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Dossier

Strikes, Social Conflicts, and Class Struggle in Wartime

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Letter from the editor

Once again war threatens the world, the future of the planet and condemns the working classes to poverty. Once again, working classes must push hard to stop Ukraine/Russia war, NATO's warmongering and the genocide of the Palestinian people. In this edition, we take on the urgency of the answers still to be built, of the workers' movement that needs strength and of finding convergences with the youth for the climate emergency, with anti-fascists who fight against growing authoritarianism, with anti-racism on all continents, with the defence of public services and radical gender equality.

From the past, we get examples in which the left and the workers' movement have achieved significant victories against the war waged by the empires. This is the case of Marina Kabat's text about the frustrated participation of the Argentine military in the Korean War in the 1950s. It is the example of the workers of the North of France and Belgium occupied by the troops of the Reich, of their struggle for better living conditions, and of the extraordinary resistance to the Nazi occupation, in a review of Steve Cushion and Merylyn Moss' book, *On Strike Against the Nazis*. From the present-day, we publish a text by members of the workers' committee of the Portuguese public television (RTP) where the field of labour struggles fully assumes the positioning on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

We also publish an interview with Michael Roberts where the path and thought of the British economist are a fundamental reference

for thinking the world in which we live and the crucial alternatives to ensure the future.

A text on two recently published books, and presented at the 6th Conference of IASSC, is Buntu Siwisa's contribution to this edition of the *Workers of the World* journal: *Labour Revolt in Britain, 1910 – 1914*, by Ralph Darlington, and *Recasting Workers' Power: Work and Inequality in the Shadow of the Digital Age*, by Edward Webster are the two books that Siwisa talks to us about, showing us the evolution of capital accumulation and the continuity of exploitation, and how labour resists in strategies of organization and mobilization. In fair tribute to Edward Webster, who passed away in March 2024, we republish a text by Karl von Holdt, originally published in *The Conversation*. Eddie Webster was present at the 6th IASSC Conference, last February, presenting his book.

Resisting, organizing, mobilizing is the enormous urgency of the present to which this issue of *Workers of the World* intends to contribute on the reflection and response capacity of class internationalism.

Workers of the World is the journal of the International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts (<https://www.iassc-net.org/index.php>). Articles for *Workers of the World* should be sent to o workersoftheworld1848@gmail.com

João Carlos Louçã

Marina Kabat The Argentine workers' anti-war movement during the Korean War (1950-1951)

ABSTRACT

During the Korean War, the United States, invoking previous treaties, asked Argentina and all Latin American governments for support. Notably, the US requested them to send troops to participate in the military conflict. The Argentine president, Juan Domingo Perón, looking forward to economic aid from the US, promptly agreed and began the preparations. But his arrangements were thwarted by a pacifist campaign organised by the Argentine Communist Party. Women, youth, and unionised workers were essential to this campaign. Particularly decisive was a mass demonstration of railroad workers in Rosario city. The campaign, despite harsh repression from the government, achieved its objectives, and no Argentine soldier was sent to fight in the Korean War, a testament to the success of the resistance.

KEYWORDS

Pacifism
Peronism
Strike
Communism
Peronism
Korean war

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines popular resistance to sending Argentine troops to the Korean War between 1950 and 1951. The most significant event of this process, a workers' demonstration in Rosario, has piqued the interest of various historians and is one of the focal points of our study. Today, I can offer a more comprehensive reconstruction of this event with access to new sources. Furthermore, carefully examining different documents allows us to analyse the entire process of resistance against Argentine involvement in this global conflict in support of the United States. To understand and reconstruct this process, I looked at various sources. First, I examined local, national and international newspapers, including newspapers from Uruguay. Second, I used declassified secret documentation from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Third, I studied newspapers associated with the Communist Party of Argentina (CP) and its political fronts and leaflets published and distributed by these same organisations. Finally, I also took into account, to a lesser extent, oral and written testimonies from those directly involved in these events.

Overcoming research challenges to comprehend the events under analysis necessitated a meticulous cross-referencing of various sources. From 1949, the government tightened its grip on the press, with censorship primarily impacting prominent national newspapers. Consequently, information from local newspapers could fill in gaps left by national newspapers. Foreign media also offered valuable insights, particularly from neighbouring countries or the United States. Similarly, the secret reports of the CIA were indispensable in understanding the government's repressive activity, systematicity and planning, and underscore the thoroughness of our approach.

However, the task of reconstructing the campaign against sending troops to Korea was not without its challenges, primarily due to the deliberate silencing of one of the parties involved. The Communist Party strategically used ad hoc fronts to promote a campaign against sending forces. Subsequently, after the fall of the Peronist government, it aimed to garner the support of Peronist workers. The events that thrust the Communist Party ahead of Peronism were conveniently omitted from the Party's official history. To study them, I had to rely on the testimonies of those involved and documents from that period, a testament to the complexity of our task.

ARGENTINE RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE KOREAN WAR

Perón's relationship with the US government was initially fraught with tension but gradually improved after he became president in 1946. At first, Perón's nationalist stance was viewed as a threat by the United States. During the political campaign leading up to the 1946 elections, which Perón won, the US ambassador to Argentina, Spruille Braden, became heavily involved in the campaign against Perón and was even identified as its leader.

This interference by the US ambassador in Argentine internal

affairs triggered a nationalist response that contributed to Perón's victory.

