Can More Collective Bargaining Win Less Pay Inequality?

The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor
By Hamilton Nolan (NY: Hachette Books, 2024)

Reviewed by Molly Botros

Widening income disparities in the United States have fueled public anxieties and voter divisions since pay paralysis began in the 1970s. Although the neoliberal school of thought has defended winner-take-all, trickle-down economic policies since the late 19th century Gilded Age, it has left many malcontented with the arrival of a New Gilded Age. In his 2024 book *The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor*, Hamilton Nolan argues that the most promising path for shrinking income inequality is through the collective bargaining power of labor organizations.

Nolan begins with a comprehensive history of his own relationship to union efforts and frustration with the country's persistent wealth gap.[i] Nolan's parents – to whom he attributes his interest in seeking justice – were Civil Rights activists who were engaged with *The Great Speckled Bird*, a counterculture newspaper operating in Atlanta from 1968 to 1976.[ii] This upbringing propelled Nolan to a career in journalism in 2008, beginning at Gawker.com, an expose-style online news publication that gave its writers journalistic liberty.[iii] At Gawker, Nolan focused his articles on class issues, unemployment, and workplace conditions, effectively making him the labor relations reporter, and shifted his concentration to union efforts and union busting. Simultaneously with his labor reporting, he noticed that Gawker lacked organization and benefits for its employees. Eventually, an opportunity arose whereby he was able to work with the Writers Guild of America, alongside the other journalists at the startup, to organize a union. Thanks to the union's collective bargaining with their employer, he and his staff colleagues were protected from layoffs caused by a lawsuit against the publication. As a result, a slew of other online media publications began their own union efforts, and media became far more unionized.

His introductory chapter establishes his experience with unionization to underline his unwavering belief in the power it wields. He makes clear his belief that unionization is for the benefit of all Americans and that every working person could benefit by joining the labor movement. Thus, this book is directly written for the public to persuade them of the potential of unions, whose capacity widens with increasing membership, in reducing income disparities. Nolan follows this self-referential introduction with thirteen other chapters, six of which serve as case studies of major unionization efforts – some successful and some not. These case studies include South Carolina Republicans' especially hostile state anti-union policies, California's childcare workers' unionization drive, Las Vagas' thriving culinary union, Miami's hospitality union effort, a West Virginian restaurant's union-busting story, and the successful strike by Nabisco workers in Oregon.

Sara Nelson, the charismatic leader of the Association of Flight Attendants and a former candidate for the AFL-CIO presidency, features prominently in three chapters. Another three chapters discuss the gridlocks in place for grassroots union efforts and why major unions within the AFL-CIO, are instrumental in devoting resources to support pro-worker actions by worker centers and other community activists not yet formally represented by unions The final chapter discusses the challenging road ahead for unions and, more importantly, the ways to stimulate broader grassroots union support.

Nolan acknowledges throughout the book that unions are on the decline as a share of the workforce.[iv] He asserts that is partly due to private corporations' fierce anti-union measures and to laws obstructing or prohibiting effective collective bargaining. This idea of a systemic assault on unions is first presented in Nolan's introduction whereby he sets forth the idea that there has been a collaborative effort between big businesses and the legal and political systems to dismantle the abilities of unions to make any meaningful strides for workers' rights.[v] Nolan convincingly expounds on this further in his second chapter entitled, "The Place Where Unions Go to Die," where he presents case studIES of various union efforts and corporate union-busting responses in South Carolina, "the most anti-union state in America."[vi] This chapter opens with the story of a South Carolina textile workers'

strike in 1934 that resulted in the murder of six people.[vii] Although he acknowledges that South Carolina businesses are no longer at liberty to order the killing of those on the picket line, Nolan does not seem convinced that the state has fully mended its ways.

The chapter then shifts to detailed evidence of the various ways South Carolina's political leaders and its firms have quelled most unionization attempts, leaving the surviving unions holding on by the skin of their teeth to remain operational. Like all of the South, it is a so-called "right to work" state, which cripples union efforts by allowing workers to avoid paying dues to cover costs of their union services, but still assume the benefits of the union. Since unions must contractually incur the legal and other costs to negotiate for all the establishment's covered employees, this translates to depleted funding that can threaten the union's very survival.[viii] Nolan sketches specific examples of unionization efforts that have been squandered by South Carolina's union intimidation. For instance, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) lost a union election after a state-wide campaign against unions took place following years of union campaigning. On a similar note, Giti Tires staff spread manure on the location where the United Steelworkers had organized a rally, leading to enough intimidation that the workers shied away from vocalizing what happened. Some unions have even responded to decades-long anti-union sentiment by renaming their union as an "association" to curb the instantly allergic reactions of South Carolina residents. Hence the retitled South Carolina Education Association (SCEA). Still, despite these efforts, some believed the SCEA to be a part of an organized crime ring. The anti-union sentiment is so pervasive in the state that the SCEA has spurred anti-union unions such as the Palmetto State Teachers Association (PSTA), which functions to thwart the efforts of the SCEA and endorse political candidates who will further suppress unions.

However, perhaps the most appalling piece of evidence presented by Nolan in the case of South Carolina's anti-union, borderline abusive efforts is the fate of Gary McClain, an employee of Tenneco, a plastic manufacturing plant. Tenneco was in the process of being organized by the International Union of Operating Engineers in 2002 when the company held an internal anti-union meeting, where McClain voiced support for the union. The next day, on his way to work, he was pulled over by the sheriff's deputies and involuntarily detained as a "mental health risk" for six months because some of the other employees noted that he seemed rude and distressed at the meeting.[ix] Nolan's mounting evidence for how anti-union legislation, efforts, and general sentiment have transformed South Carolina into a union-adverse abyss is compelling. Further, in this chapter and throughout the book, Nolan goes beyond solely relying on statistics to illustrate major trends (which seldom stick with readers) and instead presents on-the-ground research and stories that likely incense far more readers.

