

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**ANTHONY WINSON and BELINDA LEACH, *Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives: Labour and Community in the New Rural Economy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, 222p., Index. \$50 Cloth, \$24.95 Paper.**

*Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives* is an examination of the experiences of recently laid off workers in five Ontario towns during the 1990s. The book is part social history and part polemic. Attention to the context in which macro and micro events take place gives it a social-history quality, whereas, the focus on capitalism and the inherent destruction in it and its affect on people forms the basis of the polemic argument.

The authors thoughtfully researched and offered clear descriptions of the towns and their manufacturing enterprises and as such, provide a rich background against which to examine issues and impact of economic restructuring on individual workers' lives. In sum, manufacturing plants reducing their workforces or closing down resulted in the narrowing of employment opportunities. Frequently, individuals who were able to find work earned lower wages than in their previous jobs and worked under more insecure conditions. These changes had implications for not only the individuals affected, but also the communities in which they lived.

The authors studied five communities at various points in time and used a combination of research methods. The first phase of the study began in 1992 when the authors interviewed laid-off workers from the Canada Packers plant in Elora. In the following two years, they studied the experiences of laid-off workers from Canada Packers in Harriston and Westinghouse in Mount Forest. In 1996, Wilson and Leach conducted follow-up telephone interviews with 34 of the 68 interviewees from these three towns, all in Wellington County.

The second phase of the study began in 1997. The authors focused on analyzing quantitative information including manufacturing and census data for 39 small Ontario towns. At this stage, they conducted more interviews, this time with recently laid-off workers in Arnprior in the Ottawa valley who had been working at Weavexx. They interviewed 18 out of 40 laid-off workers, in addition to other employees, including managers. The final site is Iroquois Falls, the Abitibi Paper Company had laid off workers from its pulp-and-paper mill. They interviewed 34 of these individuals by telephone.

The authors note that they made an attempt to have a representative sample of interviewees in terms of gender and age. They used an interview guide to gather information on work history, education, employment of other household members, pay, employment-related benefits, their experiences with union and management representatives, and impacts of losing their jobs on their relationships.

In their introduction the authors indicate their concern with the literature on globalization, deindustrialization and economic change due to its failure to adequately address issues at the local level. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that they presented the rich detail in the interviews in a shallower depth than one would expect. Although they discuss the specific impacts on people's lives, such as income insecurity, feelings of humiliation, loss of structure and regular activity, feelings of inadequacy, isolation, etc., they did not provide a theoretical frame for these impacts. Instead, the vignettes of people's lives are presented as the sum total of macro economic forces.

The book's shifting between macro-economic forces and micro individual experiences is useful as a point of contrast; however, it can also be problematic. Specifically, contrasting aggregate statistics, such as national unemployment rates, with particular community situations is somewhat incongruous. Overall, unemployment rates decreased across Canada towards the 1990s as recovery from the recession took hold. However, this would not lead one to expect, as these authors do, that employment situations improved equally across the country. Thus, to point to job losses in particular communities as evidence that aggregate statistics somehow obfuscate reality is questionable.

The authors see global capitalist restructuring as the cause of changes in the lives of the people in the five studied communities. However, some of the recommendations for improving the lives of people in rural areas is to enter into partnerships with private industry with caution and to increase investment into the public sector via decentralized offices in small towns. Although both of these suggestions are potentially useful, they do not deal with the problem identified by the authors, namely the destructive force of global capitalism. Simply to introduce higher quality and paying jobs, whether they be with a new manufacturing plant or public sector employer, does not address the problems inherent in capitalism as a system. In other words, the authors' argument could have better engaged with the debate of capitalism itself.

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