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Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor

A Book Review

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We live in a paradoxical time. On the one hand, workers and organized labor are in their worst state since the early 1930s. Only 6.4 percent of private-sector workers belong to unions; average hourly pay is below what it was in 1973; 40 percent of adults lack the savings to pay for a $400 emergency expense. On the other hand, there is more excitement and organizing potential on the left, and among many workers, than there has been in generations. The Fight for $15 has been remarkably successful; hundreds of thousands of teachers have gone on strike illegally and won; innovative new forms of organizing are reinvigorating both labor and the left.

Steven Greenhouse, longtime labor correspondent for the *New York Times*, surveys this extraordinary terrain in his new book. While he doesn't provide a detailed history of labor, he does cover some of its most dramatic moments and significant phases from the early twentieth century to the present, with a journalistic flair for personal stories often absent from academic accounts. Much of the narrative, particularly of the neoliberal attack on unions, is bleak, but in the end Greenhouse's argument is compelling: labor's present weakness is not engraved in stone. A renaissance is possible.

The most interesting parts of the book are those that lend support to this argument. Too few people are aware, for example, of the spectacular successes of Culinary Workers Union Local 226 of Las Vegas.

> "Its membership has more than tripled since the late 1980s," Greenhouse writes, "soaring from eighteen thousand to sixty thousand today, making it one of the most powerful and fastest-growing union locals in the nation."

Dishwashers, waiters, and hotel housekeepers—immigrants, blacks, refugees—have been raised to the middle class.

The trick has been to reject the union's old "business unionism" model and make it a rank-and-file union, starting in the 1980s. With the help of large and long-lasting strikes at casino-hotels—one lasted over six years—the Culinary forced one hotel after another to accept "card check" neutrality (meaning it would recognize the union after a majority of workers signed cards supporting it). Even the very anti-union MGM finally changed its tune, after public demonstrations were held and the union distributed reports to MGM's investors warning them that a Culinary strike could damage the company's precarious finances.

Other unions could also learn from the Culinary's dedication to politically mobilizing its members. In 2016, it was decisive in switching Nevada from 'red' to 'blue': its members knocked on 350,000 doors, got thousands of people to register to vote, and brought tens of thousands of early voters to the polls. In 2018, similarly, the union was instrumental in flipping a U.S. Senate seat from red to blue, along with the governor's mansion and two House seats.

Greenhouse is especially interested in how activists and a "militant minority" of workers have adapted to the adverse conditions of neoliberalism. In chapters on app-based work (Uber, TaskRabbit, Mechanical Turk, etc.), the Fight for $15, viciously exploited farmworkers in Florida, the teacher strikes of 2018, and "how Los Angeles became pro-labor," he explores the novel strategies and tactics that have been used—in some cases outside the framework of any traditional union at all.

For tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida, for instance, conditions have approximated slavery. In 1993, activists founded the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) to educate and entertain workers by means of leadership training sessions, a low-power radio station, weekly skits about farmwork and social justice (with the immigrants as actors), and other programs. By the mid-90s the Coalition was organizing strikes to press growers for higher pay and better working conditions. But the strategy wasn't working.

So they switched their focus: they began to pressure tomato-buying chains like Taco Bell and later McDonald's and Burger King. They had two demands: that these companies require their suppliers to adopt a code of conduct, and that they pay their suppliers a penny more per pound, money that would be passed on to the pickers. With the help of university and high school students, the National Council of Churches and other religious organizations, federal prosecutions of forced labor on Florida farms, and highly visible tactics like a hunger strike outside Taco Bell's headquarters, the CIW organized a boycott of Taco Bell until the corporation would agree to its demands. In 2005, it finally did. A few years later, other companies followed.

As a result, 35,000 farmworkers have had their wages and working conditions significantly improved. A workplace-monitoring program, which experts have called the best in the U.S., ensures that violations are investigated and punished.

> "[T]he tomato fields in Immokalee," one researcher says, "are [now] probably the best working environment in American agriculture."

Such stories as these make *Beaten Down, Worked Up* an inspiring read. The final chapter is particularly interesting, for Greenhouse gives concrete advice on "how workers can regain their power." Perhaps there could be a major national workers' group comparable to AARP, called something like the American Association of Working People, to which members would pay dues and which would advocate for their interests. Activists could champion a system of worker representation on company boards, similar to Germany's. Union leaders should be incentivized to do more organizing. If the federal government won't act, states could implement new laws Greenhouse outlines.

Readers familiar with labor history and the recent corporate attacks on unions might find the book's treatment of these subjects a little superficial, but Greenhouse's purpose, in any case, is to contribute practically to the struggle for workers' rights. And at this he will surely

succeed admirably.

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