

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# The Ongoing Challenge: American Workers and Unions

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Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2004)

Francis Green, *Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006)

Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah M. Meltz, *The Paradox of American Unionism: Why Americans Like Unions More Than Canadians Do But Join Much Less* (Ithaca: ILR Press 2004)

Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006)

Immanuel Ness, *Immigrants, Unions, and the New U.S. Labor Market* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2005)

THE PRECARIOUS NATURE of work in the United States and the decline of American unions have been the focus of a great deal of both academic and non-academic attention in recent years. There are compelling reasons for this as workers grapple with ever-widening wage disparities between rich and poor, longer hours for lower wages, and unions which represent a historically smaller percentage of the workforce. My reading of the books discussed here coincided with a short trip to the Florida panhandle, a sojourn which quickly reinforced the reality of working in contemporary America. Northern Florida is a geographically attractive part of North America which is also located deep within the mostly non-union South. Florida – famous for tourism, beaches and theme parks – is, like many states, dependent upon a steady supply of low-

wage service industry workers. Most of them will not join unions, nor have the opportunity to do so. They will instead toil in precarious, low-paid jobs while serving the needs of wealthier people.

The challenges facing workers in states like Florida, the role of unions, and the impact of race and gender are the focus of the five volumes examined here. There are a range of methodological approaches utilized by the various authors, many of them statistically based, and a variety of insights are found within these works. The main issues involved with this discussion – how did American workers and unions get into their current state – are crucial not just to the United States but to workers around the world. Working conditions in the United States, and trends within the American labour movement, influence what occurs elsewhere. This is especially true for Canadian workers and their unions since they have become so inextricably linked through economics to the United States.

The works discussed here contribute a valuable overview of the current state of American workers and their unions. They collectively represent an informative contribution to the overall literature on the decline of unions and the overall diminution of the quality of work in the post-World War II US. The literature on union decline and renewal is important for non-Americans to consider. There is work on the issues facing Canadian labour, such as research by Leo Panitch and Don Swartz, but union decline and failure is a particularly notable theme in American labour studies research.<sup>1</sup> Academics in Canada who are concerned about workers and unions will hopefully not find themselves composing a similar canon of work. While complementing each other, the books discussed here also suggest further avenues of inquiry to help better explain how American workers and their unions got into their current state, and how they could move forward.

The United States does not compare well to other industrialized countries in terms of working conditions. Francis Green, an economics professor at the University of Kent, ably illustrates this reality in *Demanding Work: the Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Society*. Technological change and the rise of the service industry are shown in this quantitative analysis to have contributed to work intensification. Green devotes considerable attention to Quality of Work Life programs (QWL). These programs have been the focus of other studies, and unions have reacted ambivalently to them. Corporations advocated their implementation from the 1970s onward but, as Green demonstrates, QWL has not done much to improve the quality of workers' lives. Workers in the United States have instead experienced a gradual decline in work quality.

While noting the views of Harry Braverman and the impact of Taylorism, Green nonetheless feels that there is an ongoing debate about technological change. He also delves into an analysis of the meaning of skill, and the

1. For a discussion of attacks on union rights in Canada see Leo Panitch and Don Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: the Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*, third edition (Toronto 2003).

rising demand for work skills in recent years. Increased skill demands have been conversely accompanied by lower wages. Work has become increasingly precarious, and unemployment has remained an ongoing social problem. All these trends have contributed to a diminution of workers' sense of well-being, and indeed of their health. Green advocates for greater consideration of the economics of well-being, and a genuine improvement of work life quality.

Much of the data presented by Green on the United States, such as declining union density, can be readily found elsewhere. A visit to almost any union website will quickly reveal that wages are down, jobs are more precarious, and workers feel themselves to be under greater duress. Green also notes that worker concerns about work precariousness are regularly reported in the media. The strength of this analysis is his placement of the American experience within a broader global context. Non-Americans may have already read comparative studies which have come to similar conclusions, but Americans interested in how they are faring in relation to other countries would find Green's analysis to be useful.

