

A Part of The Future We Need

The Future We Need: Organizing for a Better Democracy in the Twenty-First Century
by Erica Smiley and Sarita Gupta (NY: Cornell University ILR Press, 2022)

Reviewed by Gertrude Goldberg

According to Erica Smiley and Sarita Gupta, our future would be a lot brighter and our democracy healthier if collective bargaining in the workplace was much more widespread and applied to numerous economic issues beyond the workplace.

“While voting, lobbying, and other forms of policy and legal work are important forms of democratic participation, collective bargaining—both at work and elsewhere—applies democratic practices to economic relationships.” It is the “gateway to democracy in the whole economic arena.” Without both political and economic democracy, the authors emphasize, “the whole system is compromised.” (p.3)

Smiley is Executive Director of Jobs with Justice. Gupta was Director of the Ford Foundation’s Future of Work(ers) Program when she co-authored *The Future We Need* and is now the Ford Foundation’s Vice President of US Programs. Both authors are seasoned collective bargainers and movement builders.

In recognizing that *The Future We Need* is both economic and political, Smiley and Gupta join a line of thinkers who emphasize the interdependence of these two essential components of liberty. We are reminded of Franklin Roosevelt’s landmark proposal for a Second or Economic Bill of Rights – that “individual freedom cannot exist without economic security.” Their emphasis on collective bargaining as the instrument for achieving economic and political freedom is what distinguishes Smiley and Gupta’s approach.

What is this magic bullet that will safeguard both economic and political rights?

“Traditional worksite-based collective bargaining ... is a system by which working people can exercise collective power and directly confront the owners of capital in a way that reclaims portions of that capital for working people and their communities.” (p. 13)

Collective bargaining “sets the terms and conditions of work” and “allows everyday people to ‘practice democracy’ – directly engaging in the decisions and choices that affect their lives.” Collective bargaining “significantly increased upward mobility in the United States in the United States” and “played a key role in enabling Black

and Brown people to escape poverty and attain economic security in the United States” The authors see collective bargaining as “a gateway to democracy in the entire economic area” and if its effect is deepened, “an impetus to the revival of democracy.” A 21st century definition of bargaining proposed by the authors includes the extension of collective bargaining beyond the workplace: “The process whereby working people take collective action in negotiating with any entity that has power over their rights, living conditions, and overall economic well-being in a way that produces an enforceable agreement that can be renegotiated as conditions change.” (p.74). Unions are the “vehicles” for work-site collective bargaining. Because of the drastic decline in the number of workers represented by unions—from over 30 percent in the mid-1950s to just above 10% in 2020 – the number of people in the United States able to practice collective bargaining has “dramatically decreased.” Yet, even at its height, collective bargaining was only practiced by a minority of US workers. How widespread, I ask, must union representation be in order to deliver “the future we need?”

Collective Bargaining and Labor History

“Workplace Democracy Does Not Happen by Accident” is the title of a chapter in which the authors relate the history of collective bargaining to the history of the U.S. Labor Movement. Here they focus, not on the obvious choices such as the American Federation of Labor, but on such Black-led assertions of worker power as that of the Atlanta washerwomen in the 1880s who used the techniques of a mass meeting, mobilization of the influential support of Black clergy, organized door-to-door canvassing, and a city-wide strike to gain their demands for better pay. An even more monumental and influential uprising from the depths is the mass refusal to work by Black slaves, midway through the Civil War.

