

# **Greenhouse, Steven (2019) *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor*, Alfred A. Knopf, NY.**

## **Review by Jack Metzgar**

Terrence Wise works two jobs making \$7.50 an hour at Pizza Hut and \$9.47 an hour at Burger King for a combined 12- to 16-hour day. His girlfriend Moe, with whom he has three daughters, is a home health aide (median wage: \$12 an hour). They get \$240 a month in food stamps, and the children are covered by Medicaid, but Terrence and Moe have no health insurance for themselves. Though Terrence bemoans having so little time with his daughters and not being able to afford the ‘real wedding’ Moe wants, they can get by if nothing bad happens. But it did. Moe sprained her back lifting an obese patient and could not work for three months. They missed rent payments, got evicted, and had to move in with Moe’s brother – ‘eleven people crowded into a three-bedroom apartment,’ with all the strain and animosity that can cause.

Terrence and Moe’s is just one of the many intimate stories Steven Greenhouse tells to illustrate the myriad ways workers are ‘beaten down’ in American workplaces today. But the couple also shows up later to illustrate the ‘worked up’ part of Greenhouse’s book. Terrence was one of the strikers (at both jobs) in Kansas City’s Fight for \$15 campaign, where his storefront preaching skills made him an ideal spokesperson for the campaign, as Moe and their daughters joined him on the picket line.

*Beaten Down, Worked Up* is a strange book with unusual ambitions. Greenhouse’s 2008 *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* documented in heartbreaking detail the deteriorating conditions of workers across many different economic sectors, none more than retail and warehousing. This book attempts to evoke those conditions to a reading public he presumes knows about them, and then to show how labor unions once dramatically overcame even worse conditions, why those unions have been depleted and destroyed, and some of the new struggles, tactics and strategies that provide hope for a resurgent labor movement.

Labor historians and activists will justifiably criticize each part of the book for being relatively superficial in recounting current mainstream progressive conventional wisdom. But all four parts read together present a compelling case for labor unions in today’s context. Imagine general middle-class readers, people who read serious books like this, who have little knowledge or experience of labor unions, and who have recently gained some sympathy for them. This book should enhance those sympathies as it fills gaps in those readers’ knowledge across a broad front. One can only hope it becomes a best seller.

Greenhouse, *The New York Times*’ labor and workplace reporter for two decades, is gifted at creating poignant profiles of people and their situations while at the same time illustrating larger trends and social realities. He must be especially good at winning a wide variety of people’s trust

because he gets the kind of details that people are often uncomfortable revealing. He brings working people alive in all their complexity for folks who don't know many, while at the same time providing the thrill of recognition for those of us who do. While this is not quite poetry, it is amazing how each of his profiles and stories exemplifies some larger reality, whether historical or contemporary.

The book's brief history makes no attempt to be comprehensive or synthetic. Rather, Greenhouse retells the stories of a handful of struggles and the people who participated in them: the 1909 shirtwaist workers' strike known as the Uprising of the 20,000; the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and its influence on Frances Perkins; the United Auto Workers' sit-down strike at General Motors in Flint in 1937; Walter Reuther as the so-called 'builder of the middle class'; and the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike during which Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. This approach is bound to irritate those with a more extensive and complicated grasp of American labor history, but taken together these individual stories very evocatively illustrate the huge accomplishments of the labor movement in the first two-thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The section on unions' long-term demise is more analytic and, predictably, overemphasizes publicly visible events like the failed PATCO strike in 1981. But even where you might disagree with what Greenhouse backgrounds or outright neglects, his analysis is broadly sophisticated and credible, based as it is on a thorough exploration of the 'demise' literature. And, again, what makes Greenhouse's account special is his gift for weaving humanly revealing stories in and through his analysis.

I found the final part of the book, on current worker struggles, to be its strongest. Greenhouse covered many of these struggles as a reporter, and he has access to a wider variety of sources than most other reporters. The campaigns he covers are all pretty well-known – the Fight for \$15, the Immokalee farmworkers in Florida, the dramatic revival of the Los Angeles labor movement, the recent teachers' strikes in conservative states, gig workers organizing, and various efforts at labor-management and labor-community partnerships. As someone who followed all of these campaigns as they were developing, participating in a few, I found Greenhouse's accounts of each especially revealing since he so skillfully narrates a story from beginning to end while what I observed from the outside were disparate events as they came into and out of my awareness. To have all these well-told stories serially presented was both revealing and heartening, fulfilling Greenhouse's obvious intention of providing hope for the future of a revived labor movement, most likely in new and different forms than in the past.

This points to a weakness which is the other side of the book's strength. Greenhouse, as reporters do, is looking for dramatic new things that gain widespread public attention – new forms of worker organization particularly. In doing so, he misses how various traditional contract-based unions have transformed themselves by revitalizing their internal organizing and broadening their focus on the public good. I'm in Chicago where Illinois AFSCME recently won a series of sweeping improvements in state workers' contracts after heroically defending themselves against four years of GOP Governor Bruce Rauner's scorched-earth attacks. Likewise, the Chicago Teachers Union just won a two-week strike where key issues were about having nurses, social workers, and librarians in every school, thereby 'bargaining for the public good.' Both unions have traditional union structures, but over more than a decade they have been transforming themselves by

systematically organizing their own members for battles both in the workplace and within the broader public. Though some new ideas played a role in each case, none were nearly as important as the long-term, steady organizing work it took to activate and unify workers around common goals.

For people in unions today or tomorrow, these processes of internal transformation within traditional structures are likely more important, and more hopefully inspiring, than even Greenhouse's most inspiring stories of creative new struggles. But for general readers, *Beaten Down, Worked Up* may be the single best introduction to the past, present, and potential of worker organization in America.

### **Reviewer Bio**

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