

STEVEN GREENHOUSE

# THE BIG SQUEEZE

TOUGH TIMES  
FOR THE AMERICAN WORKER



## Congregational Study Guide

for *The Big Squeeze:  
Tough Times for the  
American Worker*  
by Steve Greenhouse



Study questions and process developed  
by Interfaith Worker Justice

# Table of Contents

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<b>I</b>	<i>Preparation</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>II</b>	<i>One-Session Outline</i>	<i>2</i>
<b>III</b>	<i>Four-Session Outline</i>	<i>3</i>
<b>IV</b>	<i>Six-Session Outline</i>	<i>5</i>

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# I Preparation

Below are three options for an adult study or Sunday school classes using Steven Greenhouse's book *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* as the primary text. The leader will need to prepare some materials ahead of time to tailor the session or sessions to your particular congregation. The study can be a one-session program (which is tough), a four-session program (which is more relaxed), or a six-session program (which allows for thorough discussion).

Whether you study the book in one session, four or six, the preparation is much the same.

1. **Set dates and times and promote them.** Set the number of sessions you will have, as well as the dates and times you will meet. Make sure to set the dates far enough in advance so you can order the books and have folks read it. Use your regular congregational communication vehicles to promote the session, plus recruit participants personally.
2. **Review outlines.** Review the proposed outlines and adapt as you see fit. The outlines are just suggestions, not mandates. You know your group. Adjust the outline to ensure maximal participation and discussion possible.
3. **Collect information about your faith tradition's positions on justice for workers.** Visit your denomination or faith tradition's website, or visit the website of Interfaith Worker Justice ([www.iwj.org](http://www.iwj.org)), which has many of the denominational statements on workers. Either copy some of the position statements for each participant, create a PowerPoint with the information, or write information on large newsprint. Some traditions have strong denominational positions on justice for workers. Other traditions rely solely on sacred Scripture. Draw upon what is most appropriate for your tradition.
4. **Order books.** Books can be ordered through any major bookseller. Consider purchasing through Powell Books ([www.powells.com](http://www.powells.com)), which is a union bookseller and offers discounts similar to Amazon or Barnes & Noble.
5. **Divide responsibilities for reading and discussing particular chapters.** There are 16 chapters in the book. How you will read and discuss the book varies based on how many sessions you will be offering.

**One session:** If you have 15 or more people in your group, ask each person to read chapter one plus one additional chapter and be prepared to discuss them. If you have fewer participants, ask each person to read chapter one plus a reasonable division of the rest of the book. Obviously, participants should be encouraged to read the entire book, but if they cannot make the time, they can focus just on their assigned chapters. Ask them to prepare to share about the chapter or chapters using the questions listed on the outline for studying the book in just one session.

**Four sessions:** Ask participants to read four chapters before each session.

**Six sessions:** Ask participants to read the entire book as follows:

Before Session I:	Chapters 1-3
Before Session II:	Chapters 4-5
Before Session III:	Chapters 6-8
Before Session IV:	Chapters 9-10
Before Session V:	Chapters 11-13
Before Session VI:	Chapters 14-16

6. **Arrange for snacks if appropriate or desired.**
7. **Arrange for newsprint and markers.** You will need this for many sessions.
8. **Recruit someone to lead opening and closing prayers or reflections.** Appropriate prayers, reflections and readings can be found by visiting the website of Interfaith Worker Justice ([www.iwj.org](http://www.iwj.org)).

# II One-Session Outline

If you are studying *The Big Squeeze* in only one session, you will need two hours. If you have 15 or more people in your group, ask each person to read chapter one plus one additional chapter and be prepared to discuss them. If you have fewer participants, ask each person to read chapter one plus a reasonable division of the rest of the book. Obviously, participants should be encouraged to read the entire book, but if they cannot make the time, they can focus just on their assigned chapters. Ask them to prepare to share about the chapter or chapters using the questions listed below on the outline for studying the book in just one session.

## **Opening Prayer or Reflection** (1 to 5 minutes)

### **Discussion on Chapter One** (30 minutes)

- ◆ What surprised you in this chapter? What new information about the economy and working conditions did you learn? (Write these things up on newsprint.)
- ◆ Do you know people who have been “squeezed” by the economy? (If you have a small group, discuss it as a whole group. If you have more than six people, divide into pairs or groups of three and ask people to share in the small groups.)

### **Overview of Chapters Two through Fifteen** (45 minutes)

Ask for five-minute presentations on each chapter. These presentations can either be made by one person or by groups of people. Ask the presenters to:

- ◆ Tell a story from the chapter.
- ◆ Give three surprising or shocking statistics or pieces of information revealed.
- ◆ Share how the reader felt about the situation.

### **Review your faith tradition’s statements or sacred text.** (20-30 minutes)

Ask participants what parts of their statements or sacred text speak to the concerns raised by workers being squeezed? How does your faith inform how you receive the stories in the book?

