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BOOK REVIEW

THE CLASS STRIKES BACK: SELF-ORGANIZED WORKERS' STRUGGLES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Dario Azzellini, ed. | Michael G. Kraft, ed.

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The path through decades of working class defeat is much discussed but little studied. Azzellini and Kraft's book *The Class Strikes Back* seeks to change that by helping to fill one of the most glaring holes in class analysis today. It offers a compilation of detailed analyses of workers organizing to shift the balance of power between capital and workers, or what is otherwise known as class composition, from 13 countries and nearly every continent. Everyone involved in and studying working class self-organizing needs to not only read this book but use it as a model for continuing this long overdue work.

The Class Strikes Back is really a study of four kinds of workers movements, some of which overlap. The first are the weakest part of the book, those that examine what is called "labor NGOs" in which unions and NGOs forsake working class organizing for Alinsky style "mobilizing" to "advocate" on behalf of workers in Egypt, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, and Colombia.

The next are case studies from India, Germany, South Africa, Colombia, Italy, and the United Kingdom. In these countries, we read of self-organized workers contesting the dominant bankrupt model of unionism beholden to class collaboration otherwise known as service or "interest based bargaining" focused almost exclusively on "servicing the contract". The chapters from India and Italy are extraordinary examinations of how workers study the class composition and devise new tactics and strategies to shift the balance of class power.

The third set of contributions focus on worker control in which the recuperation of failed companies either emerge as a stop gap measure in the midst of capitalist crisis, such as the United States (Chicago Windows and Doors Factory), Indonesia, and Greece, or are harnessed by the state in an attempt to manage class struggle, as in the case of Venezuela.

The last, and most intriguing, group of struggles are those which are composed of a combination of the last two sets of tactics and strategies with the objective of experimenting with what CLR James called the "future in the present".[1] In these, worker recuperations express workers' pursuit of what Antonio Negri called "self-valorisation" of the multiple ways of living that subvert and transcend work and capitalism.[2] In the studies of Indonesia and Venezuela workers demonstrate the capacity to not only "imagine" (e.g., what is often portrayed in the inaccessible academic jargon of "imaginaries") and experiment with a new forms of social organization in which production is driven by the interchange between urban and rural communities engaged in self-directed democratic planning.

1 | STUDYING CLASS COMPOSITION

Azzellini and Kraft's project is a critical examination of "how new anti-bureaucratic forms of syndicalist, neo-syndicalist, and autonomous workers' organisation emerge in response to changing work and production relations in the twenty-first century." (p. 6) Although unacknowledged in the book,

this is where the influence of autonomist marxism shows itself most vividly in this much needed project. *The Class Strikes Back* closely follows the work of the Italian and American autonomists since the 1970s who developed a class analysis, or sometimes referred to as workers' inquiry, of the capacity of the working class to recompose its power (its offensive tactics and strategy to tip the balance of power in their favor) in the face of the current composition of capital (the relations of production and level of technology), and capital's efforts to decompose the working class's power (the tactics and strategy of capital's counter-attack).[3] This tension between recomposition and decomposition mark out the moments of instability and what Cleaver calls the "rupture of capital's dialectic." Not only can capital attempt to harnessed the conflict to restore stability and generate vast new wealth, it can seek to manage them so the tensions are diffused or rechanneled in ways that allow just enough conflict while avoiding the possibility of disruption to restart accumulation. A last possibility exists in which neither harnessing nor managing are possible and the workers struggle erupts into a revolutionary crisis in which appears a potential way out of capitalism.[4]

What we are offered in the book, especially in the chapters on India, Indonesia, South Africa, Italy, and Venezuela, is a detailed study of the class composition of the balance of power between workers and capital and how workers studied that composition of class forces to devise new tactics and strategies to realize their objectives. This is the intent of the editors who warn that "the last 30 years of neoliberal economic policy has led to the configuration of new forms of worker organisation that use tactics, pursue goals and design strategies that differ strongly from traditional institutionalized union politics." (p. 7) These studies should be closely read and repeatedly replicated if workers are to shift the balance of power back in our favor. As the editors observe, workers are devising a diverse array of new tactics and strategies under differing terrains of struggle which must be analyzed in their specific contexts (p. 7).