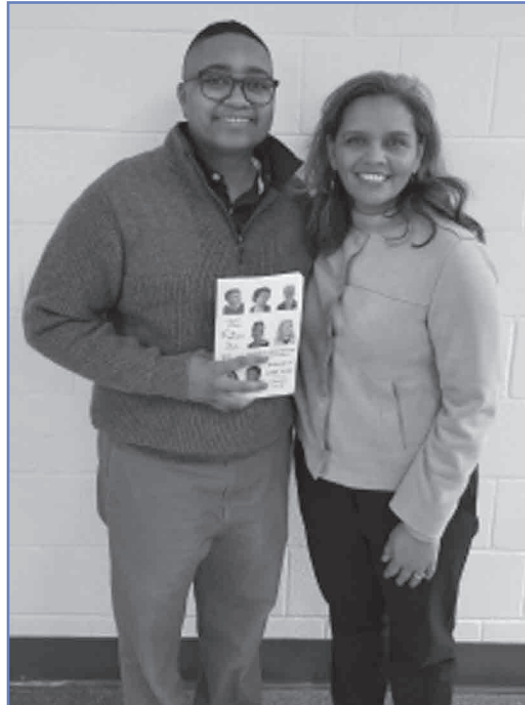
The “divergent aims” of organized labor early in the twentieth century are noted. The Knights of Labor were devoted to educational and cooperative activities and avoided industrial conflict where possible. In stark contrast, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) “sought complete capitulation of capital to the working class.” The authors point out that “Many craft union organizers used color and gender to define who was fit to govern themselves.” Craft unions saw government intervention as paternalist and undermining their ability to govern themselves as full citizens--a challenge to their masculinity.

Early railway unionists, by contrast, recognized the need for government oversight of the federal rail system. Both railway unions and carriers pushed for the Railway Labor Act of 1926 that allowed for government to mediate when negotiations between employers and workers broke down. “Yet, this guarantee came at a dangerous cost that continues to haunt us today, since the act required rail unions to give up their right to strike.” Indeed, we have just seen the cost of that surrender – in the recent battle over sick pay for railway workers. However, it is important that this demand would not, with a more developed welfare state, be an issue for collective bargaining. Smiley and Gupta call attention to this burden and for the failure, until recently, for progressives to prioritize rights that workers in other wealthy democracies can count on.

The authors acknowledge that the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 created a legal framework for collective bargaining, “opened pathways to family-sustaining jobs,” and related economic benefits to millions of Americans. Nonetheless, they emphasize that the goal of the NLRA was to “keep commerce moving, thereby ensuring the success of US capitalism. One might also say that the act was intended to reduce the effects of a Depression and the mass unemployment and reduced wages that were impoverishing American workers. In addition to the NLRA’s egregious omission of occupations in which the majority of African Americans and women were employed, those who framed the legislation were “not interested in addressing the needs of working people as whole people, as active participants in the economy through multiple channels.” Smiley and Gupta do not specify how New Deal legislation could have achieved those broader goals. In their brief history of U.S. labor, Smiley and Gupta do not assess the role of the CIO in relation to issues of both race and gender despite its generally being regarded as more progressive than the AFL in these regards. Nor do they allude to the role of the Communist Party or its members in furthering racial justice in the labor movement.

The authors draw some lessons from the history of US labor. One is that any agreement that compromises the fundamental powers that workers use to enforce and maintain those agreements, particularly the right to strike, is a recipe for long-term disaster. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 which robbed labor of important rights by banning secondary boycotts and exempting millions of workers from NLRA protection “illustrates how quickly a federal government that appears to be firmly on the side of workers can be twisted in the opposite direction when workers themselves fail to be vigilant about not just winning the game but also changing the

rules to protect and maintain those victories.” The authors, however, provide no evidence of declining worker vigilance. The story of labor’s response to Taft-Hartley is a complicated one that includes compromise on the part of labor movement leaders but widespread workers’ protest.



