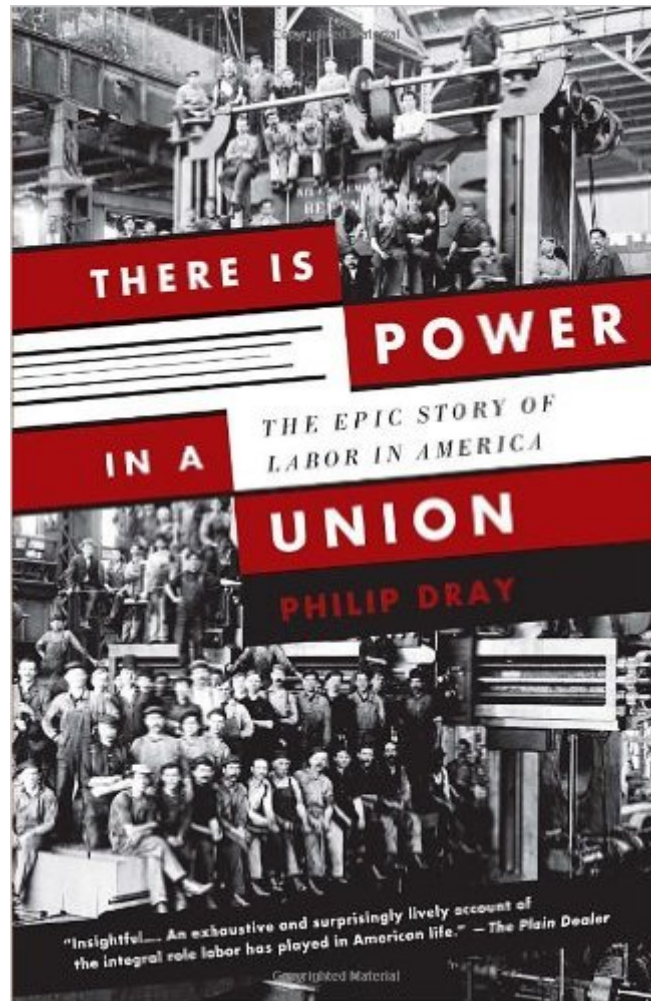


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There Is Power In A Union: The Epic Story Of Labor In America



Synopsis

From the nineteenth-century textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, to the triumph of unions in the twentieth century and their waning influence today, the contest between labor and capital for the American bounty has shaped our national experience. In this stirring new history, Philip Dray shows us the vital accomplishments of organized labor and illuminates its central role in our social, political, economic, and cultural evolution. His epic, character-driven narrative not only restores to our collective memory the indelible story of American labor, it also demonstrates the importance of the fight for fairness and economic democracy, and why that effort remains so urgent today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this new book by Dray, there are an endless number of episodes relating to the struggles between the big business and the American workers from the nineteenth century onwards. Murder, greed, corruption, sacrifice, farcical trials, personal courage and many interesting narratives are at the core of this story. Many mythical figures populate the pages here, among them Eugene Debs, Mother Jones, Walther Reuther, Jimmy Hoffa and others. It is worth quoting a passage which can easily represent the general message of this important opus. The following words were uttered by another well-known figure, Big Bill Haywood during his trial after being charged with conspiracy: "We are conspiring to prevent the making of profits on labor power in any industry. We are conspiring against the dividend makers. We are conspiring against rent and interest. We want to establish a new society, where people can live without profit, without dividends, without rent and without interest if it is possible; and it is possible, if people will live normally, live like human beings should live. I would say

that if that is a conspiracy, we are conspiring" (p.366) The workers were also concerned about their safety and in the period between 1880-1910 fifteen thousand American workers a year perished in on-site accidents, with thousands more injured or sickened, mostly in connection with mine and railroad work. Many anarchists joined the workers in their struggle and one of them, Alexander Berkman, even added that "the removal of a tyrant is not merely justifiable; it is the highest duty of every true revolutionist". At the urging of Congress, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer targeted suspected Bolshevik sympathizers and labour radicals across the country especially during WW1. What we take today for granted after getting hired in various jobs-social benefits, health care- was achieved only with many efforts and struggles, as this superb book makes it clear.

