

We Shall Not Be Moved

Betrayal—How Union Bosses Shake Down Their Members and Corrupt American Politics

LINDA CHAVEZ AND DANIEL GRAY
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REVIEWED BY: TOM SHIPKA

The authors of this critique of contemporary American labor unions have long histories of antipathy toward labor unions. In this particular volume their wrath reaches new heights—or depths—as they lambaste unions and their leaders. In their long list of the sins of organized labor, perhaps the one they find most serious is the alleged abandonment by union leaders of the primary historical mission of unions—collective bargaining and workplace issues—for a national power grab through co-opting the Democratic Party. Leading the Chavez-Gray list of the chief labor political conspirators in “subverting the American political system to their own ends” are the NEA and the AFL-CIO.

The authors claim that big labor’s capacity to raise and spend huge sums of money—\$18 billion of “fo ræd dues” a year by their count—for political uses and to divert paid staff from their real jobs to political campaigns enables it to dictate the platform of the Democratic Party and to ensure that would-be presidents kowtow to it, sometimes reversing positions 180 degrees. Evidence purporting to show how actual or prospective Democratic presidential candidates pander to big labor is presented throughout the book. But despite labor’s foray

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into politics, the authors note, it cannot deliver its own members, as witnessed by the past two elections.

Not only has big labor failed in the political arena, they say, but it has presided over the virtual demise of the labor movement, especially in the private sector, as the segment of unionized private sector workers has dwindled to 8.2 percent. Only moderate success in the public sector has staved off complete disaster for labor, they argue. But it comes at a price for the taxpayer, they say, because it means an expansion of government and more taxes. “Even more troubling,” they write, “government-employee unions put the American public directly at risk, using their monopoly power over vital public services like policing and fire fighting to extort concessions from the government.”

Chavez and Gray propose to end the “special privileges” that unions enjoy by making a number of “reforms.” These include outlawing exclusive representation, requiring unions to spend dues only on negotiating and enforcing contracts and not on politics, repealing prevailing wage laws, permitting flex-time and comp-time to replace overtime pay, and so on. Nonetheless, the book is worth reading for several reasons. The first is that it is a good test of critical thinking for readers of *Thought & Action*, most of whom are sympathetic to the labor movement in general and to the higher education labor movement in particular. The book will give readers a different (but not necessarily new or accurate) view of unions in the private and public sectors that they should know. The second is that those who want to resuscitate unions in our society need to understand and evaluate the criticisms in this book before they can effectively act on them or rebut them. The third is that the authors and the passionate anti-labor, right wing ideology that they manifest in the book are not going away any time soon. Indeed, as the real power of organized labor is arguably at a low point in modern history, the authors seem intent on dismantling the union movement altogether, and we can expect to see many of their proposed “reforms” surface in the Congress in the next several years.

Finally, one or more readers of this book in academe who are qualified by background and experience need to produce not merely a rebuttal but a fresh contemporary apologia for the labor movement, one that can help spur a renaissance in American unionism. This apologia needs to explain among other things, why focusing solely on negotiating contracts is short-sighted. Powerful forces in society aim to negate the fundamental rights and interests of union members. For the labor movement to cede the stage to them by restricting themselves to a local approach would significantly harm the workers and families that unions are created to serve. 