*Authors Erica Smiley and Sarita Gupta
at Hofstra University Book Reading, 3/14/2023
(photo credit: Regional Labor Review)*

In discussing “government,” the authors tend to omit the difference between the two major parties, the Democrats being moderately pro-labor for a short time in the 1930s and the Republicans largely hostile to labor. Republicans dominated the 80th Congress that enacted Taft-Hartley over the veto of Democrat, President Harry S. Truman. In both Houses of Congress the number of Democrats voting not to sustain Truman’s veto narrowly outnumbered those voting to sustain the pro-labor veto. Missing from the authors’ analysis of labor’s decline is the Democratic Party’s lack of support for labor in the last sixty years, despite heavy electoral support for Democratic candidates on the part of organized labor—what labor economist Richard McIntyre refers to as “unrequited love.” This omission is consonant with their stated view:

The Great Rollback

A chapter on “The Great Rollback” emphasizes globalization and the consequent ability of global corporations

to outsource production tasks to countries where workers’ rights are fewer, government regulations are scarce, and salaries much lower than in the US. With financial capitalism, the successor to managerial capitalism, investors gamble with companies and other economic entities in order to maximize profits – with severely negative consequences for wages, safety, healthcare, or other social needs. Redoubled use of the divide and conquer tools of white supremacy, patriarchy, and xenophobia on the part of today’s Right is a feature of the rollback emphasized by Smiley and Gupta.

Contingent work – subcontracted, temporary, part-time, or otherwise precarious work is a “powerful antilabor trend” associated with the rollback. The authors emphasize that a sizeable proportion of the US workforce is contingent – about two-fifths. Some contingent workers are indirectly employed and unable to negotiate with their “real bosses.” Some are misclassified as independent contractors, hence outside the legal framework of the NLRA as well as denied such safety net protections as unemployment insurance. The authors also take a look at the gig economy, concluding that “it is far from the worker-empowering revolution that companies are marketing and far less sizable.” This is a conclusion similar to that reached by labor historian Frank Stricker in an article, “The Gig Economy: How Big, How Bad?”

Not to be overlooked in the armory of capital “rollback” are the skyrocketing sums that corporations can spend to influence U.S. elections, a trend well-established before the Citizens United Supreme Court decision. Another Supreme Court blow to labor that could be noted is the 2018 Janus ruling that non-union government workers cannot be required to pay union fees as a condition of working in public service.

With union density at “rock bottom,” the authors conclude that “the best unions can do is to win decent benefits for a small section of the working class—namely their members.” Their pessimistic observation of the result: “... a dynamic that pits the interests of organized workers against those of the unorganized majority.” Unintentionally, according to the authors, “unions have thus played into the same divide-and-conquer strategy that underlies the Right’s appeals to racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia.” On the brighter side, Smiley and Gupta hail the alliance of SEIU, Black Lives Matter, and the Fight for Fifteen as an important counter-offensive to capital’s current divide and conquer strategy.

Pushing Back against the Rollback

Much of *The Future We Need* is devoted to a discussion of how labor can push back against a system that isn’t working for most of us—one epitomized by a choice for many working people between covering the rent and putting enough food on the table. Stories told by workers who are pushing back are a welcome feature of this book. These stories are preceded by the workers’ portraits which are painted in the innovative style of queer, feminist painter Gwenn Seemel.

In their section on the labor movement the authors call for broadening our image of US workers—beyond the stereotype of “a strong white man wielding a pickaxe or a hammer while building one of the major industries of the twentieth century—steel, automaking, or mining.” The 10 workers featured in this book hardly fit that outdated stereotype. There is only one man. These workers are teachers and employees in a department store, domestic service, school food service, an auto manufacturing plant, a packing house, and multinational retail and fast food enterprises. Most of these workers are black or brown, and none wields an axe at work. Reflecting the authors’ view—that some of the most creative approaches to workplace democracy are by people fighting for dignity in the communities where systems of worker oppression descended from slavery have been in place the longest—six of the nine featured workers are employed in the South, the remainder in St. Louis, Lynn Massachusetts, and Brooklyn.

While the authors emphasize the need for organizing and collective bargaining beyond the workplace, they consider it “urgent that we simultaneously defend our ability to collectively bargain in the workplace.” “Many of the strategies to expand bargaining, they explain, will not work unless we secure this first.”

