

american people see their standard of living decline, as fewer and fewer of us have health care, as pensions crumble into dusts and the social safety net becomes a fond memory, we wonder: Why is this happening? Fifty six million people would join a Labor union tomorrow if it wouldn't cost them their job. The most serious problem facing the country is the decline of Labor unions, and Dr. Tait knows why. Unions became bureaucratized and inflexible and could not withstand the onslaught of government and institutional persecution. Out of this wreckage, Dr. Tait explains why and how some unions and organizations were able to succeed in a time of failure. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of recent economic and social history, she has a shrewd insight into politics and group dynamics and she writes clearly and lucidly. This book ought to be required reading for every working person in the country. With American workers under attack on virtually every front, the time to stand up is now and this book shows how and where.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Great Concept, Unsatisfactory Execution
By James R. Maclean
I love the idea of this book. It is extremely timely, in the sense that it addresses circumstances that are faced by a growing percentage of the labor force in the developed world. Anyone curious--or skeptical--about this claim may want to read *The Big Squeeze (Greenhouse)*. To put it bluntly, a giant proportion of workers are being reduced to lumpen status by restructuring and mass layoffs. Poor workers are inherently difficult to organize because of the very conditions that make them poor: the work may be transient, the conditions informal, the workers subject to sanction, or the work sites physically isolated. Workfare and prison labor (utilized by the private sector) are forms of difficult-to-organize labor that have been created by willful state policy. In many cases, Ms. Tait does a good (or excellent) job of explaining the complexities and challenges faced by the organizers or organized, as with workfare abuse by several states. Where the book falls short is helpful narrative or analysis. Organized into representative case studies (a reasonable choice, for the subject matter), the accounts of determined planning and organization all sound like inspirational chain emails. A group of people suffering dreadful exploitation and hopeless prospects suddenly muster together the courage to stand up for themselves. Entrenched bureaucrats at the racist establishment union tell them it can't be done, but the [aforementioned group] believe in themselves and triumph in some deeply inspiring way... proving something vague and obvious. A few times she presents enough facts to permit the reader to draw her own conclusions. Mine were that the challenges of organizing desperate workers vary widely; what works varies a lot, depending on issues like the potential solidarity of the worker cohort involved, the nature of the employer, and the methods of industrial action available. I regret that she didn't discuss in greater detail the effects of lawbreaking/civil disobedience by desperate organizers, because outright criminalization is a common obstacle faced by her protagonists. But she seems to place such a high value on the mere fact of having stood up to authority, that she tends to gloss over (in my opinion) the consequences of doing so in an ill-advised way. The book has many strengths, all the same. It covers a lot of ground and is based on first-hand interviews with participants (which probably explains the tribute-like nature of the narrative: Ms. Tait sounds like she befriended her subjects); it has a lot of sources that can be checked for greater specificity--in regards to, say, concessions won, or subsequent developments. Ms. Tait does contribute something to the study of such a broad topic by observing general trends in organizing, like the mutable nature of activist groups (which can morph into unions and morph back out). I would say that it is definitely a worthwhile read for anyone determined to raise consciousness about activism generally.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. An inspiring book about grassroots labor organizing
By Roxanne MA
wonderful tour through movements for economic justice since the 1960s, covering decades of good organizing work by civil rights, feminist, immigrant and anti-poverty groups. Many of these worked outside the boundaries of the "official" labor movement, creating inventive local and sometimes national unions to fight for improved wages and working conditions along with issues like affordable housing, decent health care, and social and economic equality for women, immigrants and people of color. The author pays careful attention to the dynamics of race, ethnicity and gender within labor and community groups, and shows how diversity can be a great asset in building stronger movements. This important book should be read by anyone trying to understand labor's historical development and future direction. An enjoyable read!

A classic account of low-wage workers' organization that the US Department of Labor calls one of the 100 books that has shaped work in America. As low-wage organizing campaigns have been reignited by the Fight for 15 movement and other workplace struggles, *Poor Workers' Unions* is as prescient as ever.

