

## BOOK REVIEW

Pérez Ahumada, Pablo. *Building Power to Shape Labor Policy: Unions, Employer Associations, and Reform in Neoliberal Chile*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. 224 pp.; hardcover, \$55.00.

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Latin America has undergone transformations of varying degrees in its labor legislation over the past two decades. Politicians, technocrats, unions, entrepreneurs, and informal workers have mobilized in country-specific ways to advocate for changes or preserve existing labor rights. The trajectory of labor relations follows a broader historical arc, beginning with the introduction of workers' rights legislation in several Southern Cone countries in the early twentieth century and continuing through the neoliberal shifts that reshaped much of the region by the 1990s. These changes, besides being politically crucial, have also sparked a rich body of academic research aimed at understanding them. Studies by Murillo (2001), Cook (2010), or Carnes (2014) come to mind. Or, further back in time, works from comparative perspectives, such as those by Bergquist (1986) or Collier and Collier (1991). "Building Power to Shape Labor Policy" is part of this tradition in its quest to understand how unions and employers' associations negotiate reforms in contemporary Chilean experience.

Pérez Ahumada proposes new lenses to approach this subject matter. Critically drawing on the power resources approach, the author emphasizes the processes "through which workers and capitalists organize to influence the policymaking process" (p. 4). The book aims to look beyond conventional factors such as labor market dynamics, deindustrialization trends, authoritarian legacies, or state capacity in promoting and defending reforms. Instead, *Building Power to Shape Labor Policy* observes a crucial aspect of class relations, related to associational power, seen through the mobilization capacity of employers' associations and workers' confederations. The book's central argument is that labor laws and their interpretations emerge from negotiations between actors with varying levels of influence and capability. Its main contribution lies in understanding in detail the strategies that actors use to enhance their capabilities. More specifically, the author analyzes both historical processes, such as attempts to reform the Chilean Labor Plan during the 1990s, and recent developments related to the difficulties in implementing progressive reforms during this century. Internal processes in the CUT (Workers' United Center of Chile) and CPC (Confederation of Production and Commerce), Chile's main union and business associations, are examined in detail here. Finally, the author proposes reading the Chilean case from a comparative perspective, considering the Argentine and Uruguayan experiences, to demonstrate the strength of his approach.

The book's strength resides in three aspects. First, because the Chilean situation is fascinating, given its trajectory of democratization and economic growth, intertwined with labor conflicts at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The author provides a much-needed systematic analysis of this case, approaching it from both a historical perspective—examining the lingering effects of the Pinochet dictatorship on labor relations—and a contemporary lens, revealing how various actors interpret their experiences against a backdrop of social change. The intriguing nature of the case implies a greater challenge given the abundance of studies on the world of work in Chile, one of the most dynamic fields in Latin American academic discussion. This leads to the second noteworthy aspect of the book: its meticulous and comprehensive presentation of evidence. The

author engages and discusses political and academic debates, offering a nuanced understanding of the actors involved and their strategies. It's a work that not only dialogues with global theoretical literature—stemming from the author's dissertation at a US university—but also contributes meaningfully to national issues, striking a balance between academic rigor and political relevance.

Third, the book has great merit in narrating the history of both business and labor organizations. Nearly 60 interviews with key actors, including union leaders, representatives from the business sector, and government officials, allow for mapping critical processes. To enrich this qualitative data, the author incorporates available statistical information providing deeper insights into mobilization and recruitment strategies. In a notable departure from typical Latin American labor studies, the book offers a comprehensive look at the business sector. It doesn't just examine them as an opposing force but it focuses on their self-perception and organizational dynamics. This approach allows for an analysis of business leadership and the factors contributing to its resilience, even during periods of center-left governance. Similarly, while the CUT has been the subject of previous studies, this book brings a fresh perspective, as it focuses on its decision-making processes and internal tensions, an approach that effectively challenges the tendency to portray workers as mere victims.

This book offers valuable insights into current processes of social change, particularly in contexts where leftist governments struggle to advance labor reforms. One of its striking contributions is challenging the assumption that ties between left-wing parties and unions necessarily lead to better legislation for workers. Instead, the author demonstrates that final outcomes depend on the power unions build to carry out sustainable changes. This argument is particularly relevant when considering the effects of President Boric's rise to power in Chile, or processes of legislative reforms in Brazil or Colombia under progressive governments. The analytical perspective on business associations helps readers understand how abrupt legislative transformations can occur even in the absence of major ideological shifts within the government. One might consider, for instance, the 2020 Agrarian Law in Peru, where labor legislation was modified after three decades without a leftist government: understanding the weak associative power of the agro-export elite seems crucial to grasping the dynamics at play.

In summary, "Building Power to Shape Labor Policy" raises important questions about potential labor reforms and offers novel lenses for examining union and business actors. While providing rich evidence on the Chilean case, its implications extend far beyond. Readers interested in labor changes, the Chilean context, or broader processes of legislative reforms in Latin America will find this book a valuable resource for reflection.

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