves practical, although the paucity of examples of successful youth oriented union activity in the book makes it clear that overcoming the power of an employer is an extraordinary event. Thus, *Youth at Work* provides valuable insights into the world of youth employment in the retail and service fields. It has also sounded the alarm over the conditions that prevail in such industries despite the existence of unions, and illustrated the importance of age (and life stage) in studies of non-standard work. However, further study is necessary, for example with respect to the conditions faced by those without union protection and the long term prospects of those youth trapped in stopgap jobs.

Sandra Magnusson
University of Alberta
slr@ualberta.ca

Sandra Magnusson is a doctoral candidate with research interests in work and employment policy, Canadian development, and environmental issues.

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/cjscopy/reviews/youthwork.html>

July 2002

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online