But Azzellini and Kraft's objective is not merely to study the terrain of struggle but understand how workers are devising innovative new tactics and strategies to move the working class to another level of struggle. Whether those struggles have what Perrone called "positional power" that can use tactical disruption to facture capital's power is another question.[5] The struggles portrayed in their volume "point both the persistence with which direct democracy is pursued—also in the sphere of production—and its potential as a real alternative to the current system of capitalist exploitation." (p. 15) While these questions of a post-capitalist project is limited to the analyses of Indonesia and Venezuela they raise the crucial questions of whether the path to the future in the present lies through a Leninist capture of the state (Venezuela) or the autonomist self-organization of life within the interstices of a capitalism in crisis as in Indonesia.

2 | BANKRUPT MODELS: ADVOCACY AND BARGAINING

With little critical analysis, the chapters on Egypt, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, and Colombia face the same dilemma that has seized the union movement in the United States. Union density has dropped and unions have become well integrated in one or more of the dominant parties. Simultaneously, unions have virtually abandoned the tactics and strategies of organization and disruption in favor of Saul Alinsky's model of interest group pressure tactics of advocacy outside the terrain of the shopfloor combined with the narrow focus on contractual compromise and concessions. While each of these case studies uncritically find value in the model of the union as interest group under conditions of authoritarian rule and the disruption of post-war society, their limits are apparent. Advocacy relies on recruiting nonworkers such as sympathetic elites, consumers, and NGOs who can bring the

requisite resources such as grants, status, and publicity to generate sufficient damage to a brand, reputation, and market share and extract some of the demanded concessions and state regulation.

While these so-called labor NGOs can maneuver the limited political space available by reducing, although not eliminating, the risk of repression they all share the same common flaws. They are imposed from the top down, focus on picking off low hanging fruit to satisfy foundation, NGO, and union donors, and do not provide the conditions for workers to self-organize to directly disrupt the relations of production. In the cases of Egypt and Turkey, for example, workers have taken over bankrupt factories and restarted production as their own bosses. They market their new cooperatively produced products as proto-capitalists whose workplace democracy becomes a source of valorization itself marketed in the global fair trade distribution circuits. While worker ownership has resulted in modest improvements in the conditions and quality of life of the workers they have not escaped the grip of capitalist exploitation of labor, albeit this time self-imposed.

As the weakest contributions to the volume, these case studies could have been left out to strengthen the book. However, their inclusion is incomplete without a case study of the source of the union advocacy model: the U.S. labor unions which are often financing and influencing these campaigns. Since U.S. unions are playing a role in some of these and other countries where unions are taking this strategic route, a case of study of union workers advocacy groups such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the "fight for $15" in the service sector, or raising the minimum wage through the ballot initiative might have provided more context into the flaws of this model and the conduit by which it is being spread globally.

3 | SELF-ORGANIZED WORKERS UNIONS

Of the case studies of self-organized workers challenging the dominant unions the cases of India and Italy stand out for their thorough analyses of class composition. Both studies begin with a similar objective of assessing the failure of the dominant left parties and their closely affiliated labor confederations, as in the case of India, and the unions, in the case of Italy. These assessments are intended to assess the changing composition of capital which accelerated the growth of the so-called precariat, temporary contract workers, who are treated as flexible inputs in the so-called "just in time" model of production and reproduction that has seemingly infiltrated all sectors of industry from unskilled to skilled and professional labor such as professors as myself (p. 29).

As Kumar and Samaddar insightfully argue in their study of the mostly contingent Gurgaon-Manesar Suzuki workers self-organized strike wave, it is necessary to continually re-evaluate the conditions workers face in order the devise the necessary strategy and tactics to confront the existing composition of capital and recompose their struggles. They highlight the critical factors required in a study of class composition including "relational judgments, the evaluation of balance of forces, logistical planning, measurement of time, etc." (p. 35) These factors are critical for assessing the required strategy and tactics for workers to challenge the conditions of the terrain of struggle in which they find themselves, or what the authors call the "new modes of organisation" (p. 35).

