

ONLY ONE THING CAN SAVE US

*Why America Needs a New Kind
of Labor Movement*

THOMAS GEOGHEGAN

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Is labor's day over or is labor the only real answer for our time? In his new book, National Book Critics Circle Award finalist and labor lawyer Thomas Geoghegan argues that even as organized labor seems to be crumbling, a revived—but different—labor movement is the only way to stabilize the economy and save the middle class.

But the inequality now reshaping the country goes beyond money and income: the places we work have become ever more rigid hierarchies. Geoghegan makes his argument for labor with stories, sometimes humorous but more often chilling, about the problems working people like his own clients—from cabdrivers to schoolteachers—now face, increasingly powerless in our union-free economy. He explains why a new kind of labor movement (and not just more higher education) is the real program the Democrats should push—not just to save the middle class from bankruptcy but to revive Keynes's original and sometimes forgotten ideas for getting the rich to invest and reducing our balance of trade, and to promote John Dewey's vision of a “democratic way of life,” one that would start in the schools and continue in our places of work.

A “public policy” book that is compulsively readable, *Only One Thing Can Save Us* is vintage Geoghegan, blending acerbic, witty commentary with unparalleled insight into the real dynamics (and human experience) of working in America today.

Only One Thing Can Save Us: Why America Needs a New Kind of Labor Movement Details

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Adam says

Leftists praise Geoghegan for thinking out of the box when it involves shaking up organized labor's establishment, but they get uneasy and defensive when Geoghegan's outside-of-the-box thinking challenges long-held leftist tenets. To say that organized labor is on the decline is obvious. But Geoghegan's leftist critics should also acknowledge that the Labor's Left too, has been in steady decline. Geoghegan's book demands more serious consideration and engagement from his leftist critics.

Geoghegan's two arguments here that stir up the most controversy are (1) With so-called "right-to-work laws" steadily on the march through the states, unions' days of exclusive representation are numbered, so the labor movement might as well start developing alternative strategies to deal with this reality: namely, organizing and bargaining for workplaces with a minority-union membership, and (2) American unions should adapt the practice of "works councils" of its European peers, whereby workers get elected to sit alongside management and have voting power over the decisions that effect the workforce.

Just as we can anticipate traditional unionists protesting Geoghegan's book ("what! Give up exclusive representation? Why, that's the backbone of the unionism!"), so can we anticipate leftists responding "What! Have workers sit on a works council! Why, that goes against everything we stand for!"). Geoghegan is quick to provoke both labor's establishment and labor's left. As a socialist in the labor movement, I'm not sure if Geoghegan is right either, but I think his ideas need to be taken seriously and merit thoughtful critiques.

Only One Thing Can Save Us was reviewed in about as many outlets as we can expect for a book about the labor movement. The most substantial critique I read was Chris Maisano's in Jacobin (jacobinmag.com/2015/01/bringing-labor...). Maisano may very well be correct in his positions, but he does not always sufficiently prove how. I would love to attend a debate between the two, or read a longer-form response from Maisano, whereby he could further elaborate his points.

But in his article, Maisano is a bit unfair to Geoghegan, equating "co-determination" (the works council arrangement) with other labor-management partnership schemes such as "lean production," which he himself correctly acknowledges is only a "guise" of partnership:

"Besides, US workers and their unions already have ample experience with imported models based on labor-management partnerships — and it's been a disaster. The Japanese auto transplants, for example, brought lean production, quality circles, and other practices that have only served to increase the exploitation of workers under the guise of partnership and 'jointness.'"

It is not contradictory to acknowledge the guise of the Japanese auto strategies and at the same time entertain Geoghegan's proposal of works councils.

The risk of workers identifying with the interests with the company is certainly real. But I have enough faith in workers that I'm not yet convinced that their participation on works councils automatically means their co-optation and subsequent abandonment of their class consciousness. Geoghegan's book should prompt an earnest exploration of how works councils could advance workers' interests in the American context. I don't know enough about how the German model has functioned in practice, but we can certainly observe the results of the power of German unionism—a significantly higher level of organization and a higher standard

of living for the German working class. Works councils in transnational corporations have the potential to transcend national labor movements. Maisano and other critics haven't paid attention to Geoghegan's point that federating works councils across countries could form an international works council, something that should catch the attention of socialists.

It also feels unfair when Maisano brushes aside Geoghegan's concern over American debt to foreign creditors. Again, I don't know much on this subject, but Maisano seems rash when saying that it implies some kind of xenophobia. That's like saying resisting the movement of jobs to China is xenophobic because it is against job growth for the Chinese. Maisano very well may have a strong economic argument for his disagreement with Geoghegan, and he may very well be right. But he should bother to actually make the argument.

Maisano and most of us who identify as socialists in the labor movement keep our faith in the primary power of worker self-activity and direct actions like the strike. But we mustn't feel threatened by and act reactively to calls for experimentation with new strategies.

