

Employers, Unions and the Immigration Debate

Immigrant Labor and the New Precariat by Ruth Milkman. (Polity Press, 2020)

Reviewed by Geordy Canela

This book explores the belief, common among many Americans in the past two election cycles, that immigration is the cause of economic precarity and growing inequality in the U.S. work force. The author is a Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the Graduate Center at CUNY and the director of research at CUNY's School of Labor and Urban Studies. In the book's introductory chapter, she explains the growth of immigration as politicians have supported employers' demand for low-wage workers. She also explains the often-yawning disparities between working conditions of white-collar workers compared to those of immigrants. The findings she presents indicate that the inaccurate information-driven by conservative voices advocating for immigration restrictions has caused U.S.-born workers to believe their job options have been eliminated or significantly reduced because of immigrants. The intended audience for the book is US-born citizens who believe immigration has negatively impacted the economy as well as those who believe immigrants are personally responsible for their own struggles to find and maintain jobs. The book presents readers an accessible and dynamic discussion that has been too often missing in debates on such views.

Chapter One focuses on the U.S. immigrant workforce – both authorized and unauthorized – and their struggle with low wages. Chapter Two presents the 21st-century immigration debate from a historical perspective and describes the relationship of the immigrant workers to the labor movement of the U.S. as well as the shift of organized labor from exclusionary to inclusionary. Chapter Three explores the transformation and degradation of employment in the 20th century. Chapter Four describes the set of economic dynamics that provide demand for low-wage immigrants and payment inequality. In the last chapter, Milkman explains the struggle that immigrants endure to improve their pay and working conditions. Of the five chapters, Chapter Two represents the meaning of the book more prominently than the others because it compares modern situations against the history of labor in the U.S. and how these events shaped our society today.

Chapter One, "Brown-Collar Jobs: Low-Wage Immigrant Workers in the Twenty-First Century," portrays the job biases that immigrants have faced in the 21st century. One of the biases that Milkman

portrays is the language requirement that employers often demand and how jobs with that condition tend to be avoided by vast numbers of immigrants. New immigrants are often at the bottom of the labor market working in physically demanding, menial, and dangerous jobs while also being poorly paid. These jobs are labeled as those native-born Americans spurn. The counterargument that Milkman portrays in chapter one supports the position that immigrants are not stealing widely desired jobs. This is due to their limitations in speaking the English language. Her point clearly states that conservative ideologies promote the harms of immigration to the U.S economy which she proves to be incorrect through several data presented. For example, she states that Immigration is argued to reflect and intensify the disruptive effects of capitalist development.

In the past, many now-spurned jobs attracted a large American employee base, but this has steadily declined through the years as work conditions and compensation eroded and an increasing number of Americans rejected them. These rejections started in the 1970s when employers began to cut wages and economic restructuring spread. The rejection of these jobs contributed to the occupational segregation between U.S.- and foreign-born workers. Public debates only highlighted the fact that five percent of the U.S. workforce consists of unauthorized immigrants.

Also provided in Chapter one are the negative labels and stereotypes of immigrants that they are uneducated even though research reveals that thirty-seven percent of immigrant workers aged twenty-five years or older have a four-year college degree. At the same time, fifteen percent of unauthorized immigrants also have a four-year college degree. Immigrants are geographically distributed throughout the country with the Midwest containing the lowest immigrant population at nine percent. Milkman represents numerical data to provide the reader with clear information about the reality of immigration which helps navigate them away from the negative narrative that the immigrants are being portrayed. Chapter one states the occupations held by immigrants are also unevenly distributed, with especially low numbers in fields like science and engineering and high numbers in fields such as nail salons and dry cleaning. Forty-two percent of U.S.-born citizens hold professional and business occupations compared to thirty-three percent of the U.S. immigrant population. The fields held by immigrants have higher injury and death rates compared to the ones held by U.S.-born citizens. Chapter One defines occupational segregation as the reinforced racialization of brown-collar jobs. Brown collar jobs are depicted as very different between U.S.-born citizens and the mostly unauthorized immigrants. Chapter One makes it clear that the labor market is very unjust towards immigrant employees and provides them with only the jobs that Americans do not want. Hence, the author concludes that immigrant competition in the labor market does not appear to be prominent because of the limitations present in occupational segregation.