The primary weakness with Green's analysis is that, while he presents some gender-based employment data, there is no data on racial or ethnic difference. Incorporating these two variables is crucial to understanding the current nature of work in the United States. Immanuel Ness ably weaves these themes into his analysis of immigrant workers in New York City in *Immigrants, Unions, and the New U.S. Labor Market*. Ness, a political science professor at the City University of New York, references useful statistical data. Additionally, the personal accounts of immigrant worker exploitation provide the most compelling support for his view that contemporary immigrant workers are more likely to organize than their American-born counterparts. Ness emphasizes the need for grassroots organizing, which is important because he also shows that unions – arguably the most important advocates for workers – have not always effectively responded to the needs of immigrant workers.

Ness describes appalling exploitation of Mexican, African, and South Asian workers. The arrival of non-European immigrants began in earnest in 1965 with the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act. (14) The influx of new immigrants coincided with the transformation of New York City into a service economy. America's largest city – a centre of culture, finance, arts, and intellectual ferment – is economically reliant on a pool of exploited service workers. Immigrants are forced to assume new identities that were formerly alien to them. Mexicans, for example, never conceived of themselves as something other than white but began to do so after coming to the city. Ness describes a dichotomous New York City that is both a financial centre and working-class metropolis.

Immigration plays a complex role in Ness's narrative. In some cases, immigrants exploit immigrants. This is particularly true of Korean greengrocer owners who employ Mexican employees. American-born employers are similarly exploitative. A West African immigrant reported being treated like a

slave by his employer. Another would make derogatory comments to West African employees who did not speak English while shaking their hands - giving the impression that he was complimenting them on their work. People who thought that they would make decent wages which would afford them a reasonable standard of living in America, and in the process enable them to send money to their home countries, were instead compelled to reside in cramped conditions with barely enough money to live.

Working conditions akin to indentured servitude are a frequent theme in Ness's analysis. South Asian and black car drivers and others become grievously tied to their employers through lease agreements and other fees. Drivers' wages, often as little as \$4 to \$6 per hour, are insufficient to cover living expenses and onerous work requirements like uniforms. (144) Racism plays a recurring role in Ness's analysis. The racism of Korean owners towards Mexicans; of grocery employers towards West Africans; and of customers towards South Asian drivers. The latter group has had customers accuse them of being terrorists if they feel at all displeased with the service that they receive. Immigrant workers have also been impacted as much by broader economic trends as they have by conditions in their workplaces. The 9/11 terrorist attack on New York City had a deleterious economic impact, as well as magnifying the likelihood of employers threatening to take measures which would lead to deportation.

The conditions described by Ness certainly suggest that immigrant service workers in New York City would be a prime organizing target for unions. New York is the most highly unionized state in the United States, and there are a range of active unions in New York City. Regrettably, they have not effectively responded to the needs of immigrant workers. Ness recounts how the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE, which is now UNITE-HERE) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) let union politics and jurisdictional issues ruin a grassroots-based organizing drive started by Mexican greengrocer employees. In contrast, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) gave much more assistance to a similar drive conducted among black car drivers.

Ness quite correctly concludes that rank-and-file militancy is the basis for building a labour movement. Similar views have been expressed in other recent works by authors like Steven Lopez.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, as Ness illustrates, the labour movement could not effectively respond to the needs of immigrant workers even in a state with the highest union density in the United States. This is particularly troubling because, if unions cannot organize oppressed workers where they are strongest, then how well will they fare in states like Florida or North Carolina where they are weak?

Ness provides some tremendous insights into the lives of immigrant workers

2. See Steven Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Study of the American Labor Movement* (Berkeley 2004) for a discussion of successful grassroots organizing by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

in New York City. The main shortcoming of his work, as opposed to Green's, is that he appears to focus primarily on male rather than female workers. Providing a slightly broader historical context would have also been beneficial since New York City's reliance on cheap immigrant workers is not a new development, nor is organized labour's indifferent response to them. Including these variables would have introduced an additional analytical dimension and further strengthened an already compelling narrative.

