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***Workers and Labour in a Globalised
Capitalism, edited by Maurizio Atzeni.
A Review.***

Chris Leggett *

The overall theme of *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism* is set by the editor's introduction: 'Neo-liberal globalisation and interdisciplinary perspectives on labour and collective action'. His justification for the book is that the attention of researchers from overlapping disciplines is shifting away from 'non-conflictual visions of work associated with Human Resource Management...back to workers and labour'. Its aim is 'to provide a comprehensive set of theories, themes and issues...that can help reflect on the centrality of labour within the contemporary process of globalisation'. The underlying perspective of this book is that adopted by Gall for his contribution (Chapter 9: 'New forms of labour conflict; a transnational view'), i.e. 'a Marxist or radical one whereby it is assumed that there is a continual and unceasing conflict of interest between capital and labour over the terms of exploitation of labour by capital and the oppression that is involved in maintaining this exploitation'. Many contributors however challenge orthodox interpretations of Marx in order to explain, for example, new forms of worker resistance to the capitalist labour process.

To achieve its aims *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism* is composed of ten chapters contributed by academics specialised in work and employment studies from universities in the UK, the USA, and the

* Chris Leggett is Adjunct Professor in the College of Business Law and Governance at James Cook University, Australia. The present review refers to Maurizio Atzeni, ed. *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism: Contemporary Themes and Theoretical Issues*, Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, UK. 2014. 254 pp. ISBN 9780 230 30317-1.

Netherlands organised into three parts: theoretical, classical and contemporary issues respectively. Part 1 (Chapters 1-4) is concerned with 'Explaining the Centrality of Labour within Capitalism, Part 2 (Chapters 5-7) with 'Explaining Workers' Resistance and Organisation', and Part 3 (Chapters 8-10) with 'Workers Organising in the Global World'.

Spencer (Chapter 1: 'Marx and Marxist views on work and the capitalist labour process') reminds the reader of the usefulness of Marx's writings for the analysis of working life. Marx challenged the classical economists' view of work as 'toil and trouble', and argued that creative work could be liberating, except that its organisation and control in capitalist society creates the alienation of workers from their work, from the product of their work, and from each other. According to Marx, reforming capitalism would not render work non-exploitative; to achieve that capitalism would have to be abolished. Marx's relevance to the capitalist labour process was revived by Braverman in the 1970s, particularly with his emphasis on de-skilling as a means of capitalists increasing the subordination of workers, although Spencer feels that Braverman neglected the importance of the creation and management of consent, central to the subsequent labour process debate – how labour power is converted to labour.

According to Silver (Chapter 2: 'Theorising the working class in twenty-first-century global capitalism'), historically four key strategies by capitalists in response to labour-capital conflict stand out: the 'spatial fix', the 'technological fix', the 'product fix', and the 'financial fix', respectively relocating production to lower wage regions, adopting labour saving technology, distributing the gains from productivity increases, moving capital from one economic activity into a more innovative one, and pulling capital out of trade and production and putting it into finance and speculation. Silver claims that each of these 'fixes' only succeed in rescheduling capitalist crises and have brought about 'a new deep crisis of legitimacy for capitalism', which requires 'A radical rethinking of everything'.

'Who is the working class?' asks van der Linden (Chapter 3: 'Wage Earners and other labourers'). Descriptions have emphasised structural, socio-economic characteristics, but the Marxist historian E. P. Thompson 'considered "class"' subjectively, 'as an outcome of experience, emerging out of those socio-economic characteristics', and therefore always different, never predictable. With class awareness modern wage labour struggles for its interests in diverse ways, through trade unions, political parties 'even paramilitary units'. Now there are calls for a more inclusive interpretation of the working class than the nineteenth century concept of the proletariat, one that includes peripheral and 'hidden' wage labour, the

lumpenproletariat, the precariat, subsistence labourers and household workers. Van der Linden calls this class of people, including slaves, indentured labourers within capitalism the ‘extended or subaltern working class’ i.e. those whose labour is commodified but not conceptualised as wage labour by Marx and resistance to exploitation has taken forms other than the strike. In similar vein Federici (Chapter 4: ‘The reproduction of labour power in the global economy and the unfinished revolution’) offers a feminist critique of Marx, for ignoring the unpaid reproductive work of women. This chapter completes the explanations of the centrality of labour within capitalism; Chapters 5-7 each focus on explanations and examples of workers’ resistance to capitalism.

Darlington (Chapter 5: ‘The role of trade unions in building resistance: theoretical, historical and comparative perspectives’) has written an essay on trade unionism predicated on the resurgence of collective action and reaction by trade unions to post-GFC austerity, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement, and, more generally, the neo-liberal project. The essay applies the double-edged sword metaphor of justice and defending workers’ interests. This dichotomy is reflected in the selection of references – from Marx and Engels to Flanders and Hyman, and in the topics of revolutionary potential and the inbuilt limitations of trade unionism. Cohen (Chapter 6: ‘Workers organising workers: grass roots struggle as the past and future of trade union renewal’) continues with the ambiguity of trade unionism, here ‘institution’ versus ‘movement’, and questions some assumptions in the literature. Tracing the historical correlation between surges in strikes and growth in trade union memberships the author draws the reader’s attention to the significance of grassroots spontaneity in industrial action. Another contest of the capitalist work relations has taken a variety of forms of workers control. However, from one perspective workers’ control is the ‘deviant’ antithesis of the accepted ‘natural’ order of things, i.e., management control; from another perspective workers’ attempts at alternatives within the capitalist system undermine the revolutionary potential of workers’ control of production. As Atzeni (Chapter 7: ‘The workers’ control alternative’) expresses it, ‘Paradoxically, the idea of a more motivating and inclusive work environment, which has been promoted in many industries as a way to capture the knowledge and creativity of workers, has been central to the interests of capital rather than labour’.

Mollona (Chapter 8: ‘Informal labour, factory labour or the end of labour? Anthropological reflections on labour value’) reflects on the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘labour’, in particular ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ work, and how societies have valued them. Following accounts and analyses of

developments in Africa, of Toyotism (in the North and in the South) and of the BRICS he concludes that ‘the dialectics of formal and informal labour reproduces (sic) the oscillatory dynamics of capitalism’. Also globally, or rather ‘transnationally’, Gall (Chapter 9: ‘New forms of labour conflict: a transnational view’) surveys ‘New arenas of contestation’ --the return of the general strike; industrial action short of striking; occupations; individual acts – but warns that what may appear new is really a different context.

Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism does not offer a concluding chapter but the final chapter by Ness (Chapter 10: ‘Labour migration and emergent class conflict: corporate neo-liberalism, worker mobility and labour resistance in the US’) fulfils that function in that the role of migrants within the labour movement, although recurrent, is a significant feature of the global economy. Particularly significant is the temporary migration of so called ‘guest workers’. Ness concludes that ‘Labour unions must form to consolidate the power of migrant working class militancy’ and that despite the efforts of the ITUC and the ILO ‘little will become [of them] without sustained union support’. Labour migration is deserving of its inclusion in a book devoted to the study of conflictual visions of work.

Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism is unlikely to be read by researchers, scholars and practitioners committed to ‘non-conflictual visions of work associated with Human Resource Management’, but if read by those nurtured on the conflict view of industrial capitalism whose radicalism has waned under the intellectually enervating effect of neo-liberalism, it could refresh and energise them.

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