

Faue, Elizabeth (2017) *Rethinking the American Labor Movement*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Review by Joseph Varga

There is no shortage of scholarship on the demise and potential revival of the American labor movement. The acceleration of industrial relocation, the corporate and political assault on union rights, and the problems of an often moribund and fragmented labor movement have created a virtual cottage industry of books that attempt to explain labor's demise and prescribe solutions for rebirth and renewal. The results have been decidedly mixed, as union density continues to fall and the assault on workplace rights and on the social wage only seem to increase, backed now by a new populism that ignores organized labor and instead claims that the solution lies in still more corporate power and the empty promises of the "strong leader." It is, indeed, hard to imagine where organized labor goes from this low point.

Along with sociologists, economists, political scientists, labor educators, and labor activists, historians have been a strong voice in the often-contentious discussions of labor's past and future. Katz and Greenwald's 2014 edited volume, *Labor Rising: The Past and Future of Working People in America*, is one recent contribution from mainly labor historians, using the past to understand the present. As a leading scholar in the field of labor history, Elizabeth Faue was a contributor to that volume. With her latest book, *Rethinking the American Labor Movement*, Faue draws on her own widely praised feminist scholarship and on the historiography of writing on organized labor to synthesize the struggle of American workers for equity, rights, and respect. I am not certain whether the book truly qualifies as a "re-thinking" as the title suggests, but it is a skillful work by one of the best scholars on the topic. The book provides, in Faue's own words, "a short and accessible overview of the labor movement of the twentieth century." (2)

Faue's basic approach is two-fold. First, the book seeks to present the history of the growth and decline of organized labor in the United States in the context of the tension between organized labor's dual roles: as a social movement fighting for systemic change and as service organizations that represent members. Second, the book attempts to wrest the trajectory of labor's growth and decline from the "golden age" narrative of white, male industrial workers of the post-World War II period, and present a more complex picture that includes at all points the struggle of women, people of color, and the marginalized to find their place within the movement and its organizations. It does these both very well while presenting some of the big questions and events such as the Debs-Gompers debates over the labor question, the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, and the contention in the movement over strategies and tactics. Faue draws on a depth of knowledge and utilizes some of the best secondary sources available to labor scholars.

The book begins in the late nineteenth century with two chapters on the development of the craft unions and the struggle of the burgeoning industrial unions to achieve recognition and parity. These chapters successfully highlight the tension between labor as a social movement and as a narrow set of institutions representing skilled workers. The middle two chapters deal

with the rise of the CIO and the rapid expansion of unionism while also highlighting some of the failures of the labor movement to take advantage of the momentum provided by post-war prosperity. With its focus on raising the standard of living for the industrial workforce, organized labor missed many opportunities to expand its influence by representing the needs of the “diverse character of the labor force” (11) in the era of post-war prosperity. The final two chapters cover the hot ground in labor history scholarship, the rank-and-file rebellions of the 1970s, the rise of vehement anti-unionism, the influence of new social movements, and, finally, the emergence of the new global labor market. The book concludes with a brief discussion of contemporary labor struggles.

At its best, this book tracks skillfully between the various factions and approaches that make up the historical and contemporary labor movement and draws out the solidarities and tensions that have existed from the 1870s onward. The strength of the work is in presenting organized labor for what it is—a fractious coalition of interests with often-competing ideas and approaches to the same questions—not what those of us invested in it would want it to be. Faue presents organized labor and the labor movement in its rich diversity. Here the labor movement is not heroic or noble but conflicted and sometimes narrow, as often dispiriting as inspiring. The drawbacks of the book are few. Faue has a tendency to gloss over some of the worst shortcomings of key organizations. For example, there is little discussion of the details of the charges against Hoffa’s Teamster leadership and almost nothing on raiding and in-fighting between unions in the post-war period. While union racism is discussed, it could have been dealt with in more depth. The brevity of the work leaves out some events and details, like the battles over the 1968 and 1972 Democratic presidential nominations, that are important to a synthetic understanding of the history of labor.

But these are minor faults in an otherwise valuable work that always returns to the basic issues of working people and their struggle for a better life and decent working conditions. The book, based largely in secondary sources, provides an excellent overview of the labor movement as well as a fine bibliography of works on the topic. It would make a fine course book for undergraduate classes in the history of American labor. For labor scholars and activists who want to know where labor is going by knowing where it has been, this is a great place to start.

Reviewer Bio

Dr. Joseph Varga is Associate Professor of Labor Studies in the Indiana University School of Social Work. He arrived at IU in 2009 after receiving his doctorate in Sociology and MA in Historical Studies from the New School for Social Research in New York City. He has been involved with the labor movement for nearly four decades as a rank-and-file Teamster activist, shop steward, researcher, and organizer. Joe teaches undergraduate courses on the history of American labor and on the role of wage workers in the global economy.