Race, gender, and ethnicity get full treatment in Nancy MacLean's *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace*. MacLean, a professor of History and African-American Studies at Northwestern University, has written a broad synthesis of the existing literature on civil rights and the workplace. She builds upon a basic argument that workplace rights gained by women and other minorities since the 1960s are rooted in gains made by African Americans as a result of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This clause prohibits workplace discrimination based on race, sex, colour, religion, or national origin. Considerable detail about events leading up to the passage of the act is provided, as is the initial response of employers and unions to it. The passage of the Civil Rights Act, and in particular the implementation of Title VII, brought what MacLean appears to believe was enormous change in the workplace. She suggests that Title VII "lit up the path" for Mexicans. (168) Much of her evidence supports this view, but not to the extent that she suggests. Title VII may have lit the path for some Mexicans, but not for the ones described by Ness.

MacLean devotes considerable discussion to women's efforts to gain access to the construction trades, especially apprenticeships. However, the statistics which she cites do not support her overall view that progress was made. There was only a 0.5 percent increase in the number of women employed in skilled trade occupations over a relatively long period – this hardly seems like a major improvement. (280) Rather, claims of progress appear to be substantiated more by the initial entry of women in traditionally skilled male occupations than by evidence that they have been hired in substantial numbers.

MacLean does not limit her analysis to those who promoted civil rights at work. She attributes the rise of neo-conservatism in America to the emergence of civil rights. The enormous influence wielded by conservative commentators like William F. Buckley and Irving Kristol is noted, as is the American Jewish community's divided response to affirmative action. There is also no question that a white male backlash came about as a result of affirmative action. However, MacLean perhaps attributes too much significance to the backlash to the civil rights movement in the rise of neo-conservatism. People like Buckley were at the intellectual forefront of that movement, but so too were others like Friedrich Von Hayek. Neo-conservatism was partially a response to civil rights, but was also an antipode to Keynesianism and the New Deal.

MacLean's analysis of political and business responses to affirmative action in the 1980s is similarly questionable. She recounts the success that civil

rights and women's groups had in preventing Ronald Reagan from rescinding Executive Order 11246, which mandated affirmative action for federal contractors. (301) She then goes on to suggest that business groups, which initially opposed affirmative action, supported it by the time that Reagan was considering revocation of the executive order. Notwithstanding, the Reagan administration systematically weakened enforcement of affirmative action programs and deprived agencies like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) of funds. Revocation of the executive order thus became a moot point, and resistance to the administration's agenda may not have been as complete as MacLean postulates.

There is little doubt that women and visible minorities derived benefits from the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, as well as from affirmative action. However, while clearly celebrating progress that has been made, MacLean does not fully explain why so many people in the United States still find themselves socially and economically deprived despite the existence of laws and regulations intended to help them. Women who progressed during the decades following the introduction of Title VII – like future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg – appear in MacLean's analysis. Those who succeeded because of Title VII and affirmative action are the main focus here, while those who have derived no benefits are not.

MacLean does not explicitly refer to the emergence of a rights culture in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, but this is essentially the process that she describes. Nelson Lichtenstein has discussed this phenomenon, and believes it to be one of the reasons that workers have identified less with unions.<sup>3</sup> People became more reliant on the network of legislation passed after World War II, particularly civil rights acts, to defend their interests rather than unions. This response may not have been unwarranted considering that the labour movement was ill-disposed to fully incorporating women and minorities into unions in the decades immediately following the war. Moreover, as the weakening of affirmative action enforcement illustrates, relying on legislation for protection can be fraught with danger.

Unions, principally those representing construction workers, occasionally appear in MacLean's narrative but she does not fully note the contentious impact that civil rights had on organized labour and working-class communities. For example, while noting that Lyndon Johnson supported the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, she neglects to mention that civil rights were favoured by his administration over labour law reform. Unions were agitating for the revocation of Section 14b of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1964, but Johnson chose to spend political capital on the passage of the civil rights bill. Working-class communities were also shaped by civil rights changes. Referring to the

3. For a good overview of themes relating to organized labour's decline in the post-war decades, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton 2002).

work of someone like Thomas Sugrue, who focused on the impact of race on working-class Detroit, would have strengthened her analysis.<sup>4</sup> Incorporating information on how women were treated by industrial and public sector unions would also have been useful as construction unions represented only one part of the labour movement and were also more conservative than other sectors.

