

Review of: Ruth Milkman. L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement. New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.

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This is a fun book to read, particularly if you are pro-union and empathize with the immigrant experience, but it is not an easy book with which to come to terms. Its focus is the revival of trade unionism in Los Angeles and the role of immigrants in that process. This is surprising, given the historic reputation of L.A. as an open shop city, hostile to trade unions and inhospitable to organization. It is also surprising given the generally prevalent view, in the labor movement and outside, that immigrants are particularly resistant to labor organization. Thus, both the revival and the role of immigrants require an explanation. The thrust of the book is to provide them. The argument is built out of four case studies of union-immigrant organization: the janitors, local port trucking, the dry-wallers, and the garment workers. About three quarters of the book draws out of these case studies a series of hypotheses, or conjectures, which explain the developments in Los Angeles more broadly. In the penultimate chapter, the cases are presented in narrative form.

There are too many different conjectures here to prove (or identify) them individually in the rigorous scientific sense with just four cases. For that you would need at least as many cases as there are conjectures. But when brought together, they form a coherent story, a story which is plausible and original and which four cases could sustain. That story starts from the generally accepted understanding of how mass unionism developed in the United States in the first place and why it has declined. The pivotal points in that understanding are the Great Depression, the emergence of mass industrial unionism, and the legal protection offered by the National Labor Relations Act. Before the Depression, unions in the United States struggled to survive in a generally hostile legal environment through the use of an eclectic repertoire of tactics, including strikes, boycotts, and public relations campaigns, all designed to bludgeon the employers and take wages out of competition. The successful unions were those who occupied a

strategic position of the economy which give bite to these tactics or in occupations where workers exercised a monopoly over skills. In the Great Depression, a new form of industrial unionism emerged, drawing initially on the anger and sense of the solidarity of workers in particular industries generated by the shared experience of the Great Depression. These industrial unions were then extended in World War II in an environment where government sought industrial peace at all cost and in the postwar period by the protective shell of the labor legislation that was passed in the 1930's. The decline of those unions in the 1980's and 1990's reflects the increased competitive pressures generated by technological change, deregulation and foreign trade, and, most important for Milkman's argument, the shift in labor law, and even more so, in the way the law has been administered and interpreted, which has greatly weakened governmental protection.

All of Milkman's cases—and this is the first piece of her story—are drawn from industries that were historically organized by the old AFL unions which predate the Depression and which still today consist of many small, unstable enterprises and a labor force which moves easily among them. Labor organization in these industries has always existed outside the protective shell of labor legislation. Unions have maintained an industry organization by exploiting economy linkages along the supply chain to bring into line recalcitrant employers whose workers they could not organize directly (top down organizing), and they learned to exploit these linkages by developing an intimate knowledge of the structure of the industry. Thus the Teamsters union (i.e., the truckers), was able to organize in southern California through firms in the North who transferred cargo in the South: Unionized workers in the North forced their employers to boycott the Southern firms that did not sign the union contract. Similarly the Ladies' Garment Union organized the relatively large manufacturers and then threatened to strike those who did not impose comparable terms on their subcontractors. In the construction industry, the skilled, and hence powerful, craft workers boycotted jobs in which weaker unskilled laborers and janitors were not organized. These older unions prospered in the 1990's, Milkman argues, by reviving these traditional tactics—which they either remembered from the past or rediscovered in similar structural circumstances.

The other piece of the story Milkman tells is about the surprising militancy and solidarity of the communities of immigrant workers and the willingness of these workers to make the sacrifices and take the risks required to organize. Trade unionists, and in fact, most outside observers, have tended to write off this group. They have seen the increasingly immigrant labor force as, on the one hand, too vulnerable to effectively organize, fearing exposure and deportation if they tried, and on the other too weakly committed to the U.S. labor market to make the investment which unionization requires. Immigrants were also thought to see the jobs through the lenses of conditions at home and hence to be tolerant of wages and working conditions which national workers rejected. Indeed, the revival of immigration is, in fact, seen as a major cause of labor's decline and, until recently, most of organized labor has favored exclusionary legislation.

But Milkman argues that in the industries from which she takes her cases immigrants were not the cause of de-unionization but the result. As unions were broken and conditions deteriorated in the industry, the jobs lost their attraction to native workers and the natives moved out into sectors that remained organized (long haul trucking and commercial construction, for example), leaving a vacuum in the now unorganized sectors (local trucking, residential building) which immigrants were recruited to fill. Over time, these new arrivals have settled permanently in the area, and the immigrant workforce, whatever its initial motivation for coming and attitude toward the jobs, is now dominated by workers with a long-term commitment to the U.S. labor market and their children, who grew up here and thus judge conditions in terms much closer to those of native workers. The immigrant communities have, moreover, tight social networks which facilitate the recruitment of new members and provide strong support, both moral and material, for strikes and boycotts.

