

Book Review

**Alexander Gallas (2024) *Exiting the Factory. Strikes and Class Formation beyond the Industrial Sector* (vol. 1 and 2),
Bristol: Bristol University Press. ISBN: 978-1529242225
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Reviewed by

Nicolas Pons-Vignon, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI)

The decline of organised labour's influence has inspired two dramatically opposed views among critical scholars and the Left: some argue that labour's retreat as a class is so significant that workers' struggles are now of secondary importance when it comes to explaining, and influencing, the trajectory of capitalism¹. Others reply that the change in the relative power of unions does not mean that workers' militancy has disappeared, or that class-based politics has become irrelevant; on the contrary, its weakening calls for renewed attention and engagement. The implications of this debate cannot be underestimated, as they directly influence the search for (alternative) political subjects that could support and shape progressive agendas. Proponents of the former view have focused on various alternatives to the working class, ranging from a multitude of individuals who aspire to work independently to the "popular classes" in the case of the France Unbowed movement (Talpin, 2025). What is *not* under discussion, however, is that the evolution of capitalism since the start of the decline of union power, most pronounced in but not restricted to the Global North, has propped up the relative position of capital owners vis-à-vis those who depend on the sale of their labour for survival. Evidenced by the (downward) evolution of the labour share of income, this rising inequality becomes clearest, and most painful, during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic when, as Gallas observes, "the losses of capital were socialized and the losses for labour were privatized." (p. 44).

In *Exiting the Factory*, Gallas makes a powerful case for the enduring analytical and political relevance of the working class, following the late Leo Panitch's observation that "the decline in the size of the traditional industrial labour force is accompanied by the proletarianization of many service and professional occupations and the spread of more unstable, casual and contingent employment", thus opening up "new strategies for labour" (Panitch, 2001: 367, quoted in Gallas, p.12, vol. 1). This is however no nostalgic endeavour, as Gallas rejects "methodological Fordism", the western-centric tendency to treat Fordist manufacturing, industrial relations, and the national scale as the implicit model for analysing capitalism and labour — even after Fordism has declined. There is little doubt that this path dependency has crippled the ability of many activists and scholars to deal with the challenges of neoliberal capitalism.

¹ One version of this argument is Standing's (2011) attempt at conceptualising a "precariat" as a new composite class, which was compellingly debunked in a special issue of this journal (see Paret, 2016).

The first volume of Gallas' book plays a crucial role in this respect, as it engages with the theoretical debates that underpin Global Labour Studies. He argues that global labour scholars implicitly take the "side of workers" because their approach is analytically rooted in capitalist class domination and inspired by a normative objective to overcome it. As he puts it, "workers deserve support when they exercise their collective power to resist and challenge their own subjugation" (p. 162, vol. 1). Gallas then develops a constructive, albeit far-reaching, critique of the Power Resources Approach (PRA) that has precisely sought to develop analytical tools to map the forms (and support the deployment) of worker power. While acknowledging its strategic usefulness and normative orientation, he argues that PRA lacks a theory of class and systematically conflates union power with working-class power. By focusing on resources rather than relations, PRA maps labour's capacities without adequately theorising exploitation, domination, or the ambivalent role of institutions, especially unions, in stabilising capitalism. As a result, it struggles to distinguish analytically between labour strategies that contribute to class formation and those that deepen class partition. Gallas therefore calls for embedding the PRA within a materialist class theory capable of "capturing the contradictory class effects of trade union activity and the tensions surrounding it" (p. 163, vol 1).

In the second volume, Gallas builds on a rigorous analysis of what he calls settled capitalism and of neoliberalism and successfully steers clear of the twin pitfalls of underestimating the extent of transformations (methodological Fordism) and over-determining the significance of new phenomena. The fundamental question he addresses is whether the decline of trade unions and Fordist productive organisation means that the working class is disappearing. To answer it, he sets out to explore whether the increasing importance of services in total employment has been accompanied by the emergence of a new working class endowed with class consciousness.