The three works discussed thus far provide an informative overview of the state of the current conditions in which American workers toil, and the way in which civil rights have helped shape the workplace. The labour movement comes off poorly in these analyses – unfriendly towards women and people of colour, and otherwise unable to meet the needs of contemporary workers. Despite this, it is obvious that unions have a pivotal role to play in improving workers' lives. Ness and MacLean's work demonstrates that unions have not always been able to effectively respond to the needs of women and minority workers. The work on American labour's decline since the 1950s emphasizes a similar range of factors which have accelerated the movement's decline. Paul Buhle's work on bureaucratization is representative of what could be called the decline thesis, along with Patricia Cayo Sexton's work on employer and state opposition.<sup>5</sup> Much attention has been devoted to the decline of the Left, including work by Judith Stepan-Morris and Maurice Zeitlin, Stephen Cutler, and Stephen Meyer.<sup>6</sup> The existing literature illustrates that American unions were purged of their most progressive elements with leadership often passing to sclerotic leaders who accepted the free-market system. The unions were also subjected to employer and state hostility. Ness and MacLean add to this by presenting new insights into labour's responses to women and immigrants.

The labour studies monographs that have been produced on the decline of organized labour and the state of work in America are rooted in a range of approaches but principally in history, sociology, or political science. Economic commentaries have also been produced on these topics. The foregoing discussion illustrates this trend. However, the labour studies research has been accompanied by a separate and often distinct industrial relations literature.

4. See Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton 1996) for an insightful discussion of how white workers' responses toward race were shaped in the post-war years.

5. See Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York 1999) for insights into leadership failures and overall bureaucratization in the labour movement. Patricia Cayo Sexton's *The War on Labor and the Left: Understanding America's Unique Conservatism* (Boulder 1991) illustrates the ferocity of American capital's response to workers' movements.

6. See Judith Stepan-Morris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (Cambridge 2003), Jonathan Cutler, *Labor's Time: Shorter Hours, the UAW, and the Struggle for American Unionism* (Philadelphia 2004), and Stephen Meyer, "Stalin Over Wisconsin": *the Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900–1950* (New Brunswick 1992) for comprehensive discussions of union purges and the suppression of rank-and-file militancy.

Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah Meltz's *The Paradox of American Unionism: Why Americans Like Unions More Than Canadians Do But Join Much Less* is an example of this latter type of scholarship. Both authors are deceased. Lipset was a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Meltz was professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. They produced a statistically based comparative study of unionization in Canada and the United States that would likely drive many writers in labour studies to distraction because of their rather brief analysis of the post-war development of Canadian and American unions.

Lipset and Meltz suggest four primary reasons why union density is higher in Canada than in the United States. Canada is more social democratic and communitarian; lower rates of approval of unions in the United States are related to their relative weakness; Americans have greater difficulty joining unions; and Canadians place more emphasis on the common good. Lipset and Meltz follow with a large amount of supporting data which compares Canada and the United States to other countries, particularly in Europe. A cursory historical overview including references to the passage of the Wagner Act, Taft-Hartley, and the Rand Formula is also included.

Employer responses to unionization, such as those demonstrated by various levels of management, are referenced in the analysis of Lipset and Meltz. They suggest that Canadian managers are more resistant to unions than their American counterparts. The Canadian state, and overall Canadian political economy, is based on the Tory political tradition. Lipset and Meltz go so far as to suggest that the American Revolution gave birth to two countries – Canada and the United States. Social democracy is described as playing a greater role in Canada.

The growing importance of public sector unionization in Canada and the United States is noted, most notably in education. The statistics referenced by Lipset and Meltz illustrate a substantial difference between the two countries' labour movements. There is double-digit union density across Canada, with Alberta having the lowest rate. The American labour movement is conversely shown to be concentrated in the North-East and Mid-West, while being largely absent from the South and South-West. It is consequently a regional movement. Lipset and Meltz do not fully contemplate the implications of this fact, but it clearly calls into question how the American labour movement can realistically claim a national mandate when it cannot demonstrate anything close to uniform union density across the country.