The workers featured in this book are pushing back against age-old challenges that were tamed by civil rights and women’s movements but resurgent in the pushback. Capital’s traditional divide-and-conquer strategy for weakening labor is alive and deadly in today’s effort of bosses to pit whites against blacks, women against men, and native workers against immigrants. And the workers’ stories, moreover, tell of the sheer immiseration of people who do the hard and necessary work for us—work that was only deemed “essential” when a pandemic demonstrated how much we need them. Some Walmart’s workers, we learn, spend their days off at a food bank. Unable to afford a car, an older worker featured in this book walks seven blocks to a bus stop, takes four hours each way to get to work at McDonald’s and sometimes has only been assigned four hours of work. Not to mention the lack of respect from managers that comes through in these stories.

Rubynell Walker-Barbee, a food service worker at Morehouse College in Georgia, organized a successful drive for membership in the SEIU. After three years working at Morehouse, she had been rewarded for good work with a \$.02 increase! She started “asking around” and realized some people she worked with weren’t even making the minimum wage. The confusion of frequently changing general managers was one of the reasons Walker-Barbee began organizing, and the union brought enforceable rules to their workplace.

Unionization, however, did not prevent a statewide assault on all food service workers in the state. The state labor commissioner arbitrarily revoked of unemployment insurance benefits that school-service workers rely on during the three-month school vacation—a loss that created great hardship for workers earning low wages to begin with. The workers, both union and nonunion, organized, rallied outside worksites, even went to the labor commissioner’s house. And they succeeded in having the governor overturn the commissioner’s denial. “It felt like we’d gotten back pay when our wages had been stolen” was the way that the denial of unemployment benefits was conceptualized.

Lidia Victoria, a Dominican immigrant helped with the fight to gain union recognition for Smithfield Packing in North Carolina that, Smiley and Gupta observe, centered on the fight against white supremacy, including its impact not only on immigrant workers and workers of color but also on the white workers in the plant.” Victoria points out the diversity in the plant:

“black people, white people, Native Americans, and Spanish-speaking people from all over and that supervisors would try to create divisions around this. They would say things like “The African Americans are like this, so we keep them here. And the Spanish people, you know they work really hard.” At the same time they told other people that the Spanish-speaking people were there to steal their jobs. “Of course, the company knew our chances of winning decreased the more divided we were. And they played on this.” (p. 83)

She believes the supervisors knew that some workers were undocumented and that they were vulnerable. “It wasn’t long after we started getting more people excited about the union that ICE raided our plant and took twenty-six people.”

Sanchioni Butler, a UAW organizer, found that Nissan in Canton, Mississippi:

“used their money to divide the workers.” “They would encourage white workers in the plant, who were in just as bad shape as everyone else, to still feel privileged over Black workers.” Many of them, she writes, “had their own ‘aha’ moments after they experienced an injury and saw how the company treated them just as badly as they had treated Black workers who had been injured.” (p. 92)

In an earlier job at a Ford plant in Texas, Butler, who “came in with a few Black workers,” found that she was sexually harassed by white men and Black men. When she wanted to take the test for a higher-paying “prime job” in maintenance, men from the union as well as management told her to take her name off the list of those taking the test.

Smiley and Gupta regard white supremacy “as a tool of capitalist dominance for white people”—one supported by Sanchioni Butler’s observation of how white workers were led to feel privileged over black workers but were treated just as badly. The authors emphasize that “patriarchy, like white supremacy, must be centrally targeted by labor organizers and others who want to build a truly effective movement for economic democracy.