### **What can you do?** (30 minutes)

Ask participants what they think can be done about the issues. (Download *Ten Things You Can Do to Help Workers in Low-Wage Jobs* from [www.iwj.org](http://www.iwj.org) to give you some extra ideas.) Brainstorm ideas and put them up on the newsprint. Ask each person to commit to doing at least two things. Explore whether there are any group actions the participants might want to take.

### **Thanks and closing prayer/reading/song:** (1-2 minutes)

Thank everyone for participating. Have someone lead a closing prayer, reading or song.

# III

## Four-Session Outline

The outline below is a four-session study guide for *The Big Squeeze*. It is designed for 50-minute sessions, which are the most common timeframes for adult education classes in congregations. If you happen to have a longer timeframe available, adapt the outline to allow for more discussion. Ask participants to read four chapters before each session.

### Session One

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapter One** (20 minutes)

- ◆ What surprised you in this chapter? What new information about the economy and working conditions did you learn? (Write these things up on newsprint.)
- ◆ Do you know people who have been “squeezed” by the economy? (If you have a small group, discuss it as a whole group. If you have more than six people, divide into pairs or groups of three and ask people to share in the small groups.)

**Discussion on Chapters Two, Three and Four** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Does anyone know someone who has been sexually harassed on the job, like Kathy, or injured, like some of the workers at Landis? Did the people you know speak up, complain or organize against the conditions? Why or why not?
- ◆ Is the growing disparity of income and wealth in the society of concern to you? What are the consequences for our community?
- ◆ Have you ever heard of anyone not getting paid for all the hours they worked or having hours “deleted” from their records? What would you do if this happened to you or someone you know?

**Remind participants to read the next four chapters.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

### Session Two

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Review your faith tradition’s statements or sacred text.** (20 minutes)

- ◆ Ask participants what parts of their statements or sacred text speak to the concerns raised by workers being squeezed? How does your faith inform how you receive the stories in the book?

**Discussion on Chapters Five through Eight** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Should there be a social contract between companies and their workers? Why or why not?
- ◆ Do you know of people in the congregation who have had to work off the clock? Have the teens in the congregation ever experienced these problems? (Teens are often worked off the clock, as are undocumented immigrants and others who employers think don’t know or won’t exercise their rights.)
- ◆ What’s wrong with paying people as “independent contractors?” How does this hurt workers and the society?
- ◆ What do you think about Walmart? If you shop there, what do you like about it? How do you feel about its treatment of workers?

**Remind participants to read the next four chapters.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

### Session Three

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapter Nine** (20 minutes)

- ◆ Why should companies treat their workers right? Why is it good for business? (Make a list on newsprint of why treating workers can be good for business.)
- ◆ Do you know business leaders, especially some within the congregation, who try to treat their workers fairly?

- ◆ How could you as individuals and the congregation as a whole support and encourage ethical business people?
- ◆ Were you familiar with the contrasts between Walmart and Costco? Could you shop at Costco instead of Walmart? Would it matter?

**Discussion on Chapters 10-12** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Have you ever felt stressed and overstretched by your job and home obligations? How have you handled the stress and stretching? (The group may choose to spend the entire time on this question, which is fine. This is a lively topic for most.)
- ◆ Do you know of people who have lost their jobs through outsourcing? What happened to them? What obligation do you think companies should have toward their long-term employees?
- ◆ If an immigrant is working without proper documents, is it acceptable or justifiable for employers to take advantage of them? What does your faith say about treatment of immigrants?

**Remind participants to read the next four chapters.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

## Session Four

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapters 13-15** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Have you ever been a member of a union? Did you have better wages, benefits or working conditions as a result? Did you like being a union member or not? Were members of your family union members? Did it help them? Do you think unions are still needed?

- ◆ Do you know young people who are struggling to make ends meet with a job or struggling to get money to go to college? What should be done to help them?
- ◆ Do you know seniors who are struggling to make ends meet on their pensions or who only survive on social security? Do you have retirement savings at your place of employment? Is it adequate?

**Discussion on Chapter 16** (20 minutes)

- ◆ What should we as a society do to help workers? (Make a list on the newsprint.)
- ◆ What can we do in this congregation to lift up the concerns of workers and support workers? (Make a list on the newsprint.)
- ◆ What can each of us do individually to challenge “the big squeeze”? (Make a list on the newsprint.) Will you commit to doing one or two of these things?

Get a volunteer to type up the things people think the congregation and individuals can do. Send the list to each member in the group, as well as to the leadership of the congregation. Perhaps there are some suggestions that the congregation might consider.

**Thank everyone for participating.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

# IV Six-Session Outline

The outline below is a six-session study guide for *The Big Squeeze*. It is designed for 50-minute sessions, which are the most common timeframes for adult education classes in congregations. If you happen to have a longer timeframe available, adapt the outline to allow more discussion. Ask participants to read the entire book as follows:

Before Session I:	Chapters 1-3
Before Session II:	Chapters 4-5
Before Session III:	Chapters 6-8
Before Session IV:	Chapters 9-10
Before Session V:	Chapters 11-13
Before Session VI:	Chapters 14-16

## Session One

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapter One** (20 minutes)

- ◆ What surprised you in this chapter? What new information about the economy and working conditions did you learn? (Write these things up on newsprint.)
- ◆ Do you know people who have been “squeezed” by the economy? (If you have a small group, discuss it as a whole group. If you have more than six people, divide into pairs or groups of three and ask people to share in the small groups.)

