

## Compte rendu

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*US Labor in Trouble and Transition: The Failure of Reform from Above, The Promise of Revival from Below*, by Kim Moody, London; New York: Verso, 2007, 289 pp., ISBN 978-1-844671-55-7.

par Anthony M. Gould

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***US Labor in Trouble and Transition: The Failure of Reform from Above, The Promise of Revival from Below,***

by Kim Moody, London; New York: Verso, 2007, 289 pp., ISBN 978-1-844671-55-7.

This book addresses two related matters. First, it provides a thoughtful and cleverly crafted analysis of the decline of the United States union movement. Second, it presents a strategy for union revival. The publication has 11 chapters which cover these issues from the perspectives of stakeholders in the labour management process. For example there are sections dealing with demographic and geographic changes; post-mortems on previous attempts to recreate more effective unions and, finally, a chapter which offers a comprehensive plan for their renewal. The book mostly has a historical focus. In this respect each discussion is inclined to make its point through presenting a contrast between industrial and post-industrial society. In making this contrast, the book stays focused on its key message(s).

Moody presents argument(s) about union decline which are thoughtful, iconoclastic and embedded in a detailed discussion of economic history. In my opinion, the main strength of the book is that it provides a new and multidisciplinary way of understanding what happened to unions. It gives some convincing explanations of why the structures and institutions of post-industrial society are inherently less collective than the world in which I started my career. It replaces (or augments) views which vaguely imply that union demise is occurring because of virtual workplaces, global trade and outsourcing. In this respect, the book breaks new ground through examining the antecedents of these phenomena and resists uncritically rehashing well rehearsed arguments. Rather, it offers a rather detailed narrative which posits that industry profits have declined in the post-OPEC years because of growing

competition including international competition. Employers, so the argument goes, made up the shortfall through employment relations strategies. Broadly speaking, these have been: outsourcing; adoption of what we all know as the HRM approach; and lean manufacturing, which is perhaps a specific manifestation of HRM. For the most part, this argument is well supported by data from disparate sources.

One of the book's strengths is that it incorporates an historical perspective into its argument. This approach has two advantages. First, and most importantly, it makes the work entertaining to those of us who are history buffs. I also enjoyed the way the author builds his case through moving back and forth between qualitative and quantitative consideration of various evidences. For example, the discussion of CEO salary growth is amongst the best analyses of this issue that I have seen. It incorporates information about aggregate trends as well as elements of case studies. Second, the book's argument(s) mostly have "face-validity"; they seem to arise from, or fit with, historical circumstances and appear to be supported by data.

I have three criticisms of the book. First, on several occasions points are not explained as well as I think they need to be. There are two subcomponents to this criticism. The first is that key ideas are ignored or not addressed – in what I consider to be – sufficient detail. The second subcomponent is that certain discussions are confusing and could be better explained. For example, early in the book, a discussion is presented about declining industry profits which arise from a falling return on fixed-capital. On page 13 a Table is presented that provides data that is intended to build the case that US firm profits have been

in long-term decline between the years 1950 and 1972. I found this discussion somewhat unconvincing and difficult to follow. I think that more – and better – definitions would have aided the analysis.

The second criticism is more serious. Certain data is inconsistent; a problem which, once discovered, shakes one's confidence in the entire publication. For example on page 98 there is a reference to union density with the claim that it peaked in the United States at 32.5 percent of the non-agricultural workforce in 1953 and has been in decline ever since. On the same page another reference is made to union density of the national workforce peaking at 35.7 percent in the same year. In fairness to the author, it may be that these two figures are referring to different sectors of the workforce but the discussion of this matter is not clear.

My third criticism of the book is that sometimes its argument(s) failed to completely convince me. I think the problem may be that the author is being overly ambitious. In a single volume he attempts to create from scratch a new paradigm for understanding union demise. In his quest to build a better mousetrap he may have – at times – fallen victim to a tendency to be selective in the data he emphasizes and been

inclined to draw conclusions on the basis of limited information. For example, the book mostly ignores the influence of contemporary communication trends, such as development of the internet, on employer strategy vis-à-vis unions. In a similar vein, in general, the book analyses what is impacting American business rather than strategies employers are pursuing. For example, the author views outsourcing as the only inevitable reaction to shrinking profits and not as one of several possible options for bettering performance. Some of these biases are subtle but have an insidious way of constraining a reader's critical thinking.

In this book Moody has attempted to do something which is novel and, I think, deserves a place amongst ideas about declining unionism. The problem-solving perspective he offers is particularly attractive. In some ways, his approach creates a new *genre* of thinking about labour history because it does not just identify themes or trends but gives a sense of strategy for the unmaking of mistakes. In these respects the book reminds me of some I have read about strategic management. If this is so, then the book really has something important to say and may end up as a classic.

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*Unwrapping the European Social Model,*

sous la direction de Maria Jepsen et Amparo Serrano Pascual, Bristol, U.K. :  
The Policy Press, 2006, 272 p., ISBN 978-1-861347-98-5.

Difficile, quand on referme cet ouvrage, de ne pas rester profondément perplexe quant à la capacité du « modèle social européen » (MSE) de s'imposer durablement comme voie de développement originale, en offrant une alternative au capitalisme à l'américaine. En effet, on peut s'interroger sur la robustesse du projet qu'il est censé incarner, où l'économique et le social devraient être articulés l'un à l'autre dans une perspective de complémentarité. À

lire les auteurs réunis dans ce volume, on serait plutôt tenté de croire que le MSE est actuellement à la croisée des chemins, dans la délicate posture de devoir affronter, sur la base d'un bilan de réalisations pour le moins contrasté, des défis d'une envergure imposante.

Dès l'introduction, conçue comme une synthèse de l'ouvrage, les responsables de l'édition tracent le portrait des principaux problèmes et enjeux soulevés par le MSE : la difficulté de