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Karina Mora

Alexia Diorio

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THE FIGHT FOR \$15: THE RIGHT WAGE FOR A WORKING AMERICA

David Rolf. The New Press, 2016.
262 pages.

Karina Mora[†] & Alexia Diorio^{††}

In *The Fight for \$15: The Right Wage for a Working America*, David Rolf, a seasoned labor union leader, describes the need for a \$15-per-hour minimum wage.¹ He begins by contrasting the “old world,” one in which labor unions were strong and employees enjoyed cradle-to-grave benefits, with the “new world,” an environment in which labor unions are weak and employees face insecure, part-time, and benefit-devoid job prospects.² But, according to Rolf, advocating for a higher minimum wage is the way—possibly the only way—to fight back. The higher minimum wage is the end goal, and the means is a new approach to organizing labor. Rolf offers the example of the passage of the \$15 minimum wage ordinance in Seattle as embodying the new approach to organizing workers. Through his depiction of the Fight for \$15 in Seattle, Rolf hopes to provide a framework from which other labor movements can learn. He champions the Fight for \$15 by arguing that it is a good policy decision backed both by moral and economic principles: job security and long-term stability for workers, and economic growth based on increased consumer demand, respectively.³

Rolf starts the book by describing an idyllic pre-1970s America: the middle class was strong, the economy was growing, and income inequality

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†. J.D. 2019 (U.C. Berkeley).

††. J.D. 2020 (U.C. Berkeley).

1. DAVID ROLF, *THE FIGHT FOR \$15: THE RIGHT WAGE FOR A WORKING AMERICA* (2016). David Rolf is the former president of the Seattle-based Local 775 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). He remains the president of Working Washington, an SEIU-backed nonprofit organization, and the Fair Work Center, which provides legal aid to workers seeking to enforce pay and labor standards.

2. *Id.* at 5.

3. *Id.* at 181, 227–233.

was shrinking.⁴ In short, the American dream of working hard, owning a home, sending children to higher education, and retiring in relative comfort was alive and expanding.⁵ The implication here is that Americans were actually able to live off their wages. Workers, even those without a formal education, could expect a secure retirement without relying on the government for assistance. Rolf argues that two trends in the 1970s led to a turn for the worse for American workers. These two changes, he tells us, have led to the problems facing America today: the widest wealth gap on record, stagnant income and wages, a decline in union power, and a shrinking middle class.⁶

The first change was a shift in national attitude from pro-government and pro-union, to anti-government and pro-business.⁷ With the rise of the Reagan administration also came the idea that the market operated best when left undisturbed by the government, and thus deregulation and union busting were emphasized.⁸ More broadly, the idea was part of the now infamous theory known as “trickle-down economics.”⁹ The theory posits that deregulation will drive innovation, create entrepreneurs, and lead to job creation.¹⁰ Rolf adamantly refutes the validity of trickle-down economics.¹¹ He argues that growth is driven by demand from consumers. The logic is simple: by paying workers higher wages, workers will have more disposable income, which in turn will stimulate consumption leading to job creation.¹²

Second, the nature and structure of the job market have changed. More than one-third of the workforce is freelance, contract, temporary, or part-time.¹³ The rise and success of the “on-demand economy,” a system that connects users with services through an online platform, has further brought attention to the growing number of Americans working part-time.¹⁴ For Rolf, the change is problematic because many workers do not have the option of working full-time—they are forced into a patchwork of part-time jobs because employers want to avoid paying the benefits that often accompany full-time employment.¹⁵ As a result, many workers hold

4. *Id.* at 3.

5. *Id.* at 5.

6. *Id.* at 7, 14, 17.

7. *Id.* at 5.

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 7.

10. *Id.* at 181.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 67.

14. *Id.* at 42–43.