The issue is not abstract but empirical; Gallas studies the frequency and objectives of selected strikes in the service sector. After a wide-ranging review of press articles, he focuses on three European cases of non-industrial strike waves in order to assess their class effects under conditions of neoliberal restructuring. Their diversity reflects the different forms of mobilisation: the German railway strike, the British junior doctors' strike, and the general and feminist strikes in Spain. The question, then, is the extent to which these movements succeed (or fail) in developing a broader, inclusive class agenda beyond the specific issues they target and the constituencies that drive them.

Gallas shows that service sector strikes can generate collective power and moments of class formation, but typically in conjunctural, fragile, and uneven forms. The German railway strikes demonstrate how occupational militancy can be highly disruptive while remaining largely sectional, with inter-union competition and narrow constituencies limiting expansive solidarity. By contrast, the junior doctors' strikes in Britain illustrate how professional workers may be temporarily "adsorbed" (that is, conjuncturally aligned rather than durably incorporated) into a broader working-class identity when disputes are framed around public goods such as healthcare, patient safety, and austerity. The Spanish general and feminist strikes represent the most expansive configuration, extending the terrain of struggle beyond the workplace to encompass reproductive labour and wider social relations, thereby producing broader solidarities but with limited organisational consolidation.

Across these cases, Gallas argues that the class effects of service sector strikes depend less on militancy per se than on political framing, the generalisability of demands, and the ability to connect workplace conflict to wider societal antagonisms. The book's central empirical conclusion is that there is evidence of class formation beyond the factory, but that it is no longer cumulative or linear; instead, it unfolds episodically, through moments of mobilisation that may just as easily dissolve as endure. Strikes in the service sector (both private and public) create connections between workers

and often defend working-class interests beyond a single occupational category. In several cases, they encompass service users, despite the (deliberate) media tendency to present industrial action as selfishly motivated. Gallas therefore pinpoints the existence of opportunities for mobilisation capable of fostering a shared class consciousness. These opportunities must, of course, be seized.

Gallas pointedly associates the start of the crisis of unionism to the “rupture with the settlements between capital and labour instituted after the Second World War in the Global North, which had traded union acquiescence to the (often Taylorist) discipline characterizing the industrial work process for full employment as well as increasing wages and improving living standards” (p. 25, vol 2). However, the book treats non-industrial labour primarily as a terrain of political mobilisation and solidarity, rather than as a labour process shaped by the historical diffusion of industrial forms of control. As a result, the organisational and technical structuring of service work — including standardisation, performance metrics, and managerial abstraction — remains largely outside the frame of analysis. Yet, service-sector conflicts have often arisen precisely from the imposition of productivity-enhancing logics into non-industrial work, as captured by the idea of “McDonaldization” (Ritzer, 2002). Bridging these perspectives would allow the class effects identified in *Exiting the Factory* to be situated not only in relation to political framing and collective action, but also in relation to the industrialisation of service labour itself. Such a dialogue would strengthen the book’s empirical insights by connecting episodic moments of mobilisation to the everyday organisation of work that conditions both the emergence and the limits of service-sector solidarity.

Exiting the Factory is an important contribution that seeks not only to interpret contemporary labour struggles, but to clarify the conditions under which they may once again acquire transformative force. Gallas’s sober yet sympathetic analysis of service-sector strikes avoids both nostalgia for Fordist class politics and speculative searches for substitute political subjects. Instead, it foregrounds actually existing forms of resistance and the contingent processes through which class formation may still occur. In doing so, the book makes a compelling case for global labour studies as a space where empirical inquiry, strategic reflection, and political imagination can productively intersect — and where the question of working-class agency remains both open and central to any serious thinking about social change.

References

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

NICOLAS PONS-VIGNON is a Professor at the Competence centre Labour, Welfare and Society of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI). His research engages with the political economy of precarious work, the transformations of care work, and labour inspection. [email: Nicolas.ponsvignon@supsi.ch] [ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1796-3466>]