That said, the amount of time the author takes to castigate states and businesses who collude in union-busting is arguably less than that which he spends condemning large, established unions for permitting the near-demise of organized labor. Nolan states that although there is "dizzying potential" within unions, they still have a level of mismanagement and apathy that needs to change if there is any chance for unions to survive and grow.[x] The main organization that Nolan seems to view simultaneously as complicit in the decline of union membership and also the one that must restore it is the AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the US. Nolan is dismayed at the AFL-CIO's feeble approach to reversing union decline. Liz Shuler, the president of the AFL-CIO since 2021, famously stated that within a decade, the union will organize a million more workers. This is so few that, given our fast-increasing population, the fraction of unionized workers would keep falling.[xi] Nolan cites this as evidence that the AFL-CIO's leadership has succumbed to the external forces behind unions' decline and is not exhibiting even the slightest sign of serious protest. Nolan wittily compares this to a weakling who merely sign up for a gym membership to lift one pound. This technique is clever because it compels his readers to view the absurdity of the current situation of unions and hopefully feel irked enough to contribute to the organized labor movement.

Throughout the six chapters featuring union case studies, one of the most frustrating is Tudor's Biscuit World union failure, which seemed to have been avoidable had an established union intervened in the process. Tudor's is a restaurant in a small town in West Virginia whose employees were becoming increasingly frustrated by their poor work conditions, treatment, and pay. Consequently, six union-organizing employees began their union effort by collecting signed cards from the store's other workers. These employees then drove to the district manager's location to ask for their recognition as a union. However, the manager refused to hear any of their requests and simply walked off. The restaurant demanded an NLRB election which bought management enough time to engage in intimidation and coaxing of the remaining restaurant workers up to the election, which was scheduled a month after the incident detailed above. The restaurant even hired what seemed to be a labor consultant to diffuse the union effort within the store. At one point, one supervisor told an employee that her son's college student status could be jeopardized if she involved herself with the union.[xii] Eventually, the tactics employed by the restaurant worked and the store lost the NLRB by a vote of 7-5. Nevertheless, this union campaign was unexpected because most workers are not familiar with the steps to develop a union or know that they have the power to do so, in this respect, Tudor's was an exception. However, it was still insufficient in the face of even a relatively small corporation, supporting Nolan's assertion that powerful, established unions must intervene to support grassroots union endeavors.

This is why Sara Nelson's drive for union growth is such a significant portion of Nolan's work; Nolan believes that the course for unions will only change when public perception and trust in unions is reinvigorated, which needs to come from the revitalization of crumbling union powerhouses like the AFL-CIO. Nelson is painted here as a sort of beacon of hope for the future of unions.

Nolan envisions her waking the federation from its current drowsy condition through winning the presidency. However, Nolan's hopes did not pan out in the 2022 AFL-CIO convention due to a serious illness that prevented her from running a successful campaign. Instead, the former secretary-treasurer of the organization, Liz Shuler, succeeded the late Richard Trumka. Nolan believes that Nelson's union leadership experience, serving as the president of the Association of Flight Attendants, in conjunction with her ardent belief in fighting the union's uphill battle, would have made her the force to revive unions in America. However, Nolan can be faulted for spending far too much time on this dream. There seems to be a romanticism of Nelson, with nearly an entire chapter dedicated to her as a sort of autobiography from childhood to today. While it certainly arguable that a revival of the AFL-CIO's power is integral for its member unions' survival in the US, it seems excessive to devote nearly a quarter of the book to Nelson's leadership potential there.

Furthermore, while Nolan's thesis that a revival of unions must come from existing structures and powerhouses like the AFL-CIO, the larger idea that unions are the only way that Americans can shrink income inequality and the labor-management power imbalance is not supported or discussed in length outside the introduction. Of course, unions serve as an excellent tool for collective bargaining to increase pay, improve work conditions, implement benefits, and even aid in improving job security. However, Nolan offers little evidence to substantiate the theme that they are the only answer that Americans have in the face of wage stagnation and the recent run-up in consumer price inflation. While Nolan does present sufficient evidence of wage stagnation and the potential power of unions, these ideas are not clearly or convincingly linked in a direct relationship to one another. Thus, to say that unions are the sole answer to income inequality seems to render this conclusion incomplete.

Nevertheless, Nolan's work is an excellent outcry to the general reading public to support unions. Labor organizations have the ability to change much of the socio-economic landscape in the US, but not without tremendous effort within major existing unions, labor law reforms, and public education about what unions are and what they serve to do for working families.

Molly Botros is a Economics/Political Science graduate of Hofstra University.

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Notes

i Nolan, Hamilton. The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor (New York: Hachette Books, 2024), 11-20.
ii Huff, Christopher Allen. "Great Speckled Bird" (New Georgia Encyclopedia, August 3, 2007). https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/great-speckled-bird/.
iii Nolan, The Hammer, 13-15.
iv Ibid, 230-248
v Ibid, 16-17
vi Ibid, 43
vii Ibid, 43
viii Ibid, 43
ix Ibid, 60
x Ibid, 18
xi Ibid, 144
xii Ibid, 162