

This issue has taken on an increased salience with the rise in economic nationalism we are seeing across the world right now. Though Schuhrke does cite the historian Dana Frank, who is critical of appeals to economic nationalism, this is an issue that could have used further interrogation especially in connection to building labour internationalism.

Overall, *Blue Collar Empire* is a welcome contribution to labour studies and history. It is an easy read that is written in a clear and straightforward style that is easy to follow along. While it will be of great use to academics and students, its importance is something beyond the academy. It is a book that should be read by young labour activists to avoid the disastrous mistakes of an earlier generation.

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**Hamilton Nolan, *The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor* (New York: Hachette 2024)**

“THIS IS A BOOK about how, and whether, the labor movement can save America. It is about the dizzying potential of organized labor, as well as the heartbreaking flaws that hold it back.” (8) This is how labour journalist Hamilton Nolan describes his first book, *The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor*. Though Nolan’s synopsis is a tad grandiose, it does capture the ambitions of the book. Through a series of vignettes recounting strikes, organizing drives, and door-knocking campaigns across the United States, *The Hammer* examines the yawning gap between workers’ growing desire for union representation and the lack of a commensurate response from America’s labour officialdom.

Nolan is no impartial observer. In 2015, he was centrally involved in organizing

journalists at the now-defunct online news site Gawker while employed as the latter’s “de facto labor reporter.” (3) Despite inspiring a subsequent wave of unionization at other digital media outlets, Gawker is better known for releasing a sex tape featuring former professional wrestler, Hulk Hogan, that elicited a Peter Thiel-funded lawsuit which eventually resulted in the publication’s bankruptcy. These days Nolan covers the labour beat for the left-wing magazine, *In These Times*, while also publishing a popular Substack, entitled “How Things Work.” He is among the young leftists in alternative media who found an audience covering labour and politics during and after the first Donald Trump administration.

*The Hammer* covers a wide breadth in its thirteen chapters. From child-care providers in California, to striking Nabisco workers in Portland, Oregon, *The Hammer* is a series of snapshots featuring workers across America vying for power where they have it. The book pays particular attention to often ill-fated organizing drives in the U.S. South, arguing that a revival of organized labour also requires reckoning with these right-to-work states. Many chapters feature on-the-ground interviews with workers leading uphill organizing drives at places like a Lowe’s hardware store in New Orleans or a biscuit restaurant in Elksville, West Virginia. These stories personalize the daunting power imbalance between corporate capital and its disorganized, low-wage workers, which highlights further the lamentable lack of support from the established labour movement. Chapters also spotlight pockets of worker power from which Nolan draws inspiration and seeks to illustrate the promise of reestablishing union power as a cornerstone of local economies. Chapter Three, for example, features leaders from the International Longshoreman’s Association at the port

of South Carolina, where an embedded blue-collar union has extracted impressive gains while operating in the state with the lowest union density in the country.

While a book squarely focused on the struggles of working people, *The Hammer* is also concerned with taking the leaders at the helm of American labour to task for their lack of urgency and inventiveness. “Rather than seeing the tens of millions of workers who could be organized as an urgent priority, the institutions of organized labour have, to a large degree, contented themselves with tending to the small and shrinking walled gardens of their existing membership” (7), Nolan summarizes. As he describes it, the recent surge in organizing and interest in labour has been in large measure driven by rank-and-file workers, often forming independent unions or alternative worker organizations. This is both a reflection of the potential of bringing millions of new members into the labour movement and the systematic failure of existing unions to respond to workers’ demand for representation. “Organized labour has found itself with too many interior decorators and not enough builders.” (240) This critique is primarily aimed at the AFL-CIO, America’s national labour federation, which today functions “as a mediocre in-house lobbying firm and traffic cop for America’s unions.” (24) At the same time, through a recurring focus on Association of Flight Attendants-CWA union leader, Sara Nelson, and her almost-campaign to lead the AFL, Nolan makes his case that national stewardship is key to union revival. As he contends, “If you wiped the AFL-CIO off the map due to its shortcomings, you would just have to rebuild it.” (25) “The AFL-CIO is not bad, it is just *blah* [...] It offers pleasant bureaucracy when we need heroics” (137), Nolan concludes. It is here where the book at times loses its narrative thread. On the one

hand, Nolan invests much promise in the potential of currently disempowered and mostly unorganized workers, some of whom are working in small workplaces in rural parts of the country with little strategic power in the broader U.S. political economy. On the other hand, despite an insistence on the driving force of rank-and-file self-activity, Nolan remains committed to the notion that personnel change at the heights of labour leadership is key to unlocking union revitalization. Chapters move back and forward between portraits of localized worker action and analyses of quiescence at labour’s helm. The tension between connecting insurgency from the bottom and change at the top is never fully resolved.

Nolan’s recurrent digressions on the AFL-CIO and the potential of a leader like Sara Nelson is explained in part by what he argues is an urgent need for national organizing coordination. Why could Starbucks baristas in South Carolina pull off an organizing drive but workers in the same state at Boeing’s non-union manufacturing facility could not, he asks. His answer is that the former were part of a national movement with a coordinated strategy and the ability to scale up. *The Hammer* also finds inspiration in other pockets of organized union power. Perhaps the book’s stronger chapters detail the long organizing tradition of Unite Here Local 226, otherwise known as the Culinary Union, in Las Vegas. Through interviews with union leaders, organizers and stewards, Nolan describes how the union not only works to maintain an activated membership between contract fights with casinos and hotels but also uses the strategic economic power of Las Vegas to subsidize organizing and membership growth elsewhere. The Culinary Union is able to “wrap its hands around that city’s throat and demand that the working class receive its fair share of the money flowing into town.” (111) Though

an inspiring and potentially instructive example, it contrasts sharply with many of Nolan's other stories of isolated workers going it alone, without support from national or even local unions or labour federations. The problem of convincing a conservatized union leadership to mobilize existing resources and personnel for new organizing persists.

As Nolan summarizes, "There has basically been one single dispute running through the entire history of the American labour movement. On one side are the people who believe that the most urgent task is to organize everyone who doesn't have a union, because unions are the only tool that can maintain the

critical balance of power between labour and capital. On the other side are the people who already have unions, and who believe that the important thing is to protect what they have." (26) *The Hammer* is a book aimed at convincing the latter group that labour's decades-long existential crisis has grown urgent enough that it is time for deep change. Though things have not grown so dire in Canada, readers in this country will also benefit from engaging with *The Hammer*. Many of the book's criticisms of existing unions, as well as its suggestions for labour revitalization, will find a receptive audience outside of the United States.

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