

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



***Mobsters, Unions and Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement*, by James B. JACOBS, New York: New York University Press, 2006, 352 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-4273-0.**

Anthony M. Gould

Volume 62, numéro 3, été 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016495ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016495ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)
1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Gould, A. M. (2007). Compte rendu de [*Mobsters, Unions and Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement*, by James B. JACOBS, New York: New York University Press, 2006, 352 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-4273-0.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 62(3), 573-575.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/016495ar>

regroupent dans des ensemble régionaux ; le droit supranational continuera vraisemblablement à demeurer l'apanage de l'Union européenne (voir ainsi Burkett, Arthurs, Compa, Marleau). La normativité du travail de l'OIT semble aussi vouée à un rôle relativement plus effacé qu'à l'époque de l'après-guerre. Les droits nationaux (malgré les limites qu'entraîne leur territorialité, ce que l'on n'analyse pas tellement) conservent tous, leur importance. Ils doivent être effectifs ; leur adaptation au contexte contemporain de mondialisation conduit à se soucier non seulement de leur contenu substantiel, mais aussi des institutions qui assurent sa mise en œuvre. L'établissement et l'application de normes du travail adéquates font partie de projets de société plus englobants et vont de pair, en longue portée, avec la prospérité économique des pays auxquels ils correspondent (voir ainsi Banks, Langille, Pastore). La coopération multiétagée, beaucoup plus que le recours à la sanction économique, assure l'atteinte de tels objectifs de la part de pays qui se rapprochent économiquement (*ibid.*). Tout comme les normes internationales du travail elles-mêmes, cette action

multinationale doit également compter sur la participation d'acteurs de la société civile ; groupements syndicaux, entreprises transnationales, ONG (voir ainsi Pastore, Singenberger, Cornish *et al.*).

Il revenait sans doute aux directeurs de l'édition de l'ouvrage, qui en avaient fort bien présenté et situé initialement le contenu, d'en dégager finalement un certain bilan. Tel complément eût distingué l'entreprise de plusieurs autres collectifs du jour tournant autour du thème « mondialisation-travail ». On peut aussi regretter que certaines des études de l'ouvrage n'explicitent pas de façon plus marquée et détaillée comment ce dit phénomène de mondialisation modifie l'organisation de la production, à laquelle celle du travail est elle-même liée. Le droit du travail, tant international que national, doit, en effet, directement correspondre à cette réalité productive transformée. Il n'en demeure pas moins que l'ouvrage réunit dans une facture impeccable un ensemble de contributions d'une grande richesse en la matière.

PIERRE VERGE
Université Laval

Mobsters, Unions and Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement,

by James B. JACOBS, New York: New York University Press, 2006, 352 pp.,
ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-4273-0.

This book is about the connection between organized labour and organized crime in the United States. It addresses: misappropriation of worker pension and operating funds by union office holders and other criminals; extortion of employers by union officials and the mafia; and union/employer conspiracies to operate cartels that corruptly allocate contracts and set prices. It mostly deals with its topic, labour racketeering, historically. In taking this approach, the author analyses the enduring patterns of criminal behaviour of a small group of

stakeholders in the labour movement. Underlying this discussion are portraits of distinct periods in 20th century American history. These include: the bootlegging era; the congressional hearings “high-point” period of 1957-59 during which the *McClelland* senate select committee saw a procession of union officials and members of the mafia take the 5th Amendment; the age of federal law enforcement’s obsession with communism as the only matter worth investigating and the consequent unabated proliferation of criminal

organizations throughout the 1960s; and the post-Hoover FBI era when the murder of a high profile union official, Jimmy Hoffa, caused law enforcement to give priority to breaking up *cosa nostra* organized crime families.

The author traces the history of union racketeering and provides compelling accounts of the activities of parties from organized labour; criminal associations; employer groups; the United States Department of Justice and the FBI; and State and Federal Legislatures. The scope and nature of the crimes of well known union officials and mafia bosses are meticulously described as are the public-policy efforts which aimed to ensure that transgressions are not repeated. One of the book's strengths is its illumination of the legalistic aspects of how individuals with complex and ambiguous roles have behaved corruptly. For example, Jimmy Hoffa, head of the *International Brotherhood of Teamsters* in Minnesota, and labour organizer of truck drivers, dock workers and warehousemen throughout the Midwest is referred to repeatedly. The reader is left with a sound understanding of the nature of his influence, diversity of his crimes, and legal remedies used to curtail their future occurrence.

