Now that the Cold War has ended and the great ideological contest is settled between capitalism and socialism, perhaps Americans can at last look with clearer eyes at deformities within their own economic system. The most central of these is the employment system itself in which most people go to work for someone else and, unless they happen to be highly skilled professionals or independently wealthy, they consign a major portion of their lifetimes to the direction of others, forfeiting basic rights and autonomy in the process of earning a living.

With few exceptions, the system works like this: capital hires labor and capital claims ownership of the final product. Can one imagine an economy in which labor hires capital? Where workers have a legal right to the profits and legal responsibility for the liabilities because they are the owners, where workers jointly manage the firm and themselves in a democratic fashion?

This conception of work life is not an abstract vision beyond human possibility, because these conditions already exist for millions of Americans who work in employee-owned companies, cooperatives, or partnerships.

The great goal of reform ought to be making this arrangement the common experience for Americans—or at least forcing these questions of ownership, rights, and work into what is now the sterile economic debate of American politics. For at least two generations, some Americans from the ranks of both workers and owners have been struggling to create employee ownership, not as a grand political gesture but as a practical reality in their everyday lives, in the offices and
factories where they work, in the companies some have founded and owned.

This book recounts their progress, the enormous challenges and successes. It is an excellent starting text for people who wish to think seriously about how a general transformation might proceed. Readers who are looking for romanticized cheerleading on behalf of employee ownership will doubtless be disappointed by this report. Readers who wish to engage seriously in developing a more promising future for the American workforce will find numerous and invaluable insights to inform their own inquiries. Given the historic social weight of the status quo, no one should be surprised to learn that making a genuine conversion to worker-owned enterprises and self-management is very difficult to do. No one should be dismayed to see that sometimes the efforts fall well short of realizing the ideal. These are human systems being altered and everyone involved, in a sense, has to learn new work relationships—managers and workers alike—while also making sure the enterprise remains profitable and survives.

The unambiguous message from the “real” world, however, is that people can succeed at this, not easily or perhaps right away but with hard effort and resilience and the earnest application of what they know. Employees can and do change their own circumstances and some are delivering profitably on the promise of taking responsibility for their own work.

William Greider