Book Review

Peter Ackers (2024) *Trade Unions and the British Industrial Relations Crisis: An Intellectual Biography of Hugh Clegg.* Routledge. ISBN 978-1-032-42290-9. 254 pp. £135 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
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Books about 'what went wrong' are usually gloomy and partial. Not this one. It is an all-round exploration of the world of British industrial relations (IR), when strikes were the norm and union power a reality. It was when Britain, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, had a manufacturing base worth talking about. It is about the people who were the advisers to the union leaders, senior directors, key ministers and civil servants of the 1960s and '70s.

Hugh Clegg (1920-1995) was Professor of Industrial Relations at Oxford and Warwick Universities. A communist at school and university, Clegg changed after returning to complete his degree at Oxford from the army in 1945, left the Communist Party quietly and shifted his intellectual focus to the world of shop stewards and managers. The nearby huge car factories and engineering works at Oxford and Coventry, which employed tens of thousands, were a hotbed of industrial strife with regular outbreaks of strikes led by their unofficial leaders, shop stewards and their convenors, which even the union officials had to run to keep up with.

Clegg's focus was not from the usual academic ivory tower, but from a sympathetic yet critical position of knowing more than a bit about what the problem was. It was due to the breakdown of a system of inter-war national agreements between unions and employers which had ceased to be relevant to conditions in the car factories and other works of post-war Britain. It was too slow, only established minimum national rates of pay and was managed from remote union and company headquarters.

This system had become more than a minor irritant. Successive governments in the 1950s and early '60s struggled with Britain's declining (industrial and general imperial) power and growing inflation. The establishment came to see the central problem as one of too much union power, which the more aggressive shop stewards' power seemed to personify. Ackers traces how Clegg set about analysing the problem at grassroots level in Oxford and Coventry and came up with a unique solution with 'the charisma of a dry, taciturn man'. Of course, Ackers has little illusion that Clegg's recipes would have worked. In his view, Clegg and his colleagues at Oxford and Warwick had no sense 'that they were teetering on the edge of a major political, economic and social revolution' beyond the future of trade unionism. Ackers considers that they had 'little recognition of the growing service economy or the post-industrial transition Britain would make in the 1980s. "They were focused on 'an imaginary future soon to be overtaken by events" (page 191).

As we enter the era of another majority Labour government, amidst some concerns about high union pay settlements, Professor Ackers recalls the last such era, when Clegg's ideas and activity

dominated. Labour, which was thought to have a special relationship with the unions, governed from 1964 to 1979 (with a short-lived but similarly focused Conservative interval from 1971-74). They tried a new approach, setting up a judge-led Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations in 1965, to examine and report with a view to fundamental legislative reform. This was the Donovan Commission, which Hugh Clegg and many of his IR protégés served as advisers. He wrote most of the report, which was issued in 1968. It was immediately adopted by the government as a basis for fundamental reform of the IR system. However, the Employment Bill called 'In Place of Strife' departed from Clegg's core voluntary approach. The minister, Baroness Barbara Castle, sought to strengthen it with clauses penalising strikes. Though by today's standards Castle's measures were modest, the unions reacted violently to any regulation of their industrial activities. The bill was dropped in a 'deal' with the TUC, and the rest is history, as Baroness Thatcher's later return to a far more restrictive union regime has commanded the scene ever since the 1980s. There is another, more union-friendly take on these historical events which rests on Clegg's voluntarist approach to industrial relations' reform, from which the employers and Department of Employment advisers and politicians would not emerge so unscathed as in Ackers' account. But that is for another day.

It will be interesting to see to what extent the current majority Labour government will want to loosen the tight legislative straitjacket, as its union allies would like. It is doubtful whether its current Employment Act has this in mind. But as a useful and succinct study of the industrial relations world, Ackers' book on Clegg would be a very useful starting point.

Professor Peter Ackers has done a fine job in 'explaining another mind from a different era'. He has published widely on Hugh Clegg's legacy and is an Emeritus Professor in the History of Industrial Relations at Loughborough University, UK.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JIM MOHER is a former national union officer and latterly historian, and a Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London. He is the author of *Walter Citrine, Forgotten Statesman of the Trades Union Congress* (2021).