Geoghegan takes on a number of other topics in the book, which has prompted some Goodreads reviewers to complain that the book is too unfocused. I disagree, and think that, taken together, they constitute a powerful form of engagement with liberals who have abandoned the labor movement. Geoghegan pierces several myths that have become accepted by mainstream Democratic party types, including the idea that getting more education is a strategy for getting us out of poverty and the country out of its economic mess. The result is a book that manages to challenge conservatives, liberals, and radicals alike.

Johanna says

I love Thomas Geoghegan (his *Which Side Are You On?* is one of the books that has most knocked my socks off), and in my case, this book was certainly preaching to the choir in terms of politics. But it gave me new things to think about in terms of how to go about achieving these goals, so that pushes it past 4 stars for me. It helped that he lives and works in Chicago, so many of his examples were local for me.

Carl says

Written by a labor lawyer who knows his economics, Keynes anyway. Argues that it is not education that is going to help us overcome inequality - increasing the number & percentage of college graduates is just going to contribute to increasingly dismal post-graduation job prospects. Says we need to support labor & nothing supports labor like organization - unions. Increased union power & participation will result in (1) lowered national private & public indebtedness, (2) increased aggregate demand, (3) more equitable distribution of GDP, (4) reduced trade deficit, (5) diminished financial sector and (6) greater national stability. Given the unlikelihood of unionism making gains thru the legislative process, Geoghegan sees room for hope in globalization to the extent that foreign, especially German - plants in the U.S. are more worker & union friendly than U.S. counterparts, & the revision of U.S. union policies such as exclusive representation.

Eric Lotke says

Is the title too apocalyptic? Maybe so, but it's worth it. Especially because it contains friendly, chatty, easy-to-read directions about how to avoid the apocalypse.

Geoghegan shows how organized labor is essential to a functioning economy. Capital has the money; people have the numbers. But they need to organize to level the playing field and get their fair share.

American labor unions aren't perfect and Geoghegan criticizes them as only an old friend can. But unions do plenty right, and if we don't help then we're all going down together. Please read this in your book group. Collective action can't be done alone.

Josh says

Good stuff on our over-reliance of "get an education" when wages are falling for most workers as labor unions are whittled away. As always with his writing, it is passionate but not always clear and he has a habit of repeating ideas, making a 200+ page book that feels like it could have been half the size with the same takeaway. His arguments for unions giving up exclusive representation in exchange for making joining a union a civil right are pretty interesting, but I don't think even he fully believes them.

Gerald Friedman says

Great book

Georgetown shows how revived and transformed labor movement is vital for America's future economy, democracy, and for a decent society. Solidarity forever!

Scott Schneider says

This is a book for labor junkies. It is almost a stream of consciousness rant Geoghegan is having with himself about the problems with the labor movement, why a strong labor movement is needed to bring back the middle class and how the solution is more democratic workplaces like they have in Germany where elected worker councils run the plants. This book is particularly good for labor lawyers as it poses some legal solutions that might help, like getting rid of the requirement for unions to represent everyone in a workplace and having member-only unions. Also suggested is to make unionization a civil right. Lots of out of the box thinking which will hopefully stimulate discussion and breathe more life into the labor movement.

Keith says

I'm a big fan of Tom Geoghegan and I applaud him for again writing about how the American Labor

Movement needs to stop doing things that don't work and challenge itself to be something different. I think he's more right than wrong in his prescription that some form of "members only unionism" coupled with an emphasis on making joining a union a civil right and advocating for broad-based policy reform. I just wish he made this point stronger before page 215 of this book. Unfortunately what could be a strong and cogent argument gets lost in other points Geoghegan wants to make about individual and national debt as well as the necessity of a college education. His points on these issues are interesting but not really germane to his thesis about the need for a new kind of labor movement. Read the penultimate chapter of this book, skip the rest.

C. Scott says

A fine book by Thomas Geoghegan, filled with ideas about how to revive labor in the US. Unfortunately this book suffers in comparison to *Which Side Are You On?* Geoghegan's best work written almost 25 years ago. A lot of that has to do with tone. The tone in *Which Side Are You On?* is dispirited. The tone in *Only One Thing Can Save Us* is almost completely defeated. There are of course glimmers of hope embedded in this new volume, but the author's grim outlook on the future - and he is someone who possesses much insight in this particular field - brings the whole thing down. Despite all this I am still very glad that this book exists. There are important ideas here. We should listen.

Mills College Library says

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Amanda Valenti says

This is one of those books that really altered my perspective--it's good to find at least one book like that a year. I highly recommend. It is easy to read and really gives you a good grasp of the history and economics behind his argument.

Samuel Lubell says

This is a pro-union book. I found its depictions of the Chicago Teachers Union interesting and I like the idea of changing the rules so unions could go into places and unionize workers who want to join without requiring a majority vote so everyone is represented.
