[Review of the book *Labor Regulation in the Global Economy*]

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Abstract

This is a practical and useful volume on labor standards in today's highly globalized world. An introduction is followed by ten chapters, some of them general, talking about the ILO or the WTO, and some more specific, focusing on the United States and Europe. The general chapters cover the ILO, corporate codes of conduct, efforts to introduce labor standards into the multilateral trade regime, arguments for and against labor standards in trade, and policy implications. The specific chapters cover U.S. initiatives on child labor, labor standards in the bilateral trade agreements entered into by the United States and the European Union, labor standards among the European Union member countries, and NAFTA.

Keywords

labor standards, globalization, trade, policy, United States, Europe

Disciplines

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Comments

Suggested Citation


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Labor Regulation in the Global Economy. By George Tsogas. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001. 216 pp. ISBN 0-7656-0557-8, $64.95 (cloth); 0-7656-0558-9, $22.95 (paper).

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The strength of the book is its combination of sound institutional description with strong opinions and judgments. Regarding the latter, I do not agree with all of Tsogas’s views—in particular, I take exception to the two-page critique of me, which I thought misrepresented the approach I have taken to labor standards. I found the coverage to be imbalanced in places: for instance, six pages on the GE and Honeywell cases in NAFTA versus one page on the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work—arguably the most important development in labor standards in decades—and no mention at all of the ILO’s pathbreaking “Decent Work” initiative. Occasionally, the volume wanders off in strange directions, such as in the subsection “Any Role for ‘HR’ in HR?” where the author talks about the core competencies of HR professionals in handling an ethics policy. Was it a slip of the pen (or the keyboard) when the author referred to the HR function as the “human rights” function? Still, this is a book that I would recommend to newcomers to the subject and to more experienced practitioners alike.

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Is it possible to promote the cross-border movement of goods, capital, commodities, and information—as provided by the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 (NAFTA)—yet exclude the free movement of labor? Focusing explicitly on the U.S.–Mexico relationship, the authors say “no.” Regional economic integration inevitably means greater labor mobility between the two nations. Efforts by the United States to maintain and enforce its immigration policies are not only doomed, but deceitful. Politicians, it is alleged, know that immigration laws are ineffective and enacted “largely for political purposes” (p. 2).

Stripped of its qualitative reasoning and quantitative data manipulations, this study asserts that the most fundamental premise of post-1965 U.S. immigration policy—that all countries should be treated equally by its terms—as both unrealistic and absurd. Mexico, the authors contend, should be considered a “special case” and treated accordingly. To the degree there is a perceived problem of illegal immigration from Mexico, the authors assign fault to U.S. immigration policy in general and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) in particular. The United States should recognize this reality; capitulate; and redesign its immigration policies to accommodate these circumstances.

As sociologists, the authors reject neoclassical economics with its reliance on simple, individual cost-benefit calculations to explain Mexican emigration to the United States. The process is far more complex, they say. Migration decisions stem from social capital considerations that are often made collectively by families and sometimes entire communities. They are the product of social networking systems. Prospective remittances to family members left behind also frequently figure.

In most studies of international labor migration, “push factors” are also cited as critical. In that vein, the authors carefully document the gross incompetence, intentional malfeasance, and criminal corruption of most twentieth-cen-