Chapter Two, “Immigration and Labor in Historical Perspective”, explains the history of immigration into the United States. The United States population consists almost entirely of immigrants and the Americans who survived the European conquest. The U.S first attracted a various number of migrants for several reasons consisting including religious or political persecution, war, hunger, and the desire to be reunited with family members. Several thousands of Europeans migrated to the country as servants but later, more migrants were

attracted by the rise in available industrial jobs. After the U.S. gained independence, much of the workforce consisted of servants and African slaves. After the Civil War, the U.S. economy was transformed by urbanization and industrialization. During the 1880s large companies started forming and this led to an acceleration in immigration rates. Most immigrants were young unskilled men and servants. In 1907 the U.S. population had increased immensely due to these high immigration rates prompting some to believe the ideology that immigrants are trying to rob Americans of their jobs. An example that is presented in this chapter is the KKK. They were one of the major groups that shared this ideology. In the 1920s immigrants and their children made up most of the nation's manufacturing jobs while the vast majority were miners and contractors of the transcontinental railroads. Immigration to the U.S. was unrestricted until World War One as the U.S. needed labor to support its economic growth. The history of occupational segregation began in the 1900s and research indicates that most available jobs were restricted to coal and steel mining and received significantly lower pay which was brought to light during the Great Depression.

The Great Depression had a huge and drastic effect on almost all available jobs and impacted all levels of the labor market. Mexicans and Filipinos who had held farming jobs before the Great Depression were dismissed from their duties as American-born citizens took over these jobs. Unemployed white people often believed they were more entitled than other races to any available job. A few years after the depression, WWII broke out which led to a resurgence in demand for labor for the U.S. economy. White people then started leaving those same farming jobs and upgrading into higher-paying jobs while immigrants were required to join the workforce at the bottom of the labor market. Even though there was a high level of demand for workers, in 1955 large groups of Mexicans started being deported back under the policy of Operation Wetback. Chapter Two in Milkman's book provides very detailed information on the labor market impacts of immigrants throughout the different economic stages of U.S. history. She portrays the formulation of conservative groups' ideas against immigration which is so visible today in much of the right's arguments and policies.

Chapter Three, "The Eclipse of the New Deal: Labor Degradation, Union Decline, and Immigration Workers", explores unionism during the time when President Franklin Roosevelt created New Deal policies that drastically altered the American political economy. One of the major acts created under the New Deal was the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. This act authorized the right for Americans to unionize and bargain collectively, thereby shaping the conditions under which one-third of the work force won union representation by the mid-1950s. Unprecedented union power plus high marginal income taxes on the rich brought strong economic growth, an historic reduction in income inequality, and vast expansion of middle-class jobs. When international competition started to rise in the 1970s, American corporations increasingly shifted production to places where labor was much cheaper and began to attack union power. President Reagan accelerated this anti-union trend in the 1980s, while also trying to end most employers' ability to hire undocumented migrants. In 1986 he signed into law the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). This act provided a path to

citizenship for three million undocumented immigrants, but also barred employers from “knowingly” hiring unauthorized immigrant workers.

In the neoliberal era, there have been several efforts to prevent the influences of organized labor which has caused the rate of unionization to suffer drastically. One of the major factors that contributed to de-unionization was more nonunion construction. Buildings that were constructed throughout this period started hiring for basic cleaning positions like janitors. These jobs were non-unionized because they required fewer skills and were occupied mostly by immigrants. Meatpacking was another job that was non-unionized and was often located in areas that were unlikely to be able to unionize. Chapter Three explores in close detail how jobs have been affected by de-unionization throughout the U.S. and presents factual evidence regarding the impact of governmental regulations on immigration and its relationship with available jobs.

