BOOK REVIEW

How Did a $15 Minimum Wage Become an Achievable Goal?


Reviewed by Lennart Seufert

The fight for a higher minimum wage has become one of the defining national labor campaigns of recent decades. Since the federal floor was last raised in 2009, a conservative majority in Congress has blocked all attempts to close its many exemptions, strengthen its woeful enforcement and raise it above a sub-poverty-level $7.25/hour. Starting in November 2012 in New York, strikes by low-wage fast-food workers spread across the nation, arriving in Seattle in May 2013. Within a year, Seattle had somehow won a $15 minimum wage—the highest in the United States—without a gutty political fight.

David Rolf was one of the leaders of the campaign for this first $15 minimum wage law, drawing immediate national attention. After years of union organizing experience in New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles, Rolf became founding president of Seattle-based Local 775 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in 2001. By the time of the minimum wage campaign, Local 775 had over 27,000 members—enough to build up a political base in the city’s progressive community groups and liberal power brokers. Here he compiles the interesting history of his life as part of an (almost) dead American labor movement, bringing personal narrative and politics into a captivating story. He writes about the people and the strategy that, with shocking speed, won the country’s highest minimum wage. Rolf combines economics, history, and consciousness-raising wisdom to lay out a blueprint for achieving a $15 national minimum wage and building an economy that works for working people.

Especially noteworthy here is the sweep of the history he relates. While the book centers around the chapters specifying the battle for a decent wage in Sea-Tac and Seattle, there is likewise extensive work done to outline this moment inside the recorded setting of the political clashes of the most recent forty years, viz., the solidification of neoliberal authority. The author makes a profoundly educated case for a national $15/hour minimum wage as the main useful answer for turning around America’s decades-long slide toward turning into a low-wage country.

The author wants to answer two questions: (1) How did the American Dream, where hard-working Americans could obtain good jobs and a road to middle-class stability, change into a nightmare of increasing inequality and insecure work? And (2) What are unions and workers going to do to bring workers on the way from poverty to prosperity? Rolf argues that increasing the minimum wage to $15/hour is one of the defining labor issues of our time. The book is structured into three main parts: describing the increase of low-wage work and disparity, recounting the story of how laborers and unions are sorting out the fight for $15 campaign, and exposing common myths the campaign is hitting against.

David Rolf’s examination of the ascent of imbalance and unstable employment in the United States tracks recognizable familiar territory: He contends that conservative policies like deregulation and tax cuts, started to grab hold among portions of the regular business community, while also spawned by growing unemployment and inflation. The conservative movement through the 1980s and 1990s was hence capable to advance their longstanding fantasy about disintegrating the intensity of unions and working standards.

The decline of the middle class was followed by the ascent of “new work” which is divisive and unstable, but also adaptable. Laborers were atomized in the workplace and their aggregate power and solidarity have been dissolved. He demonstrates an incriminating picture of work today, with its multiplication of subcontracting, part-time, temporary, and freelance work. Rolf additionally notes there are presently more workers in the U.S. who have no lawful option to frame a union than workers who do.

Rolf’s investigation of the changing workplace is valuable, however, even if it somewhat underplays the role the attack on the welfare state has played in the subversion of working people’s certainty and security. For example, the ascent in post-secondary education fees and public infrastructure added to a feeling of isolation and financial dread among the common laborers. The political defeats endured by the regular workers are not just as significant as the mishaps suffered by laborers in the workplace - they are interlinked.

Rolf emphasizes that it is important to understand that the ideological move in workers’ confidence and feeling of aggregate force is the consequence of both the rebuilding of employment and public infrastructure added to a feeling of isolation and financial dread among the common laborers. The political defeats endured by the regular workers are not just as significant as the mishaps suffered by laborers in the workplace - they are interlinked.

The enormous mobilization for the municipal triumph in Sea-Tac, which beat a well-funded employer campaign, made the fight for $15 a model that could be replicated elsewhere. SEIU coordinators, union staff members, and local activists wanted a $15/hour starting wage and a union at several subcontracted firms based at the airport. Finally, they were able to agree on a $15 minimum wage.

The authoritarian mobilization for the municipal triumph in Sea-Tac, which beat a well-funded employer campaign, made the fight for $15 a model that could be replicated elsewhere. While he does not do enough to build up this point further, this story of treating employment standards as aggregate negotiating for non-union laborers is one of the key vital bits of knowledge the fight for $15 has demonstrated in a period of legislative and legal assaults on union rights.

His solution is addressed to unions to push for preferred negotiating models over the 1935 NLRA/Wagner model, for instance, sectoral bargaining that targets the entire site of work. The old NLRA approach to a great extent misses how transforming the economic struggles into more extensive political fights is a way for laborers to reverse the situation on employers and remove sectoral obstructions that frequently hold up the traffic of more extensive laborer solidarity. Increasing the minimum standards can help