



The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker

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The Big Squeeze takes a fresh, probing, and often shocking look at the stresses and strains faced by tens of millions of American workers as wages have stagnated, health and pension benefits have grown stingier, and job security has shriveled.

Going behind the scenes, Steven Greenhouse tells the stories of software engineers in Seattle, hotel housekeepers in Chicago, call center workers in New York, and janitors in Houston, as he explores why, in the world's most affluent nation, so many corporations are intent on squeezing their workers dry. We meet all kinds of workers: white collar and blue collar, high tech and low tech, middle income and low income; employees who stock shelves during a hurricane while locked inside their store, get fired after suffering debilitating injuries on the job, face egregious sexual harassment, and get laid off when their companies move high-tech operations abroad. We also meet young workers having a hard time starting out and seventy-year-old workers with too little money saved up to retire.

The book explains how economic, business, political, and social trends—among them globalization, the influx of immigrants, and the Wal-Mart effect—have fueled the squeeze. We see how the social contract between employers and employees, guaranteeing steady work and good pensions, has eroded over the last three decades, damaged by massive layoffs of factory and office workers and Wall Street's demands for ever-higher profits. In short, the post-World War II social contract that helped build the world's largest and most prosperous middle class has been replaced by a startling contradiction: corporate profits, economic growth, and worker productivity have grown strongly while worker pay has languished and Americans face ever-greater pressures to work harder and longer.

Greenhouse also examines companies that are generous to their workers and can serve as models for all of corporate America: Costco, Patagonia, and the casino-hotels of Las Vegas among them. Finally, he presents a series of pragmatic, ready-to-be-implemented suggestions on what government, business, and labor should do to alleviate the squeeze.

A balanced, consistently revealing exploration of a major American crisis.

The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker Details

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Author : Steven Greenhouse

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From Reader Review The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker for online ebook

Jared Cook says

This book is about what is wrong with the American workplace and it ought to be required reading for anyone in the employment law, management, or human resources fields.

It has the tone of a NYT journalist: a tone that is scrupulous about facts and statistics, but that is not above using a shocking anecdote to really punch at the gut and drive the point home. This can be an effective device, but in this book, its repeated so often that the heroes and villains become stock characters, their struggles formulaic, and the resolutions predictable. That isn't to say that the stories themselves aren't effective, just that their presentation got a little scripted.

The "squeeze" of the title is just that: declining wages (at least in terms of purchasing power, if not in terms of dollars), combined with what is less noticed: increasing workplace demands caused by a sometimes legitimate need to cut costs and stay competitive in a globalized world. But really the plight of the American worker, which really is the focus of the book, goes beyond wages and demands and touches on discrimination, inhumane treatment of workers, and even dangerous conditions.

Greenhouse's description of the problem is, for the most part, effective. His proposed solutions seem like an afterthought. Part of that is the fact that he is a reporter, not a policymaker. But he also seems to have not researched his solutions with the same depth that he did the rest of the book. Some of his proposed reforms, for example, sound just like what is already in place and has been for quite some time in the federal WARN act. And many of his proposed reforms that are not actually written into the laws have been accepted by the courts as a matter of interpreting those laws to actually make sense and be effective. Still, this portion of the book was minor enough that its superficiality didn't detract too much overall.

Anzelom says

I now read books mostly about unions. I went to a conference at Hofstra U. a week or so ago on Labor Studies, and I met the author there who signed my copy of his book.

Great book on understanding how the Labor Party in the USA and throughout the world has had its power gradually eroded by giant, American, mult-national corporations!

Nothing new there but fascinating reading in terms of knowing just how (in detail) this is done to workers.

I especially enjoyed the chapter on Walmart!

They still lock some of their workers in at night. Other tricks these companies use include: erasing overtime, not counting any hours past a certain number, no real benefits, contingent workers, part-time and permatemps, outsourcing jobs overseas (cheaper labor costs), etc.

I sort of knew a lot of these tricks. So I am reading this book to find solutions.

One argument I can now make is this: study after study shows that happy workers produce more and feel a commitment to their work place. And happy workers result when you treat them fairly -- good pay, benefits, vacation, retirement, etc.

The solid argument for doing this is: keep the turnover rate low.

Turnover costs these companies more than it is worth to most of them!

I will write again when I finish this book.

I am 2/3 of the way done now!

He is a great person and a great writer.

He has worked for the NY Times as their Labor reporter for years and years. Most newspapers do not even have them anymore!

