Global Labour Journal

Volume 1 | Issue 2 6

5-31-2010

Review of Ariel Ducey's 'Never Good Enough: Health Care Workers and the False Promise of Job Training'

Elizabeth Quinlan
Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada, elizabeth.quinlan@usask.ca

Recommended Citation
Quinlan, Elizabeth (2010) "Review of Ariel Ducey's 'Never Good Enough: Health Care Workers and the False Promise of Job Training'," *Global Labour Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, p. 299-300.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/vol1/iss2/6

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Labour Journal by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.

Review of Ariel Ducey's 'Never Good Enough: Health Care Workers and the False Promise of Job Training'

This review is available in Global Labour Journal: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/vol1/iss2/6

Book Review

Ariel Ducey (2008) *Never Good Enough: Health Care Workers and the False Promise of Job Training*. New York: Cornell University Press. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7504-7

REVIEWED BY *Elizabeth Quinlan, University of Saskatchewan*

The trade union movement has had to defend itself against the onslaught of capital and hostile governments for the past 30 years. Heatlh care workers and their unions have not been immune. Ariel Ducey's excellent book, *Never Good Enough*, is an account of how the United Healthcare Workers East (SEIU) Local 1199 in New York has reacted to the hospitals' attack. In the process, the union gave up its fight for the wider issues of peace and social justice, for which it was justly famous.

Ducey argues that Local 1199's principle response has been to join the hospitals in promoting job training programs, designed, so it was said, to enable workers to climb the professional ladders and pay scales. These training programs were, however, an integral part of the hospitals' larger strategy of re-engineering the hospitals' operations. Not able to move the jobs offshore to other countries with lower labour costs – as is done in manufacturing and other kinds of service work – management was left to re-engineering strategies. Local 1199 joined enthusiastically with the hospitals in lobbying the state government for the funding for the job-training programs, despite the fact that the main objective of the programs' is workers' compliance with the re-engineering. Ducey's analysis reveals that the union's collaboration may have saved some jobs and some cash for some workers, but in doing so, it lost its soul. It is impossible to know whether the union could in fact have continued to function as before or whether it was compelled to bend to the winds of change in order to survive. Ducey does not deal with this problem.

Ducey's book presents a withering critique of all these training programs, which are of much more benefit to the hospitals than to the workers. Most of the training has little to do with the actual skills needed for the jobs. Even more problematic, according to Ducey, is that caring is cast as a natural ability, inherently satisfying (especially for women) and therefore 'society does not care and respect those whose very jobs are to provide care and respect'. Workers internalize a view of themselves as deficient and therefore needing to be 'topped up' perpetually by more training.

Never Good Enough is a rich description of the structural deficiencies of the health care system and the impact on the workers at the private, non-profit ('voluntary') hospitals in New York City. When Ducey explored the question of how health care workers are coping with the contradictions and irrationalities of the system within which they work, she found that they 'dip into the well of their own humanity' to console, comfort, and care for their charges, while enrolling in yet another training program with the hope that it will lead to meaningful, well-paying work in the field to which they are committed. Most of the health workers we meet in the book come to the United

States from the developing countries entering by way of the underground 'nanny' job market. Although Ducey does not address this issue directly, their emigration inevitably deprives their home countries of their labour power and has significant repercussions for the health care systems in those countries.

The book is an extraordinarily well-written and well-researched socio-political examination of health care and labour politics. Personal stories are woven into a persuasive analysis of the fault lines in America's health care system. Although the chapters are separated according to main themes, the author moves her analysis nimbly across the borders in order to synthesize and integrate her material. The overlaps are an effective stylistic device in a non-linear structure to help the reader make sense of the intricacies of her subject. For instance, individuals, whose interviews are reported in early chapters, often re-appear in subsequent chapters to buttress intertwined themes. Ducey articulates an empathy and respect for the workers who receive Walmart-like wages and yet put up with such things as patients throwing their dirty diapers at them. She goes a long way with her analysis to taking up the very mission she criticizes the union for allowing to slip: to press the public to re-examine their ideas on the value of caring work.

Ducey's book is especially useful in view of the sweeping health reform bill which Congress has at last passed. Among many other things, the reform bill includes a host of cost-saving proposals and in particular mandates to cut costs of USD 400B for Medicare and Medicaid over the next ten years. How are these cuts going to be made and at whose expense? This is a huge question, which the unions representing health care workers should start thinking about and working together on. Studying and discussing *Never Good Enough* together with the massive health reform bill itself, is a good place to start.

Elizabeth Quinlan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, Canada.