

## Book Review

**Bogliaccini, J.A. (2024) *Empowering Labour: Leftist Approaches to Wage Policy in Unequal Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781-0094335-25 240 pp. US\$105.00 (hardcover).**

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*Empowering Labour* presents a meticulous analysis of the political dynamics that shape how and when centre-left governments employ wage policy as a pre-distributive strategy to promote equality and inclusion. The book's central argument, articulated in Chapter 2, is that the form and scope of wage policies are determined by two primary factors: the degree of unity between Left parties and labour's political legitimacy. These factors, in turn, are shaped by the long-term strategies of elites toward labour. Such strategies create path dependencies, influencing "differential opportunities for further options down the road" (p. 2).

The empirical evidence supporting this argument is drawn from a comparative study of Chile, Portugal and Uruguay. Through diverse sources – including archival materials, documents from labour unions, business associations and state institutions, as well as interviews with key informants such as labour leaders, employers, state officials and experts – Bogliaccini demonstrates how these countries exemplify three qualitatively distinct approaches to combining predistributive instruments with redistribution.

The first part of this historical and causal account, presented in Chapter 3, explores how elites in these countries developed divergent strategies toward labour inclusion in the early 20th century. Chilean elites adopted a strategy of "elite-based contention", while Portuguese and Uruguayan elites pursued "controlled coordination" and "consociationalism", respectively. These strategies fostered distinct political practices – such as labour recognition, representation and participation in representative associations – that defined the degree of "empowered inclusion" of labour. Although none of these strategies survived the neoliberal and post-authoritarian transitions intact, Bogliaccini persuasively argues that they remain resilient, continuing to shape the power constellations between labour and capital. For instance, this historical legacy explains why labour legislation in Chile is notably more labour-repressive than in Portugal or Uruguay.

The second part of the analysis, detailed in Chapter 4, examines the critical role of Left unity in determining the use of wage policy as a predistributive instrument. Bogliaccini argues that unified Left parties are more likely to moderate labour activism – such as wage militancy – thereby increasing the likelihood of employing wage policy (for example, Uruguay). Conversely, when the Left is fragmented, governments face greater challenges in managing activism and are less inclined to use wage policy, relying instead on minimum wage adjustments and redistributive policies to address inequality (for example, Chile).

Bogliaccini's findings underscore the causal primacy of Left unity over two other sources of

conflict highlighted in the literature: the type of party-union relationship and intra-union rivalries (see Carnes, 2014; Cook, 2007; Etchemendy, 2011; Murillo, 2001; Pérez-Ahumada, 2024). Building on this foundation, Chapter 5 explores the outcomes of these political dynamics. Focusing on the role of wage policy as a redistributive instrument following transitions to democracy and free-market economies, the chapter elucidates why, aside from minimum wage policies, wage policy is only deployed when governments have the capacity to balance office-seeking strategies with labour empowerment. In such cases, governments successfully transition wage-setting mechanisms from decentralized, individual-level arrangements to centralized, mandatory frameworks.

Bogliaccini's analysis highlights the key differences among the three countries. In Chile, power dynamics during the Concertación governments left little room for wage policy, leading to a reliance on a "left-liberal strategy" centred almost exclusively on administratively set minimum wages. By contrast, in Portugal and Uruguay, historical political dynamics enabled leftist governments to adopt strategies of "state-led concertation" and "neo-corporatist policymaking", respectively. Portugal institutionalized labour's influence through consultation, while Uruguay embraced a tripartite, consensual income policy approach grounded in coalitional politics, mandatory centralized bargaining, and the empowered inclusion of labour.

Bogliaccini's approach makes two significant contributions to the literature. First, it enriches the study of working-class politics and redistributive policies by arguing that Left unity holds causal primacy over traditionally emphasized factors such as party-union relationships and intra-union rivalries. While this argument invites further exploration, it adds a critical dimension to existing scholarship by highlighting how Left unity shapes the adoption of wage policies as redistributive instruments. This nuanced perspective, rooted in robust comparative analysis, not only advances our understanding of labour policy dynamics but also provides a valuable framework for assessing political strategies aiming for economic inclusion and equality.

Second, the book underscores the enduring significance of wage policy as a tool in the repertoire of leftist governments seeking to achieve equality. This insight is particularly relevant for analysts and policymakers, who often focus on redistributive policies – those addressing inequalities post facto through mechanisms such as taxation – while overlooking the redistributive potential of wage policy.

In sum, *Empowering Labour* is an essential contribution for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the intricate political dynamics underpinning wage policies and their pivotal role in advancing economic equality.

## References

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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