Philip Dray's powerful book lives up fully to its subtitle -The Epic Story of Labor In America. Few books move with the power and ease of "There is Power In A Union." Filled with unforgettable characters who claim monumental places in American history, Dray captures the personalities that carved the labor movement into the annals of American history. Bill Haywood, Mother Jones, Elizabeth Flynn, Albert Parsons, Joe Hill, Frank Little: some of them died, all of them made huge contributions to give American workers the benefits they have today. The unions may not be the powerful forces they once were in American history, but this book stirs up the ghosts and brings the historic battle between labor and capital back to life. I have read lots of history - few books stand up to the splendid work of this one. It is impossible to appreciate the anatomy of the labor fight in America without reading this book.

I find this a very well written and well researched history of the US Labor movement. Although I share the author's great sympathy for the cause, I find his treatment well balanced; giving management their due, but also sparing neither side their blind spots. The author emphasizes some struggles and neglects others but I find this a strength because his narrative and detail work well without neglecting important issues such as racism and sexism within the unions.

Philip Dray lays out all the broad-level issues in the history of American unionism. The good? Minimum wage laws, maximum work hours laws, occupational safety, pensions, and more. The bad? Various degrees of racism among many unions, resting on their laurels after the 1950s, failure of industrial unions to cooperate with environmentalists (and believing corporate lies while resisting such cooperation). The AFL, post WWII, then the reunited AFL-CIO being so anti-Communist that it willingly let its outreach efforts in the developing world be co-opted by the CIA. Most unions'

knee-jerk support of the Vietnam War. The ugly? The degree of government oppression, from militia to regular Army to bad laws to even worse court rulings. For example: The "supervisors can't unionize" provision of Taft-Hartley has been, along with complacency, one of the biggest factors in the decline of organized labor.) The government and general public's willingness to stereotype all unions as anarchic, Communist or both. That's all detailed in this book. Even if you know a fair amount of the story, you may not know all of it, let alone all the details. (I know nothing about the AFL-CIO entanglements with the CIA, for example -- entanglements so bad that union groups were connected with both the Arbenz overthrow in Guatemala and the Allende overthrow in Chile.) On the rise and fall, Dray is equally good. Beyond unions' complacency at getting various benefits, and shifting social definitions in America, he notes that unions' alienation of environmentalists, slow engagement with the civil rights movement, and alienation of much American youth in the late 1960s and early 70s over Vietnam were classic self-inflicted wounds. The one thing missing? I wish Dray had done a bit of crystal-ball gazing. Nonetheless, this is a great overview.

From cover to cover I can only use the word moving to describe the greatness in this work. I myself a unionist, was so moved by the words in this book. The struggles of the working men and women of America in the history of this great nation paint an amazing masterpiece of patriotism and dedication to labor and its rights to exist. Our rights to representation and collective bargaining are engrained in the constitution as this book documents. But while these rights are wonderful, the history of how they came about has made me ever more aware of the reasons why they exist. Today sadly the union has a shameful reputation, the antics of power hungry labor leaders, the politicizing of the labor movement, and the childish attitudes of various unions whining like children because things don't go their way are an insult to the legacy of these brave men and women who were willing to sacrifice their freedom for the cause of fair labor and its evolution. America was built on the backs of men and women who stood for principles. While individual opinions and views were different they still were but little threads that became the tapestry of America and its incredible history. This is a book about America and one of the elements that made it great, and that element is the drive of the individual to have fulfillment in the work of his hands. While this is not a ploy to sell this book, it is however; my written testament to this amazing book. May you enjoy it as I have and may it open your eyes as it did mine.

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