Curcio's analysis of workers in the logistics sector of Italy's retail distribution system highlights the need to accurately assess the role of race in the decomposition of working class power. Curcio provides an effective model for analyzing how capital uses the racial division of labor to decompose working class power. As Cucio illustrates, cooperative enterprises have transformed themselves into the suppliers of contingent workers, or what she calls the "dispotif of labour organisation" managing a racially segmented workforce in which 98% of the workers are migrants originating from a variety of African countries (pp. 262–263). For workers to self-organize requires overcoming the internal

and external forces of racism and status hierarchy enforced by a diverse range of language, religion, legal status, legal protections, and education levels (higher among the Arab North Africans than sub-Saharan Africans for example) that construct an imposing racial division of labor. As Curcio observes, "overthrowing the 'racial division of labour' was a fundamental precondition for the interruption of the capitalist valorisation process, especially at the beginning of the mobilisations" (p. 267). Although, for obvious reasons, she is silent about the tactics they used to overcome this racial class hierarchy, as one interviewed worker observed, they exist to "split up the workers, putting a group against the other" (p. 267).

After workers identify how the barriers to their organization can be overcome they next assess the relations of capital they confront and how they impede the workers from achieving their objectives. Here, Curcio points us to identifying "the weakest moment in the circulation of goods" in which these logistics workers are perfectly situated. Curcio shows how the workers read the existing composition of capital to identify what Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness call key "choke points" and assert their positional power to disrupt the production and distribution of capital.[6]

Once they built alliances with other precarious workers exploited by the cooperative labor contractors and supportive students, the self-organized logistics workers aligned with the union S1 Cobas, the only one they could find that uses strategic disruption as leverage to achieve their objectives. As Curcio recounts, S1 Cobas stands out for a leadership that reported "a single blockade can blow up the entire logistics circuit….We are talking about a huge economic damage as well as an incalculable damage to their image" (p. 274). Completing the process of studying the class composition, Curcio shows how workers attempted to recompose their power to confront and disrupt capital to recompose their power across racial and job statuses to achieve their objectives.

Although we are left without details of the outcomes of their struggle we have the roadmap for carrying out a similar workers' inquiry into recomposing working class power. Curcio observes that this campaign of the most vulnerable workers highly divided by racial hierarchy are capable of applying leverage against what appears to be a new inpenetrable relation of production. The logistics sector is based on the highly concentrated accumulation of knowledge, information, and data which must be processed by computers. This internal hierarchy of capital's own composition is its weakest pressure point, Curcio reminds us, "a battleground for and against the accumulation of capital" (p. 274). Curcio's strategy is hard to ignore: disrupt that choke point of information and workers have brought the global distribution and production system to its knees. "The workers' knowledge of the production and distribution cycle, of its spatial and temporal coordinates, provides the opportunity to forge a formidable weapon using the master's own arsenals—one which can be turned against him" (p. 275).

Setting aside the heavy jargon about the supposed "new modality of struggle" and "militant subjectivities," is evident that Curcio is providing an invaluable model for reading the existing balance of power between capital and workers, and devising new tactics and strategies to recompose working class power so that workers can effectively deploy that power against the existing composition of capital.

4 | WORKER CONTROL AND SELF-VALORIZATION

The studies of Indonesia and Venezuela encapsulate the long running debate among syndicalists: whether worker control transforms workers into their own bosses imposing the relations of capital on themselves, state managed factory recuperations are another form of state capitalism, and if linking consumer and producer in a direct democratic planning process can transcend capital relations of production.

Co-editor Azzellini's contribution on Venezuela is a comprehensive critical assessments of President Hugo Chavez's now moribund Bolivarian "socialism for the 21st century." As Azzellini observed, short-lived Venezuelan socialism was multi-pronged. New labor laws were passed protecting workers from outsourcing, unfair firings, established set working hours, expanded pensions to all workers and recognized unwaged housework as "value" producing labor in the constitution—the first to do so. The early years of Chavez saw a massive explosion of worker cooperatives funded by oil revenues mostly producing for export while still following the "logic of capital" (p. 87). Short-lived state funded "social production companies" were set up to invest in local communities. Each of these top down driven initiatives floundered and were short-lived although many existing examples still operate.

