Book Review

Angry Workers of the World (2020) *Class Power on Zero-Hours.* Oakland, CA: PM Press. 392 pp. ISBN 9781527258341. Softcover US$20, £10.

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The Angry Workers of the World (AWW) follow in the footsteps of 1960s and 1970s communist activists – often from student or "intellectual" backgrounds – who chose to become manual workers as a way to contribute to working-class struggles. Several books have been published to recall this experience, but most of them were written after the fact, in the form of personal memoirs. *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, on the other hand, is a practical reflection on the activists' current militant work in the factories, warehouses and distribution centres of west London. It is meant to encourage other left-wing activists to "get rooted" in the working-class areas of their own cities.

As I am writing my PhD thesis on the Marxist turn to industry in the 1970s (with a focus on Québec, Canada, where it was called *implantation en usine*), I wish to draw parallels between the AWW and their precursors. During the Long Sixties, several communist organisations in the Western world shared a commitment to join the working-class in its daily struggles, but their specific tactics and outlooks varied widely. Some of them got involved mainly in shopfloor struggles, trying to build workers' power from the ground up, while others strove to integrate workers within a vanguard party through the promotion of a specific strand of Marxist ideology (Mao Zedong Thought, for example). The Angry Workers of the World are much closer to the former than the latter. Throughout the book, we learn little about their ideological background, except that they "were active in a libertarian communist and a socialist feminist group" (p. 21).[1] They considered that these were decent organisations, but like most left-wing collectives, their interactions with the working class were sporadic at best. They felt the need to become "plugged in", to develop strategies based on the concrete realities of workers. So they moved to a working-class area and took up manual jobs. As firm believers in the idea of working-class self-emancipation, they do not claim to provide a recipe for successful organising. Rather, their book is a thorough appraisal of their attempts to participate in and amplify workers' struggles, in the hopes of eventually forming a rooted revolutionary organisation.

The book is not written for an academic audience and does not use any academic jargon, but it provides a substantial and detailed analysis of industrial work in west London. Much as the best ethnographies do, it shows us that first-hand accounts, combined with statistical evidence and a good theoretical grasp, can be a powerful tool to understand the contemporary condition of the working class. As such, the AWW's analysis is reminiscent of Robert Linhart's (1981) *The Assembly Line*. It is noteworthy that the tactics used today by managers and capitalists to control workers

[1] All page references come from the ePub edition of the book.

resemble those of fifty years ago. An example that comes to mind is to divide-and-rule "by giving lower management positions to Polish, Romanian, Asian people, who become the 'middlemen' for workers of their respective backgrounds" (p. 27).

One of the AWW's contributions is to shatter the myth that we live in post-industrial societies. They show the continuing importance of industries that are difficult to outsource, such as food processing. They also demonstrate that although logistics and warehouse jobs may be classified as part of the service sector rather than the manufacturing sector, the lived experience of working in these environments is very similar to the old assembly line: in large nondescript buildings, dozens of closely packed workers accomplish highly taylorised tasks under the constant surveillance of authoritarian foremen. And just as in the industries of yesterday, today's logistics workers find ways to cope or to resist, including jokes, individual acts of rebellion, drugs and collective action.

But the Angry Workers do not solely want to describe working-class life; they want to intervene in rebuilding class power. Over the course of their six years as rooted activists, they set up a solidarity network which successfully solved several individual grievances. By providing legal advice, writing "scary but effective official letters to bosses" or by showing up in front of a company office with placards and leaflets, they managed to help workers win back money stolen by employers, temp agencies or crooked "visa agents" (p. 43). To avoid becoming service providers, they told people that they were workers in the area themselves and they insisted that the workers who were supported should take an active role in their own defence. The aim of the solidarity network was to get in touch with local people in order to scale up and engage in collective protests. Although they made several contacts, they were not able to achieve the critical mass to create "a local counter-power" (p. 57). Similarly, in their respective workplaces, they spurred small-scale mobilisation, but they "didn't have major 'organizing successes'" (p. 401): "if we believe that struggles are crucial for our work, then the years from 2014 to 2020 in west London were a thorny desert" (p. 36).

One striking feature of the Angry Workers' approach in this book is its honesty and humility. In contrast with some 1970s groups who made grandiloquent claims about their conception of revolution and who got involved in vicious polemics with other communist groups, the AWW engage in respectful debate with other currents of the Left: "'Democratic Socialism' is currently the main alternative vision to transforming capitalism, and as such we need to take it seriously, despite our deep disagreement with it" (p. 354). They criticise Democratic Socialists for their excessive emphasis on parliamentary politics.

In their day-to-day involvement, the AWW's approach is based on trial-and-error. The best example of this is their decision to become union representatives despite their conviction that unions "exist to mediate the relationship between labour and capital rather than break it" (p. 114): "But rather than rely on left-communist dogma, we wanted practical experience within the big unions to see how things actually operated" (p. 203). Their experience confirmed that existing unions left very little room for radical action, in part because the other reps were not willing to challenge the status quo they benefitted from.

Looking back on their experience as students-turned-workers in the 1970s, some of the activists I interviewed were critical of their own union involvement because they felt they were substituting themselves for the workers. Their implicit assumption was that union reps who rose directly from the ranks of the working class would be more in touch with their colleagues. In practice, the AWW's book shows that many union reps have a condescending attitude toward workers – when they claim that their colleagues won't be bothered to sign a petition, for example – or choose to participate in the union for their own personal advancement, as a springboard to management positions.

On the other hand, AWW activists are convinced that workers hold the key to their own emancipation. They repeatedly reaffirm that the real power of workers lies in their own collective action. Consequently, they make explicit efforts to ensure that workers take matters into their own hands, rather than depend on representatives. This does not always work, however. During a strike by hospital workers, for example, they suggested an assembly meeting, but they soon realised that "the dynamic of them listening to outsiders, somehow as an audience, was difficult to break" (p. 37). One of the activists, a forklift driver at a ready-meal factory, helped her fellow workers win concrete demands, although she felt that there was no culture of self-organisation: "But unless there was a person driving this and plugging away at it, keeping the pressure on, it would never have happened. This person was always me" (p. 200). This is coherent with my research on activists who "proletarianised" in the 1970s. They often helped their colleagues mobilise for various improvements in their workplaces, but they were frequently unable to overcome the propensity of workers to delegate their own power to authority figures. This contradiction made them uneasy. Still, the AWW's book shows signs that a confident culture of working-class action can be built over time: a couple of weeks after the publication of the Angry Workers Bulletin at the ready-meal factory, fifty workers autonomously organised a one-day strike to demand a pay rise (p. 230). Revolutionary activists who are initially "outsiders" can play an important role in working-class struggles, as long as they make sure that their intervention promotes autonomy rather than passivity.

Reference

Linhart, R. (1981) *The Assembly Line.* Amherst, MD: University of Massachusetts Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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