"This is a wonderfully sunny history of recent efforts to bring the social justice commitments and tactical innovations of community organizing to the labor movement, and especially to the ranks of low wage workers."—Frances Fox Piven, co-author of *Poor People's Movements*
"This updated and revised edition of *Poor Workers' Unions* provides entry into a multi-racial and multi-ethnic multitude of struggles inside and outside the union movement. It remains essential reading for students, scholars, and people who want to make their own history by organizing."—Michael Honey, author of *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign*
"Poor Workers' Unions is a much-needed reinterpretation of the labor movement since the 1960s. Vanessa Tait offers an expansive notion of both the meaning of labor and labor organizing—those who worked in

traditional and non-traditional venues, for pay or not, nearly all of whom understood class as intimately bound up with race, gender and ethnicity. This book offers hope and a vision for building a broad-based workers' movement. It is essential reading for anyone who cares about social justice or the future of the labor movement."—Premilla Nadasen, author of *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*"As working people seek to envision a new labor movement, they will find invaluable inspiration in the hidden history of social justice unionism revealed in Vanessa Tait's *Poor Workers' Unions*."—Jeremy Brecher, author of *Strike!* and *Climate Insurgency: A Strategy for Survival*"This updated edition of *Poor Workers' Unions* more than provides a useable past for today's 'Alt-labor' taxi drivers, domestic workers, freelancers, fast food servers, retail clerks, and day laborers. Vanessa Tait shows that another labor movement is possible, one rooted in racial, gender, immigrant, and economic justice, that bridges community and workplace. In offering strategic lessons and inspiring stories, she envisions a brighter future for the people made by the people for all."—Eileen Boris, co-author of *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State*"Vanessa Tait's *Poor Workers' Unions*, upon its original publication a classic of incisive history and lucid interpretation, now reappears at a crucial moment, as the demographic transformation of the working class accelerates. The threat of worsening conditions stands alongside the urgency and the possibility of new organizing. Tait's thorough revisions, Fletcher's foreword, and Tzintzun's afterword add vital updates and reminders. Buy this book and give it to your friends."—Paul Buhle, labor historian and editor of a dozen radical comic books"With gripping tales of grassroots experiments in social justice unionism from the 1960s to the present, Vanessa Tait cracks wide open our concept of what a labor movement looks like, and shows how it can be part and parcel of movements for racial and gender justice. In the process, she does a stunning job of helping us imagine workers' movements that are creative, democratic, and, above all, build power from below—pointing the way to a vibrant future for labor."—Dana Frank, UC Santa Cruz"*Poor Workers' Unions* makes a critical contribution to the current debate about how unions can survive, in open shop conditions, as voluntary membership organizations. Vanessa Tait emphasizes the importance of building workplace power through grassroots organization and rank-and-file control. This book reminds us that greater 'participatory democracy'—a concept that animated progressive activism in the 1960s—should be the goal of labor and community organizing today."—Steve Early, former organizer for the Communications Workers of America and author of *Save Our Unions*"While the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions desperately try to figure out how to rebuild and energize the labor movement, Vanessa Tait reveals in this exceptional book that poor workers have been showing the way for the past forty years. Tait examines and analyzes in meticulous detail a wide range of movements organized by poor workers to improve their circumstances and build a more just society. She demonstrates that these movements were founded and developed upon principles of rank-and-file control, democracy, community involvement, and solidarity and aimed to improve all aspects of workers' lives. These are precisely the principles and aims upon which a new labor movement must be based but which the official labor movement has been slow to embrace. Both labor activists and labor historians will learn much from this book."—Michael Yates, author of *The Great Inequality and Why Unions Matter*"As existing unions continue to bottom out and search fitfully for an answer to declining power and influence, Vanessa Tait's *Poor Workers' Unions* reveals the significance of successful labor organizational forms that demand our attention and understanding. Tait demonstrates that organizations with deep roots in communities are essential in paving the way for a more robust union movement in the United States. Bill Fletcher Jr. provides a compelling new foreword assessing challenges ahead as the US working class and trade unions seek to build a counterforce to the rapacious capitalist system. *Poor Workers' Unions* is essential reading for organizers and students of the American labor movement."—Immanuel Ness, author of *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class* and professor at City University of New York"*Poor Workers' Unions* is an important and inspiring book about how workers of color and women workers are taking the lead in building democratic, grassroots labor and community movements even in today's hostile political climate."—Karen Brodtkin Sacks, Professor of Women's Studies and Anthropology, UCLA"Vanessa Tait has made a critical contribution to broadening our understanding of who and what is the labor movement in the US. With detail, analysis, and a compelling writing style, Tait captures the dynamism of alternative forms of working-class organization that have long been ignored. In formulating a new direction for organized labor in the US, the history Tait addresses must become a recognized part of our foundation."—Bill Fletcher, Jr., President, TransAfrica Forum and former assistant to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney"At a time when the US labor movement is engaging in an unprecedented public debate over the course of its future—over what course will best assure that it has a future—one of the luckiest breaks we could hope for would be for an informed and talented labor communicator to publish a book that not only advocates a focus that has been missing from the discussion, but also lays out the evidence of the past four decades for why this focus is critical to our success. *Poor Workers' Unions* does all that. This is the most important contribution yet to the current debate over the smartest direction for the labor movement's future."—David Swanson, International Labor Communications Association, formerly Communications Coordinator for ACORN"Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic won't revive the labor movement. *Poor Workers' Unions* examines some of the most exciting and impressive attempts to develop new forms to incorporate workers whom unions have largely neglected. Vanessa Tait makes a valuable contribution to the new impulse by showing us