The primary thrust behind the effort to put the economy under worker control were the "socialist workers councils" (or CSTTS) which were mandated for all private and state owned businesses. While imposed from the top down, as were other of Chavez's initiatives, to cement the loyalty of the working class to his rule these CSTTS's were embraced by workers on the shopfloor level while sabotaged by unions, mid-level party hacks, and owners and managers of the firms threatened by a parallel structure for workers to assert control over production. Although CSTTS's provided workers a counter power to this triumvirate, they fell far short of worker control. As Azzellini observes, in the state owned companies and several private firms where the CSTTS's exist, "the workers do not have control of the company, and they do not participate in management or decisions regarding who is in charge of the management" although in practice, the workers control access to the shopfloor and could disrupt production (p. 91).

Chavez's ruling party appears to have been paralyzed by the schizophrenia of simultaneously appearing to appeal to the impulses of Venezuelan workers to democratically control the economy while undermining their capacity to do so in practice. "The company management and the ministerial bureaucracy are in no position to dismiss the workers, but they verbally assure their support for workers' control while they actually make it impossible" (p. 91; see also p. 106). Azzellini appears to argue that Chavez's influence was merely skin deep. His own functionaries explicitly undermined his programs at every step. At best, the CSTTS's provided leverage to workers to recuperate fraudulently shuttered companies, extract unpaid wages, bring in state intervention to hold management and owners accountable, and in rare cases use recuperations to provoke nationalization. Here, Venezuela looks much like the social democratic "polder model" in The Netherlands and "co-determination" in Germany rather than a socialization of production under democratic control of workers.

More interesting are the "communal councils," also funded by oil revenues, in which 10–20 families would practice direct democracy by establishing a wide variety of organizations to provide for hyper localized needs. By 2015, the 40,000 communal councils were organized into 1,200 regional communes. Unlike the abandoned cooperative program in which many coops degenerated into businesses, communal councils established "businesses" whose sole purpose is to serve the provision of local needs while linked together in distribution networks to circulate direct sale and exchange of basic goods such as school supplies.

Reminiscent of the short-lived syndicalism of the anarchist controlled areas of Spain in the early months of the Spanish Civil War, some worker controlled firms have linked up with communal councils by reciprocally adding local community members to the workers assembly and workers representatives placed on the communal council, although its unclear that such a clear distinction really existed (pp. 101–2). In this way, local community needs drive a direct democratic planning process in which producers and consumers rationally plan production according to real needs rather than the accumulation of capital.

For Azzellini, such cooperation between waged workers and local communities is swamped by the persistent reality that most social property companies are state, not worker, controlled and have "not altered in any way the social relations of production" (p. 103). Even the supposed nationalization of the Venezuelan economy is more myth than reality as the state controls no more than 54% of GDP, a mere 0.37% more than in 1999 when Chavez was first elected (p. 103). It is more likely, Azzellini argues, that private interests have infiltrated the state to wield state power as a means to institutionalize, manage, and diffuse workers power rather than facilitate it. While the CSTTS's are a continuing means for workers to struggle to hold the state to its rhetoric of state socialism, class struggle is still common throughout the cooperative, state, and private sectors because they remain capitalist. If workers have used the rhetoric of socialism to extract some gains they are but temporary concessions primarily financed by royalties earned on oil revenues. With the fall of oil prices Chavez's successor President Maduro increasingly channels its meager assets into maintaining the loyalty of cronies and the military at the expense of appearing to appease working class demands.

The lessons of workers struggles in Venezuela are a contemporary variation on the gains of workers in the heyday of European post WWII social democracy. Class struggle ratcheted open access to the state which resulted in qualitative improvements in the conditions of life but at the cost of blunting, channeling, and managing class struggle to restore capital accumulation. The capacity to use reform to move class struggle to the next level on which to fight was blocked. Reform became the end, not the means. And as reform they can be eroded, stripped, and transformed into their opposite over time, the means to manage class struggle and expand the exploitation of labor.

