

Mary Davis. *Comrade or Brother? A History of the British Labour Movement*. London: Pluto Press, 2009. 304pp.

It is rare for a history of a national labour movement to grasp the international (ist) imagination in the way Davis does in *Comrade or Brother?* It must be admitted, this is in part because the struggles recounted from the Luddites to New Unionism are so familiar to labour scholars and activists everywhere, but it is also because Mary Davis reads the British labour movement in a non-ethnocentric way. At the foreground are the deep gender divides and the heavy burden of imperialism and racism that shape the British working class. These make the book so relevant and why it travels so well. If you missed the first edition in 1993 now is your chance to catch up on a vital resource for global labour history.

As Mary Davis puts it “All oppressed and exploited groups have the right to reclaim their past- none more so than the working class itself” (p.3). This is not a history of an ever-forward march towards a glorious destiny. Rather it is critical and analytical focusing, in particular around the troubled relationship of the Trade Unions in regards to women and immigrant workers. The traditional gender and colour-blind narratives of the British labour movement are shown to be an inadequate analysis and, for that matter, a guide to action today. Thus, this is very much a book for the labour movement, seeking to recover critically its living history.. As Mary Davis argues “connecting the separate spheres of class, race and gender in a manner which comprehends both their distinctiveness and interrelationships is long overdue” (p. 6).

This is hardly the place to go back over the ups and downs of the British working class movement from 1780 to 1980, the period covered by this book. It is a history nicely woven into an account of how capitalism developed in Britain, and created a greatly expanded industrial working class. By 1850 the language of class was dominant with a stark divide between the owners of capital and those who sold their labour power to survive. However, by 1889 there was a solid level of workplace organization committed to defending wages and living standards. The early mutual-aid associations or ‘friendly societies’ gradually mutated into the modern form of the trade union. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the political organization of the workers movement also progressed with the emergence of Chartism, which potently connected class-consciousness with political organization until it was defeated in 1850.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by a gradual shift from absolute exploitation (through a lengthening of the working day for example) to a more intensive modality through the speed up of machinery and tighter labour discipline. For their part, trade unions became more formalized and, in the better organized sectors, began to engage in collective bargaining with the employers. However, the socialism of the Owenite and Chartist movements was forgotten, and this emerging 'labour aristocracy' was quite conservative. It was only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of the 'new unionism', inspired by leaders like Tom Mann and Ben Tillett, that trade unionism spread to the less skilled and non-manual sectors creating the modern mass labour movement we know today.

In a book entitled *Comrade or Brother?* it is no surprise to find gender relation and women workers to the fore in this account. At every stage of its development the working classes and the workers' movement comprised both women and men. The radical and socialist origins of the labour movement were also matched by a strong feminist component. Women's involvement in Chartism was a dramatic demonstration of the growing consciousness around gender and class issues. Women's work was often under-reported, not least because much of it occurred in the sweated trades and as outworkers or, as Mary Davis puts it "in small, dingy unregulated workshops escaping the notice of the inspectorate and hence of factory legislations" (p.83). This description has a very contemporary ring to it when viewed from a Third World labour studies perspective.

Male workers often actively kept women out of paid employment and trade unions themselves became an intensely male affair in terms of their active disdain for gender politics of any kind. Female trade union membership increased by 150 percent during the First World War, but only the National Federation of Women Workers and the Workers' Union made a serious effort to organize women workers consistently. An official or simply *de facto* ban on the employment of married women showed attitudes had not really changed since the Victorian era. Male workers and male trade unionists collocated in the social exclusion of women. Apart from anything else, this greatly diminished the potential of the labour tradition to create a strong unified popular mass movement.

Now, the British labour movement was not alone in its debilitating sexism but it did lead in terms of the influence of

imperialism and racism within the labour movement. The rise of Empire coincided with the rise of the modern labour movement. Mass culture extolled the virtues of self-help, but also those of colonialism whereby lesser peoples would be subject to British tutelage. The term social imperialism, first coined by Karl Renner in 1917, accurately sums up a system in which the spoils of empire would be used to finance social reform at home. Racism, eugenics and jingoism or national chauvinism united in a potent mix. For Mary Davis this constellation “provided the new unifying antidote to the emerging socialist consciousness of the 1880’s which threatened to expose the possible class conflict of a declining economy” (p.88).

Social imperialism continued as a powerful force into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and not even all the socialist organizations took an anti-imperialist stance. As to the mainstream labour movement at the very best it was silent on Empire, the partition of Africa was simply never referred to, but much more common was a fervently pro-Empire stance. Notions of the ‘white man’s burden’ were more or less dominant with a racial chauvinism greatly weakening the unifying potential of the trade unions. Overt racial prejudice and an effective colour bar in many areas contributed to high Black worker unemployment, a situation that only changed with the acute labour shortages during the Second World War. Unfortunately, the contemporary debates around racism, black worker self-organization and the trade union relationship to immigration lie outside the scope of this book.

From a ‘majority world’ (to not say Third World) perspective what can we gain from reading and absorbing the lessons of *Comrade or Brother?* Maybe we can start by placing the original labour movement generated by and against the Industrial Revolution in its proper context. As central to the labour movement as was Birmingham and Manchester, so were India and Africa, not to mention Ireland. It was part of a global labour history, and not a unique and pristine model that others should follow. No labour movement – least of all the British labour movement, can be considered within its neat nation-state envelope. Empire and colonialism, and the ever present and rebellious Ireland, were part of the context and an integral element of the DNA of the British labour movement. More broadly this lesson might lead us to also internationalize our own labour histories in the South.

Another major lesson emerging from a subaltern reading of this text is the always present divisions within the global working

class. It is nothing surprising, and if it is morally reprehensible that is hardly relevant politically, to see the working class divided along a whole series of inter-sectional divisions. The way the regime of capital accumulation and political legitimation took the characteristics they did in Britain under the Industrial Revolution and British Empire should illuminate present day labour movement problems. If unity across regions, genders, ages, religions, skill levels, and employment relationships cannot be taken as a given then its ongoing political construction becomes a priority. In that sense this book sets an optimistic tone (or at least one not mired in deep pessimism) because it demonstrates how labour movements develop, struggle and that solidarity can sometimes be achieved.

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Allan Engler. *Economic Democracy: The Working Class Alternative to Capitalism*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2010. 112pp. & Gregory Elliot. *Ends in Sight: Marx /Fukuyama /Hobsbawm /Anderson*. Toronto: Pluto Press, 2008. 160pp.

*Economic Democracy* by Allan Engler and *Ends in Sight* by Gregory Elliott are small paperback books written in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, each offering assessments of capitalism and the potential for its ending. While both arguments are framed by Marxist theory, the different approaches taken by the authors lead them to different conclusions and produce works that complement one another.

Engler's *Economic Democracy* presents a critique of capitalism and a vision of economic democracy as the alternative best suited to the working class. The book is written in accessible language with few citations, more the style of a popular manifesto than academic essay. It is divided into three major sections: Capitalism: Socialized Labour; Economic Democracy: Ending Minority Rule; and Opposing and Ending Capitalism: Reforms to End Capitalism. Each of these is divided into brief subsections, all listed in the contents thereby reinforcing the feel of the book as practical and accessible. Engler writes from the perspective of a longstanding social activist and unionist in Canada. He is also the author of *Apostles of Greed, Capitalism and the Myth of the Individual in the Market* (Pluto Press and Fernwood, 1995).