

Book Review

Gregor Gall (2017) *Bob Crow: Socialist, Leader, Fighter: A Political Biography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

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Bob Crow was, it can be reliably stated, one of the most successful trade union leaders in modern British history. The leader of the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMT) from 2002 until his sudden death in 2014, he was a “household name” who received the respect of friends and enemies alike. Laced with warm anecdotes and amusing stories, this book is a timely and serious account of his life, which is nothing short of necessary. With dramatic shifts in the political landscape following his death in 2014 – such as the election of Jeremy Corbyn and the Brexit referendum result – his strong opposition to the European Union and to Labour Party affiliation, and his almost de facto syndicalism are precisely the aspects of his career which makes a biography published today so compelling. As one of the only leaders able to increase the strength of the RMT in a time of general membership decline, the book seeks to highlight practices and strategies that the labour movement may do well to review.

From the start of the book, Gall tackles some of the serious limitations he faced in producing the work, and explains their effects on the final draft. Of considerable note was the refusal of the RMT to collaborate with him, going so far as to encourage members and other associates not to contribute to the production of this biography in any serious way. The reader may speculate as to why this was the case, but with this obstacle rather honestly accounted for, Gall then goes on to provide a more traditional biographical form, before confronting the character of Bob Crow from a variety of different aspects.

The book therefore begins by detailing the early life of Bob Crow, growing up in a council estate in east London, from his first job as a track worker to his first appearance at union meetings. It explores the influence of his father, himself a trade unionist and member of the Communist Party, and discusses the effect this may have had on Bob's worldview, highlighting in addition other defining moments in his personal and private life. Given the distance between the author and anyone who may have been able to provide personal insights into these moments, the book is limited to speculation. Despite that, Gall has no trouble providing an insightful and eloquent account of Crow's childhood, itself an insight into the hardships of the 1960s and 1970s.

Of particular interest to readers may be the arrival of Bob Crow into the trade union movement itself. Within this discussion, several characters may sound familiar. Figures like Mick Cash and Steve Hedley are used to illustrate and provide a deeper understanding of the various factions within the union. The former is now the current General Secretary of the RMT, representing

the more moderate pro-Labour Party tendency in opposition to a relatively broad alliance of left-wing factions. The RMT itself is a merger between the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Union of Seamen. This history brought with it certain divides along the lines of profession and industry, and the book artfully covers these less romantic features of internal political rivalry.

Gall suggests that Crow's position within the London Underground, for example, stacked the odds against him in building influence within the union more generally, perhaps unexpectedly more so than his Communist Party background. The how and the why of this reveal much about the internal dynamics of the RMT, which even close followers of the union may be unfamiliar with. Indeed, the most educational aspects of this biographical account are those which explain such power blocs, and provide the reader with tools to understand the RMT today. The image of Crow which emerges is one of a pragmatist who was able to lead the union with all its diverse elements. Gall is quick to punctuate this discussion with a reminder that the RMT remained above all a democratic union, and breaks from the more common description of Crow as a General Secretary with almost total decision-making power.

The second part of the book departs from this chronological account of Crow's life, and turns to a format within which Gall highlights several key political issues surrounding Bob Crow as a General Secretary and interrogates them in detail.

Among the most important of these issues today is the RMT's relationship with the Labour Party. Crow was, throughout his leadership, staunchly opposed to Labour and to Labour Party affiliation. Gall quotes Crow in a manner indicative of his general style and personality as having once said that the only parties he was interested in were garden parties. His reasons and background are well explored. However, one must be constantly reminded of just how wrong Crow fundamentally was in his writing off of Labour as a resurgent left-wing force. Without specifically trying to embarrass Crow for this viewpoint, Gall is able to confront the reader with an honest reminder of how unlikely the rise of Corbyn really had been, while at the same time recounting some objections to Labour affiliation which may certainly still hold.

Crow was not like other trade unionists on several other issues. His left-wing opposition to the European Union (EU) placed him in stark contrast to the Trades Union Council (TUC) as well as the labour movement in general. Left-wing opposition to the EU has a long and well-cemented base in British politics; a core advocate of this position was the late Tony Benn MP, who died shortly after Crow. Without weighing up the pros and cons of the Bennite position on the EU, Gall suggests that Crow's premature death just over a year before the referendum deprived the national discussion of a perhaps necessary left-wing perspective. What this could have meant for the outcome is hard to say, but Crow's optimism for a labour movement in a post-EU Britain may provide the basis of a new discussion regarding organising strategy which looks forward rather than back.

The issue of the role of women in the RMT is not addressed to the same extent as a number of the other issues. Crow was if nothing else a vocal supporter of women's rights, but Gall suggests that the "macho" culture he exemplified had mixed results for the female membership. Certainly, in terms of achieving better pay and conditions, this confrontational culture had its advantages, but the effect this had on the internal and social dynamics may not have benefitted women overall. In many cases this discussion is diffused by Gall with wider issues of direct democracy within the Union. Given that the majority of trade unionists in Britain today are women, while the UK has only one

female trade union leader, the issue could perhaps have been explored in further detail. Nevertheless, Gall certainly proves some key and interesting insights into the deficit between words and actions on this point.

While the book is heavy on the practice, with further discussion on how he transformed the union's internal finances, effectively allocated resources, used a mixture of soft and hard power in external relations, and helped set up a credit union while avoiding scandals, Gall makes a brief departure to assess to which sort of theory Crow may be accused of adhering. While crediting him with tactfully merging his traditional working-class speaking style with an unashamed use of the word "socialism" at any opportunity, the biography cites a number of columns, speeches and interviews in which Crow often mapped out contradictory or somewhat confused definitions of socialism itself, ranging from a sort of democratic socialism to something similar to the Soviet model. Perhaps due to the ideological lens through which Gall is inclined to review events, the term "syndicalism" is not given due credit, though that may have been a better description of his theoretical position. Gall simply concedes that for Crow theory was not as important as action.

Regarding his later life, Gall provides a detailed account of the momentous hostility Crow faced on a daily basis from the mainstream media, who not only regularly attacked his activities as a union leader but routinely invaded his personal life. The biography reminds us that journalists even followed him to Brazil on holiday, went through his rubbish and regularly discussed his spending habits, diet and drinking preferences. The insinuation that this may have taken a toll on his health is perhaps well-placed, and shines a light on the responsibility of the media to respect the rights of trade unionists to operate, while providing an important warning to other labour activists and leaders about the dangers of stress which come from union work. Partly related to this, Gall hints that Bob Crow may have been intending to stand down as leader, or to step aside in the upcoming leadership election, but arbitration of this point is left solely to the reader.

In summary, this book should be placed high on the reading list of anyone interested in British industrial relations and the labour movement in general. It provides an account of the life of a titanic figure in the British labour movement who did things differently and achieved real, tangible results. Times have changed dramatically since Crow's death in 2014, and yet this book is able to draw out aspects of his leadership and personality from which the reader may find insights into the current state of affairs. Gall identifies in a precise manner those features of Crow's life which are of greatest significance to the modern situation, and provides in some metaphorical way a chance for Bob to give his opinions once again on a range of issues he did not quite live to see.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DAVID O'CONNELL is a recent graduate from the Global Labour University in Germany and a current PhD Candidate. Originally a labour activist from the United Kingdom, for the past four years he has been an active member of the German public and service sector union, Ver.di. Prior to his studies, he was leading an effort to establish a works council in a small company and participated in its operation, and remains involved in organising efforts. [Email: davidocconnell22@aol.com]