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BOOK REVIEW

Eric Blanc, *We Are the union: How worker-to-worker organizing is revitalizing labor and winning big*. University of California Press, 2025, \$24.95, ISBN: 9780520394919

REVIEW BY JACOB GOODWIN

Working people are looking for answers as economic inequality reaches new peaks. This fact underlies Rutgers' Eric Blanc's new call to rebuild the middle class by investing in and developing rank-and-file union members, in his appropriately titled book, [We Are the Union](#) (2025).

Blanc initially describes how we arrived at the current situation, building off Putnam (2000). Social and cultural fragmentation are key to his analysis of the decline of unions. Increases in commutes meant more time in cars and less time at little league games where kids of co-workers would play together. Less time together meant a thinning of the social fabric and less of a collective identity.

Greater worker dispersion translated to real organizational hurdles for unions. The fragmented social landscape of the last thirty years increased the costs associated with organizing new workplaces. The physical distance between work sites made it more difficult for union staff to facilitate campaigns or identify organic leaders, workers with followings. No longer were workers socializing together and raising kids together—resulting in waning worker power as a byproduct of not being easily organized in a shared communal space.

The growth of the suburbs and shifting economic winds contributes to what Blanc calls the “post-Reagan consensus” within unions. The consensus is defined by risk aversion and a shift away from organizing the unorganized. Unions became hesitant to invest in bringing on new worksites due to the costs of first contract campaigns and contract maintenance. Practicing a strategy of “managed decline” was seen as a necessity by many in union leadership to preserve resources and to continue to provide services to paying members. This practice continued while the industrial base was hollowed out. It was infrequently unquestioned as union orthodoxy until the rank-and-file upsurge of the Chicago Teachers Union (2012). The proponents of the post-Reagan consensus within labor saw their choice as reasonable even as membership sank to all-time lows and worker pay lagged behind inflation.

In the past several years, adaptation at the grassroots level has created an opening for labor to break out of its bunker mentality. The success of upstarts like Amazon Labor Union, Starbucks Workers United and classroom teachers in states like West Virginia have demonstrated the promise of a new model of forging people power: worker to worker organizing.

Unlike the staff intensive efforts deployed by unions under the post-Reagan consensus, worker to worker organizing had minimal reliance on staff. The cost to organize is significantly lower. Workers use online tools to strategize, create media content and to train one another. The central pillar of the worker to worker model is shop floor decision making.



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Still, many in union leadership hesitate to engage in this fluid decentralized model, Blanc admits. Some leaders have the fear that if they support such efforts it may harm their own job security in leadership. New success could mean a new champion rising from the ranks. Others fear that recent wins at Amazon and Starbucks are ephemeral. Despite these concerns the simple math of costs and benefits had led established unions to make more investments to support worker to worker organizing.

The promise of worker to worker organizing is its potential to scale up. The low point of entry cost of organizing your own workplace, along with the availability of various digital resources, grants workers the kind of agency that can create or optimize “whirlwind” moments. The labor movement, Blanc explains, has rarely grown in a slow steady manner. Instead, it surges ahead in fits and bursts. The growth trend of labor points to the need of following a model, such as a burgeoning rank-and-file movement, that can go “viral”.

Pursuing the model outlined by Blanc does not require abandoning the tried and true methods of organizing. Some feel that the choice today is between the status quo of top down staff oriented organizing and what might be derisively called spontaneous organizing. Such a binary choice ignores the fact that prioritizing rank-and-file participation as a model of democratizing unions can be done while continuing to practice established methods of organizing. Advocates of rank-and-file union democracy still practice power mapping, relationship building and campaign coordination. In short, a new model can rely on trusted methods.

Worker to worker organizing applies what works best for a local worksites. Flexibility lends itself to balancing the concepts of “deep organizing” and “wide organizing” at the point of application. One of the knocks on using digital tools in organizing is that they create a shallow but potentially wide reach. People can zoom from home for trainings, which is helpful for those with second jobs, commutes and families, but it has been argued, zoom events lead to limited relationships. In contrast, the deep relationships one cultivates over years on teams at work can be meaningful, yet lack the scope or reach needed to unite a dispersed work force. Placing tools in workers hands at the local level enables each potential association to make the choices that best fit the needs of their membership (and potential membership).

Empowering and not encumbering rank-and-file members in building unions is the most important indicator of union success. According to the multi-decade research of labor scholar Kate Bronfenbrenner, “...more than many other single variable, having a large active, rank-and-file committee representative of all the different interests in the bargaining was found to be critical to union organizing success” (Blanc, 177). *We are the Union* integrates scholarly research like this throughout a broader narrative in an accessible way, mirroring the marriage of advocacy and hard scholarship that the union movement needs today.

One of the strengths of Blanc’s work is his proven record of union activism. He writes about his work in the *Emergency Organizing Committee*, supporting frontline workers during the pandemic. He is in the field and in correspondence with workers who are leading the field in organizing from auto plants in the south to baristas in the Northwest. And he has written this latest book in search of what unites us, our pursuit of a living wage, fair treatment on the job and a society that is just.

Blanc’s book offers a strong argument to win over union leaders, a guide for workers looking to get started with a union drive and encouragement for rank-and-file reformers within existing unions. All of this is to say, *We are the Union* is an artful attempt to build a big tent based on revitalizing our unions.

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