The controversy over labor standards is one of the central debates in the contemporary period of economic globalization. Economists have generally entered this debate through cost-benefit analysis, but there are important questions of morality and class that do not fit easily within the orthodox approach. In this book I draw on the Institutional and Marxist traditions in economics to present an analysis of worker rights and labor standards that takes both moral questions and class relations and interests seriously.

I argue that a prime and imminent tendency in the contemporary world economy is the lengthening of commodity chains through which the ultimate employer is able to wash his hands of moral responsibility for the conditions of work. This is true in globalized production networks, such as those operated by Nike and other global manufacturers, as well as in temporary and subcontracted work situations in the United States and elsewhere.

Asserting the rights of workers against such practices may be a promising strategy, but in failing to distinguish between the individual and collective meaning of rights the supporters of such slogans as “worker rights are human rights” may end up with something quite different from what they expected. The antislavery movement indirectly created support for capitalist forms of exploitation, the push for *individual* employment equality in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the undermining of workers’ *collective* rights, and contemporary corporate codes of conduct emphasize the rights of the individual but say little about collective rights. The definition of rights is influenced by class interest in ways that the supporters of such rights ignore at their own peril.

Recognizing that what constitutes a right is influenced by class relations and interests, and that the assertion of rights will necessarily have contradictory rather than simple effects, I examine the practices of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the interaction between labor law and U.S. foreign policy, and the activities of labor-based nongovernmental organizations in creating worker rights and enforcing labor standards. I argue for the strengthening of the ILO as an authoritative institution. Opponents of including labor standards in trade agreements point to the ILO as the appropriate forum for dealing with labor problems, though the organization has little enforcement power. Critics
of the ILO contend that its weakness is by design, and there is something to this. But of all the existing multilateral organizations the ILO comes closest to the kind of global regulatory commission that could produce reasonable values by bringing all interested parties to the table, and its (rather arbitrary) definition of core labor standards is gaining widespread acceptance.

In the United States, workers have few legally guaranteed rights, and what rights they do have eroded over the last generation. The United States has an abysmal record in ratifying ILO conventions. Yet as the dominant economic power, and with a self-image as a promoter of democracy and freedom, the U.S. government sometimes puts itself in the vanguard of the international worker rights movement. I argue that while the reasons generally given in the United States for not adopting ILO conventions are specious, particularly those concerning freedom of association and collective bargaining, the United States’ occasional support for international labor standards could be leveraged to improve worker rights domestically.

There is a long history of popular movements challenging the idea that “human rights” are discarded once one enters the factory or office door. Over the past decade a vigorous student movement demanding that university-licensed apparel be made sweat free has developed across the United States. While its goals are modest, I argue that this movement could have a large impact, to the extent that it builds organizing capacity in the newly industrializing countries while potentially creating a desire for class justice at home.

The classical socialist dream of the common experience of proletarianization and exploitation leading to working-class unity and revolutionary socialism was not realized. A desire for class justice must be cultivated; it does not flow inevitably from capitalist relations of production. In thinking openly and deeply about the constructed meaning of “worker rights as human rights” I hope to contribute to a positive, pragmatic discussion of how to improve material conditions and democratic participation for working people, not just to critique economic orthodoxy or deconstruct one of the sacred cows of the political Left. A popular politics that is more theoretically sophisticated and conscious of class than what is generally on offer in the United States has a real chance to make a concrete difference in twenty-first-century globalized labor markets, and also in the homely setting of the college classroom, as I argue at the end of this book.

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