Kimberly Mitchell is a union organizer whose labor activism included the role of shop steward at Macy’s in DC. The authors relate her self-description to the concept of intersectionality or intersecting identities and the consequent need for twenty-first century collective bargaining to consider the whole person:

“If all you see when you meet me is that I’m a worker, you’re missing the entire point. I am a whole person. I should be able to exercise control of my life in all aspects—at work, in my home, and in relationship to the big banks and the large corporations who shape so much of our society. If we fail to see people like me as whole people, then we’re losing good soldiers who could be in this fight with us, this fight for dignity and respect.” (p. 72)

A chapter titled “Beyond the Red and Blue” tells the story of the successful teachers strike in West Virginia, one of the states that adopted right to work laws in the last 30 years. Smiley and Gupta refer to “a remarkable anomaly”: that the first of the 55 West Virginia counties to implement the work stoppage were, if anything, more conservative than those in other parts of the state. All three are red states, one of them 98 percent white and relatively poor (median income \$36,000). These counties, however, located in the epicenter of the mine wars after World War I “identify with the ideals of dignity and respect for working people.” Smiley and Gupta conclude that “organizing people is not about their ideology.

It is about appealing to the values that drive them.” Apart from the difficulty of distinguishing between ideology and values, this is a rather small sample to draw conclusions about going beyond the Red and Blue.

Heather Deluca-Nestor, president of her county union local, emphasizes that teachers who participated in the work stoppage were doing more than protecting their rights as workers. “I guess you would call us the standard-bearers of public education and defending our children.” Deluca-Nestor contrasts teachers who defend public schools--their employers--with her steel-worker relatives who strike against their company for fair wages. What goes for teachers could also apply to other public-service workers who are allied with their employers when it comes to gaining public support for these services.

New Challenges for Collective Bargaining

While challenges like the divide-and-conquer strategy are age old, some of the direct-bargaining examples in this book address new challenges. One is “the fissured workplace” which David Weil, former labor administrator in the Obama administration, describes as: “a constellation of different companies delivering what the consumer may think of as simply ‘the Marriott experience.’” In such workplaces, it is difficult for workers to know who their real boss is and with whom to negotiate. In the world of global capital, Smiley and Gupta emphasize, the “ultimate profiteers” must be confronted directly. Another newer challenge is what sociologist Beverly Silver calls the “spatial fix” or the avoidance of labor militancy and power by relocating sites of production. Here again, the real boss is not at hand.

Several initiatives to address the spatial-fix are cited. One is the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), “a strategic network of garment-sector unions and other worker organizations from countries across the continent.” The network seeks to form “a global bargaining unit with an equal role in governing the industry rather than allowing suppliers and the global retail brands to pit working people from one country against those from other countries.” The authors report that “the AFWA continues to thrive even in the harsh circumstances presented by the COVID-10 pandemic and the ongoing shifts in global capital.” However, they provide no examples of success.

The Accord on Fire Safety in Bangladesh is an example of “intensive collaboration around bargaining demands and organizing goals across national borders” that is necessitated by the global economy. However, US retail giants that sell Bangladesh-made garments had refused to sign on to the accord at the time when this book was written. Global Union Federations (GUF) are international union federations that attempt to construct global framework agreements (GFAs), but these agreements “often lack real enforceability.”

The stories of Bettie Douglas, a Black grandmother employed at McDonald’s in St. Louis, and Cynthia Murray who works at Walmart in Maryland, provide examples of the need to target the

ultimate profiteer rather than a local franchise owner. When Douglas tried to bargain with the franchise owner, her direct boss, she realized it was not a decision he could make and that “We had to try to engage the executives at the top of the McDonald’s corporation.” And she has overcome the nervousness she first felt in testifying about her experiences before a large audience that included McDonald’s executives. She has gained personal strength from expressing her true feelings and expresses hope that face-to-face meeting with executives will make each understand where the other is coming from, but there is no report of successful outcomes. Cynthia Murray recognized that “With a company like Walmart, you can’t just go store to store. What to get to the top of the company.” Murray tells one story of a face-to-face encounter with a Walmart executive in which she and her colleagues made him listen to a story of how one of them lost her baby when, while pregnant, she was forced to pull a pallet jack. For the first time she could see he was human and realized they were too. Yet, Murray relates no gains for Walmart workers from the encounter.

