

Creating a Transcontinental North American Working Class Movement

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Richard Roman and Edur Velasco Arregui. *Continental Crucible: Big Business, Workers and Unions in the Transformation of North America*. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2013. 148 pages. References. Index. Paperback. Price: \$19.95 CAN.

As the title suggests, *Continental Crucible: Big Business, Workers and Unions in the Transformation of North America* by Richard Roman and Edur Velasco looks simultaneously at corporate political strategy, the unions' responses, and the effects of industrial relocation and worker migration. It is this (as I wrote in a blurb for the book) that makes this book unique and so valuable. We are asked to look at class dynamics and class struggle and their impact on industrial investment policies and demographics throughout North America in a holistic way that is seldom attempted. The authors argue that these dynamics have laid the foundation for a new and necessary stage of international working class solidarity both in North America and in the world. Yet, while the fundamental approach is correct, it seems to me that they tend at times to exaggerate the existing level of struggle, to misunderstand the complexity of the situation of Mexican workers in the U.S., and to overestimate the likelihood of revolutionary developments in Mexico in the near future.

Before turning to my doubts, let me first explain the approach of this book and point out its strengths. *Continental Crucible* provides an essential framework for thinking about North American labor issues in terms of business policy, union strategy and migration patterns. And it traces in detail the ways in which business organizations in Canada, Mexico and the United States, each for their own reasons and somewhat differently, eventually arrived at the common policy of adopting neoliberal strategies and a vision of continental economic integration. The U.S. Business Roundtable, the Canadian Business Council on National Issues, and the Mexican Business Coordinating Council turned to neoliberalism and economic integration as a way of responding to a decline in profitability, confronting labor militancy and imposing labor discipline, ending older social pacts and in the broadest sense changing the national cultures to put competition and consumerism at the center. Though we cannot go into those differences here, the book deals with the initial differences between each of the national strategies that ultimately put them on the same road.

Taken together, these strategies eventually converged to create the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a treaty that, while most beneficial to U.S. corporations, also offered important incentives and benefits to both Canadian and Mexican business as well. The result of these economic changes generally and of NAFTA in particular was even more uneven economic development among the three countries and regions within them, leading to increased wage competition, downward harmonization, and more migration.

The Canadian, Mexican and U.S. labor movements each responded differently to these developments and failed to come up with a common and coordinated response, so a new North America political economy was created that now provides the terrain of struggle. In the authors' view, two historical developments laid the basis for labor collaboration in North America today: first, the creation in the twentieth century of the International Unions—really U.S.-based unions—that have local union affiliates in the United States and Canada; second, the combination of U.S. plant relocation to Mexico and Mexican migration to the United States, which means that millions of Mexican workers are employed by U.S. companies on both sides of the border. The U.S. labor movement is the hinge, linked to Canada through the International Unions and to Mexico through

investment and migration. At the same time, women have entered the workforce and the migrant streams in enormous numbers in all three countries, changing the existing patterns of employment and implicitly challenging patriarchy and the existing gender hierarchies.

Roman and Velasco argue that though these developments have been going on now for more than 30 years, the labor unions continue to operate on antiquated and obsolete strategies derived from national and nationalistic principles, and from narrow trade union conceptions of the role of unions. The result has been that unions have failed both to develop a class-wide model of struggle in their own countries and have also failed to create the international coordination necessary to confront the big business on the continent. The authors assert that the development of overlapping labor markets, continental production chains, and massive migration laid the basis for a new kind of labor solidarity and struggle. They see hope in the strategic alliances between unions such as the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) in the U.S. and the Authentic Labor Front (FAT) in Mexico, and in the attempt by the United Steel Workers (representing U.S. and Canadian workers) and the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers (Los Mineros) to create a new transnational union.

They argue that if we are to build a continental labor movement the unions need a new vision as well as a new strategy.

“Solidarity can only be built on the bases of a struggle for upward harmonization, which would require regulating capitalist investment and labor markets, tasks that would require challenging the power of big business or struggling for a transformation of the economy from capitalism to one of socialist democracy. Either would require a powerful workers’ movement, rooted in communities and workplaces, with a strategy of struggle and an alternative vision of society; a vision that rejects competition and embraces solidarity.” (p. 105)

This book then is *not* simply about cooperation and coordination between existing unions, but a call for a profoundly democratic, anti-racist and anti-sexist transformation of the existing unions to make them genuine fighting organizations of the continental working class. It is this complex and combined analysis of business, labor, migration and gender relations that makes this book so powerful and important.

