

Book Review

Negotiating Risk, Seeking Security, Eroding Solidarity: Life and Work on the Border

by Holly Gibbs, Belinda Leach, and Charlotte A.B. Yates. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2012, \$18.95 CAN, paper. ISBN 978-1-55266-527-5. Pages: 1-147.

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This interdisciplinary study brings together approaches from political economy and social anthropology to show how working class solidarity is intrinsically linked to but extends beyond the workplace. Gibbs, Leach and Yates argue that in examining solidarity more attention must be paid to the interplay between class, gender and race in relation to workers' broader community experiences and sense of security and risk as a result of labour force changes. The authors set out to demonstrate how globalization and neoliberal policies and practices have led to structural limitations which have impeded possibilities for sustained solidarity. Through interviews with Mexican and Canadian automotive workers in the cities of Ciudad Juárez, Guelph, Stratford, Windsor and Brantford, they center their research primarily on working class women's experiences of solidarity to examine the impact of structural inequities resulting from class, gender and race divides. Their decision to focus on automotive workers in Canada and Mexico is based on what they see as the industry's continued importance as both "a symbol of the good life in North America" and "an exemplar of globalization."

Gibbs, Leach and Yates explain solidarity as the capacity for collective action based on collective identities and a shared sense of belonging. Using a social relations paradigm that employs the concepts of "social reproduction" and "community", they explore changes to the foundations of solidarity. First, they look at how the conditions and structure

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of labour markets shape work experiences, then move on to introduce the research communities in detail. They subsequently explore the gendering of solidarity through the major themes which resonated from their interviews: 1. experiences and feelings of solidarity, risk and insecurity; 2. family lives and the changing world of work; and 3. the impact of (im)mobility on solidarity and community relations. Importantly, their study connects workers' experiences of risk and security, family life, and (im)mobility to both structural political-economic changes and new management control techniques, including increased competition leading to declined wages and benefits as well as job loss; restructuring of government income support programs and privatization of social services creating barriers to health, housing, and employment security; violations of labour laws and safety practices due to inadequate regulatory scrutiny and a lack of independent unions; and gender segregated work practices such as placement of women in parts production, scarce training opportunities, sexist job advertisements and screenings for pregnancy. The authors' convincingly argue that these policies and practices, which more adversely affect women and racialized peoples than white men, have led to the individualizing of collective responsibility and the destruction of collective identities as well as the deterioration of community needed to uphold long-term working class solidarity.

This study demonstrates how the materiality and social relations of gender, race, family and community play significant roles in the experiences of automotive industry workers. According to the authors' interviews and analysis, women in both countries are employed in less skilled occupations in the automotive industry which places them at the bottom of the production chain and translates into lower wages, less job mobility and more insecurity. While women in Canada seek the benefit of unions when they can, the data presented reveals how women in Mexico tend to distrust unions which are mostly state-affiliated and have a history of collaboration with management. Despite this difference, women in both countries face negative impacts as a result of the social reproduction of gender norms, including being sexualized by coworkers and in the labour movement in general. Women also bear the brunt of family responsibilities in the home. The social reproduction of gender norms at the family level means that women in Juárez and the Ontario cities examined here play dual roles as unpaid domestic workers and paid labourers. Also, the increased pressure to relocate to places of employment after plant closures or in search of work further strains workers' sense of community. Racialized workers in Canada are

additionally affected by a competitive industry which has created an atmosphere of “us versus them”; where top-paying jobs remain in the hands of mostly white men. In Mexico, the hierarchy of race based on skin colour, linked to the legacies of colonialism, determines who gets access to which jobs. To deal with sexism, racism, and overburdening responsibilities, workers rely on individualized coping methods rather than collective solidarity. These individualized responses internalize anxiety, stress, sexism, and racism so that responsibility for institutionalized sexist, racist, and violent behaviour and practice is placed on the individual experiencing these injustices rather than on the unjust structural and societal foundations that enable these practices to continue.

The claim that solidarity is “deeply gendered” is not a novel one, as rightly acknowledged in this study; however, the authors’ analysis – grounded in the experiences of workers – provides a significant contribution to understanding the ways in which solidarity is gendered and how globalization and neoliberalism impact the manner in which solidarity is actualized. In this way, this study offers critical insight into the gendered effects of neoliberal policies and practices on solidarity in other employment sectors. In comparing the similarities and differences between worker experiences in Canada and Mexico while recognizing the generalizability limitations of their data due to the small number of Mexican workers interviewed, Gibbs, Leach and Yates underscore the importance of class to any analysis of solidarity. The authors also make a strong case for how independent unions can help mitigate risk and security through collective action, and education concerning the impact of structural changes on their workplace thereby reducing the tendency to scapegoat individuals based on race and/or gender. Substantially, their research points to the contradictory processes that exist alongside the erosion of working class solidarity revealing traditional and non-traditional practices and possibilities for solidarity which has considerable implications for the exploration of solidarity movements outside the workplace in all fields of study and political contexts.