

Book Review

Jane Holgate (2021) *Arise: Power, Strategy and Union Resurgence*.

London: Pluto Press.

ISBN 9780745344027. 248 pp. Paperback £17.

Reviewed by

Maurizio Atzeni, Centre for Labour Relations, CEIL/CONICET, Argentina

Jane Holgate's *Arise: Power, Strategy and Union Resurgence* is a book in a long series of texts on trade unions revitalisation and renewal that reflects on the future of the broader labour movement by looking for insights into workers' struggles and organisations of the past, the recent past and the present day. It is a book full of energy, hope and politics written passionately by a committed and experienced labour scholar. The book is structured around four main blocks: a theoretical one analysing power from different angles and approaches (pp. 18–37); an historical one, looking at the development of British trade unions from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s (pp. 38–105); a more contemporary section analysing the impact of the turn by the Trades Union Council in the United Kingdom (UK) to social partnership first and to the organising model since the end of the 1990s (pp. 105–185); and a final block presenting reflections about the future directions of unions' actions and strategies in light of the recent emergence of new independent "indie" unions and of a renewed interest in the relations between community and union (pp. 185–219).

I think the use of history to produce insights and lessons and to establish parallelisms with contemporary events is an excellent way to open the discussion about the strategies available to the labour movement for building power. From this point of view, the book does a good job, in particular by highlighting the similarity existing between the precarious workforce of the docks and textile sector of the late nineteenth century with that of today's gig economy. Here, Holgate rightly emphasises that, despite the lack of structural power and in an unregulated labour market in both historical cases she presents, workers have successfully built their strength by adopting bottom-up organising processes led by democratic decision-making experiences and characterised by deep solidarity ties between workers, spanning the workplace and the community. However, this insight – that the most precarious and least protected working conditions and exploitative labour processes have invariably generated across history solidarity, democracy, conflict and organisation – does not seem to occupy a central place in the author's further reflections. For instance, in the section "Rethinking trade unionism for the future", which is part of the final chapter that optimistically is titled "Winning power is possible", the visions and strategies of leaders rather than the "community of struggle" of the indie unions seem to take a central role.

Clearly, leadership from the top is important in creating a culture that allows organisational change to take place ... so transformational leadership from the top is important in driving change and creating the capacity and willingness to act (pp. 198–199).

Later on in the same chapter, almost at the end of the book, we find again a sort of messianic belief in leaders.

Only a strong thoughtful leadership that is prepared to reconceptualise what trade unions are actually organising for can overcome these restrictions (oligarchic tendencies) and then re-orientate unions so their purpose is a true and inclusive social movement operating for the benefit of the working class as a whole (p. 216).

Leaders are certainly important in mobilising people and building organisation; we know that particularly a left-wing and politicised leadership is fundamental in winning the collective soul of workers (Darlington, 2009; Cohen, 2011). However, in my view, the “transformational leadership from the top” imbued with “vision” and “strategic capacity” associated with the idea of leadership proposed by Holgate seems far from the way in which contemporary experiences of bottom-up indie organising have been described, less focused on leaders with vision and more on solidarity (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020) and “communities of struggle” (Però, 2020). Similarly, it is far from the insights generated by the experiences of struggle and organising associated with the “new unionism” of the early twentieth century that Holgate well and approvingly describes on page 56:

Another often overlooked feature from the period of new unionism is that it wasn't the case that unions went into the workplaces to organise workers, rather workers rebelled against their exploitation and went on to organise unions. This distinction between top-down and bottom-up organising is important. It was often organic leaders from among the workers that led these successful strikes (p. 56).

This ambivalent discourse on the role of leaders and on the process of collective organisation building is recurrent in the book and leads me to wonder about the overall aim and scope of the book. On the one hand, it seems there is a genuine interest in investigating the sources of workers' power through historical analysis, in learning from these and in criticising trade union practices of the past (as with the organising model of the 1990s). On the other hand, the recommendations for winning power are over-reliant on the willingness to change of inspired trade union officials in currently existing unions in the UK, without a real assessment of the material obstacles and organisational inertia that can be faced by officials while on the ground. Thus, in other words, my impression is that Holgate “delete with the elbow what she wrote with her hand”.

Fifteen years ago I came across *Ramparts of Resistance* by Sheila Cohen (2006), another book published by Pluto Press, that aimed to use UK working-class history to rebuild workers' power. Despite this apparent similarity, in Cohen's text her stance on bottom-up rank-and-file processes of organisation and on the idea of union as a movement, and thus with a class-based renewal, was clear from the beginning. This stance was discussed not just from an ideological point of view but in an elaborated and detailed manner across the book at various stages, highlighting in particular how processes of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation influenced the decline of the UK trade union movement. In contrast, in Holgate's book there is a tendency to speak of the working class in union terms and of unions in working-class terms, as if the two were synonymous. In my view, this adds to the ambivalent discourse mentioned above and, overall, I think this work remains trapped within what I have called “trade union fetishism” (Atzeni, 2021), a tendency of industrial relations scholars of analysing complex and contradictory social processes, as those concerned with collective interest formation and organisation, not through the lenses of class analysis but of currently existing trade unions' institutional strategies and practices.

Arise is a book never short of criticism about trade unions' top-down practices and strategies,

recovering useful insights from the history of workers' struggle, and looking at a future in which the community can again become a constituent part of union action. Despite the limitations and ambivalence noted above, I think the book could be helpful for academics, trade unionists and community activists in search of inspiring historical insights.

References

- Atzeni, M. (2021) Workers' Organizations and the Fetishism of the Trade Union Form: Toward New Pathways for Research on the Labour Movement? *Globalizations*, 18(8): 1349–1362.
- Cohen, S. (2006) *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost their Power and How to Get It Back*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cohen, S. (2011) Left Agency and Class Action: The Paradox of Workplace Radicalism. *Capital & Class*, 35(3): 371–389.
- Darlington, R. (2009) Leadership and Union Militancy: The Case of the RMT. *Capital & Class*, 33(3): 3–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03098168090330030101>
- Però, D. (2020) Indie Unions, Organizing and Labour Renewal: Learning from Precarious Migrant Workers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(5): 900–918.
- Tassinari, A. and V. Maccarrone (2020) Riders on the Storm: Workplace Solidarity among Gig Economy Couriers in Italy and the UK. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(1): 35–54.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MAURIZIO ATZENI is a researcher at the Centre for Labour Relations, Argentinian National Research Council (CEIL/CONICET) based in Buenos Aires, having previously held positions at Loughborough and De Montfort Universities in the UK. He has published extensively on labour conflict and precarious workers' collective organisation in journal articles and chapters. He is the author of *Workplace Conflict: Mobilization and Solidarity in Argentina* (Palgrave, 2010) and of *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism* (Macmillan, 2014), a book translated into Chinese and Spanish that analyses labour from an interdisciplinary perspective. His is also the co-editor of a forthcoming handbook on The Global Political Economy of Labour. Maurizio serves on the editorial board of *Work, Employment and Society*, the *Journal of Labor and Society* and *Work in the Global Economy*.
[Email: matzeniwor@gmail.com]