In this emphasis on the immigrant worker community, Milkman speaks to a central theme in contemporary American social thought, i.e., the loss of social capital and the increasing anomie of American life. This is a theme which has been developed most prominently by Robert Putnam and, in relation to social movements, by Theda Skocpol, authors which Milkman does not mention but come readily to the mind of the academic reader. As Milkman does mention, Los Angeles has become the canonical example of

these developments in American life. The contrasting social solidarity of the immigrant communities is another reason why they are a vehicle for union revival.

The basic problem with all of this is that when one finally arrives at the narratives at the end of the book, one suddenly realizes that the premise of the argument has never really been proven and is actually open to question. Only two of the four cases are successful; the well-known Justice for Janitors campaign and the dry wall carpenters. The organization of the local-port truckers and the attempt to organize Guess, Inc., as the opening wedge in a campaign to revive unionism in the L.A. garment industry both failed. The numbers involved in the two successful organizing campaigns are relatively small. Union membership in L.A. numbers over one million. This is almost as large an absolute number as it has ever been, although it is only about 15% of the total labor force (compared to 13% in the country as a whole). We are never told exactly what the membership of the successfully organized unions are now, but they cannot amount to more than maybe 5% of the total. The bulk of union membership is in the public sector, in large scale manufacturing, particularly automobiles and airlines, and in the entertainment industry. These are not strongholds of immigrant employment. I can attest personally that there is definitely a dynamism and excitement about the labor movement in L.A. that one does not find elsewhere in the country. I do not question the fact that things are really different there. There is also a dynamism to the immigrant communities there (as elsewhere in the U.S.). But the explanation for either of these and how much they are related to each other remains in open question. It is not a question which I would necessarily have asked before I read the book. But the book does not, it seems to me, begin to provide a convincing answer.

I was, however, convinced by Milkman that immigration *could* contribute to the revival of the labor movement, and thus in the end the book succeeded in raising in a sense the inverse of the question which it set out to answer: Given that the industries in which immigrants are concentrated are especially susceptible to the organizing tactics of the AFL unions and given that the immigrants themselves appear open to organizing, why do half the campaigns fail? I certainly do not have the answers to this question, but I do have a conjecture here, a conjecture that comes partly out of the material in the book

itself and partly from talking to other people close to the trade union movement and to the immigrant organizations.

Part of the answer must be that most of the old AFL unions have not carried over the lessons of how to maintain economic pressures in a hostile legal environment. The two campaigns which were successful were conducted by unions operating in their traditional jurisdiction where they had, or knew how to develop, the kind intimate knowledge of the industry required to leverage power. But the truckers campaign was not conducted by the Teamsters Union at all, but by the Communication workers who were thus operating outside their traditional jurisdiction in an industry in which they had no special expertise. The Guess campaign was actually led by the garment union which should have known what it was doing, but that union has virtually given up organizing in the Garment industry and is pouring its resources instead into organizing shops in parts of the economy which are not so threatened by foreign competition. They withheld resources from the L.A. campaign to focus in these other areas. This notion of mixed strategy unionism, organizing across industry lines wherever it seems possible to pick up new members, may turn out to be a successful approach to organizational survival (although it is hard to see how in the long run), but if it is, it will be a new strategy that has very little to do with the kind industrial unionism which grew out of the New Deal, nor with the AFL strategy of the preceding era.

Milkman is right about the “organizability” of immigrant communities. But that is not necessarily synonymous with actually organizing unions. My own view is that immigrant communities, along with a variety of other social identity groups (women, the aged, the disabled, the deaf, gays and lesbians), have become increasingly mobilized over the course of the last thirty years. But these are all movements in and of themselves. In the case of immigrant communities, organization at work or around work is but one manifestation of the larger community mobilization. At certain moments, a struggle around workplace issues may become the focus of the broader mobilizing effort and at these moments the whole community may become invested in that project and provide the material and moral support which one sees in the campaigns that Milkman describes. But this is very different from the kind of continuing support it takes to maintain and

expand the union after the initial organizing drive. For this, the union and its aims must be understood as part of the broader community effort. Unions have been very reluctant to relate to these identity groups in these terms. They see the immigrant communities as purely instrumental in the larger union organizing effort (and Milkman's discussion reflects this instrumental view). The union leadership does not treat the community leadership as equals but expects them to subordinate themselves and their goals to the goals of the labor movement. It thus becomes extremely difficult to maintain even a coalition of left-wing organizations, let alone to sustain long-term continuing support in any of these identity communities for trade unions. It is not clear that this cleavage is inherent in the structure of the problem, and perhaps over time, unions will acquire a certain humility which will enable a more durable and less troubled alliance. But for the moment, it is definitely an obstacle for the kind of union revival which Milkman envisages.