Review of: Administering the Taylor Law: Public Employee Relations in New York, by Ronald Donovan

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for many years and deepened the problems that beset industry and society today.

Daniel Nelson is professor of history at the University of Akron. He has published several studies of Taylorism and of the rubber industry, and most recently has edited A Mental Revolution: Scientific Management since Taylor (1992).


Reviewed by Peter Rachleff

The last two decades have been particularly grim for the American labor movement. Unions have shrunk in membership and declined in power. The only bright spot has been the public sector, particularly at the state level. Yet there has been precious little scholarship about the unionization of public employees and the dynamics of labor relations in the public sector. Its attempt to fill that gap should make this book of interest to labor historians, economists, and labor relations experts.

Administering the Taylor Law has even more to recommend it. It is a case study of New York, whose system has been extremely influential in the development of public sector collective bargaining in many other states. Ronald Donovan is an experienced and esteemed professor at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. In addition to careful research in Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) records, court transcripts, and newspapers, Donovan has conducted extensive interviews with some of the key players in the system’s development and functioning. This study stands on a solid foundation and has a potentially wide applicability.

Donovan carefully lays out the development of the system from 1967 to the late 1980s. He shows how, in the midst of a political minefield, a viable and effective system took shape. He is particularly good at highlighting the contributions of individual figures, such as George W. Taylor, who shaped the initial law, and Robert D. Helsby and Harold Newman, the two chairmen of the PERB over its history, who were willing to depart from Taylor’s formulations when pragmatism and pressures suggested change was in order.

Yet Donovan also shows that the actions of public employees themselves were often the driving force behind the development of the public bargaining system. The 1966 transit strike created the crisis that pushed Nelson Rockefeller to create the Taylor Committee, and important changes in the system were provoked by the New York City sanitation workers’ strike of 1968 and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers’ strike later in the same year.
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Administering the Taylor Law is also interesting at a systemic level. It makes it quite clear that labor relations with public employees were not simply a carbon copy of the private sector's system. The PERB wrestled long and hard not only with finding a middle ground between labor and management, but also with how to secure the 'public' interest. Determining bargaining units was a particularly vexing problem, both in terms of defining shared interests and in deciding where to draw the line between supervisory and subordinate personnel. The PERB also struggled with the definition of its own authority, particularly in the realm of unfair labor practices.

My major criticism is that Donovan is a bit too quick to term this whole experience a "success." It seems to me that this depends on one's point of view. Donovan is certainly right that a "system" was created that gradually became secure in its own right. But he fails to examine how well this system has been working for its participants—the state of New York, public employees, and the "public." New York's financial difficulties are so severe that Mario Cuomo held back from the 1992 presidential campaign because, he said, he needed to address them. The municipal repercussions of this fiscal crisis drove Ed Koch from office in New York City and have contributed to shortening David Dinkins's career. Public employees feel less and less secure in their jobs, and their wages and benefits have seen little increase of late, while the public has been experiencing a cutback in services. I have trouble squaring these realities with the "success" of a bureaucratic system. Students of labor relations need to widen their horizons to incorporate real life questions, unless they are willing to hide out in the irrelevance of "academic" questions and ivory towers.

Peter Rachleff is associate professor of history at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the American Labor Movement (1993) and is a contributor to "We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s, edited by Staughton Lynd (forthcoming).


Reviewed by Kosmas Tsokhas

This is the first full-length historical survey of the development of U.S. merchant shipping since 1900. In defining the scope of his study, René De La Pedraja recognizes the importance of coastal and inland shipping, but he focuses mainly on those companies involved in foreign trade, including proprietary companies such as those owned by the United Fruit Company,