15. *Id.* at 52.

multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet.¹⁶ The work is also highly fragmented not only because it is part-time, but also because it is micro-scheduled. Micro-scheduling is a business tactic whereby employers adjust a worker's schedule on short notice to match consumer demand. Companies call in workers when demand increases and send them home early when demand decreases. As a result, some workers may work shifts as short as two or three hours.¹⁷ Rolf also predicts that the job market will continue to change as artificial intelligence increasingly gains ground, resulting in the displacement of more workers by technology.¹⁸

Unfortunately, Rolf does not adequately address why Americans gradually began to embrace an anti-government, pro-business attitude and abandoned a pro-government, pro-regulation stance.¹⁹ In one sentence, he explains: "The American public, feeling burned by high inflation and unemployment, began to accept this narrative"²⁰ He does not explain why or how pre-1970s America, if it was indeed the ideal environment for the average working American, led to the high inflation and unemployment rates of the 1970s. Thus, the book is unlikely to convince conservatives, shaped in the mold of Ronald Reagan's *laissez-faire* and free-market policies, that government regulation and strong unions are better than their preferred alternative. Furthermore, Rolf does not explain why the pro-business attitude has persisted for so long despite its failings.

Rolf's response to the changing tides is that "it doesn't have to be this way."²¹ He argues that America need not resign to a future of continued income inequality, wage stagnation, and job insecurity.²² Following his discussion of the ideological shift and structural changes in the job market, Rolf discusses new and creative labor movements that have arisen from union decline. He starts with organizing efforts such as the Justice for Janitors movement in the 1990s and continues with discussions of more recent movements like Occupy Wall Street, OUR Walmart, and the Fight for 15. These movements have made use of a creative, anything-goes attitude while shifting the focus to local policy and increasing efforts to work in coalition with other community organizations.²³ His comments on the limits of these campaigns, such as a lack of sustainable financing sources, are valuable to those interested in reforming worker movements.²⁴

16. *Id.* at 43.

17. *Id.* at 27.

18. *Id.* at 46.

19. *Id.* at 5.

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 54.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.* at 55–96.

24. *Id.* at 71 (noting that "none of these organizations is building permanent worker institutions that replicate the power and reach of traditional unions").

He acknowledges that living-wage campaigns continue to depend on funding from unions and foundations, yet does not fully explain the reasons why unions have decided to invest heavily in these movements.²⁵ In fact, he surprisingly goes so far as to say that unions invested in these campaigns without a clear end goal.²⁶

Rolf then describes the movements to raise the minimum wage in the state of Washington. Using the city of Seatac as an example, he describes the evolution of the airline industry and the increasing use of subcontractors, and also includes excerpts from airport workers' experiences.²⁷ He discusses some of the strategies behind ballot initiatives and leveraging the support of local businesses.²⁸ In Seattle, Rolf describes how the \$15 minimum wage law was passed as a result of the perfect storm of Councilmember Kshama Sawant's election, Ed Murray's run for and leadership as Mayor, and the recent \$15 minimum wage win in the city of Seatac. Interestingly, Rolf downplays the role of Kshama Sawant and her supporters (15 Now) in the minimum wage movement, although news reports from the time are filled with photos of red 15 Now shirts and banners.²⁹ While it is unclear if these factors can be replicated in other cities, it is helpful to understand the levers that unions and community groups used to successfully push \$15 forward.

Rolf details the behind-the-scenes negotiations of labor and business leaders to design the \$15 minimum wage law. Rolf co-chaired the Income Inequality Advisory Committee (IIAC), which is tasked with developing a new minimum-wage policy for Seattle.³⁰ In the committee, he worked with a diverse group of individuals—business, philanthropy, and community leaders—who, like him, had strong opinions of what ought to be done.³¹ Inevitably, he recounts, the committee sometimes got “stuck” on a particular issue.³² But his experience as co-chair of IIAC reflects the larger

25. See, e.g., *id.* at 65 (noting that the Working Families Party “depends on strong unions to be its largest contributors and its governing coalition”). See also *id.* at 67 (noting that the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy “is still funded primarily by philanthropists and by unions in Los Angeles”).

26. *Id.* at 93 (noting that “what Mary Kay Henry was asking the union to do was to make a leap of faith: let’s start building a movement of low-wage workers first, organized around a clear and moral set of demands, and worry about the end game later”).

27. *Id.* at 97–105.

28. *Id.* at 105–21.