the struggles already underway."—Dan Clawson, author of *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*"Vanessa Tait's insightful documentation of poor people's organizing and the labor movement over the last fifty years reminds us of this important history. *Poor Workers' Unions* is evidence that activism is not dead but has been rejuvenated under a broader justice agenda that addresses women and men's everyday lives."—Mary Romero, author of *Maid in the U.S.A.* "History has shown that periods of insurgence in the labor movement have been driven by workers who were formerly marginalized by the existing labor movement and that these workers have organized themselves and built institutions which differ markedly from existing unions. Tait's *Poor Workers' Unions* documents the contemporary recurrence of this historical pattern. The picture to which she gives us access offers hope to those of us who continue to anticipate a turnaround in the fortunes of the US labor movement."—Peter Rachleff, author of *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement*"An impeccably researched book, *Poor Workers' Unions* will be of great interest to labor scholars, students, and activists. A strength of this book is that it disrupts the hegemony of whiteness and the (re)colonial mindset plaguing the labor movement."—Dan Irving, of *Radical Political Economics*"Stirred from sleep by its own near death and by relentless prodding from the activists whose work Tait chronicles, labor is rediscovering the shopfloor power and community magnetism of social justice unionism. Its most compelling vision now comes from veterans of poor workers' unions. Through their hard-won advances, those veterans have gained both the authority to reform unions from within and the resources to run bold organizing drives, such as *Justice for Janitors* and *Hotel Workers Rising*, among low-wage service workers, largely men of color and women."—Nancy MacLean, Professor of Arts Sciences, Duke University and author of *The American Women's Movement: 1945-2000*"Tait persuasively demonstrates that organized labor quickly strayed from its grassroots rank and file beginnings, becoming instead a conservative, class-based bureaucracy bent on the status quo and dismissive not only on poor workers but also of the real needs of workers everywhere—needs that stretch far beyond wages and benefits to encompass such social justice issues as welfare, childcare, housing, and immigrant rights as well as race and gender both in the workplace and community."—*Altar Magazine*