


2-2000

## Review of Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy/Illusions of Opportunity: Employees Expectations and Workplace Inequality

Peter F. Meiksins  
Cleveland State University, [p.meiksins@csuohio.edu](mailto:p.meiksins@csuohio.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc\\_crim\\_facpub](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc_crim_facpub)

 Part of the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

---

### Original Citation

Meiksins P. (2000). Illusions of Opportunity: Employee Expectations and Workplace Inequality. *Labor History*, 41(1), 118-120.

### Repository Citation

Meiksins, Peter F., "Review of Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy/Illusions of Opportunity: Employees Expectations and Workplace Inequality" (2000). *Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications*. 77.

[https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc\\_crim\\_facpub/77](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc_crim_facpub/77)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology & Criminology Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

**Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy**

KIM MOODY, 1997

London: Verso Books

pp. vii + 310, \$40.00

**Illusions of Opportunity: Employee Expectations and Workplace Inequality**

SONIA OSPINA, 1996

Ithaca: ILR Press

pp. xiii + 214, \$45.00

The two books under review are wildly different. *Workers in a Lean World* is a wide-ranging analysis of the global economy and the role of unions within it by an engaged, theoretically sophisticated labor journalist/activist. *Illusions of Opportunity* is a narrowly focused academic monograph that examines how employees in a single organization respond to the reality of workplace inequality. I cannot claim to have

discovered a good reason for reviewing them together. Still, these two very different books do converge on the single, disturbing reality of inequality and growing uncertainty in the contemporary workplace.

In *Workers in a Lean World*, Kim Moody, director of *Labor Notes*, presents an iconoclastic view of the global economy. In a well-documented and largely persuasive analysis, Moody challenges the dominant view that globalization has created a single, unified world economy with a completely new set of dynamics. Rather than simple globalization, he sees the spread of capitalism to all corners of the globe, a process which has had both old and new consequences, all of which are uneven and contradictory. The spread of global capitalism has stimulated the emergence of three economic "regions" centering on the United States, Europe and Japan. Within these regions, traditional North/South inequalities have been preserved or even intensified; the North remains the site of most economic activity and remains firmly in charge of the production chains that reach into the impoverished South. Rejecting labor strategies based on the assumption that economic power has shifted away from the North, Moody urges labor to understand the dynamics of this new capitalist world economy. Capitalist competition has not been eliminated; on the contrary, it has been reshaped on a regional basis and intensified by the accelerating pace of technological change. The economy has become more, not less, centralized as mergers and acquisitions increase the control over production of major Northern employers. The stagnant or declining wages of workers in the North are not the simple result of capital mobility and the export of jobs; in fact, Moody shows that these phenomena are quite limited in scope. Instead, he focuses on new production methods (most notably lean production, with its combination of new technology and what he calls "archaic" forms of subcontracting and casualization) and the rise of neo-liberal economic policy (which has encouraged an increasingly privatized, deregulated economy).

Moody acknowledges that this new economy has presented real problems for workers and threats to organized labor. While he recognizes that capital mobility and labor migration have, at times, intensified competition among groups of workers, he is more inclined to stress the threats generated by intensified competition and lean production (e.g., restructuring to eliminate excess capacity, the growth of casual and contingent labor, and downsizing). The argument that the new global economy has produced a fragmented and therefore increasingly impotent working class is, in Moody's view, misguided; he notes that the working class has always been divided by race, gender and other factors, and contends that the new economic order presents real opportunities for organizing, especially because it links workers together across national borders in complex production chains dominated by a single employer.

Moody presses for more international labor cooperation to complement the national organization that continues to be essential; but, he feels that existing international labor organizations are too conservative and removed from the realities of the workplace to offer much hope. Instead, he calls for "rank-and-file" internationalism, which he feels is exemplified by the Transnationals Information Exchange (an international group which served as a center for the dissemination of information on new forms of unionization). And he hopes that the efforts of new "social movement unions" to reach beyond the workplace while providing a class vision, to foster member activity and union democracy will provide the vehicle for renewed labor activity in the late 1990s and beyond.

