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Manitoba Office

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## Youth Voices

A review of *From Demonized to Organized: Building the New Union Movement* by Nora Loreto submitted by Gabriel Bako

**T**his new book published by CCPA National provides a timely analysis of unions and neoliberalism. Mainstream media teaches youth, who have been born and raised under neoliberalism, to be consumers of popular culture rather than critical and active participants in our communities. We've known nothing else, so it's no wonder why more of us believe in the notions of individualism rather than collectivism. Loreto's book challenges these ideas and invites youth to consider a different perspective.

Based on the influences we have grown up with, many youth distrust all things institutional; governments, our education systems and unions. It becomes especially easy to distrust unions and the ideas of collectivism when mainstream media tells us almost daily that it's unions' fault that we don't have full-time stable jobs. It also doesn't help that as youth we're often working multiple low-wage, precarious jobs that are primarily in retail/service sectors, most of which are non-union. On top of this our parents often have non-union jobs as well, so our impressions of unions are often only those negatively portrayed through media. As a generation we're extremely uninformed about unions; in fact most of us share the sentiment that unions protect the lazy, keep people overpaid, and convince workers to strike for no good reason.

I myself was guilty of these sentiments. In high school I was assigned the task of writing about a problem we saw in Canadian society: I identified unions. I thought that they prevented young workers from

getting ahead. Despite my teacher being part of a union, he never challenged my opinion. The following year I got a job in a unionized workplace. I still had anti-union sentiments, and didn't understand why union dues were coming off my pay cheque, where the money was going or that I was part of a collective structure that was benefitting not only myself, but my coworkers. No one had explained it to me; there were no resources for me to learn more.

I stayed a reluctant member of my union for three years. In 2009 the collective agreement was up for negotiations and I decided that if I got involved I could be angry at someone from the union, get some answers, and even learn something. As roughly 2,000 members went to go ratify the contract in March 2009 I got up and spoke in opposition of our union, told all the young people that the union wasn't reflective of us and that we should vote against the contract. I had decided rather than being resentful and passive, I should become active and try to advocate for change. My union saw that I was eager to be involved and some of the older activists reached out to me without being critical. They engaged respectfully with me and bit by bit educated me about the benefits of unions. Since attending the UFCW's national youth internship program in 2010, I've been an active member of the labour movement.

My experience shows how it's easy to be from my generation and not have an appreciation for unions, even when you're a member. It reinforces the notions of

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

popular culture and how neoliberalism is so entrenched, so normalized. Loreto analyses all these issues and more.

From *Demonized to Organized* also educates older workers, activists and leaders in unions to unpack the reasons why my generation has distrust in not only unions, but also the political systems and society as a whole. More importantly, Loreto's book has the potential to speak to my generation. The book inspires us to think critically about how media, politics, and society have impacted on our perceptions of unions and collectivism.

The first couple chapters of the book examine what a union is and debunks anti-union sentiments, many of which I felt when I was in high school or first started my job. Loreto concludes, "A union is a democratic structure for workers to advance their interests against the interests of their bosses so that through cooperation and negotiation, both sides can find common ground." Loreto effectively conveys the idea that unions are about equalizing the relationship between the capitalist class and the working class, not only in workplaces, but also within society as a whole.

Loreto dedicates an entire chapter to "Labour Disputes". This is an important chapter because mainstream media and conservative politicians use labour disputes to sway public opinion in opposition of unions. Loreto argues that this is intentional because labour disputes are sensationalized in contrast to the day-to-day operations of the union. Most Canadians only hear about unions during times of dispute and perceived civil disobedience. The strongest argument the chapter highlights is the importance of workers being able to democratically and collectively decide to withdraw their labour power in a workplace dispute, something the media never communicates to the public.

Prominent in the book is the role of government in advancing neoliberalism and the degradation of organized labour. Governments at civic, provincial, and federal levels have all enacted measures that have eroded unions' power and swayed public opinion. Loreto examines how politicians have enacted policies that benefit corporations, such as tax reduction and free-trade deals. These policies advance the capitalists' interests, but often fail to advance workers' interests. Corporations paint unions negatively because they contradict and challenge these corporate objectives.

Loreto's book is especially relevant to young people who don't get the opportunity to critically examine their ways of thinking, or what they've been told about unions and collectivism. I was fortunate to be able to formulate opinions that now contradict my former ones. Loreto reminded me that unions are the only institution in society that fight for and advance workers' interests. They are the only democratic institution within society that has roots in communities across the country, which is able to unite a diversity of people, challenge neoliberal rhetoric and defend democracy for all of society.

This point about democracy is the most important message in Loreto's book and the reason why it is important for young people to read.

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