

**New Labor in New York:  
Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement**

Ruth Milkman and Ed Ott, eds.

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Edited by sociologist Ruth Milkman and veteran labor organizer Ed Ott, *New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement* collects thirteen essays written by graduate students enrolled in Milkman and Ott's experimental labor studies seminar at the CUNY Graduate Center in 2011. Though academic in origin, each of the contributions was written in "collaborative partnership" with New York City activists and organizers whose work is the subject of the book, and several of the authors are organizers themselves (viii).

Aiming to produce a guide that would be "valuable to . . . organizers and activists," whose efforts the book documents, the essays collected wrestle with three related questions (viii): How to organize successfully despite a broken system of labor laws? How to organize a rapidly expanding precariat? Why is it vital for the labor movement as a whole to adapt a much more daring and experimental approach to organizing than it has in recent decades? What follows is an extended argument for organized labor to invest time and resources in building community-based organizations, engaging in community organizing alongside immigrant communities and establishing a much more robust network of worker centers.

Most usefully, this book can be read as a manifesto for organizing in the post-New Deal era. In recent years, the twin logics of precarity and neoliberalism have increasingly removed vast categories of workers from even the meager protections of labor law. In order to shift "market risks from employers to subcontractors, or to individual workers themselves," employers have replaced the "relatively stable employment model" that sustained "midcentury unionism" with a "vast population" of independent contractors, who now toil beyond the reach of the Wagner Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) (6). At the same time, employers have waged an all-out war against unions since the 1970s, decimating the power that organized labor once had. The contributors all argue that an organizing model predicated on this sort of stable employment and on the willingness of employers to concede unions' right to exist no longer works.

By contrast, worker centers and community-based organizations described in *New Labor in New York* are not bound by the same laws that have limited the power of unions since the 1947 passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. They can "more easily engage in strikes and other forms of direct action" with less fear of legal retribution (4). Though often operating with extremely limited resources, they are more capable of engaging in the sorts of creative organizing necessary to reach a rapidly expanding precariat. Finally, immigrant workers are significantly overrepresented in occupations—such as domestic work and street vending—that are "explicitly excluded from coverage under labor and employment laws such as the FLSA and the NLRA [National Labor Relations Act] (12)."

It is vital for unions to expand their community organizing efforts among these immigrant communities if the labor movement is going to grow.

*New Labor in New York* is also a practical response to calls previously made by both Milkman (“Immigrant Workers and Labor’s Future,” in *Labor Rising: The Past and Future of Working People in America*, ed. Daniel Katz and Richard A. Greenwald, 240–52 [New York: New Press, 2012]) and Jefferson Cowie (“Getting Over the New Deal,” in Katz and Greenwald, *Labor Rising*, 164–73) to return to the forms of experimentation characteristic of labor movements in the Progressive Era, before the passage of the Wagner Act channeled labor organizing through the National Labor Relations Board. Though invoking “the precariat,” one of labor history’s hottest new buzzwords, this collection of essays reveals a historical sensibility that was absent from Guy Standing’s original invocation of the term in his 2011 book (*The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011]). As Milkman points out in the introduction, the precariat as we see it today is not entirely a new thing. The “work arrangements that [the precariat] refers to are hardly without historical precedent: in many cases they parallel older forms of labor exploitation that were widespread in the United States prior to the New Deal reforms of the 1930s” (2).

The parallels between models of organizing prevalent in the Progressive Era and those described in *New Labor in New York* are often quite striking. Florence Kelley and Jane Addams would have found themselves right at home in the worker centers described here, which bear a close resemblance to the settlement houses of the early twentieth century. The broad array of initiatives undertaken by Make the Road New York (a worker center described in chapter 8) echoes the ecumenical reach of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union during its late nineteenth-century heyday. And, of course, just as immigrant workers formed the basis of the proletariat during the first Gilded Age a century ago, in today’s Gilded Age, immigrants compose a significant proportion of today’s precariat.

Each contributor investigates the history of a single organization and its campaigns in New York City, focusing on new and experimental forms of labor organizing and exploring the benefits and challenges of collaborations between unions and these community groups. One of the many fine examples in this book is Ben Shapiro’s insightful discussion of the relationship between New York Communities for Change (NYCC) and the effort by Local 338 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union to organize the city’s independent groceries. Among the benefits for labor unions of community-based organizations like NYCC is their ability to create opportunities to build communities of workers outside the workplace that can reinforce solidarity within the workplace. This is especially important where US labor law gives employers the power to bar organizers from the workplace or to limit the ability of employees to communicate with one another while at work. However, outside the workplace—and beyond the reach of a broken labor-law regime—workplace solidarities can be strengthened through community organizing, sometimes enough to win union recognition. At the same time, the success of these efforts depends upon labor unions’ willingness to cede a certain degree of control over the campaign to community partners and a readiness to experiment, fail, and experiment again. In cataloguing these lessons, the authors provide inspiration for unions to expand and improve upon the foundation laid by organizations

such as the Retail Action Project, VAMOS Unidos, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center, among the others discussed in the book. Through a discussion of their failures alongside their victories, the authors also hope to make it easier to avoid past mistakes.

The only real criticism to be made here is that many of the campaigns described in these chapters took place during and just after the simmering tensions between Service Employees International Union and UNITE HERE had broken out into open conflict between 2008 and 2010. It may have been out of a sense of tact or propriety that this history was excluded. However, that conflict must have influenced the outcome of campaigns like the New York Civic Participation Project (NYCPP), which had once enjoyed the support of locals from both unions. As Stephen McFarland explains in his contribution, the NYCPP had been founded in 2003 as a way for “pro-immigrant unions in the city to work together and with key community allies to support pro-immigrant/pro-worker policies” (190). When UNITE HERE withdrew from the project in 2008, the conflict between two of the unions that have proved most willing to embrace the New Labor ethos must have had some impact (196). Caught in the cross fire of a jurisdictional dispute, community-based organizations like NYCPP would certainly face challenges to both their success and their autonomy.

*New Labor in New York* is an essential primer on some of the most exciting organizing happening today and offers a repertoire of tactics and strategies from a much more experimental era before the Wagner Act established the current labor law regime.

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