Chapter Four, “Growing Inequality and Immigrants Employment in Paid Domestic Labor and Service Industry Jobs,” explains the distribution of wealth throughout the United States. Inequality in areas such as income and wealth started to grow immensely in the U.S. with the process of deindustrialization, de-unionization, and deregulation. Inequality started steadily growing in response to increased demand for paid domestic workers and various other services. The impact of rising inequality on domestic and personal service work expanded in the 1970s as household services grew. Inequality greatly increased for women who were highly educated and in the upper-middle class. Their earnings grew rapidly until they were unable to have jobs that were restricted from them based on their gender. This occupational segregation led to the gender gap declining while income inequality became larger. Female occupations in the 1940s were most prominent in areas of domestic labor, ultimately reaching a peak at two million women working in private households. This profession represented eighteen percent of the female workforce. Unfortunately, the pay in these domestic jobs was significantly lower and the quality and working conditions were dependent on each individual job. Chapter Four describes the details regarding inequality in payment for domestic labor and provides numerical data on the rates of inequality women faced in the workforce.

Chapter Five, “Immigrant Labor Organizing and Advocacy in the Neoliberal Era,” describes the labor movement which consisted of the struggle immigrants faced regarding dangerous jobs. Through the New Deal, several laws such as minimum wage requirements and legalizing unions were passed. Restrictions were created to prevent employers from abusing their power and creating dangerous and inhumane working conditions for their employees. Movements like Justice for Janitors were the driving force in achieving these feats. However, since the 1970s unionizing has still been extremely difficult for many Americans, especially immigrants. This is in a large part due to the incorrect ideology that immigrants are unorganizable. Immigrants have a desire for unionization, and they favor a more humane and well-paying workplace than what they had available in their home countries. Additionally, immigrants often depend on community service networks in their efforts to enter the unionized labor market because they have fewer available resources than U.S.-born citizens. Although they desire to join unions, they are constantly facing stigmatization and racism despite the efforts made by these

unions to serve the immigrant workforce. Chapter Five focuses on the organization of the immigrant and migrant workers and their fight to join unions while facing several conflicts based on racism.

After reading *Immigrant Labor and the New Precariat*, the author had largely succeeded presenting a wealth of relevant information, with ample factual data to support her conclusions on the positive impact of immigration. The ideology that immigrants have a negative effect on the American economy and society is strongly contradicted throughout the book and she displays a more liberal view regarding the issue of immigration. That view not only discredits the opposing, largely Republican case, but also provides a clearer understanding of the roots of conservative Americans' frequent hostility to new immigrants. Overall, the book has great strengths and, even with its weaknesses, makes a valuable contribution to the sociology of immigration.

One of the crucial pieces of evidence that I found lacking in her book is the effect of long-term resident immigrants. Throughout her book, she claims that arriving immigrants lack the skills required to take away white-collar American jobs; however, she does not explore the skill sets of the children of these immigrants and their effect on American jobs. Many children of migrant parents receive an American education which allows them to reach the same level of skills needed to work in these white-collar jobs. This does not support her claim and she should have written about solutions to these issues and provided a percentage describing how many white-collar workers are the offspring of immigrants. This evidence would be useful in chapter one where she provides information such as the fact that 42% of U.S.-born citizens hold professional and business occupations compared to only thirty-three percent of the U.S. immigrant population.

One of the major reasons I would still recommend her work to others is opportunity it offers to see the positive points of immigration alongside the negative ones that are constantly expounded upon by some critics and media. Too many are too quick to follow the unverified claims of others without first verifying if the claims are even accurate. If slogans like Donald Trump's election campaign motto "Make America Great Again," imply an American past where immigration was at a controlled rate and did not cause any economic issues to the U.S., it calls for unbiased historical and economic evidence. Milkman's book could offer a useful means to distinguish between accurate analysis of immigration's impacts and the vast amounts of misinformation that have clouded so many Americans' thinking in recent years.

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