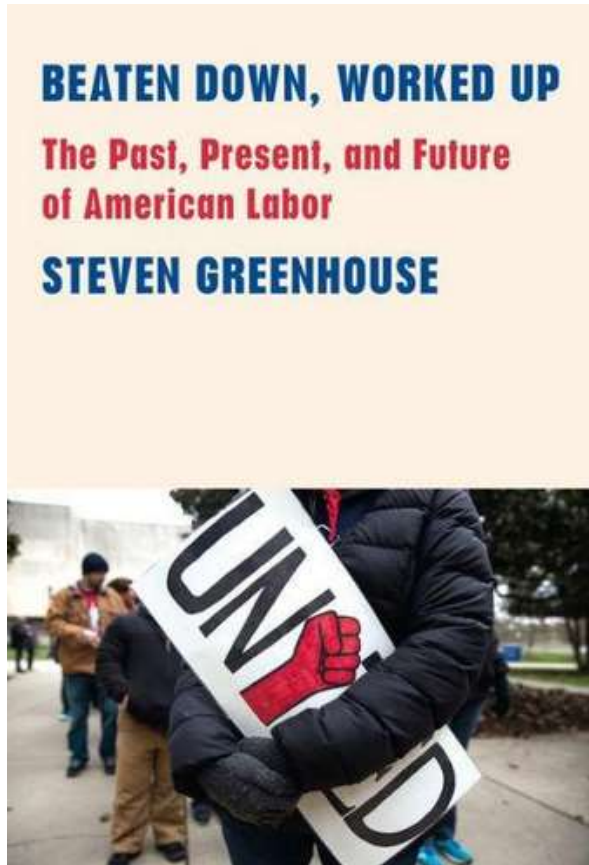


‘Beaten Down’ explores America’s labor movement

Posted: Sunday, August 18, 2019

“Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor” by Steven Greenhouse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 416 pages, \$27.95 (hardcover).



“In the following pages, I tell the history of labor unions and worker power in America, focusing on pivotal episodes that built the union movement and gave workers a true voice and true power that lifted wages and benefits for millions of Americans,” Steven Greenhouse states near the beginning of “Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor,” his new comprehensive primer on a subject that is intimately intertwined with our collective history.

“I also explore the downward arc of the union movement and of worker power – why this has been happening and what it has meant for the nation,” he continues. “I explore the factors that have fueled this decline, including globalization, the rise of the atomized gig economy and corporate America’s war against labor unions. As a result of these fights and forces, the United States now has the weakest labor movement of any advanced industrial nation, and that’s a major reason why income inequality has grown worse in America than in any other industrialized nation.”

As the author makes abundantly clear, the future of organized labor in the United States remains uncertain. Unions have been under assault for several decades and their existence is far from guaranteed as we dive deeper and deeper into the 21st century. Greenhouse understands, however, that in order to accurately assess where we currently are and where we might be headed, it is imperative that we get a clear picture of how we arrived at this critical juncture. It is obvious that “Beaten Down, Worked Up” represents a monumental – and mostly successful – attempt to connect all the dots and thus provide a clear context for the ongoing societal debate about the efficacy of the labor movement and its place in contemporary culture.

Speaking of connecting the dots, for the last 33 years of his work life; i.e., from 1970 to 2003, my father worked for Inland Container Corp., which had a highly profitable paper mill on the Tennessee River in New Johnsonville, Tenn. Like many of his generation, Dad was both a staunch conservative as well as a devoted union man. He belonged to the United Paperworkers International Union, an organization that played a key role in the economic viability of both the community I grew up in as well as the quality of life our family was able to enjoy throughout most of my adolescence. I remember the strikes, the salary and benefits negotiations and the inevitable fights when an employee was accused of some policy or procedural infraction. As such, much of Greenhouse’s prose resonated with me in a way that other readers who were similarly affected by

the labor movement in America should be able to instinctively identify with (although with varying degrees of association based on their individual circumstances).

The manuscript is extensively researched, with 40 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and 21 chapters that form the main narrative. Structurally, the book is arranged in four major sections: “State of the Union,” which consists of the first three chapters; “Labor Raises Its Voice,” which is made up of chapters four through eight; “Hard Times for Labor,” which is comprised of chapters nine through 14; and “Labor, Today and Tomorrow,” which contains the final seven chapters. Greenhouse basically takes the reader on a journey that begins with the origins of the labor movement in America and proceeds in chronological order through the present day before speculating on its future, which is very much up for grabs.

The following anecdote, which is from “Corporations Turn Up the Heat,” the 11th chapter and one of the most enlightening as far as I am concerned, illustrates precisely what the labor movement is up against in the new millennium:

“In February 2000, butchers in the meat department of a Walmart in Jacksonville, Texas, voted 7-3 to join the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. Two weeks later, even though Walmart had recently invested in new equipment for the Jacksonville meat department, the retailer announced it was closing down the meat department at that store and 180 other stores in Texas and neighboring states. Union leaders said this showed how far Walmart would go to snuff out unions, but Walmart said it had merely decided to switch to prepackaged cuts of meat.”

As Greenhouse explains a few pages later: “The right of American workers to unionize is systematically violated, so often and with such impunity that the United States falls short of international human rights standards. A Human Rights Watch report said that ‘for many employers’ the modest back-pay award for firing a few union activists ‘is a small price to pay to destroy a workers’ organizing effort.’”

Greenhouse, who has degrees from Wesleyan University, the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the New York University School of Law, covered labor for The New York Times for 31 years before retiring in 2014. He has been honored with the Society of Professional Journalists Deadline Club award, a New York Press Club award and a Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Reporting. His last book, 2009’s “The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker,” won the Hillman Prize for Book Journalism.

In the end, Greenhouse is guardedly optimistic that the labor movement in the United States has a future and he is encouraged by the younger generations who have recently entered the workforce in significant numbers and are beginning to make their influence felt along several fronts.

“It’s hard to say what form (or forms) a future workers’ movement should or will take,” he confesses near the end of the book. “It could be a newfangled form, perhaps like some of the innovative groups we’ve discussed, or it could be in the form of traditional unions, notwithstanding the sizable obstacles that workers face in unionizing. The important thing is that there be movement, energy, vision and moral courage. Labor should go back to first principles and, as always, fight for fairness, for a more balanced economy with less poverty, more opportunity, more economic security, and more work-life balance.”

I could not agree more. If you are concerned about the future, and especially our economic prospects, this is one you’ll definitely want to add to your reading list. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.