Tom says

Mainly interviews but some useful data also. Written from a mainstream liberal point of view, and this is where some of my criticisms come in. at the end his solutions are only in terms of legislation or what political leaders can do, no emphasis on worker organizing or actions. the author is the labor reporter for the New York Times.

his solution for the inadequacies of the labor movement is to simply have the state regulate them even more closely...which means he's completely missed the ways the government is controlled by employers. he wants Congress to pass laws requiring unions to spend 25% of budget on organizing, 5% on education, to give examples. but this is a paternalistic approach that would deny to workers control over their own organizations.

he also thinks unions need to be more "cooperative" with employers. but in fact that is the traditional "business union" approach and it doesn't work. it leads to sell outs. the reasons unions have shrunk is not because union officials are not willing to "cooperate" but because the employers have decided they don't need the union leaders.

Shira says

I read this book for a discussion group at work, and I have to admit I wasn't too psyched to read it. I was afraid it would be another diatribe against Wal-Mart, and while I agree that Wal-Mart's labor practices are deplorable, I didn't feel the need to read another critique of them. But I was pleasantly surprised that the author went far beyond Wal-Mart to show that there are serious labor issues across multiple sectors and multiple levels of jobs. I was also pleasantly surprised to find that it was very well written. In another person's hands, this book could have been very dry reading, but since Greenhouse is a journalist, his writing is very accessible and engaging. He skillfully weaved anecdotes about individual workers in with discussions of larger historical trends and statistics. One of the other things I particularly appreciated about this book is

that he did include a chapter on companies that have good labor practices AND make a profit. Too often, these types of books only talk about the negative companies, without exploring models of how to do things better.

I think what struck me the most is that Greenhouse made it clear that the "big squeeze" is being felt fairly universally from hotel housekeepers to Wal-Mart managers, from assembly line workers to accountants. This is not at all to equate the problems of a low-paid Wal-Mart employee with that of an accountant, but just to show that in different ways, the culture of working 'till you drop is pervasive across the economy. He also did a good job of showing the ways that the pressure that managers feel then trickles down to how they treat their supervisees. For example, he tells the story of a former Wal-Mart manager who did things while she was there that she admits were wrong and she feels badly about. So he doesn't simply demonize the store managers who lock employees in at night or who change employee's work hours to cut costs, he shows how they are in turn getting pressured from above, which makes them act in ways that they know are unethical. I think that by showing that the big squeeze is affecting white collar workers as well as blue collar workers, he is hopefully helping to awaken all of us to the need to work together to stop egregious labor practices and to demand a better balance between our work time and personal time (i.e. people should not have to take their Blackberry on vacation with them!)

Angel says

I only rated this two stars, but it is not because it is a "bad" book. The rating is because this is an extremely depressing book. If you are a worker, you already know how bad you have it (unless you are one of those jingoistic workers who vote for right wingers even when it is against your interests). Greenhouse does two main things in this book. One, he has put together an extensive collection of stories from workers who have been exploited and screwed by their companies. And I do not mean just being stingy in terms of salaries. From spying on workers to not paying for medical claims for injuries sustained at work to outright sexual harassment, workers have faced it all. Two, Greenhouse gives a pretty good history lesson on how the United States got to the point where employers pretty much can get away with exploiting their workers.

The book is very prophetic if nothing else. This book was written just as Obama was elected, and a lot of what the author predicts or envisions in the book has come to pass. In some cases, things have in fact gotten worse since the book's publication. I found it particularly foreboding when he asks what would happen if a presidential candidate proposed something like universal health care, which certainly would go a long way to solve many of our issues. Well, we already know what happened: the new president proposed it, then he watered it down to almost nothing in order to appease an opposition party bent on obstruction and which just favors the wealthy. In other words, the guy folded like a cheap suit, to borrow the cliche.

If you are somewhat informed, you probably have heard many of the stories in this book, like some of the lawsuits Wal-Mart has faced. Greenhouse does not just pick on Wal-Mart (even though the company does get one whole chapter), but he looks at a lot of other miscreants from Big Box companies to small convenience stores and predatory Rent-to-own scheme stores, call centers, so on. The book does include extensive end notes for those who want to verify some of what they are reading.

This is a book that more people should be reading. It should specially serve as an eye-opener to workers. Sadly, those workers are probably too worried trying to barely make a living to read it. We know employers pretty much won't read it, and if they do, they will probably not give a hoot. Now don't get me wrong.

Greenhouse does highlight a few decent employers, but it is clear that those are few and far in between. And to those who may say that I have it for employers, think about this for a moment. Look at the current economic mess that bankers and Wall Street got us into combined with the fact that wages have been not only stagnant but decreasing (a lot of it due also to Wall Street pressures). Now, the economy relies on people spending. They can't spend if they do not have the money, and they won't have the money if you do not pay them for their work. There was an interesting quote in the book (I think I put it in one of the GR updates here) from Wal-Mart's current CEO, who apparently is a big GOP PAC donor, actually complaining that the Republican tax cuts under Bush went to the rich. Just think about that for a moment.