Community-Driven Bargaining

“Workers are whole people whose daily interactions and struggles with the economy go far beyond the workplace. Therefore, while a union contract at work is an important step toward economic democracy, working people must also be able to collectively negotiate economic relationships far beyond their worksites, in all aspects of their lives. This is what community-driven bargaining is all about.” [154]

This opening paragraph of the section, “What is Community-Driven Bargaining?” sums up a central theme of *The Future We Need* and the authors’ justification for extending the powerful tool of collective bargaining to the full range of workers’ encounters with capital. What follows are descriptions of the kinds of economic encounters that community-driven bargaining is designed to address: renters versus corporate landlords; debtors versus big banks; and consumers versus corporations. In each of these the individual deals with powerful, remote entities—instead of an on-site landlord a company that owns over 150,000 rental properties, including apartments, manufactured homes, and RV parks.

Deloris Wright is a Jamaican immigrant who is an activist in Domestic Workers United and in its six-year, successful campaign to achieve a New York State Domestic Bill of Rights. But her struggle for economic rights did not stop with her role as a worker. As an apartment dweller in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights neighborhood, she encountered many of the problems that plague lower-income tenants such as rent costs “through the roof” and neighbors being manipulated into moving out so that landlords could increase the rent. “I couldn’t sit by and watch.” She joined the Crown Heights Tenant Union. These are some accomplishments of their community-driven bargaining:

“With the Tenants Union we have been able to negotiate with landlords and building owners. We form committees of people to

join our neighbors in housing court when they are summoned so they don’t have to navigate the system by themselves. Some of them have lived in their apartments for over forty years, and that is often who landlords are trying to remove.” [167]

Throughout US history, the authors write, the consumers-against-corporations strategy aided causes ranging from the abolition of slavery to unfair labor practices and civil rights. One might add to their historical examples one studied in depth by labor historian Annelise Orleck: the successful housewives’ boycotts over food and housing costs in a number of cities that peaked during the Great Depression, a Communist-backed movement led by women whose organizing skills were honed in the labor movement. Today, we have no nationwide consumer movement of consumers-against-corporations. Think what such a movement might have done to counter the current inflation--by targeting price-gouging corporations instead of workers’ jobs and wages.

Smiley and Gupta hold that instead of settling for enacting policy changes or electing like-minded people to office, community collective bargaining should “Help to Govern.” They suggest the creation and administration of a trust board that governs a public fund which advances community interests. An example the authors give of the “Help to Govern” approach is a Connecticut Campaign for Worthy Wages focusing on legislation that would charge employers who pay less than \$15 an hour a “McWalmart Fee” to retrieve the cost to the state of public-assistance fees resulting from their workers’ insufficient incomes. These revenues would be used to pay for the senior-care and childcare services needed by many McDonald’s, Walmart, and other low-wage workers. The legislation failed, but the insurance giant Aetna, raised its starting wage to \$16 and reduced out-of-pocket-care expenses for its lowest-paid employees. An effort in Cook County, Illinois to establish a similar fund also failed, and so did a Maine initiative to establish the right to home care supports and services for Mainers with disabilities.

Such efforts, though they may fall short of objectives, can tarnish the image of large corporations and raise public awareness of economic injustice. Although the authors discuss these efforts in the section that proposes such “helps to govern” as establishing a trust board or some form of oversight over public policies, there was no discussion of such oversight measures in discussing these initiatives. And it is hard to differentiate them from the efforts by community organizations and advocacy groups that work to elect officials and achieve legislation without measures for permanent oversight.

The authors provide several other examples of community-driven bargaining. For instance, Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs): “agreements between a developer or other company, a coalition of community partners, and most often a government agency to address the needs of those living in an area that has experienced or could soon experience new large-scale development of nearby land and facilities.” Since developing property requires

licenses, investments, and other permissions, it offers an opportunity for working people to “leverage this process to ensure that the project does not harm their economic well-being.” CBAs can include promises to hire some percentage of local residents and at living wages.

