Collective action to transform work

Working conditions are getting worse and worse. The harm they are doing to employees makes health and safety at work critical. But rather than just tackling the work-related factors of particular diseases, what is needed is to act on the work relations that are behind the decline in working conditions. Taking ownership of knowledge and modes of action is decisive here. The book (Se) Former pour transformer le travail (Learning from each other to transform work) is a valuable tool for doing that. It describes a collection of schemes run over the past fifty years in different regions (Europe, Latin America and Canada). It brings together researchers, trade unionists, health and safety advisors, etc. who as members of an international, interdisciplinary network, have developed a process of mutual education through which trainers and trainees aim to develop a critical understanding of work and test out practical ways of changing it. This process creates the conditions in which to specifically challenge work organization, which, as Laurent Vogel writes in the foreword, “is the prerequisite for any blueprint for social well-being”.

The book holds a wealth of interest:
— it explores different practices for transforming and critically assessing work, with many contributions describing schemes for training trade unionists to negotiate changes to working conditions;
— it takes a detached look at the conditions for developing knowledge that can build the capacities for collective action, especially that of union representatives;
— the assessment of schemes argues against compliance with external standards which it looks at in relation to the political issues which it underlies;
— it outlines new policy directions for training the various players in health and safety at work.

The book is not only of vital assistance to anyone trying to develop processes for transforming working conditions, it also stands out for the training methodology described which borrows from workers’ education practices. Trade union education is a testing bed for other relations where the roles of trainer and trainee are not immutably fixed. What is needed to develop a body of collective knowledge are teaching/learning methods that validate the skills and knowledge of all participants in training. Such a methodology results from a shift in the subject areas involved in the transformation of work. It makes knowledge production the result of a conjoined scientific and political commitment, not least through the status and legitimacy it confers on the voice of the stakeholders in work and working conditions. That shift in fact is the book’s basic premise.

That is why much of what it has to say is directed chiefly at ergonomics and occupational psychology educators wanting to start up such schemes, for which it propounds the ethical and epistemological foundations.

The book comes with a DVD giving access to documents, tools and video clips produced by the authors. It is a proper work tool for trade union reps as much as for other stakeholders trying out schemes for transforming work. The range of schemes chronicled helps to broaden the prospects for collective action for all those who see transforming work as a key aspect of any blueprint for social well-being.

The authors’ approach once again shows how the fight for health and safety cannot be divorced from collective action to improve working conditions. Advances in medical knowledge and technical progress cannot bring it about of their own accord.

Action for health and safety at work is therefore not predominantly technical in nature. It is a political issue to do with the balance of power in stakeholders’ practices and strategies to impose legitimate definitions of issues and procedures.

The processes recounted in this book unquestionably inform an approach to the collective development of knowledge and know-how through which to build the capacities of workers and their representatives to act on matters that go to their interests.

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