The voluminous data included by Lipset and Meltz certainly support some of their arguments. However, some variables are emphasized while not attributing sufficient significance to others. The development of a viable social democratic political movement in Canada is far more significant than Meltz and Lipset suggest. The United States is unique among industrialized countries in not having a lasting third party devoted to social democracy. It also has a comparatively weak labour movement. Lipset and Meltz also fail to



adequately discuss the opposition that American workers face when attempting to unionize. For example, as Ellen Dannin notes in her discussion of the need for labour law reform, an American worker is fired every twenty-three minutes for attempting to join a union.<sup>7</sup> Lipset and Meltz ignore data of this kind. Attributing Canada's higher unionization rate to Toryism also seems somewhat of a stretch – hence the response that would be elicited from some academics working in labour studies. Unionization was actually higher in the United States than Canada during the years immediately following the passage of the Wagner Act, so other factors obviously played a greater role than Toryism.

There is worthwhile data in *The Paradox of American Unionism* for anyone seeking to draw their own conclusions about unionization in Canada and the United States. The conclusions that Lipset and Meltz derived from their data do not adequately describe the challenges faced by the American labour movement in relation to its Canadian counterpart. Anyone wanting to understand declining union density will consequently need to look to writers other than Lipset and Meltz in order to understand the challenges that American unions have faced in relation to their Canadian counterparts, or in comparison to workers in other countries.

Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss provide a much more revealing analysis of American labour's decline, and possible solutions to this problem, in *Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement*. This book was commissioned for a European audience and it is a highly accessible overview for anyone wanting a short primer on the state of American unions. Fantasia and Voss argue that unions are the "most important potential defense against a dystopian future." (3) This basic premise is supported with a narrative that incorporates a range of supporting evidence including statistical data and references to a wide-ranging selection of the existing labour studies literature. This is a book that more strikingly compares American unions and workplaces to those in other countries than the analyses developed by Green, or Lipset and Meltz.

Wages are clearly falling in Fantasia and Voss's view, and American social welfare is stagnating in relation to other countries. They also attribute some of labour's challenges to consumerism. The term "worker" has been largely supplanted in social discourse by "consumer." (27) There is a growing literature which supports this view, including Liz Cohen's work on post-war consumerism.<sup>8</sup> Fantasia and Voss show American employers to be much more hostile to unions than Lipset and Meltz suggest. They reconsider the 1980 firing of the

7. See Ellen Dannin, *Taking Back the Workers' Law: How to Fight the Assault on Labor Rights* (Ithaca 2006) for a discussion of how labour could effectively operate in and change the labour law framework in the United States.

8. Liz Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America* (New York 2003) recounts the rise and impact of post-war consumer culture in the United States.

members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), a landmark event in post-war American labour relations. Their evidence reinforces the enormous impact that this event had, particularly since PATCO endorsed Reagan for president. Business leaders were determined to switch the balance of power to themselves beginning in the early 1970s, and the 1980s political climate facilitated that aspiration.

Fantasia and Voss have a critical view of America's labour leadership. They discuss the phenomenon of the "labor strongman" who sought to dominate the union which he led, and suggest that this type of leadership has a long history in American unions. (92) Business unionism became the norm, and unions became bureaucratized. Labour supported the Cold War, but was also negatively impacted by anti-Communism and by the deplorable effects of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act. Bureaucratization and conservative leadership are problems that have been noted by many commentators, most notably Buhle. Fantasia and Voss focus a great deal on the legislative assault that has weakened American labour, particularly Taft-Hartley. This act was, along with the Landrum-Griffin Act, a grievous legal setback for unions.

Fantasia and Voss conclude that American employers are still highly hostile towards unions. They note the vast American union-busting apparatus, and they illustrate that unions are still oriented to servicing existing members rather than to grassroots organizing. However, successful campaigns such as Justice for Janitors – which was conceived by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) – are cited as possible methods of increasing membership. So, too, is the AFL-CIO's Union Cities campaign, which involves reaching out to labour councils.

Fantasia and Voss's analysis is not intended to be comprehensive. It includes many strengths, but it also raises some questions which are not fully addressed. For example, union density has increased in places where people would not have expected it to rise. Los Angeles and Las Vegas once had low union density, as Fantasia and Voss note, but now have strong labour movements. This is particularly remarkable because Nevada is a Right-to-Work state. Successful organizing in these cities was partially due to institutional union efforts of the type described by Fantasia and Voss, but it was also due to group identity among minority workers – mostly Hispanic and often female – who felt exploited. The labour movement has made progress with integrating women and minorities, but will have to go much further in order to fully reach out to them. The evidence provided by Ness and, to a lesser extent MacLean, illustrates that unions are not doing as much for women and minorities as they could. Indeed, women and visible minorities are an ever-growing percentage of the workforce while white males, who still predominantly run the labour movement, are becoming just one of many groups in the workplace.

