

L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement. By *Ruth Milkman*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. xiii + 244 pp. Figures, tables, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Paper, \$27.50 ISBN: 0-871-54635-3.

Reviewed by Josh Sides

L.A. Story is an important and timely book, and it should be considered essential reading for anyone concerned about the recent past and probable future of organized labor in the United States. Meticulously researched, carefully argued, and measured in its claims, *L.A. Story* seeks to answer a number of questions, the most essential of which are the following: How did a group of Hispanic janitors—a group long believed to be “unorganizable” by virtue of both their ethnicity and occupation—achieve remarkable union victories in the early 1990s? And how did they do it in Los Angeles, a city once famously promoted as “the Citadel of the Open Shop” by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce? In the process of answering these questions, Ruth Milkman also draws several highly original and well-timed conclusions about the impact of immigration on blue-collar employment opportunities for native workers, about the unexpected durability, flexibility, and relevance of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions (long regarded by labor historians and organizers as bastions of “top-down” unionism and white privilege), and about the soundness of contemporary organizing strategies. The title of this book belies the profound relevance of its findings for the entire nation, and labor historians, union organizers, and policymakers ignore them at their own peril.

Though Milkman is a sociologist, the first third of the book consists of an extraordinarily thorough historical portrait of union-organizing activities in Los Angeles prior to the massive economic restructuring of the 1970s. Scholars of Los Angeles will find much that is familiar in Milkman’s account of the city’s extreme hostility to labor unionism, which lasted well into the early years of the Great Depression. However, Milkman breaks new ground by demonstrating that once large-scale union organizing began in earnest in the late 1930s, the AFL was far more influential in Los Angeles than was the CIO. Examining the history of the garment workers, truckers, janitors, and workers in the building trades, Milkman reveals the surprising vitality—and the more

surprising, though relatively infrequent, incidents of racial inclusion—of AFL unions in Los Angeles. The prevalence of nonfactory unionism in Los Angeles—a function of the region’s highly diversified, decentralized, and often service-based economy—gave the AFL an edge that would have long-term implications. “The irony,” Milkman writes, “was that the same AFL unions that had such a conservative reputation in the 1930s and 1940s would, decades later, position the new Los Angeles, with its vast population of working-class immigrants, at the leading edge of labor movement revitalization” (p. 33).

Milkman’s interpretation of the familiar period of deindustrialization and union retrenchment is also highly illuminative and original. Though the well-documented decline in union membership in California and nationwide during the 1970s and 1980s is often attributed to capital flight, Milkman’s fine-grained analysis casts doubt on this assertion. In the cases of both “nonmobile” industries like construction, transportation, and janitorial work, as well as mobile work like garment production, Milkman argues that the critical shift of the 1970s and 1980s was, in fact, “deunionization without deindustrialization.” Echoing an earlier argument by Michael Goldfield, Milkman asserts that the erosion of union strength in Los Angeles was a function of “a massive corporate anti-union offensive combined with deregulation” (p. 78). Empowered by likeminded policymakers, employers restructured industry for production “flexibility,” a euphemism for the casualization of labor through “contingent” employment arrangements, all-cash wage payments, and inadequate or nonexistent overtime compensation.

Faced with degrading working conditions and dubious futures, native white (and some black) workers left these jobs in droves, allowing a rush of immigrants to fill the void. Under these circumstances, virtually nobody—and certainly not union organizers—thought that the rising ranks of Latino employees in these industries were “union material.” But, by the early 1990s, these very workers launched successful campaigns for union recognition. In an overly schematic but still edifying section, Milkman explores the dynamics of the successful campaigns of the janitors and drywallers, as well as the unsuccessful bids of the truckers and garment workers, to support her conclusion that successful organizing today requires an admixture of both “top-down” and “bottom-up” organizing strategies.

“Nowhere in the United States,” Milkman concludes, “is there more palpable evidence of the potential for today’s working-class immigrants to reenact the drama of union upsurge that brought earlier generations of newcomers to the United States into the economic mainstream in the 1930s and 1940s” (p. 187). This may indeed be true, and most readers will likely share Milkman’s excitement about this development, but there are moments where Milkman’s zeal distracts her from certain unpleasantnesses. One particularly conspicuous example is her insistence that deunionization preceded the large-scale entry of Latinos into jobs formerly held by native workers, an argument that effectively exonerates immigrants from the charge that they are “stealing” or downgrading jobs desired by native workers. Though her quantitative evidence clearly bears out Milkman’s assertion, it does not account for the dynamic nature of ethnic competition in industry. The fact that the deunionization and job-downgrading of the 1980s preceded widespread immigrant employment must seem purely academic to those native white—and particularly black—workers who continued to seek work, particularly in the trucking and building trades. Several studies by Roger Waldinger, for example, have demonstrated the extreme barriers to native hiring that prevail in the Los Angeles service and furniture-building industries.

Nonetheless, *L.A. Story* remains a superb book, worthy of a wide readership, and well deserving of the praise it will likely attract. Milkman offers her book as “a valentine to Los Angeles” (p. ix), and it is one we should warmly embrace.

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