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Conflicting Commitments: The Politics of Enforcing Immigrant Worker Rights in San Jose and Houston

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Conflicting Commitments: The Politics of Enforcing Immigrant Worker Rights in San Jose and Houston

BY SHANNON GLEESON. ITHACA, NY: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012. 240 PP. ISBN 978-0801478147

With undocumented workers constituting up to 5 percent of the U.S. workforce and more than half of the workforce in multiple low-wage sectors, Shannon Gleeson's work comes at a time when questions concerning the politics of immigrant work are pressing. In particular, Gleeson's sensitive attention to the importance of locality and place in immigrant workers' interactions with state and non-state agencies makes clear the challenges and potentials of social movements and diverse coalitions to help immigrant workers attain rights. In sectors dominated by undocumented workers, rights are frequently and systematically violated, and in the current political context of waning union membership and cuts to regulatory agencies, a study on how immigrant workers gain rights and protections is a welcomed contribution to the field of U.S. Latino Studies. It will be of interest to anyone studying immigrant workers, labor, immigration law, or grassroots organizing.

In *Conflicting Commitments*, Gleeson turns her attention to the political field by conducting a comparative analysis of two U.S. cities to see the roles various governmental and civil society organizations play in the enforcement of immigrant workers' rights. Her analysis is based on five years of research between October 2005 and June 2009 in San Jose, California and Houston, Texas where Gleeson conducted 90 interviews with labor standards enforcement agents, representatives of civil society organizations, and Mexican consular staff to understand how the implementation of rights occurs across a field of political actors. The strength of Gleeson's work is in the way she frames this political field. She argues, "In order to understand how rights in theory become rights in practice, one must understand the borders and content of the political field in which they are being implemented" (63). Gleeson does a commendable job mapping out the content of the political field in both locations. From traditional governmental actors to understudied, non-traditional political players like the Mexican Consulate, it is clear that there are wide variations in strategies and outcomes for those seeking to enforce immigrant workers' rights.

Gleeson begins by providing the historical and legal context for her comparative analysis of San Jose and

Houston. She outlines key developments in the U.S. that have led to the growth of low-wage sectors, exacerbated by a decline in effective labor rights enforcement mechanisms, and an influx of undocumented workers migrating from Latin America to fill these jobs. As she aptly points out, "Low-wage immigrant labor and the poor working conditions they often face are ubiquitous to our everyday lives" (31). Similarly, the application of labor law is complicated in cases where it may conflict with immigration law, and the result has been a series of legal decisions about undocumented workers' rights that are inconsistent at best. One particularly strong example in Gleeson's work, and a case to which she devotes a lot of attention is the *Hoffman Plastics Inc. v. NLRB* (2002) ruling where the Supreme Court decided that workers were illegally fired by their employer for attempting to form a union, but because they were undocumented they were not entitled to back pay.

As Gleeson shows, while immigration law is federal, its implications for immigrant workers are not homogeneous across the U.S. Gleeson makes this particularly clear in her comparative analysis; although Houston and San Jose are both significant immigrant destinations relatively close to the U.S.-Mexican border, each have a distinct set of political actors, local and statewide governmental dynamics, and labor culture. On the one hand, San Jose is a decidedly liberal city with a labor history that has gained local and national attention. Further, the power of labor citywide translated into a number of local provisions, like the San Jose Living Wage Ordinance, which sets the city apart from places like Houston with far fewer labor protections. Houston is a city where local and statewide officials have created a markedly hostile environment to labor organizing and immigrants. Aside from having an active anti-immigrant movement, Texas is also the only state in the U.S. that does not require its employers to provide workers' compensation insurance. By aptly illustrating the complexities and subtle differences between the environments in which rights are enforced, Gleeson complicates overarching claims made by other scholars about the failures or successes of civic originations (202).

Gleeson's later chapters highlight the particular strategies of civil society organizations, immigrant worker advocates, and the Mexican Consulate in navigating the often complex political terrain. At issue in these later chapters is the question of how civil society organizations and state bureaucracies interact and mutually shape the agendas of agents struggling for rights. While San Jose has a vibrant and well-established set of organizations that work to help ensure the protection of immigrant workers, Gleeson portrays advocates in Houston as more dynamic, primarily because the context in which they operate is more hostile to their efforts than in San Jose. In many ways, it seems that collaborations among organizations in Houston have been forged in the fire. Although the Mexican Consulate is under a number of political constraints, they have managed to be important allies in both contexts. In the case of Houston, consular staff has taken a more active role in shepherding immigrant worker claims through the appropriate channels than in San Jose where they serve a mostly ancillary role to established labor organizations.

Gleeson's study is heavily focused on state bureaucratic structures and local politics, but because her methodology demands an intense focus on local agencies and structures, other forces and connections seem to, at times, drop out of the picture. Though she outlines some of these forces in her first chapter, her analysis could be strengthened by connecting the impacts of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s more explicitly to the limitations agents face on the ground today. One leaves the book having a good sense of the content of the political field, but less of a sense of the borders and limitations. Regardless, Gleeson's book is a thoughtful study on how immigrant workers access labor rights in San Jose and Houston given non-ideal conditions. Her study is useful for those seeking a better understanding of a transformed political field and those trying to advance workers' rights.

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