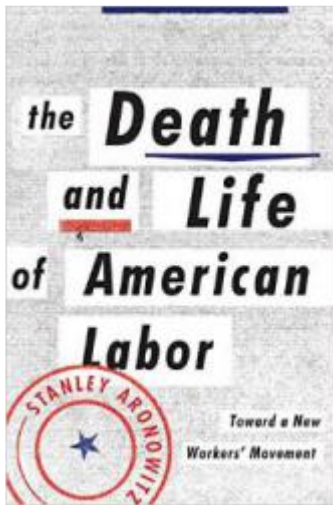


How Labor Can Save Itself

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Review of *The Death and Life of American Labor: Toward a New Workers' Movement*,
By Stanley Aronowitz, Verso, 2014.

In 1955, when the country's two contending labor federations merged to form the AFL-CIO, the combined organization represented more than one in three American workers. Unions then were strong enough, employers cautious enough and the economy juiced enough to create a working class that for the first time in history was for the most part not poor. Today the number of union members in the civilian labor force alone is just a hair above one in nine. The numbers are worse for private sector workers, where just one in 14 are unionized — this in a period when pay is frozen, real wages fall and an explosion of young people work at part-time or contingent jobs, when they work at all.

The reasons for the collapse of the “House of Labor” are many: the failure of the postwar drive to organize the South, the purges at the onset of the Cold War of radicals who were often labor's best organizers, insular union leaders who emphasized contract unionism, allowing employers free rein to run their own enterprises with no voice from workers. Union leaders even traded away the right to strike for more or less steady work. Then there's the sheer power of U.S. capital, at home and unchained.

Even in their debilitated state, unions remain by far the largest and most deep-pocketed institutions on the left and, in theory, have the potential to be the anchors of a broad-based, multiracial progressive movement. Yet, organizing the unemployed and making alliances with community groups and radicals are sadly rare. Even the support Occupy received from labor — which in New York City was a lot — was episodic. And the outstanding things Occupy did, including intervening in home foreclosures, are not yet on any union's agenda.

None of this is new to people who follow labor closely. What's new is the way it is understood by Stanley Aronowitz, former factory worker, union organizer with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers unions, prolific author and sociology professor at the CUNY Graduate Center. His latest book, *The Death and Life of American Labor: Toward a New Workers' Movement* is a slim, compelling and highly readable treatment. It builds on work Aronowitz has done over the past four decades since the publication of his seminal work, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*. This latest not only harks back to the labor movement's glory days in the 1930s and charts the present hard times for working people, but also looks at a problematic future where he says mass unemployment will be the rule and union resistance extinct unless labor rediscovers its historic mission of fighting not just for its own static or

shrinking memberships but for engaging every worker and every worker's family in the fight.

'Collective Begging'

Aronowitz targets collective bargaining itself as the rock in the shoe. Contracts have their good points: they lock in wages and benefits, codify work rules and prescribe a transparent and agreed-upon due-process system for handling grievances, discipline and firings. In return, workers give up their birthright: the right to strike and challenge the employer's arbitrary right to manage.

In the postwar boom years such a strategy bought labor peace. With the flight of manufacturing jobs, first to the South, then to Mexico and overseas in search of a workforce that would work for almost nothing, good jobs at home shriveled and unions workers were forced to make major concessions on wages, benefits, working conditions and even job security. Collective bargaining today, Aronowitz says, "is now mostly a kind of collective begging."

For the author, the era of labor-management cooperation initiated by the New Deal and welcomed by unions has come to an end. At this point business isn't even looking for lapdogs, let alone labor allies. It's a brave new world where business-driven automation across many sectors of the economy is gaining speed and destroying more U.S. jobs at home than are outsourced overseas. Worst of all, the unions' dependency on management circumscribes revolt. Labor-led struggles, such as they are, are either defensive efforts in support of Social Security and Medicare or parochial battles to preserve defined benefit pensions for government workers while private sector employees must rely on 401K plans that are contingent on a booming investment market that regularly goes through bust cycles.

Act Boldly

Aronowitz's advice: encourage direct action in the workplace (such as the walkouts that galvanized the fast-food workers movement), don't leave the fightback at protracted grievance handling and fight for a guaranteed basic income — even a \$15 minimum wage is below the poverty level. He wants working people to intervene in the process of technological change by demanding control over its introduction and design, as well as a say in how the product or service is made. (The first step: recognizing that they currently have no choice in these matters.) He wants unions to stop thinking of workers as purely wage earners or their clients, but as partners in job and community struggles, among them "raise[ing] hell about the virtually closed-down state of mass transit."

More. Aronowitz wants the movement to "take seriously the question of workplace democracy," to stop investing in polluting industries and take seriously that the war measures taken by the last two presidents are as much about spiking war production, with its fading hope of creating large numbers of new jobs, as with actual ongoing imperial ambitions.

To its credit, the book reads like the words of a secular prophet, but without the hectoring or sanctimony. Where Aronowitz misses the target, and he doesn't miss it much, is in not quantifying the trends to some of his more scaring predictions. He first floated the idea of job shrinkage as the wave of the future in his co-authored 1995 book *The Jobless Future*, and the present book holds that the jobless wave morphed into a tsunami of lost work and blown opportunities for labor. He uses the specter of mass unemployment throughout, a problem that for him outstrips even the creation of a precariat, but he relies on anecdotal evidence for that, when a look at the last 20 years of Bureau of Labor Statistics data would better demonstrate actual job loss trends. Absent that, Aronowitz's book is a wonder.

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