

BOOK REVIEW

Free labor: Workfare and the contested language of neoliberalism, by John Krinsky, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 333 pp., US\$29.00 (paperback), ISBN 0226453669

In *Free Labor*, John Krinsky reviews the expansion and political shifts in New York City's Work Experience Program (WEP). The book presents the organization and strategies of the anti-WEP social movement, along with its impact on workfare from an interdisciplinary perspective. The study of political activism in *Free Labor* is based on political, economic, organizational, cultural, and cognitive theories, and emphasizes the more general interactions between welfare-state governance and the challenges from grassroots opponents. By examining the approaches advocated and adopted in the anti-WEP movement, Krinsky provides an in-depth explanation of the effectiveness of these approaches against neoliberal policies in terms of workfare.

WEP was expanded rapidly in the 1990s under Mayor Giuliani's administration. Welfare recipients were required to do work previously done by unionized municipal workers. However, WEP/workfare workers were denied the legal status of employees, made far less money, and enjoyed fewer rights than their counterparts employed by the city. Krinsky argues that WEP was part of a broader neoliberal policy emphasizing short-term cost cutting at the expense of long-term community benefits.

To better understand the resistance against WEP, *Free Labor* integrates the macro-level institutional struggle over workfare with micro-level interviews with WEP workers. Krinsky describes the formation of the anti-WEP movement coalition and the spillover effects in policy areas beyond workfare. He is particularly concerned with individuals in the coalition, as well as the obstacles and opportunities anti-WEP activists encountered. *Free Labor* identifies the mechanism through the relations among political actors, their claims, and the changing context to develop effective strategies addressing neoliberal workfare policies. Centered on "Real Jobs, Not WEP," the concise political claims of WEP workers, *Free Labor* introduces several innovative models of cognition to depict the mechanisms in the broader system that functioned against WEP.

Free Labor adds to other studies on urban social movements that have emerged since the 1970s, such as *City Trenches*, *Poor People's Movements*, and *From Mobilization to Revolution*. The book deepens and broadens the exploration of the dynamics of anti-workfare politics and the ways in which political actors make sense of their own actions. Krinsky's analysis of how activists within anti-WEP organizations changed their minds about the claim-making strategies greatly contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Of particular interest is the book's treatment of the complex relationships among political coalitions of anti-WEP activists. Krinsky's characterization of coalitions as either *hard assemblies* or *soft assemblies* provides a novel way to explore the rationale, function, and interplay of social movement coalitions. Hard-assembled coalitions are networks in which formal coordinated action, joint fund-raising, and centralized planning predominate, while soft-assembled coalitions function as loosely joined networks, where personal acquaintance and shared information form the principal ties in the network.

Although *Free Labor* focuses on a case study of the anti-WEP movement in New York City, its findings and approaches to analyzing coalition building have applications in other urban contexts, both in the US and internationally. The book provides a sound methodological approach

to explore the mechanism in social inequality and offers innovative strategies to help oppressed groups gain rights in a neoliberal world.

Free Labor adds to our understanding of the political interplay behind neoliberal governance and systematically analyzes the cultural and cognitive aspects of political activism. It allows readers to take a close look at first-hand information from contemporary approaches of welfare-state governance and social movement organized by grassroots political coalitions.

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