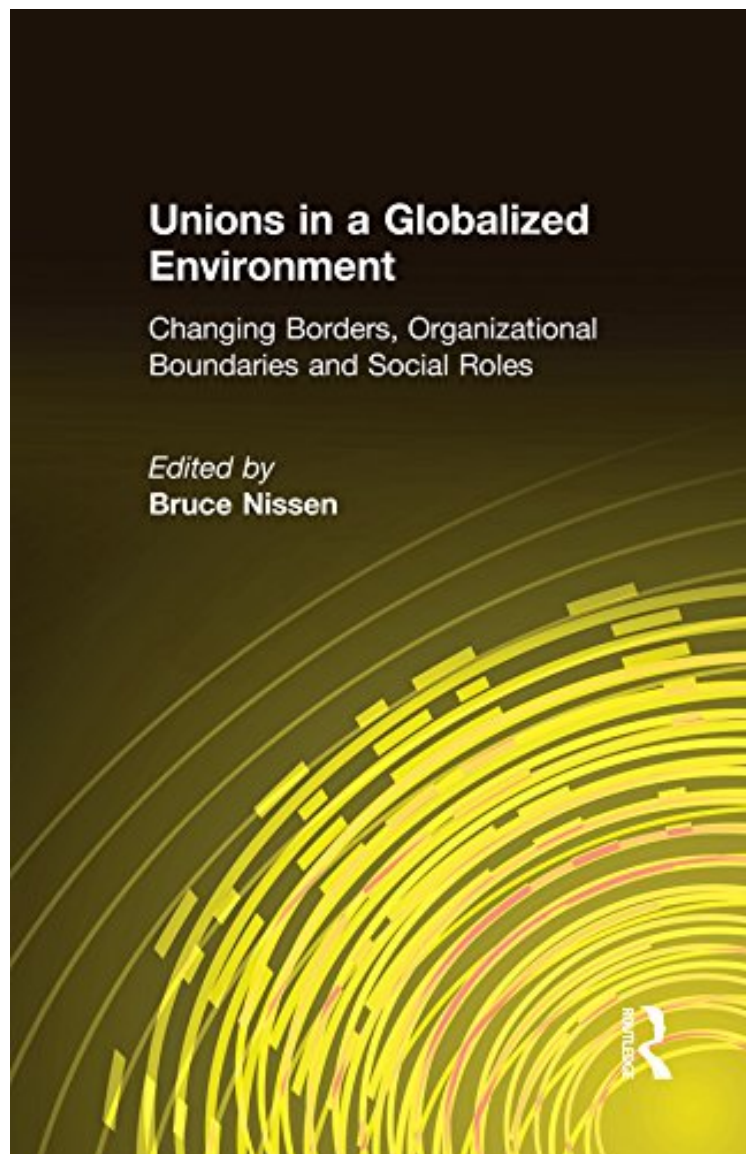


(Ebook free) Unions in a Globalized Environment: Changing Borders, Organizational Boundaries and Social Roles: Changing Borders, Organizational Boundaries and Social Roles

Unions in a Globalized Environment: Changing Borders, Organizational Boundaries and Social Roles: Changing Borders, Organizational Boundaries and Social Roles

Bruce Nissen

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7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. A focus on the fringes for big-time problems
By J. Grattan
This book is another in a spate of books produced by labor academics, activists, and officials, mostly spurred by changes at the top of the AFL-CIO in 1995, that attempts to deal with the precarious state of labor unions or the labor movement as they are inclined to say. It is the ability of transnational corporations (TNCs) to avoid labor unions by diversifying globally, especially in terms of production, and the changing ethnic composition of work forces in such locations as Miami and Los Angeles to which labor unions must adjust for their very survival according to these authors. With the passage of NAFTA the pace of jobs being shifted to Mexico has accelerated. Transnationals, mostly in the automotive, textile/clothing, and electronic/electrical industries, have now established nearly 4000 factories in the maquiladora zone in Mexico with wages at about one tenth those in the U.S. Increasingly, labor unions in the U.S. have realized that global focus and actions are essential in dealing with global firms. The essays suggest and detail all sorts of cross-border alliances and contacts at both federation and union levels, as well as worker-to-worker interfacing, designed to pressure and support organizing efforts. Many readers would be familiar with the unfavorable publicity campaigns that some U.S. retailers have been subjected to as a result of cross-border collaboration. Another strategy described is the cross-border pressure that local unions of one transnational employer can apply in assisting one another. It is fairly clear from the essays that organizing successes as a result of cross-border initiatives are few and fleeting. Though the problem is not totally ignored by the authors, widespread solidarity among workers with different languages and cultures and separated geographically is more of a pipedream than a real possibility. None of the essays even attempts to quantify overall levels of cross-border labor alliances and their impact. The authors do note that appeals to the labor laws of Mexico and the bureaucratic nightmare that describes the labor side agreements of NAFTA are of limited utility. It seems pretty evident that the taming of the forces of globalization will require far more than cross-border alliances between labor, or labor-like, organizations. Two essays demonstrate that the family and community orientations of urban-based immigrants, if properly drawn upon, can be powerful forces in organizing unions, especially in lower-end service work. The essays show that flexible and progressive leadership that is sustained is key to immigrant organizing. But such an adjustment for craft-based unions, or any union that focuses mostly on contract administration, seems to be quite difficult despite any obvious decrease in members or loss of market power. The history of exclusion and privilege for a select group of workers is hard to overcome. A recurrent theme in the essays is the necessity for the labor movement to become "social movement unionism (SMU)." It is a most nebulous concept, but one notion of SMU seems to require labor unions to become a part of community activities and concerns. One author claims that neo-liberal restructuring (NLR), which maquiladora zones are a part of, leads to SMU in contrast to business unionism. SMU advocates seem to be unwilling to squarely confront the fact of the scattering of specific workforces across vast metropolitan areas, a fact hardly conducive to SMU. Along the same line of thought, but perhaps more interesting, is the notion that unionism should draw upon the themes of citizenship, which in a democracy implies participation. The author does not seem to know where to go with his concept, however, with a proposal that central labor federations provide coordination. Citizenship opens the door for much more. For example, those on the left in the labor movement eschew worker participation in managing corporations. But, it could be contended that any concept of participation in a democracy that does not provide for worker input into decisions that affect his economic destiny is pretty weak stuff. Surprisingly, the author does not touch upon the German legal mandate for works council and supervisory board participation. This is not a big idea book. Cross-border initiatives are on the fringe as far as union participation or any significant yields for the labor movement. Organizing immigrants when and where possible is a no-brainer. The notion of citizenship for workers starts to get the picture right. It is fundamentally a political concept. It will be through substantial political power that workers' "voices" in workplaces will be guaranteed, union or no union. Furthermore, trade policy can begin to disallow imports built on the backs of those who have had to sacrifice their economic and physical health. The concept of "free trade" will be forced to take into account the real costs. But that is another book. The essays in the book are informative and useful, but for the most part the authors are tiptoeing around the fringes of large problems for the working class in the U.S. and their neighbors.

How can American unions survive in our increasingly globalized business environment? With the trend toward multinational corporations, free trade pacts, and dismantling import barriers, organized labor has been steadily losing ground in the United States. This book argues that to reverse this trend, U.S. unions must create ties with workers and unions in other countries, and include the ever-increasing number of immigrant workers in their ranks. And it calls for a shift toward "social movement unionism," which would change unions' orientation from exclusively market-focused and more toward social issues and rights.