Overall, this is a necessary expose that needs to be read, even if it is painful and depressing at times.

Similar books: Off the top of my head, I would recommend *Big Box Swindle*, which I have read and reviewed here. It may be a bit more easy to read, and it looks at another side of the issues Greenhouse discusses. Another one may be *Deer Hunting with Jesus* which may help explain why workers often vote against their interests for people more interested in giving tax breaks to the rich (nothing against the rich. You make your money legally and honestly, cool. You want tax breaks you do not need at the expense of the rest of society, that is wrong).

Mark says

We have entered a new phase in the American Working Life in which profits are increased at the expense of the workers who help produce those profits. Unions (one of the few tools available to working people to improve their lot) are being dismantled through both legal and illegal means by corporations (WalMart has a rapid response team available to nip union activity in the bud). Corporations wield enormous influence in the government and that trend continues to increase. Companies depend on illegal immigrants to fill their workforce due to their low wages and complaint nature (those breaking the law don't tend to get "uppy").

Greenhouse describes these stories of those who are under the heel of the era of globalization. While it is often upsetting, it is necessary to tell those stories. The media ignores the plight of the working poor. Politicians spend a great deal of time talking about supporting the middle class, yet pass policies that engorge the wealthy. This is required reading for those concerned about their own deteriorating working conditions as globalization makes it easier for the wealthy to squeeze the working class.

ProgressiveBookClub says

A shocking tour of America's punishing world of work—and a call for a return to fairness and decency.

Times are tough and getting tougher for the American worker. It used to be that for an honest day's work you'd get a decent day's pay, a deal that in the three decades after World War II made America's middle class the most dynamic and prosperous in the world. But no longer. As Steven Greenhouse shows in this illuminating and often moving survey of the American workplace, in recent years wages have stagnated, benefits have shrunk or disappeared entirely, job security has given way to job anxiety, hours are longer and work is often more dangerous—even as corporate profits and economic growth have soared.

How did we get here? Globalization, immigration, Wall Street's profit mania, the rise of Wal-Mart, the

decline of labor unions, anti-worker government policies—there's more than one factor at play, but the bottom line is that most American workers, all across the country, have been squeezed dry. Greenhouse tells the often wrenching stories of software engineers, hotel housekeepers, call-center workers and janitors working hard but scraping by (if that), deprived of the means to live a life of dignity. But he also shows that it doesn't have to be this way. There are companies—Costco and Patagonia among them—who do right by their workers. And there are government policies—like raising the minimum wage, enforcing workplace regulations, going after union busters—that would hugely improve the lot of the American worker.

The Big Squeeze is at once a grim accounting of a national crisis, a ringing call for reform and a constructive manifesto for change.

Bap says

Steven Greenhouse is the labor reporter for the New York Times. There was a time when every paper had someone assigned to the labor beat but with the demise of labor unions, the vast increase in interest of covering business and investing, and the general erosion of reporters, labor has been a neglected area. There are only about 5 or 6 reporters in the entire country who cover labor. Greenhouse is terrific.

The big Squeeze is a little like the book Nickel and Dimed with first hand accounts of corporate greed: Wall Mart locking night workers in the building with no way out in the event of a emergency; companies routinely manipulating payroll records to erase hours and avoid overtime; and companies systematically shipping jobs overseas even when US factories were efficient and profitable but not as profitable as can be had with wages of a dollar an hour overseas.

But the Big Squeeze covers more ground and is full of statistics that are stunning. Workers with a high school education make five per cent less today than they did in 1979 when factoring in inflation. From 2000 to 2007 productivity rose nearly 3 per cent a year but employee compensation rose by only one per cent, and corporate profit rose 13 per cent. In 2005 the average CEO earned 369 times the average worker; up from 131 times in 1993 and 36 times in 1978. This is just a sampling. If this book does not make your blood boil, you need to check whether you have any blood.

Highly recommended

Jennifer Arnold says

If you're already seriously peeved at Wall Street (and, unless Warren Buffett is actually reading this, I imagine you are), Greenhouse's book isn't going to make you feel any better. His stories of American workers are by turns infuriating and depressing - rampant minimum wage abuses, tampering with hours to avoid overtime, harassment, abuse, and threats. The most heartbreaking are the stories of workers who give everything to their jobs to support their families, only to be heartlessly laid off, let go, retirement cut, health care denied - if you can think of it, it's happened to someone.

Tales of the reality of working in America are interwoven with economic history (the development of the company-worker-government social contract in the post-WWII era and its deconstruction, beginning in the 1980s...hey, remember those air traffic controllers?) and a ton of facts and statistics. Greenhouse is one of

those talented writers who pulls off the personal stories/hard facts balance, and is capable of making dry economic theory both understandable and interesting.