Moody's analysis of the contemporary political economy is refreshing. He effectively skewers much received wisdom about the "global economy" with real data and with carefully constructed theoretical arguments that remind us of the continued explanatory power of socialist ideas. His analysis of the prospects for labor, however, lacks some of the rigor that characterizes his analysis of the economy. Social movement unionism remains very vaguely defined in this book and it is not clear that the examples he gives are anything more than isolated cases of what he hopes will become more common. Perhaps more important, Moody's case that social movement unionism is the answer is not fully developed. One wonders, for example, why a movement which reaches beyond the workplace to the poor, the casualized and the unemployed is the appropriate response to an economy in which capitalist relations of production have become more, not less, widespread. Similarly, the fact that most of the social movement unions to which Moody points have been led by public-sector workers needs to be reconciled with his argument that the world is becoming increasingly capitalist, privatized and market dominated. None of this is to suggest that Moody is wrong; rather it is that the connection between his analysis of the economy and his program for labor is not adequately developed here.

Where Moody is concerned with macro-economic trends and the response of organized labor to them, Sonia Ospina focuses on the micro-economy of the organization. *Illusions of Opportunity* is a study of a large public service organization (PSA) which seeks to understand how the discourse of equal opportunity and merit is reconciled with the realities of inequality and stratification in the organization.

Ospina's point is that not all workers have the same opportunities in organizations. And, despite the fact that all workers extol fair competition and merit, they mean very different things by this.

The core of Ospina's book is a comparison of the experiences of three groups of PSA employees: "operators," "clerical workers," and "analysts." Career ladders, and therefore opportunity structures, worked differently for each of these groups. Operators were largely permanent employees whose opportunities were determined by highly formalized civil service regulations. Clerical workers, by contrast, were a more mixed group of permanent and provisional employees; civil service rules were more weakly enforced here and the lower status of the occupation produced lower levels of opportunity. Finally, the group of analysts included both permanent and provisional employees; here, however, provisional employees seemed to have the most opportunity (although still less than operators), since bypassing civil service rules had become an increasingly common way of filling analyst positions.

Ospina finds that the various groups of workers responded to these different realities in varying ways, depending upon their definition of "equal opportunity" and "merit." Operators seemed generally satisfied with their opportunities and emphasized the equity of civil service procedures and the role of experience in defining merit. Clerical workers were largely dissatisfied with their opportunities; like operators, they favored the formalization of civil service rules, but regretted that they were inadequately enforced in their case. Analysts, in contrast, were unhappy with their opportunity structure, complaining that civil service practices protected the incompetent and limited the organization's ability to reward individual merit (defined by such characteristics as education and unusual skills) and accomplishment.

In exploring the reactions of workers to unequal opportunity structures, Ospina makes some very interesting points of interest to social scientists who study job satisfaction. She makes a useful distinction between dissatisfaction and resentment, noting that, for her respondents, the two were not the same. She also notes that the conventional distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards may require re-examination; she found that operators valued intrinsic rewards such as opportunities to learn, but largely because these opportunities were associated with opportunities for greater extrinsic rewards (pay raises and promotion).

Ultimately, however, Ospina's analysis remains confusing. Most of the second half of the book is devoted to arguing that dissatisfaction at work is related to participating in a career ladder whose "values" are different than those one holds oneself (e.g. the analysts who resented the formalized civil service rules). Yet, in the concluding chapters, she finds that there is a simple relationship between formalization and satisfaction at work—where career ladders offer predictable, formalized structures of opportunity, employees appeared to be more satisfied. The reader leaves *Illusions of Opportunity* unclear as to which of these two arguments is the "real" one.

Interestingly, the second argument points to an important area of convergence between Ospina's analysis and Moody's. In effect, she may have found that employees experience market-oriented, individualizing employment structures as a source of dissatisfaction at work. It is possible that even those who embrace the ideology of these structures (such as the analysts) were dissatisfied because structures which encourage individual competition among workers, downplay experience and create uncertainty are intrinsically unpleasant. Moody's analysis indicates that the economy is moving towards, not away, from this kind of structure. If he is right, and if Ospina is right about the consequences of these forms of organization, the promised land of flexible employment may turn out to be the crucible of labor unrest.

PETER MEIKSINS, *Associate Professor of Sociology, Cleveland State University*