

David Cruise and Alison Griffiths, *Net Worth: Exploding the Myths of Pro Hockey*. Viking, Toronto, 1991. pp. 390. \$Can27.99.

For centuries workers have formed or joined unions because of a belief that they would be more able to protect and advance their employment rights through collective, rather than individual, action. Left to their own devices, workers, via the process of individual bargaining and competition will bid down wages and other employment conditions to the lowest common denominator. In other words, unions and unionism hold out the prospect of providing a vehicle for workers to employ collective action as a counter to the superior economic power

of their employers. With this 'optimistic' view, unions operate to provide members with improved wages and working conditions, and a 'voice' in the decision making processes which occur in the world of work.

Industrial relations writings contain an alternative, or 'pessimistic', view concerning the role of unions. Within this strand of the literature unions become diverted from their ostensible function of pursuing members' rights and objectives, and are used by leaders for purposes of personal self aggrandisement. Union leaders, with this view, feel that they have a greater affinity with employers, politicians and other 'leading' figures than they do with their own members. In short, unions are used by leaders as a stepping stone for their own personal ends, (the classic exposition of such a view is provided by Frenchman Robert Michels in *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Dove Publications, New York, 1959).

In the area of professional sports unionism has had a long row to hoe. Virtually all professional sports are littered with examples of failed attempts by players to form unions. In the English speaking part of the world it is only in the last two decades, or so, that unionism has had any real impact on the operation of professional sport; with only English soccer, American baseball, American basketball and to a lesser extent American football, providing examples of unions which have wrested major concessions for members.

Cruise and Griffiths in *Net Worth: Exploring the Myths of Pro Hockey* are concerned with providing an historical expose of the underpinnings of ice-hockey in North America. In doing so they focus on, or, continually return to issues associated with the relationship between players, on the one hand, and owner/club and league officials, on the other hand. In particular, much of their attention is directed to the operation of the National Hockey League Players Association, founded in 1967 under the leadership of Alan Eagleson, a young and energetic lawyer. The analysis provided by Cruise and Griffiths of the National Hockey League Players Association is consistent with the

'pessimistic' interpretation of unionism found in industrial relations writings.

Eagleson not only headed the players association, but also acted as an agent for players and became involved in many business deals, inside and outside, hockey; and in the process, managed to amass a personal fortune. According to Cruise and Griffiths, Eagleson is happier mixing with league and club officials, and other glitterati, than players. It is interesting to contrast this position with Marvin Miller, a former leader of the Major League Baseball Players Association, who told his members that if he was ever praised by owner and league officials he should be sacked.

In 1910, 1946 and 1957 attempts by players to unionise were ruthlessly crushed by owners. In 1967 ice-hockey's establishment endorsed the formation of a players association under the leadership of Eagleson. In the words of Cruise and Griffiths 'the League sensed that Eagleson was a man that they could do business with' (p. 206). The major criticism Cruise and Griffiths direct at Eagleson is that ice-hockey players have not received the type of benefits that have been obtained by other North American player associations. It has been estimated, for example, that in the latter part of the 1980s ice-hockey players received only 20 per cent of gross income flowing into the sport (p. 307).

In particular, Cruise and Griffiths direct attention to Eagleson's handling of negotiations concerning pensions for retired players. Generally speaking, the players association has traded off traditional freedom issues which have dominated sports industrial relations (that is, controls which restrict the movement of players between clubs) and other concessions for improvements in pensions. Cruise and Griffiths indicate two major problems with this strategy. First, there has been no real accounting, or accountability, of the management of such funds. Evidence is provided of where such funds have been 'skimmed', with erstwhile pension contributions directed to the benefit of persons other than players. Second, owner and league contributions have been funded from surpluses generated from previous contributions, rather than

additional income provided by owners and the league. Players who reach the 400 game vesting requirement, of which only a minority of players qualify, have received, and can expect to receive, limited income in their dotage.

Cruise and Griffiths have provided a very readable and lively exposé

of the organisation and operation of professional ice-hockey in North America, and, in particular, the dynamics of player-owner relationships. *Net Worth* should be read by all persons who have an interest in the machinations of professional sport.

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