BOOK REVIEW

How Can The Labor Movement Be Saved?

ReUnion: How Bold Labor Reforms Can Repair, Revitalize and Reunite the US, by David Madland (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 2021)

Reviewed by Isaiah C. Figuereo

In *ReUnion: How Bold Labor Reforms Can Repair, Revitalize and Reunite the Us*, David Madland takes on an ambitious subject: the erosion of the American Dream – the stagnant wages, diminished economic mobility, shrinking union protections and increasing insecurity that plagues too many American workers. Madland seems well-suited to the task of expanding our understanding of its causes and consequences. He previously authored a book on the decline of the U.S. pension system and another on Hollowed Out: Why the Economy Doesn't Work Without a Strong Middle Class. The author received his doctorate in government from Georgetown University and is now a senior fellow to the American Worker Project at the Center for American Progress.

Drawing on Madland's extensive background reporting on unions and the employment system, ReUnion explores the connections among globalization, technological advancements, and policy changes over the last few decades and the prospects for revitalizing the union movement. Madland argues that there is a need for a new labor system that would take the best of what works elsewhere in the world and adapt it to U.S. economic, cultural and political norms. Thus, for example, the book evaluates the various pros and cons of Denmark's "Flexicurity" system, a model that combines job market flexibility with social security protections for workers. Denmark's system could prove beneficial to the American labor system if its improved social protections promoted greater worker adaptation to new training and technologies, thereby enhancing workforce resilience to market forces.On the other hand, Denmark's system could be cumbersome and difficult to translate to our bigger, more diverse economy, it could be too costly and could face some resistance from U.S. employers.

Overall the author makes the case for policy makers, employers, and citizens to prioritize labor reform and unions. The book as a whole strives to be a "call to action" for the American public and does so through the introduction as well as the six subsequent chapters with varying themes and ideas.

Madland breaks down his work into six chapters, each touching varying issues and solutions to the labor and political problems the United States is facing. Chapter 1 begins with describing, "The Plan." Madland makes a proposal for a new American labor system that seeks to push union density higher than ever in U.S. history. His reasoning is to ensure that some form of collective agreement can be met on wages and benefits for most workers. The author then delves into the step-by-step plan for what the new labor system should include. In particular, he discusses how the reform proposals should be built around public policy supporting unions and an encouragement of collective bargaining.

Chapter 2 provides a more theoretical basis for advocates of stronger unions. This chapter provides a deeper investigation into what unions do in the economy and explains why organized labor is so important in addressing the country's challenges. Madland breaks down the current political and economic problems facing the United States and how their solution requires revitalized unions. He elaborates on how the middle class is withering away, social cohesion is breaking down, the government does the bidding of the rich, and many more social and political issues. Unions help raise wages, reduce economic inequality and help in rebuilding trust and reducing racial and gender discrimination. Madland argues that this is possible by bringing up the bottom and middle class and finding a way to make politicians more responsive to ordinary citizens. This can be a difficult task, however, due to the politics of gathering support for unions. Overall, Madland strives to emphasize that unions in the US serve a vital role. But he bolsters this claim be weighing their benefits and costs. These benefits are defined further in the next chapter.

"The Contours of Modern Labor System", Chapter 3 discusses how organized labor plays a vital role in making democracy and the economy work for "regular" people. This chapter highlights how America's problems cannot be solved unless there is a change to the current labor system we have in place. Some of the research done in the U.S. and in other countries has shown how much stronger unions are when they successfully recruit members and have funding. Similarly, this chapter also acknowledges that without active support, unions cannot survive or be an asset. For decades, government policies have made it difficult for unions, particularly in the United States but in many other countries as well. As a result, unions struggle to achieve their goals and

100203 H14641_RLR_Winter_2025.indd 22 1/27/25 11:25 AM

expand their siz and power. In Madland's words, stating that "Unfortunately, U.S. labor policy is not well crafted but rather is structured in many ways that are designed to weaken unions" (64). For these reasons, Madland contrasts how other nations' labor laws compare to U.S. labor laws in chapter 4, "Lessons From Canada, Britain, and Australia". He uses the weaknesses of our labor laws as a fulcrum to make comparisons to a host of European countries including: Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. These countries all have interestingly different labor systems and offer lots of different ideas in implementing unions. For example, Canada's "more friendly version of US law" (87) and how Canada's distribution of power and income differs from the US as a result and Denmark's aforementioned "Flexicurity" system. The author readily offers compelling evidence on their strengths and weaknesses relevant to potential reforms in American labor relations.

Moreover, in Chapter 5 "Answering Skeptics", we see what a new labor system might look like and what the challenges in implementing such a system are. Madland also discusses how union structures are not always best suited for broad-based bargaining or dealing with the pressures exerted by employers and why, due to this, they sometimes may fail. Broad-based bargaining refers to a collective bargaining approach where various employers within an industry negotiate with one or more unions on how to reach a resolution. Additionally, Madland makes it clear how, even for a relatively workable system, there are also potential alternatives and changes to the law that could have a meaningful impact and could also strengthen unions, depending on how the policies are structured.

Lastly, in Chapter 6 on "Creating The New System," he explores how a new labor system can feasibly be implemented to help address the country's economic and political challenges. To pass any kind of labor law reform, however, Madland is well aware of the powerful corporate forces blocking passage of any pro-labor legislation. Enough elected officials and other political insiders will need to believe that the public strongly backs a new labor system that can fix the alleged problems Madland highlights. There are favorable paths for both political parties to take in gathering support and funding. But overall, far more ambitious labor innovations and legislation are crucial in order for there to be any broad change. "Not enough union leaders have championed large-scale labor reform to help drive the policy" (152). Despite the real difficulties of implementing such changes, this chapter ends by alleging that, even though the U.S. does face deep and enduring challenges: "The hope of this book is that it can play a role in making bold labor reform more likely by making the case for a new American labor system" (159).

A new labor system is critical to raise wages, reduce inequality, and make democracy more responsive to the people. Due to a variety of factors including globalization, technological advancements, and policy choices over the last few decades that have weakened labor unions and worker protections, the United States faces the erosion of its once-strong working-class culture. "The American Dream" Madland asserts is in trouble and unless there is labor reform, most working families are also in trouble. Overall, Madland does a fine job in describing the labor problem this nation faces, offering much insight and information, and providing a thought-provoking body of work that aims to help bring about change. But he also provides alternative perspectives and critiques of his own ideas, acknowledging the need to advance a vital conversation between labor advocates and critics.

Isaiah Figueroa is a Sociology graduate of Hofstra University.

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 27, no. 1 (Fall 2024).
© 2024 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University.

100203 H14641_RLR_Winter_2025.indd 23 1/27/25 11:25 AM