**Discussion on Chapters Two and Three** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Does anyone know someone who has been sexually harassed on the job, like Kathy, or injured, like some of the workers at Landis? Did the people you know speak up, complain or organize against the conditions? Why or why not?
- ◆ Is the growing disparity of income and wealth in the society of concern to you? What are the consequences for our community?

**Remind participants to read Chapters Four and Five.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

## Session Two

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Review your faith tradition’s statements or sacred text.** (20 minutes)

- ◆ Ask participants what parts of their statements or sacred text speak to the concerns raised by workers being squeezed? How does your faith inform how you make sense of the stories in the book?

**Discussion on Chapters Four and Five** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Have you ever heard of anyone not getting paid for all the hours they worked or having hours “deleted” from their records? What would you do if this happened to you or someone you know?
- ◆ Should there be a social contract between companies and their workers? Why or why not? What are the essential elements that should be in a social contract? What do all workers deserve on the job? What are the most effective ways to encourage or require such elements?

**Remind participants to read Chapters Six through Eight.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

## Session Three

**Special preparation:** This session would be especially meaningful if you could identify a worker in your congregation or community who had been cheated out of wages and invite the person to speak. Ask around in the congregation. If there is a workers center near you, contact the center for possible speakers.

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapters Six through Eight** (45 minutes)

- ◆ Do you know of people in your congregation who have had to work off the clock? Have the teens in the congregation ever experienced these problems? (Teens are often worked off the clock, as are undocumented immigrants and others who employers think don’t know or won’t exercise their rights.)

- ◆ What's the minimum wage in your state? Who is eligible for overtime? What other protections do workers have in your state? (Be sure to look up your state's key labor laws before the session.)
- ◆ What's wrong with paying people as "independent contractors?" How does this hurt workers and society as a whole?
- ◆ What do you think about Walmart? If you shop there, what do you like about it? How do you feel about its treatment of workers?

**Remind participants to read Chapters Nine and Ten.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

## Session Four

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapter Nine** (20 minutes)

- ◆ Why should companies treat their workers right? Why is it good for business? (Make a list on newsprint of why treating workers can be good for business.)
- ◆ Do you know business leaders, especially some within the congregation, who try to treat their workers fairly?
- ◆ How could you as individuals and the congregation as a whole support and encourage ethical businesspeople?
- ◆ Were you familiar with the contrasts between Walmart and Costco? Could you shop at Costco instead of Walmart? Would it matter?

**Discussion on Chapter Ten** (30 minutes)

- ◆ Have you ever felt stressed and overstretched by your job and home obligations? How have you handled the stress and stretching? How could your congregation support workers and families as they juggle work and family responsibilities? What could and should the society do to better support working families?

**Remind participants to read Chapters 11-13.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

## Session Five

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapter 11** (10 minutes)

- ◆ Do you know of people who have lost their jobs through outsourcing? What happened to them? What obligation do you think companies should have toward their long-term employees?

**Discussion on Chapter 12** (20 minutes)

- ◆ What jobs do you see immigrants holding in your community? Are they jobs that need to be done? If an immigrant is working without proper documents, is it acceptable or justifiable for employers to take advantage of them? What does your faith say about treatment of immigrants?

**Discussion on Chapter 13** (15 minutes)

- ◆ Have you ever been a member of a union? Did you have better wages, benefits or working conditions as a result? Did you like being a union member or not? Were members of your family union members? Did it help them? Do you think unions are still needed?

**Remind participants to read Chapters 14-16.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)

## Session Six

**Opening Prayer or Short Reflection** (1-3 minutes)

**Discussion on Chapters 14 and 15** (20 minutes)

- ◆ Do you know young people who are struggling to make ends meet with a job or struggling to get money to go to college? What should be done to help them?
- ◆ Do you know seniors who are struggling to make ends meet on their pensions or who only survive on Social Security? Do you have retirement savings at your place of employment? Is it adequate?

**Discussion on Chapter 16** (25 minutes)

- ◆ What should we as a society do to help workers? (Make a list on the newsprint.)
- ◆ What can we do in our congregation to lift up the concerns of workers and support workers? (Make a list on the newsprint.)
- ◆ What can each of us do individually to challenge "the big squeeze"? (Make a list on the newsprint.) Will you commit to doing one or two of these things?

Get a volunteer to type up the things people think the congregation and individuals can do. Send the list to each member in the group, as well as to the leadership of the congregation. Perhaps there are some suggestions that the congregation might consider.

**Thank everyone for participating.**

**Closing Prayer or Short Reflection.** (1-3 minutes)