In the name of the shareholder, Greenhouse argues, American corporations have forsaken their employees. We've just gone through the only era in American history in which profits and productivity practically skyrocketed, and wages did not. In fact, the focus on Wall Street concerns (and the corresponding issues of globalization and the general weakening of labor unions), are slowly but surely eroding the middle class...wage stagnation and depression are serious issues, and we may very well be dooming future generation's ability to rise into the middle class, all in the name of short-term profit. And retirement? Forget about it, we're all working until we drop dead.

Greenhouse shows that it didn't use to be like this, and doesn't have to be (he does write about some companies - Costco, Patagonia - who do treat workers well, and whose gains in productivity and small turnover are well worth the money spent on wages and health care).

A great, interesting read - and, if you have a decent job, makes you glad you do.

Jenny says

I think this book is a good overview of what's happening in our country, particularly to workers. It has the usual Wal-Mart is evil stuff (plus a bunch of other companies). He gave a lot of information and statistics about what workers are experiencing, from layoffs, low wages, workplace fraud, to expensive costs for higher education and health care. He also highlights some companies that are doing it right and pointed out that economically they're not worse off. Greenhouse also discussed the history of the American worker and the history of many workplace policies. For someone who knows their stuff about economics and the history of the American worker and the American middle class, this may be too basic, but for me it was just right. At the end he gives his recommendations about how to fix the problems he sees, I'd be curious to hear how people knowledgeable in those fields (like health care reform, unions, etc.) see his commentary.

E says

American Workers on Life Support

A perfect storm is battering the American worker. Blue-collar and white-collar jobs are moving overseas while America's economy lags and its immigrant population expands. Given the quality of this report, getAbstract surmises that few individuals are more suited to address this precarious situation than Steven Greenhouse, who has covered workplace issues for The New York Times since 1995. Writing with clarity and simplicity, Greenhouse illustrates the plight of the American worker with first-hand accounts of mistreatment and misfortune. He offers some solutions at the end of the book, but he finds only a few patches of optimism in the bleak landscape he portrays so capably.

Jason says

It's an amazing book. It really made me angrier than usual when you see how every American and immigrant

worker (legal or undocumented) in America is treated. I start to wonder what would happen if say a company in a country in Europe (with universal healthcare) were to start seeing how valuable the American workforce could be and started to import some of its workers. Which would hopefully lead to more people leaving.

I mean they should seriously think about it. Why should we be loyal to a country and its corporations when they do nothing to protect or help us? They outsource and offshore not only manufacturing jobs but also the high-tech jobs which leaves us no chance. Many of us can't even afford a college education or healthcare anymore. It would be better to pay taxes and support a government that would value its workforce.

Kate says

A scathing rundown of trends that affect workers, including unionbusting, decline in real wages, and twentysomethings on track to do worse than their parents, illustrated with in-depth profiles. Some of Greenhouse's prescriptions for change are predictably idealistic ("change the national conversation about workers") but I especially liked his detailed suggestions around retirement security. While the nasty things corporations do to their workers get plenty of airtime, profiles of companies who do things differently prove capital's not the enemy, and shortsighted/lazy union leadership gets called on the carpet as well. Another quibble: the fix-it chapter lists a number of things unions should be "required" to do including budget allocations, but it's not clear who requires them--their coalitions, individual unions internally or is Greenhouse proposing massive regulation?

Amanda says

Yeah I didn't get far with this one. So some New York Times writer with an Ivy League degree singles out the most down-and-out American workers and then writes a book saying this is how the entire American economic landscape looks like? There are definitely flaws in the way things are now, but maybe instead of some naive journalist offering some pat solutions toward the end of a biased book, he or she should visit countries where some of those solutions are in effect. Though he or she would probably just highlight the best examples of European style social welfare to make his or her point. I just can't stand this Barbara Ehrenreich style of journalism where one thinks they get the whole story by examining a very small sliver of life and then generalizing the experience for all of society. It's so obvious most of these authors have never had blue-collar jobs until they decided to write these books...and that the only reason they would ever associate with the trailer-park crowd would involve promoting some book that makes them appear enlightened and egalitarian.

Ac says

really depressing book with awful stories about workers getting screwed by corporations. i didn't like the author's insistence on using descriptive language when referring to the people mentioned in the book. i.e "Maria was a voluptuous woman with full pouting lips, long silky black hair, light brown eyes and the softest skin imaginable." or "Jake was a mountain of a man with bulging biceps"... it was so weird and annoying to keep reading these little character intros right before u find out that Maria worked 80 hours a week for 120\$, or that Jake lost his legs in a coal mine accident. paraphrasing of course.. did not like this book at all and i fully regret reading it.