Nevertheless, the book still raises doubts for me. Like many of us on the left, Roman and Velasco, it seems to me, have a tendency to exaggerate the size, scope and character of the contemporary class struggle. The opening sentences of the book read: “The crucible of North American transformation is heating up, but its outcome is far from clear. There is a growing clash between those pushing to continue the corporate agenda and the movements of resistance.” (p. 1). I wish I could agree with this—but I cannot. The capitalists in North America continue to push the neoliberal agenda, but there seems to me at the moment to be little significant resistance. The level of class struggle in the U.S. is at an all-time low and Canada’s not much better.

Regarding Mexico, the authors’ claim that “Mexico is the only country whose very institutional framework could be fundamentally challenged in the short and medium run,” and that we can expect a “growing insurgency” (p. 113) strikes me as wrong. They assert that “...the working class of Mexico still has revolutionary, collectivist and class-conscious rhetoric and traditions in spite of the ceaseless neo-liberal cultural offensive. The repertoire of popular protest in Mexico continues to have insurrectionary and revolutionary images and options.” (p. 114)

The authors seem to want to say that Mexico is in a pre-revolutionary situation, though they

carefully calibrate their language. Having closely followed Mexican working class, trade union and political developments for more than 25 years, I have become convinced that Mexico's supposedly revolutionary traditions, rhetoric, and images actually inhibit the development of a serious and realistic revolutionary politics appropriate for today. Mexico sees many protests, but few major conflicts; it is the only nation in Latin America that has never had a general strike. Moreover, in Mexico the Institutional Revolutionary Party that just returned to power under Enrique Peña Nieto is on a roll, either coopting or sweeping away its opponents. Mexico authoritarian regime, its corruption and violence, inhibit class struggle; workers mostly have been losing. I do not find the claim that Mexico will be the spark for a new wave of North American class struggle to be convincing. I will be delighted to be proven wrong by subsequent developments.

I am also not convinced that the U.S. International Unions, with their locals in the U.S. and Canada, represent the basis for any sort of international solidarity movement. There has always been a simmering resentment among Canadian workers against the U.S. unions, leading some 20 years ago to a series of splits, the most important being the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) leaving the United Auto Workers. I am not sure that those tensions have completely disappeared. Moreover, the International Unions are dominated by a bureaucratic caste of officials that has proven unwilling and unable to lead their members in struggle in the two separate nations. I see no reason to believe that the International Unions would be more successful in an international struggle for which they have shown little aptitude so far.

Finally, I find Roman and Velasco's treatment of Mexican immigration to the United States to be too simplistic. They argue that, "The curse of poverty follows them to their 'new' life." (p. 62) While it is true as they argue that Mexican immigrants are part of a labor reserve army that experiences particularly intense exploitation, suffers racial discrimination, and often endures poor living conditions, some immigrants also achieve relative success in new jobs and new communities and see their children find other opportunities, while many assimilate partially or wholly to American society. This is, of course, why immigrants come to the United States: because work pays more, and in addition—especially if one has papers (and many do) and certainly for the second generation—there is less repression and one has more democracy and more rights than in Mexico. The authors paint the immigrant condition with too broad a brush and too monochromatically.

Their misunderstanding of the Latino immigrants in the United States appears clearly in a statement like the following:

"The extreme poverty and racism that undocumented workers have been enduring has now spread to large sectors of the rest of the Latino population. It is this increasingly common situation of poverty that has united Latinos, with or without documents, and gave the immigrant protests of 2006 and 2010 a radical character." (p. 82)

In my view, the predominantly Latino immigrant demonstrations of 2006 represented a broad demand for dignity and democratic rights and achieved significance from the mass participation of Latinos, many leaving work to participate, giving some of the demonstrations the character of a kind of Latino general strike (or "A Day without a Mexican"); nevertheless, the demonstrators carrying the flags of their own nations and that of the United States, coming from the churches, soccer clubs, and labor unions, never had "a radical character"—if what we mean by radical is a challenge to the established economic, social and political order. Immigrants by and large were demanding green cards and a path to citizenship, the right to participate in American society, not a fundamental change in American society.

Despite these reservations about their reading of the political and social climate in the three countries, and especially in Mexico, and though I differ with them about the Mexican immigrant experience here, I believe that the complex analysis they present and the conclusions that they draw from their analysis of business, unions, and migration are fundamentally correct. As they argue, we need to build rank-and-file movements to make unions in all three countries more democratic and militant. We need to fight racism and sexism in society, at work and in the unions. And we need to build international solidarity. All of those interested in understanding the nature of the problems we face in taking on the capitalist class and building a new continental labor movement will find this book essential.