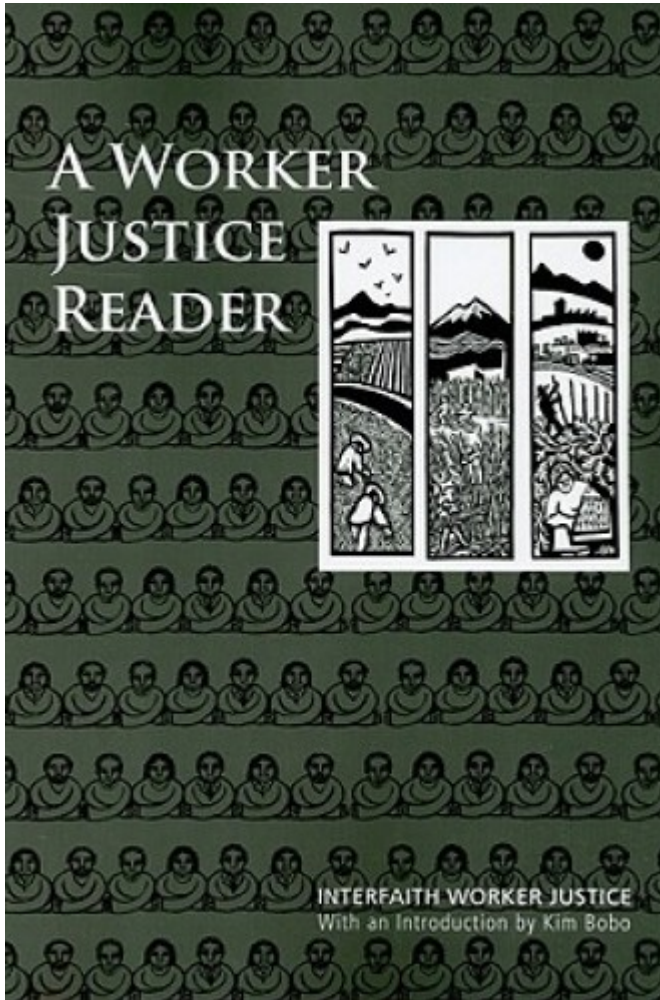


A Review of A Worker Justice Reader

reviewed by [Richard W. Gillett](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

In Review



A Worker Justice Reader

Compiled by Interfaith Worker Justice
Orbis

This very timely book appears when over 27 percent of the U.S. workforce is unemployed or underemployed and the workplace is becoming increasingly

oppressive and pressurized for those workers who still have a job. And this is a time when union membership is at historically low levels—about 12.3 percent of the total workforce, with less union membership in the private sector.

Interfaith Worker Justice, a national worker advocacy group based in Chicago, gathered these 30 essays. The book provides a comprehensive and detailed look at the globalization-era workplace from the perspective of American workers and their struggles for justice.

The volume unabashedly affirms the role of unions in the struggle for worker justice, and it offers hope for the struggle ahead. After a significant hiatus of religious involvement in labor struggles after about 1960 (with the standout exception of the farm worker justice movement), religion-labor collaboration is now very much on the rise. A decade ago Interfaith Worker Justice began to partner with the AFL-CIO to develop the first Seminary Summer program. Similar college and seminary internship programs have since blossomed in Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston and elsewhere. Now more than 50 worker centers and worker justice projects are affiliated with IWJ—and many more are informally connected.

The book will be useful and inspirational not only for seminary teachers and their students but also for pastors, rabbis and imams (it includes faith and labor statements from Jewish and Muslim traditions). As a longtime activist for worker justice I've been amazed at how little pastors know about the work life and conditions of their congregations and how little they have thought about labor issues theologically. The reader makes clear that a theology of work has fundamental application to the concerns of worker justice.

At least since Luther and Calvin remarkably coherent theologies of work have been in evidence. Papal encyclicals since the late 19th century have shone a light on issues of work in the modern economy. Pope John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*, the most outstanding theology-of-work document of the late 20th century, is explicated in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 1986 statement *The Christian Vision of Economic Life*, which is included in the reader.

A couple of minor quibbles: As one who has frequently been involved over the years in campaigns in support of undocumented immigrants, I wish the IWJ reader's essay on the topic was more focused on the experience and plight of immigrants and less academic and theoretical. Also, the reader includes the Economic Policy Institute's

labor summary for 2007. But the institute's 2009 summary—if it was available by the book's press deadline—would have provided more recent and even more devastating economic information.

Whether used selectively by religious activists seeking basic information about current opportunities in which to become involved or as a textbook in college or seminary classes on social justice, *A Worker Justice Reader* is an excellent resource.