

*BOOK REVIEW*

Workman, Thom. 2009. *If You're in My Way, I'm Walking: The Assault on Working People Since 1970*. Halifax: Fernwood. ISBN 9781552663264. Paperback: 22.95 CAD. Pages 176.

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Jean Chrétien explained his throttling of protester Bill Clennett on 'Flag Day' in 1996 with the simple statement: 'I had to go, so if you're in my way, I'm walking.' Not only is the incident one politician's knee-jerk reaction when faced with popular resistance to neoliberal policies, it is an apt description of the steamrolling central logic of neoliberalism. Workman draws on vivid examples and copious facts and figures to document the assault on working people. This violent assault is often disguised as the 'natural' outcome of the market, but its impact is as real as a 'Shawinigan handshake.' The reader will be forgiven if, having read Workman's description of current wages and working conditions, she feels like Chrétien himself has got his hands around her neck.

At the centre of Workman's book is an examination of the downward wage logic of neoliberalism in Canada. This logic which aims to re-establish profit levels has resulted in a violent assault on working people through liberalized trading regimes, scaled-back social programs and restrictive labour laws and policies. Each of the six chapters which make up *If You're in My Way* contributes to Workman's analysis of the downward wage logic. Chapter one develops a systemic understanding of capitalism and the failure of past attempts to fix the system through the fordist compromise. Chapter two looks at changes in labour law and their effects on the balance of power between workers and capital. Chapters three and four examine the declining rate of unionization, falling incidence of strikes, the stagnation in real wages, and the low-wage sphere. Chapter five explores how restructured state programs have advanced the downward wage logic, and shifted the state away from its limited legitimating activities to its current aggressive emphasis on coercing workers into an ever-deteriorating labour market. In the final chapter Workman presents his thoughts on what it would take to restore the Canadian Left.

One of the most thought-provoking sections of the book is Workman's conceptual and strategic discussion of minimum wage policy in chapter four. He argues that the function of minimum wage policy under neoliberalism 'has gone from being a device to ratify low-wage spheres in the economy to being a legislative instrument in the assault on all wage earners' (83). Workman argues that historically the minimum wage never functioned to generate upward pressures on wages. Instead, upward wage pressures came from the workplace conflict of organized labour against capital. The workplace is the natural locus of wage struggle, says Workman, rather than sympathetic campaigns in the political sphere.

Workman argues that the labour movement undermines the real basis of its strength when it accepts government regulation as the method to set wage rates: 'sustained gravitation away from this anticipated locus of the wage struggle [the workplace] reflects the degradation of organized labour within neoliberal society' (85). A further problem with the focus on the minimum wage is that, even if the minimum wage were to be doubled it would hardly be a living wage. Workman argues cogently that the left needs to shift its attention to the entire low-wage sphere. The minimum wage is part and parcel of the broader pattern of stagnating real wages for all workers, which has resulted from the ongoing profitability crisis of capitalism. When the left focuses its low-wage strategy on raising the minimum wage, Workman argues, it weakens rather than strengthens solidarity among all low-wage workers. Low-wage workers (roughly everyone earning under the median wage) do not directly benefit from an increase in the minimum wage. This causes conflict between minimum-wage and low-wage workers and transforms the minimum wage into a 'wage anchor' to which all low-wage work is compared, and contributes to wage restraint and mitigation of labour militancy (i.e. 'I earn three dollars over the minimum wage, therefore I should count myself lucky').

Workman's style is impassioned, entertaining, and a welcome change from the measured tone of most academic writing. He begins each chapter with concrete examples of the problems workers face, from which he moves to a more complex discussion of the underlying issues. While the book is not for the novice reader, upper-level undergraduates should have minimal difficulty following his argument. I used the book in two fourth-year seminars in Canadian Political Economy, and students found it to be a real eye-opener.

Workman's book deserves to be read as widely as possible. No other book provides such a detailed account of the contemporary state of working people in Canada. His final chapter is a call for the left to reject

efforts to turn 'bad' capitalism into 'good' capitalism. The book convincingly makes the case that even under the most golden conditions of Keynesianism, poverty, coercion and poor labour market outcomes were the defining features of capitalism. Workman argues in his final chapter that the left will need to restore and deepen left culture. We need to rebuild unions and put our energies into study-sessions, free schools, and pamphlets rather than electoral politics to build a meaningful left politics. *If You're in My Way* offers much thought-provoking material that deserves serious discussion on the socialist left.