29. *Id.* at 135 (noting that Sawant was “riding the coattails of the fast-food workers movement”). See also Chris McGreal, *Seattle to Debate \$15 Minimum Wage Law Amid Warnings of Class Warfare*, THE GUARDIAN (May 5, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/05/seattle-minimum-wage-socialist-councillor-class-warfare> (noting that “Sawant can claim a good share of the credit for forcing the agenda”).

30. *Id.* at 137.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 138.

fight towards establishing \$15 as the minimum wage not only in Seattle but also in other cities—a stop-and-go process as both sides discuss the implications of raising the minimum wage. Rolf’s recount of these negotiations illuminates the resulting compromise between labor and business interests and also foreshadows potential enforcement issues with the law.³³

While Rolf provides a detailed account of designing the law, he provides scant information on how unions in both Seatac and Seattle went about organizing workers. His discussion could be strengthened by detailing some of the organizing strategies used and following up on how the workers who were involved with the movement are doing today. This could provide a helpful blueprint for those interested in replicating Seattle’s success.

Finally, Rolf makes the case for a \$15 minimum wage in other cities, and addresses myths about how the minimum wage hurts workers and the economy.³⁴ This section of the book is helpful to counter the arguments of those who do not support raising the minimum wage or are unaware of the underlying research. Rolf also rounds up a lengthy list of necessary policy changes to “renew the promise of a middle class for working Americans,” including in the areas of healthcare, education, criminal justice, immigration reform, and monetary policy.³⁵ At the end of the book, he proposes new ideas for how unions and worker organizations can be successful going forward, providing a glimpse of the unique ideas and motivations Rolf uses in his leadership.³⁶

Overall, *The Fight for \$15: The Right Wage for a Working America* provides a clear and accessible overview of the Fight for \$15 movement and the need to address rising income inequality. Rolf’s book does not, however, enlighten the reader with organizing tactics or internal union strategy. As someone with experience leading a powerful union, he has unique insight and thoughts on the future of the labor movement, but spends little time sharing his own perspective. This is unfortunate because this kind of information could help other organizations who are hoping to mirror the

33. *Id.* at 154 (describing the minimum wage law as “messy” but “also brilliant”). See Donna Gordon Blankinship, *Seattle, Other Jurisdictions Struggle to Enforce \$15 Minimum Wage Laws*, KOMO NEWS (April 26, 2016), <http://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-other-jurisdictions-struggle-to-enforce-15-minimum-wage-laws> (describing the difficulty with enforcing the minimum wage ordinance in Seattle and other cities). See also Heidi Grover, *Why Aren’t These West Seattle Workers Making the Right Minimum Wage?*, THE STRANGER (May 11, 2016), <http://www.thestranger.com/news/2016/05/11/24069467/why-arent-these-west-seattle-workers-making-the-right-minimum-wage> (describing how Seattle has struggled to get the word out to workers about the wage they should be earning and to punish companies who violate the ordinance).

34. *Id.* at 195–233.

35. *Id.* at 238.

36. *Id.* at 256.

success of Seatac and Seattle. Rolf's focus on summarizing the existing research on the minimum wage is helpful for those looking for a comprehensive review, but his arguments are unlikely to sway individuals who do not already support raising the minimum wage. As the effects of a higher minimum wage and research on the minimum wage are constantly evolving, we will need more to understand how to best design policy and organize workers to restore the middle class and address income inequality, especially in a rapidly changing political climate.³⁷

Karina Mora, J.D. 2019 (U.C. Berkeley)

Alexia Diorio, J.D. 2020 (U.C. Berkeley)

37. For preliminary research on the effects of Seattle's minimum wage, see e.g., Ekaterina Jardim et al., *Minimum Wage Increases, Wages, and Low-Wage Employment: Evidence from Seattle*, National Bureau of Economic Research (June 2017), <https://evans.uw.edu/sites/default/files/NBER%20Working%20Paper.pdf>; Michael Reich et al., *Seattle's Minimum Wage Experience 2015–16*, Institute for Research on Labor & Employment (June 20, 2017), <http://irle.berkeley.edu/seattles-minimum-wage-experience-2015-16/>.