

McCallum, Jamie K. (2022) *Essential: How the Pandemic Transformed the Long Fight for Worker Justice*. Basic Books.

Review by Michael Zweig

Jamie McCallum has written the first book-length overview addressing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the U.S. labor force. Based on surveys of over 700 workers in jobs deemed ‘essential’ as the pandemic broke out and spread across the country, and in-depth interviews with 100 of them, McCallum takes the reader deep into the contradictory realities of those jobs. On the one hand, political leaders and the public hailed essential workers as heroes, for months hanging out of windows every evening at seven banging pots and pans. On the other hand, essential workers were subject to life-threatening, often life-ending, conditions of work with utter disregard for their safety and mental health.

In April 2020 almost one-third of U.S. workers were considered ‘essential,’ those whose work was necessary for public health and safety, including the orderly delivery of basic services. These jobs could not be done remotely: grocery and drugstore workers; those providing child care, building services, and trucking; letter carriers and warehouse workers, and tens of thousands in meat-processing. McCallum reports that even before the pandemic more than two-thirds of these workers were economically distressed, making less than \$14.50 an hour. The majority were women and people of color.

McCallum makes several major points. First, the ill treatment of these workers arises from the capitalist system, which routinely disregards the health and safety of all workers. He provides a host of examples of pre-pandemic neo-liberal employment policies that cut staffing levels to bare minimums to boost corporate profits. When the pandemic hit, workers in health care, meat processing, and transportation could not be spared from work even when they got sick because there was no slack in the system. Trump’s Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia actually sabotaged the protections OSHA might normally have provided in the crunch. He refused to issue any Covid-specific directives to protect workers in any industry, while, astonishingly, ‘OSHA conducted 44 percent fewer workplace inspections from March to December 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, when there was no raging pandemic’ (127).

While this vicious disregard for workers is appalling, McCallum reminds us that neo-liberal structural policies before the pandemic had already starved public health institutions, closed hundreds of hospitals in rural areas, limited medical and nursing home care in urban consolidations, and more generally gutted public services and government regulation of industry. McCallum wants us to understand that the crisis was not only a matter of the personal failings of President Trump and his officials. It was the result of the success in corporate restructuring of the economy over the past fifty years.

McCallum goes on to point out a different aspect of the story. As the pandemic intensified, essential workers rebelled in many creative ways, often uniting across occupations. The Labor Department records strikes only when they are ‘major work stoppages’ involving more than 1,000 workers lasting a day or more. Almost all Covid strikes were much smaller. A few -- like the walkout led by Chris Smalls at the JFK8 Amazon facility on Staten Island over basic safety demands as Covid began to spread -- caught national attention when workers there successfully organized a union in response to management’s firing of Smalls and others who led the strike. Most strikes, however, remained under the radar of national consciousness. Nonetheless, thousands of labor actions by hundreds of thousands of nurses, teachers, and other essential workers evidenced a growing labor militancy. In addition, these struggles began to articulate links between economic, racial, and gender justice in the economy.

Sometimes, essential workers supported each other across occupational lines, but too often, McCallum documents, divisions arose among workers that thwarted class-wide unity. ‘Differences among essential workers strained unity on the front lines. The classic sociological dividing lines of race, gender, and immigration status were in some sense less significant barriers than other pandemic-specific obstacles’ (p.52). Political divisions emerged, focused on mask and later vaccine mandates. Low-wage workers who lost their jobs as sections of the economy shut down received extended unemployment compensation through the CARES Act, which became a source of resentment among those who continued to work.

McCallum documents another important finding that emerges from his study of the pandemic. Even though the designation of some workers as ‘essential’ seemed to separate them from the rest of the workforce, there is in fact no real separation between the wellbeing of ‘essential’ workers and everyone else’s wellbeing. Essential workers regularly emphasized this point when they linked their strikes and public outcries over their health and safety to the broader public interest – medical workers and their patients; teachers and their students and students’ families; food workers and the safety of those who eat.

McCallum focuses on what is sometimes called ‘social reproduction work’ to make the analytic point. This is labor that produces and sustains the very ability of all workers to work. When this work is undermined, the functioning of the entire economy is threatened. Yet, McCallum points out, despite its role as a pillar of the economy, these low-wage workers dedicated to social reproduction were sacrificed in the pandemic, another aspect of the dual treatment of essential workers as both heroes and disposable.

While much of the work of social reproduction is done outside capitalist markets in unpaid household labor, a point McCallum acknowledges, he zeroes in on the undermining of paid social reproduction. Failure to protect healthcare workers, teachers, and food production workers in the pandemic carried forward in extreme circumstances the steady erosion of these jobs already operating in the decades leading up to the pandemic. McCallum presents this as an example of how capitalism undermines its own long-term capacity to grow. For

ordinary people, capitalism ‘creates the conditions we need to live longer, healthier lives but keeps us from benefitting from those advances as widely and equitably as necessary’ (p.175).

To deal effectively with the problems laid bare by the pandemic, McCallum calls forth the history of the New Deal. He reports that in the pandemic essential workers in unions fared much better than those in the same occupations without unions. He reminds us that unions only gained real power after serious labor unrest and economic disruption during the Great Depression led to the passage in 1935 of the National Labor Relations Act. McCallum calls for the reemergence of labor disruption now to reinvigorate a social movement that can seriously challenge the capitalist system.

McCallum acknowledges that Congress passed significant relief measures during the pandemic, including the CARES Act in 2020 and the American Rescue Plan in 2021. But the relief these laws provided was temporary. Extended unemployment payments and the rent moratorium have expired, as have increased childcare payments.

For McCallum, this shows responses to crisis ‘in the most American way possible, without any lasting changes in our welfare state’ (p.246). He asserts that only radical transformation of capitalism into a socialist society will meet the challenges revealed by the pandemic’s effects on the working class.

One source of division in the working class that McCallum identifies is the influence of Donald Trump and his MAGA message, which has gained traction in response to the real suffering, disregard, and frustration that working people experience. McCallum makes a case that socialist organizing will be a necessary part of any movement that can address these experiences with a message and program of structural change that can improve working class life in the long term.

McCallum’s writing in *Essential* is an exemplary combination of personal stories and affected voices with data and analysis. It ends in early 2022, well before the full effects of the pandemic have worked themselves out. But McCallum provides a valuable example of how continuing analysis of this period should unfold.

Reviewer Bio

Michael Zweig is *emeritus* professor of economics and founding director of the Center for Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His newest book, [*Class, Race, and Gender: Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of Capitalism*](#), will be out from PM Press in October 2023.