

Book Review for 07/27/03 by Steve Owens

Title: "The Future of the American Labor Movement"

Author: Hoyt N. Wheeler

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Length: 278 pages

Price: \$24.00

Reading time: 5 hours

Reading rating: 4 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3.5 (1 = average, 4 = outstanding)

Recently I saw an automobile bumper sticker that read: "The weekend off: Brought to you by the folks at the union." Had the sticker covered the entire bumper, it could have also included other notable achievements of the American labor movement such as the eight-hour day, enhanced pay and benefit packages, protections from arbitrary and capricious management actions, and-especially-a collective voice for employees not only in their workplace, but also in the larger society.

The American labor movement has been an important institution serving the rights and interests of worker in this country for well over a century. However, it-like many other institutions of Western society--is undergoing dramatic change. In his excellent analysis, Hoyt Wheeler has thoroughly examined the powerful economic and social forces buffeting the labor movement, not only in the U.S., but also in other advanced postindustrial societies. His threshold question is whether the "very idea of a labor movement is a viable one for the twenty-first century?" The question itself highlights the relatively fragile condition of organized labor in the U.S. Wheeler's answer is that, on balance, the answer would appear to be yes.

The author arrives at his conclusion after taking into account ideas that range from the current European Social Dialogue to the methods used by the Knights of Labor in the 19th century. It was the Knights who sought shorter working hours, an end to child labor, and equitable pay for working women-objectives that even now are not fully realized.

Wheeler examines a number of interesting strategies that may have potential for reviving the labor movement in the U.S. One noteworthy organization that is the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment, that is in the category of the "new reformist unionism" that seeks to empower workers in the absence of union membership. Wheeler examines CAFÉ's role on behalf of workers at J.P. Stevens, Melrose Resort at Hilton Head, and food service workers at the Citadel. Other categories of union styles are also included to show a variety of methods used by workers both here and abroad to strengthen their role at work and in society.

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