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Paul Osterman and Beth Shulman. Reviewed by Mary Huff
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Book Reviews

Paul Osterman & Beth Shulman, *Good Jobs America: Making Work Better for Everyone* (2011). NY: Russell Sage Foundation, \$24.95 (paperback).

With persistently high unemployment rates, we are well aware of the individual and social costs of joblessness. Far less attention has been paid to the issue of job quality—the proliferation of jobs that pay low wages, lack benefits, and offer little chance for advancement. *Good Jobs America* focuses on the individual and social costs of poor quality jobs and the need to convert them into better ones. The authors calculate that among adults aged 25 - 64, nearly a quarter earn less than 2/3 of the median wage and nearly a fifth earn wages below the poverty level for a four-person household. The risk is higher for women, minorities, and those with no more than a high school diploma.

Is this growth in low-wage jobs an inevitable result of increased competition, globalization of markets, and increased immigration? Are efforts to improve job quality as futile as King Canute's efforts to control the tides? The authors say no, and they offer strategies for converting bad jobs into good ones.

Current labor market policies focus on improving worker quality through improving educational attainment. A more educated worker is more productive and can therefore earn a higher wage. For less educated workers, there is the Earned Income Tax Credit to augment low wages and preserve work incentives. Both of these policies focus on the supply side of the labor market—the workers themselves. While necessary, they are not sufficient. The authors argue that we need also to address the demand side of the labor market—employers and the nature of their jobs. In the same way that the federal government established standards for minimum wages and maximum hours, for occupational health and safety, for

pension rights, and for antidiscrimination and equal opportunity in the workplace, it has the capacity to establish standards for job quality. Whether the political climate will allow for the use of this capacity is, of course, the underlying question.

To make their case, the authors first need to counteract the misinformation surrounding low-wage work. Faulty assumptions include: that workers are only temporarily in low-wage jobs; that low-wage work will decline as general economic conditions improve; that low-wage jobs are mainly a product of lax immigration policy; that any attempt to reduce low-wage jobs will necessarily impede economic growth; and that regulatory policy is inherently counterproductive. Having shown that the evidence does not support any of these assumptions, the authors explain why some firms choose the "high road," offering good jobs, while others choose the "low road," offering bad ones. Some firms benefit from offering good jobs. For them, improvements in worker motivation, along with reductions in turnover and hiring costs, will more than offset higher wages. Others, especially those that operate in a highly competitive environment, are not likely to survive if they act unilaterally. In these cases, changes must be industry-wide so that all firms compete on a level playing field.

How will these changes be accomplished? The authors identify three possibilities: (1) Unions need to organize workers in low-wage jobs. In the past, unions have often ignored these workers, but with declining employment in traditional unionized sectors, it becomes a matter of survival for unions to recruit new members in these heretofore ignored industries. (2) Pressure must be put on Congress to reform labor law. Current legislation and the implementation thereof has favored employers and made it much more difficult for workers to gain union recognition, despite the fact that in the absence of employer interference, a majority of workers would choose union representation. (3) Although unions and community groups have sometimes found themselves in opposition, there are many areas of common ground and stronger efforts should be made to form coalitions.

The authors say that through these three approaches combined, firms can be pressured to create good jobs. To those who say that improving job quality will lead to higher prices

for consumers, they respond that as a society, we are already paying those higher prices indirectly, as a result of the social cost of low-wage jobs—including poor health outcomes for workers and their children, and the loss of human potential when children are raised in impoverished households.

In the current political context, improving job quality will be an uphill struggle and the authors are well aware of the obstacles that will need to be surmounted. It is not so much that their prescriptions will automatically lead to success, but that the alternative, which is to do nothing at all to improve the prospects of the working poor, is totally unacceptable.

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Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (2011). Knopf, \$27.95 (hardcover), \$16.00 (paperback).

For many books about the history of the American left, the implicit questions are always about the reasons for its failure. Why are Americans so conservative? Why are traditions of social reform so much weaker in America than elsewhere? Why has the left been so frail? Scholars have addressed these questions by looking at the strength of business, the limits of the state, and most of all, the myriad strategic and intellectual blunders of leftists themselves. Michael Kazin, in *American Dreamers*, turns the question itself upside down. The American left, he suggests, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. True, it has never held state power, or even managed to build a stable political party. It has been reviled and demonized, and it has never claimed the faith of more than a small minority. Yet Kazin—who clearly identifies, albeit in an ambivalent way, with those dreamers he chronicles—remains hopeful, for he argues that the real strength of the left has been its ability to shift the horizons of the American cultural imagination. Radicals may not have drawn people to their political parties, but they were able to create a “culture of rebellion,” which could “articulate outrage about the state of the world and the longing for a different one” (p. xiv). This, in turn, helped to change political life, as it shifted the mainstream of national opinion. American