Among “Community Pathways to Workplace Bargaining,” the authors discuss coenforcement and procurement strategies. Unions are key to enforcing agreements through a grievance process, but most worksites are not unionized. In the face of massive violation of the laws protecting working people, government officials lack resources to force compliance, and legal action is too expensive.

“Coenforcement is a means by which workers can broaden the scope of bargaining by negotiating with government or private actors to play a formal role in enforcing labor and employment laws.”[p. 171] Jeff Crosby, a veteran activist who tells his story, provides an example of coenforcement. In addition to leadership in the workplace, he is a member of a Labor Council that includes organizations ranging from a Worker Center to the Chamber of Commerce. When an anti-wage theft policy was enacted, they wrote themselves into it as an advisory committee because they knew the city didn’t have the money to hire someone to enforce it.

The use of government procurement to lift economic standards has a long history. Cited by the authors as moving beyond economic to social justice is A. Philip Randolph’s threatened March on Washington on the eve of World War II—only called off when FDR signed an Executive Order to ban discrimination by defense contractors. A current model of “inclusive public procurement” was designed by Move America to benefit communities underserved by public transit by building efficient, nonpolluting public transportation and creating at the same time good permanent jobs in those communities.” Such procurement strategies “enable working people, through their unions or community-based organizations, to have a seat at the table with both government and government contractors.”

Largely confined to negotiating over wages and working conditions in the post World War II period, unions have been attempting to broaden the scope of bargaining to include employers’ impact on workers’ communities. This social movement unionism has been more common in the public sector where, as mentioned, teachers see themselves as defending public education as well as their rights as workers. Teachers in St. Paul Minnesota, for example, inserted in their negotiations that the district cease all business with banks that foreclose on families with school-aged children during the school year. The authors cite some examples in the private sector. For example, the Communications Workers of America, along with the Committee for Better Banks, and other organizations “have begun laying the groundwork for improving pay and benefits for the country’s more than one million bank workers. In doing so, the coalition has positioned itself as a defender of consumers and an opponent of banks’ most predatory practices” [186].

Technological Change: Who Benefits?

New technology, Smiley and Gupta emphasize, is neither good nor bad for workers. “When working people can inset themselves directly into the processes of designing, adopting, and governing new technologies and shifting the organization of work, the result will be overwhelmingly positive for much larger groups of people.” Their section on technological change tells two stories—one in which collective bargaining led to good outcomes for workers in a company adopting new technology and one in which the views of working people were disregarded and both the company and workers were losers.

The success story: The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) and Allen-Bradley Automation in Milwaukee were able to negotiate benefits for workers as the company was adopting new technologies. A core issue was increasing opportunity for workers with seniority to be trained for new, more technically advanced jobs. Another was the creation of apprenticeship programs available to people whose jobs were being eliminated, an issue particularly important to women. When the plant did close as a result of technological change, the union negotiated the pace of job elimination to assure that workers could retire with full pensions instead of simply losing their incomes.

Jeff Crosby, whose co-enforcement work was related earlier, is a machinist at General Electric who had organized a technology committee. Unfortunately, in building its Factory of the Future, GE did not heed the advice of the workers’ technology committee which was proposed island production in which workers would learn multiple skills as opposed to deskilling their work. Instead, the company built “one of the world’s most inflexible machining centers” which was shut down after ten years.

The Future We Need

I am in accord with Smiley and Gupta’s analysis of the conditions that have led to the decline of labor density and collective bargaining. Their proposals for countering some effects of the “Great Rollback” are also on the mark. The section on Community-Driven Bargaining is comprehensive in its identification of strategies that take collective bargaining beyond the workplace. And the workers’ stories in this book undergird the authors’ analyses of the problems and their solutions. Most stories describe workplace bargaining, but there are a few examples of community-driven bargaining. I recommend *The Future We Need* to all who aspire to make workplaces and communities more democratic and better able to resist the egregious economic inequality of 21st century global capitalism and the means by which it achieves and maintains hegemony—financialization, fissured workplaces, and the divisive persistent evils of white supremacy and patriarchy.

