

Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement
Rick Fantasia & Kim Voss
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Brief Summary

The book discusses the current state of the American workforce, in which many laborers receive no social benefits because they work non-unionized jobs, as opposed to Europe, where the social benefits tend to be universal. On the surface, the American economy seems to be booming with a proliferation of jobs, but at what costs? For example, Wal-Mart is now the largest retailer in the world; Wal-Mart's model consists of employing low-wage workers while working with foreign companies to import goods cheaply. (28-29). The Wal-Mart model keeps costs down for the consumer but keeps wages down as well.

Primarily, America has been able to dominate world economies as a result of corporations that have opposed workers rights. There are four forces which can define the American labor movement: "deregulation, decentralization, privatization and individualism," leading to a society where the citizens largely fend for themselves with very little 'collective responsibility.' (9). The authors describe the dominant, ailing model of "business unionism" and contrast it with "social unionism," with examples of social unionism victories in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

Facts and Findings

The authors note the dominance of neoliberal economics, in which the control of the economy is shifted from the public to the private sector. One example is the dot.com companies such as Amazon, whose success can be attributed to its use of low wage workers at the bottom of the chain who work for \$7 per hour to pack boxes of books ready for shipment. (5).

They discuss the differences between the American and the European labor markets, and how social benefits in America tend to be tied to jobs, especially union jobs, whereas in Europe they tend to be universal. American workers' rights (right to restroom breaks, social benefits, and right not to be overworked) have been replaced by consumer's rights (right to obtain credit, and shop 24 hours). (27).

In Europe, the wage system is centralized, whereas, in America, the wage system is determined by a largely nonunion workforce. (10). Collective bargaining, the negotiation process by which workers use unions to represent them, is decentralized in America. (23). This decentralization leads to gaps in wages among workers in similar industries. (24). For example, there are 65 national union organizations in the United States that coordinate from workplace to workplace and through government monitored elections are selected to be the official representative of the workers of the organization. (24).

In 1999, 5.9 percent of the American workforce work two or more jobs -- mostly part-time, low paying positions. (11). Many American workers are employed in low wage positions which leads to fewer social benefits (vacation, dental plan, medical benefits and training) (11). One out of four American works either a part-time or a temporary job and not the standard forty hour workweek. (12). American corporations have favored a part-time workforce and Wal-Mart, for example, has defined full-time as twenty-eight hours per week. (12).

The book then offers a historical account of the labor movement, starting with the Knights of Labor, an organization of clothing workers, and highlighting the Pullman railroad strike of 1894 and an increase in the use of state troops between 1886 and 1895 to put down strikes. (36-38).

Fantasia and Voss discuss the formation in the 1930s of the CIO -- an organization which has remade the American labor movement -- triggered by the Great Depression, the Roosevelt presidency, and workers' desperation for social benefits. (41-42). Crossing lines of race, gender, and citizenship, the CIO formed a workforce with common goals. (42).

After the World War II, the Taft Harley Act severely restricted the rights of workers and promoted business unionism, favorable to corporations. (50). The Act made union elections more regulated, granted employers new "free speech" rights, made it more difficult for employees to file grievances, and outlawed foremen (supervisors on the shop floor) from joining unions. (50-51). Further, the Taft-Harley Act made it lawful to create "right to work" states where laws make unionization difficult and low wage, low benefit jobs become the norm. (51).

The authors critique the development of "push-button unionism:" legalistic, financially driven unions with huge specialized staff, financed by automatic deductions of union dues from workers' paychecks. (55). In Europe, more issues are resolved by the central government, rather than by company-by-company negotiations. One example of the bureaucratic nature of unions is that the procedure to file a grievance has now become more legalistic. (85). First, a worker has to contact a union representative with a complaint. (85). Next, the union representative contacts the company to schedule a meeting. (85). Third, the complaint continues through a series of steps which, if not resolved, result in "neutral arbitration." (85). The authors note how decentralization can

also lead to corruption in the leadership of unions, for example, the presence of “family dynasties” in unions where leadership is passed on in families. (95).

Gus Bevona, a president of a union representing workers such as janitors and doormen earned \$450,000 annually. (93). Another union representative owned a \$2.5 million jet plane that the union gave him for his personal use. (92). Union leadership shifted from organizers to “business agents,” who called for more legalistic proceedings and restricted the mobilization of workers. (84).

In recent decades, unionization rates have declined dramatically as corporations have gained the upper hand. (122). In one key trend, corporate America has contracted out jobs -- which dissolves the relationship between employers and direct employees. (123). Contracting out jobs creates multiple employers for unions to target, and the very idea of “employer” becomes confusing and not so distinct. (123).

The authors point to a new type of unionism, social unionism, as the answer to the problem of unions in America. Social unionism works to provide workers with resources so that they will collectively solve the problems by way of rank and file leadership, emphasizing collective power, and teaching the workers how to organize. (127). Social unionism is rooted in social justice, equality, and “civil rights.”

In many campaigns, social unionism relies on heavy research of a company. Social unionism uses information such as the company’s clients, lenders, shareholders, and its subsidiaries in attempting to surmount opposition to unionization. (128). The union might then make public information that harms the company’s reputation, such as “irregular pricing” and a problem with the organization’s “health and safety record.” (128).

Social unionism practice unionism as a process, a “movement.” (130). For example, when janitors in Los Angeles, who had been hired by subcontractors, had a hard time finding who their “employer,” was under U.S. law, social unionists defined employer as “the corporate entities that ultimately held power over the worker’s lives” using a broad, practical, “movement” definition rather than a legalistic one. (130).

Recommendations and Implications

The authors point to the formation of workers centers, largely funded by unions, where women and minorities, groups that have traditionally been excluded from participating in unions, are granted a continuum of support such as English language classes, assistance with legal problems and wage concerns. (112).

Fantasia and Voss endorse “social unionism.” In the example of the Los Angeles campaign, a group of janitors joined together when former business managers contracted out the work to national investors which led to lower wages and inferior working conditions. (135). The reason for the janitor’s success was the involvement of community support and awareness and shrewd use of research. (136-137). For example, first, a study was conducted on the companies which employed janitors to show huge

differences in the wages of janitors employed based on regions and suburbs throughout the city. (139). The research showed disparity in the treatment of unionized and non unionized janitors employed by the same company. (139). Further, the research showed that on average a company paid only about 5 cents of every dollar collected from rent to the janitor's wages. (140).

After demonstrations and public pressure, including extensive media coverage, the owners relented. (144). In one protest, workers picketed and acted in a form of street theatre outside of a Los Angeles restaurant while an executive dined inside. (142). Interestingly, after outreach and community support, 90 percent of the janitors who cleaned Los Angeles high rises were unionized. (144).

Analysis / Critique

This book does a good job of illustrating that the success of American corporations abroad has largely been an illusion, if we take into account the impact of worker's rights. The authors highlight the concentration of wealth in America, where the wealthiest 5 percent own 59 percent of the country's wealth. (15). The book concludes what is needed is a focus on collective action and rank and file leadership. Overall, while the book presents much factual data, a little more emphasis on real world examples where workers united against the companies successfully could be useful.