In his book, Jacobs gives an important if unpalatable perspective of the workings and nature of organized labour. Through discussing union involvement in extortion, bribes, fraud, embezzlement and violence he also provides insight into modern employment relations. For those with an interest in union history, the book is as much an analysis of relations between actors in the labour management process as an exposé of organized crime. In this respect, it contributes to industrial sociology scholarship for at least three reasons. First, it gives detail about key events in the modern history of the United States labour movement. For example, it discusses the way the Wagner Act (1936) provided an impetus for union growth; the constraining

influence of Taft-Hartley (1947); and the *McClelland Commission* which has been characterized as providing a platform for anti-union politicians. Second, the author indirectly sheds light on a likely reason for declining unionism through drawing attention to how the image of organized labour has been besmirched by criminals. This theme broadens debate about the changing nature of work. It implicitly suggests that the current trend towards individualism in employment relations is not solely due to the triumph of employers in an era of globalization. Rather, waning unionism may be a consequence of the conduct of labour officials as well as widely-documented influences such as growth of the services sector; an influx of women into the workforce; and increases in non-standard forms of employment. The third reason the book contributes to scholarship on employment relations is that its content demonstrates myriad ways that actors in the process may interact. Its anecdotes—although not necessarily its discussion of their legal aspects—reveal that interests, power and conflict exist at both an institutional and individual level. The book is replete with well researched historical accounts of how, in practice, unions do not automatically represent member interests. Rather, they are revealed as potentially corruptible entities that may detach from an institutional powerbase and align their objectives with those of employers or nefarious criminal enterprises. These revelations confront idealism and some employment-related theory. The author does not speculate about how ideas on labour relations may be further developed in light of insight about union corruption. His focus remains mostly on historical efforts to remedy the problem.

I have two related criticisms of Jacobs' work. These may not actually be condemnations but rather reflect a difference of theoretical orientation between the author and myself. First,

sometimes the writing is unduly legalistic. This approach has the advantage of efficiently conveying technical detail but does not necessarily provide the best opportunity to enjoy learning about an interesting subject. For example, during the McClelland Commission hearings Robert Kennedy had spectacular clashes with flamboyant Jimmy Hoffa. I was disappointed that this was hardly mentioned and that the transcripts of such exchanges were not included to enliven the discussion. A related criticism concerns the personalities of those being described. It would have been a more interesting book if it gave additional detail about the traits of key protagonists. Hoffa was charismatic and aggressive. Kennedy was somewhat callow. If such personas had been delineated the work's appeal would have been enhanced. The aforementioned criticisms may prompt some—probably including Jacobs

himself—to point out that a book about union corruption should frame its question narrowly and use only relevant research to present an argument. Those who make such a case may also argue that narratives about legal history lose focus if they provide unnecessary detail. My response to such musings is that I believe it is possible to present excellent and focused scholarship and simultaneously maximize entertainment value. This is particularly so when the object of analysis is: Mobsters, Unions and Feds. Maybe the problem is that lawyers (the author) and sociologists (me) are turned-on by different things! That said, I am not aware of a book that covers the same ground as this one—let alone one that does so using such thorough research and with such technical competence.

ANTHONY M. GOULD
Université Laval

Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement,

by Clayton SINYAI, Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2006, x, 292 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-4455-5.

In this new political history of the American labour movement, Clayton Sinyai argues that the history of the American labour movement records an ongoing dialogue of American workers with one another and with other concerned citizens about the nature of democracy and the demands of citizenship. Although American labour has shown relatively little interest in socialism, neither have American trade unions practiced a “business unionism,” exclusively preoccupied with improving members’ wages. Rather, they have acted as organs of civic education preparing working people for the demands of political participation. The early American Federation of Labor (AFL) tried to achieve this end by encouraging unions to act as voluntary associations cultivating “civic virtue”

among their members. The growth of modern industrial capitalism and of the liberal state created a hostile environment for traditional republican notions of civic virtue and political participation, however, and forced the labour movement into the new departure represented by industrial unionism and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). According to Sinyai, modern industrial capitalism and liberal politico-legal institutions have thus compelled American workers to moderate their republican ideas concerning the demands of democratic citizenship. Still, the author—a researcher for the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LIUNA) and Political Director for the Laborers’ Local 11, who also completed a doctoral degree in political science at Rutgers University—insists that the