Collective bargaining is a strategy, as Smiley and Gupta point out, a means to an end. They assume that collective bargaining will be used to further the progressive goals or ends they espouse. And that is largely the case. Yet, they point out that many Black and Brown workers today “experience labor unions in part via

unionized government agencies like US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local police departments—both negative, violent forces that often terrorize these communities” (28). Smiley and Gupta note that the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis helped prevent the removal from the police force of police officer Derek Chauvin who murdered George Floyd. Moreover, they point out that the AFL-CIO defended the membership of the International Union of Police Associations (IUPA) in the federation while calling for some general reforms that IUPA was still heavily offended by” (96). What is likely to be a minority whose practice of collective bargaining supports racism or patriarchy must be opposed by progressive forces, along with struggling against the forces of capitalist hegemony.

Largely missing in this book is a consideration of the role of federal government policy in achieving a brighter future and of movements that strive for change in federal policy. The authors recognize the importance of such legislation as the National Labor Relations Act, its shortcomings notwithstanding, and, in fact, note that when protection from the NLRA became less effective in the 1970s and 1980s, working people turned to other federal laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (that prohibits sex discrimination in programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance). Their section on negotiating beyond the workplace refers to some failed efforts to enact state legislation, such as the failed McWalmart effort in Connecticut, but influencing federal policy is not discussed as part of the extension of collective bargaining beyond the workplace.

A statement of the authors quoted earlier in this review suggests that influencing government policy is not a priority in “organizing for a better democracy”: “While voting, lobbying, and other forms of policy and legal work are important forms of democratic participation, collective bargaining—both at work and elsewhere—applies democratic practices to economic relationships.” Perhaps that is one reason why some critical future needs that can only be achieved by changes in federal and state policy are not addressed in this work, such as: climate change and the future of the planet itself; the almost unthinkable proliferation of battlefield weapons that make our schools and our streets scenes of deadly violence; and a swollen military budget and nuclear arsenal that also threaten the survival of the human race. Moreover, the goal of full employment as a means of achieving good jobs for all is not mentioned in this work, despite the importance of tight labor markets to strength at the bargaining table. This book – as the authors make explicit in the final chapter – is about the future of the labor movement and its potential contribution to the important goal of economic democracy.

As a member of the unit of the American Association of University Professors at Adelphi University, I was aware of how leaders of our faculty union were able to use collective bargaining skills developed in the workplace in a successful, wider effort to save the university from a hostile right-wing takeover. Though a proud union member, my primary affiliation is with a broader movement to achieve

economic and social justice --primarily through my leadership of the National Jobs for All Network. I think of the “future we need” as more than the future of the labor movement. And I applaud efforts to make the labor movement more powerful, both in the workplace and beyond.

Admittedly, the enactment of federal policies that limit the ravages of capital are very difficult--perhaps impossible--to achieve. But what else will give us the future that we as a nation -- one that affects the well-being of the entire planet -- really need? If wider and more effective practice of collective bargaining is the route to this, then I wish the authors would have said so and shown how and why -- including how widely practiced it must be in order to lead us to the future we need.

In theory, democratic government can limit the inequality generated by capital, but that is unlikely when capital invades democratic government through unlimited campaign contributions. In fact, Smiley and Gupta call attention to this problem: “The amount of money that corporations can spend to influence elections has skyrocketed in the last half century,” and they add that the trend began long before Citizens United (41-42). Mass movements by advocates of woman suffrage, collective bargaining, and civil rights have led to restraints on white supremacy, patriarchy, and capital-- albeit insufficiently and impermanently. Smiley and Gupta propose strategies for limiting anti-democratic capitalist control of worksites and institutions beyond the worksite. Is that enough to achieve “the future we need?” Or should they have been more modest in claiming that more and better and wider collective bargaining can deliver “the future we need?”

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