The individual strength and weaknesses of the five books discussed here have been noted. There are many common themes contained therein, but so too are many unresolved issues – principally how the labour movement will move

forward. Green, Ness, and Fantasia and Voss all clearly show that American workers are earning less and feel under more duress. Their unions are weak in comparison to those in other countries, and are not always responsive to the needs of potential members. The labour movement is still bureaucratized, yet faces continual opposition from employers. Some workers have derived benefits from civil rights legislation, while others have not. Green, Ness, MacLean, Lipset and Meltz, and Fantasia and Voss could have all helped address these issues had their narratives fully integrated other variables.

It is abundantly clear that politics and legislative action have a substantial influence on workers and unions. Various types of legislation on civil rights, labour and employment, and immigration are shown to have had a decisive impact on workers and unions. Despite this, a clear political or legislative program that would benefit workers and unions is not articulated by the authors discussed here. What should unions and workers expect from the Democratic Party? The positive impact of social democratic party politics is noted by Lipset and Meltz, but it is not fully developed as a policy option for labour.

The debate about American labour's political orientation is ongoing, with authors like Taylor Dark suggesting that pursuing a third party option is fraught with peril.<sup>9</sup> The Taft-Hartley Act illustrates the need for a clearer political program. It institutionalized anti-Communism, helped bureaucratize labour, and enshrined Right-to-Work. Despite this, American unions no longer actively try to get parts of the act revoked. Instead, they focus on passage of an Employee Free Choice Act which would guarantee card-check certification. This latter act would help unions win elections, but Section 14b of Taft-Hartley facilitated the passage of Right-to-Work laws in 22 states. In a comparative context, while union security was weakened by Taft-Hartley in 1947 because of 14b, the Rand Formula institutionalized it in Canada.

Race and ethnicity matter in the books discussed here, but so too does class. Ness, and Fantasia and Voss all incorporate references to class in their analyses. Yet, it is evident that workers have responded to oppression through group solidarities that are based on race and ethnicity as much as class. What, then, will propel union renewal – class consciousness among all workers, or a mix of class, race, gender, and ethnicity that can overcome differences among workers and move them forward? It is clear that the American labour movement will have to change much more than it has so far. As noted, successful organizing in cities like Los Angeles and Las Vegas was based upon militancy among women and minorities. This suggests that the movement will have to orient itself towards these workers in order to survive, and will consequently mean moving away from the bureaucratized form of unionism that still persists in most AFL-CIO affiliates. Even the SEIU, which joined with other unions

9. On the complex relationship between the Democratic Party and the labour movement see Taylor Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca 1999).

to split from the AFL-CIO to form the Change to Win Coalition, has recently found itself under criticism in some union circles for being undemocratic and intolerant of local dissent.<sup>10</sup> The American labour movement is also going to have to move beyond its regional stronghold in the North-East and collectively pursue a progressive national agenda.

There is much to recommend in the five books discussed here regardless of the relatively minor challenges with their analyses. They collectively discuss topics which are enormously important to the future of workers and their representative organizations. The American labour movement strives to improve the lives of workers in a country that is a self-proclaimed superpower; one which relentlessly strives to impose its political and economic agenda on workers and unions in other countries. Successfully challenging this agenda requires a strong, viable labour movement. American unions are part of the solution to avoiding the dystopian future mentioned by Fantasia and Voss, and otherwise alleviating the conditions described by Ness and Green. These books should, however, be concurrently read with other sources – such as the ones cited above – in order to place their theses within a broader context.

10. The SEIU has recently found itself the subject of considerable criticism, much of it online in the blogosphere and originating from its own membership. See [www.reformseiu.org](http://www.reformseiu.org) and [www.seiuvoice.org](http://www.seiuvoice.org) for the type of commentary that is emerging.