In contrast, Hauf illustrates how Indonesian workers have used recuperations not to extract concessions from an apparently sympathetic state but to bypass it altogether. A split in the national union confederation resulted in the formation of the National Union Confederation (KSN) that, like the Italian S1 Cobas, has embraced the strategy of disruption combined with what Hauf calls a "solidarity economy," the ability to construct new autonomous social relations that both contest and transcend capitalism, or examples of "self-valorization".[7] As Hauf observes, the KSN "seeks to link urban struggles to rural struggle such as occupied plantations through the larger Indonesian People's Movements Confederation (KPRI), bringing together labour unions, peasants' and fishermen's organisations as well women's and indigenous peoples' movements" (p. 241).

Reminiscent of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, which is unfortunately not included in this volume, workers controlling recuperated factories use their personal rural linkages to connect those communities in a rural–urban democratic planning process. This strategy evolved following the ultimate failure of both worker recuperated factories, such as PT Istana, to prevail in both legal struggles in the labor courts and their collaborations with labor NGOs to market their products as sweatshop free (pp. 242–244). These failures provoked a break by some unions from labor NGOs as foundation funded undemocratic organizations that were neither worker controlled nor served their class interests (p. 245).

Following widespread rural land seizures, the KPRI was formed in order to tie together rural agricultural and fisheries workers cooperatively controlling and running these lands and operations. KPRI has linked up with worker controlled factories affiliated with the KSN to reorganize "the production, distribution and consumption of goods beyond the capitalist market by building alternative 'closed markets' between recuperated factories and occupied plantations or reclaimed landholdings" that have been increasingly seized since the fall of the dictator President Suharto after 1998 (p. 248).

The KPRI affiliated peasant's union *Srikat Pertaini* has linked its nearly 500,000 ha of tea and coffee lands on five of Indonesia's largest islands to set up new local "exchange trading systems" and villages and schools for children and adults such as those in West Java (pp. 250–1).

The rural land seizures are extremely well organized, researched, and planned. Landless workers research past communal land tenures of enclosed lands, map them, and identify their current legal status. When they find promising targets they setup a local peasant's union, organize the landless peasants, and train themselves in how to carry out seizures, self-defense against security forces, and to run the lands as cooperatives.

While it could be argued recuperated factories and lands remain in the capitalist economy, the tactics and strategies of the rural–urban linked efforts are creating a closed loop in which producers and consumers collectively reappropriate factories and lands and democratically manage production and distribution in order to subordinate them to serve *use* rather than *exchange* values. They may also serve as "a reference point for the revitalization of the global labour movement" which moves beyond wages and working conditions to democratically transforming production by interweaving different sectors together so that they are subordinated to human use values. Recuperated factories and squatted lands provide for the productive and reproductive needs of their members through collective kitchens, child care, schools, and direct democratic control. Such inspiring projects of worker self-valorization, Hauf argues, offer the potential for workers struggles "to overcome the division between the production of goods and the social reproduction of people and communities imposed by capitalism" (p. 258). It is in Indonesia that we can see a glimpse of what CLR James called the "future in the present."

NOTES

[1]James (1980).

[2]Negri (1991); see also Cleaver (1991).

[3]One group engaging in a thorough workers inquiry of class composition in the United Kingdom and elsewhere is Notes From Below, http://notesfrombelow.org/. The *Zerowork* journal and the *Midnight Notes* Collective (n.d.) were two previous projects engaged in workers' inquiry between the 1970s to early 2000s, http://www.zerowork.org/ and http://www.midnightnotes.org/mnpublic.html

[4]Cleaver (2016), p. 77. Although the effort to map class composition was vibrant in the 1970s it has mostly been neglected since then. For more works on class composition, see the journal *Zerowork* (1972/1977); Bell and Cleaver (2002); and Ovetz (2018).

[5]Perrone (1983) and Perrone (1984).

[6]Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness (2018).

[7]Negri (1991); see also Cleaver (1991).

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