

The Long Distance Feeling: A History of the Telecommunications Workers Union, by Elaine Bernard. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1982. Pp. vi, 249. Cloth, \$14.95; paper, \$7.95.

Information, according to the futurist, John Kettle, may soon supplant manufacturing and even human services as a source of employment in Canada. Kettle will not find much comfort in Elaine Bernard's history of telephone unionism in British Columbia. On her evidence, fibre optics and silicon chips have helped BC Tel ensure that the only people it will have to deal with are its customers.

People who want to know what technology can do to the workplace will find many hints and little comfort from Bernard's book. British Columbia's highly profitable and American-owned telephone system has been a leader in technology — if only because BC Tel's main advantage to its owners is as a market for new hardware. The company has also kept pace with the industry's changing styles in personnel management. BC Tel has taken turns being paternalistic, nasty and nice. Its union, to no one's surprise, has followed management's mood.

As befits British Columbia's militant tradition, unions came early to the telephone industry. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers won its first recognition strike for craft workers in 1902. It survived a savage employer counter-offensive and even extended a somewhat condescending hand to the company's women operators. What killed the IBEW at BC Tel was not its militancy during the 1919 General Strike (when the operators were the last to give in) but a shrewd "kill with kindness" campaign by the company in the twenties. Persuaded that the employer was a better friend than the union, BC Tel workers abandoned the IBEW only to face the Depression with nothing better than a clutch of toothless "employee associations."

Like many Canadian workers, BC Tel employees rediscovered unions during World War II. The old associations of traffic, clerical and craft workers were transformed first into a feeble and highly decentralized Federation of Telephone Workers and then, through tough experience, into the present-day Telecommunications Workers. In the interim, provincial particularism, internal rivalries and company "guidance" helped the union fight off raids and postponed affiliation with the rest of the national and provincial labour movement until the sixties.

That decade also ended BC Tel's peaceful era of labour relations. Bernard records the opinion of older workers that the main catalyst was a change of ownership to the GTE Corporation. It was also true that a

new guard of more militant members in a decade of rising expectations was ready to tangle with GTE's abrasive management style.

Most important, telephone companies across the continent had abandoned paternalism in favour of replacing workers by machines. The change from manual to automatic switchboards, launched in earnest after 1945, had begun the pattern by displacing thousands of operators. By now, every job in the industry, from billing clerk to cable-splicer, has been transformed by technique or technology. Remaining workers have found their jobs routinized and subjected to humiliating electronic supervision.

As a union, the Telecommunications Workers has faced changes and challenges which might have torn a weaker organization in a less labour-oriented province to shreds. Some of the struggles are familiar. BC Tel was not the only company to insist on exclusive management of a pension fund wholly contributed by employees. Other problems are unique to the industry. BC Tel training programs, for example, are deliberately structured to make it difficult for employees to take hard-earned skills elsewhere. As a result, workers displaced by change had an impossible time marketing their expertise. Elimination of jobs has made strike action increasingly difficult. Job action through the TWU has ranged from rotating strikes and flying pickets to the nationally publicized occupation of company premises in 1980. Unfortunately, as Bernard underlines, courts, media and public opinion have shown little sympathy for victims of technological change and less patience in understanding the complexity of their problems.

Elaine Bernard's book is badly needed. Generalizing about unions in Canada is like flying so high that not only trees but the woods disappear. We need more studies of individual unions and their industries. Of course the TWU is an anomaly among unions — provincially based but federally regulated, a mixture of blue and white collars, men and women — but the truth is that each union has its own anomalies. Only after many more books like Bernard's will we be able to make sensible generalizations.

As a graduate student, Bernard seems to have skipped the lectures on turgid style and Marxist categories. As a result, her book is lively, sympathetic and readable. Although her research apparently has not extended to company archives, her book is not a polemic against BC Tel. Bernard has an enviable gift for making both communications technology and bargaining issues clear to outsiders. This is a book that can be read for pleasure as well as profit.

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