After George Messersmith replaced Braden in April 1946, diplomatic relations between the two countries slowly improved. In the early 1950s, the Truman Doctrine prioritised the fight against communism, and Perón became a crucial ally in this effort. Argentina faced economic difficulties and sought investment and credit from the United States. Therefore, both countries needed to maintain reasonable diplomatic relations while allowing minor conflicts to arise.

While Perón maintained a rabid nationalist discourse publicly, negotiations were quite different behind closed doors. Peron advocated for Argentine economic independence and claimed to hold a so-called third position. This meant that Argentina would maintain a neutral stance, trade with the East and the West, and uphold diplomatic relations. However, after the Korean conflict broke out, Perón informed the United States' former ambassador in Buenos Aires, Messersmith, that Argentina would side with the Western nations. Following this, the Argentine foreign minister advised diplomatic missions that the Argentine "third position" should no longer be mentioned abroad.¹ US intelligence judged Perón's local nationalist talks as "theatrical", "for domestic consumption", or meant to improve his bargaining power with the United States. Due to the Argentine government's strong support for the US, the US government overlooked the nationalist propaganda.² However, Messersmith expressed concerns to Perón about the potential confusion it could cause among the Argentine people.³

During Perón's presidency, the Argentine government signed the Chapultepec Acts in 1946 and the Rio Pact in 1950. This marked a shift from Argentina's traditional neutrality during the First and most of the Second World Wars and its antagonism with the United States regarding its role in Pan-American diplomatic institutions. In 1946, during Perón's first month in office, he requested Parliament's approval of the Inter-American Reciprocal Assistance and Solidarity, better known as the Chapultepec Acts. These acts were designed to ensure Latin American countries' support in conflict scenarios and were promoted by the United States. Later, before the Korean War, the Rio Pact, the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, was reinforced to create a legal provision for Argentine involvement in the Korean War. Congress ratified the Rio Pact on June 28, 1950, following Perón's orders.

Peronist government repeatedly assured that it was fully engaged in combating communism, and US intelligence believed that. The CIA reports that

Argentina feels that it is completely up to date in the fight against Communism. The opinion was expressed that in no other American country is the struggle against Communism waged so efficiently.⁴

Although the agency recognised that the Perón regime's effec-

1 Central Intelligence Agency. CIA Daily. Working paper, February 12, 1951, pp. 4-5.

2 The "ratification of the Rio Treaty as well as siding with the US against the USSR in the UN represent unprecedented measures of Argentine support of US policy". Central Intelligence Agency. Probable effects of recent changes in Argentine economic practice on US security interests, August 2, 1950, p. 6.

3 Central Intelligence Agency. Cia Daily op. cit. p 4.

4 Central Intelligence Agency: Preparations of Argentine delegation for Conference of American Foreign Ministers. April 4, 1951, p. 2.

tiveness was probably exaggerated to impress the US, it also acknowledged that Peronism "set a high standard among Latin American states for containing Communism".⁵ The agency also considered that if Perón was overthrown, there could be a communist upsurge within the working movement and further labour unrest, which would negatively affect US interests as it would "considerably reduce food surpluses, an important US strategic interest in case of war with the USSR".⁶

PERÓN'S MILITARY PLANS AND COMMUNIST RESPONSE

When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, Perón prepared to participate, given the potential economic benefits of aligning with the United States. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hipólito Paz, convinced Perón to send a group of soldiers as soon as possible. Paz believed that Argentina should be the first country in Latin America to take this action. Perón was concerned that the war could expand and wanted to prevent Argentina from becoming isolated from North American markets.⁷

The CP was the only left-wing group in Argentina with a significant, yet minority, presence within the worker's movement. It initiated a peace campaign to promote a Popular Front strategy. Following the international campaign that had gained Sartre's approval, the CP initially sought the support of intellectuals. However, these efforts did not yield the expected outcome at the local level. Conversely, the CP successfully involved other political groups, particularly the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), a middle-class party, and a faction of Peronist union leaders displaced from the official unions. The movement gained support from the general public, as demonstrated by the significant number of signatures collected on petitions opposing the deployment of troops, as well as the decisive demonstration of workers in Rosario, a city in the Santa Fe province. Women's associations, such as the Unión Argentina de Mujeres (Union of Argentine Women) and the Agrupación Cultural Femenina (Women's Cultural Group), were crucial in gathering signatures. They also played a notable role in street protests, evidenced by the number of detained women.

THE PEACE CAMPAIGN IN BUENOS AIRES BEFORE 18 JULY

To carry out their peace campaign amid severe repression, the CP had to come up with creative ways to avoid being monitored by the authorities. In 1949, the Peronist government had launched a campaign against communist groups. After the outbreak of the Korean War, the surveillance of communist organisations became even more intense. Federal police units throughout Argentina were alerted to prevent any potential for communist activity. Extra patrols ranged over Buenos Aires's and La Plata's streets while intelligence agencies and police forces worked together. On 13 July, 1950, the Grupo por la Paz, a group advocating for pacifism, simulated a picnic excursion to

Tigre island to avoid police interference. This precaution was not enough: the Argentine Police were informed of the resolutions taken in that meeting (intensify the peace campaign and organise flash street meetings protesting against the ratification of the Rio Pact and the United States' interference in Argentina's internal affairs and Korea). As political activities required official permission, spontaneous propaganda was carried out instead. Small groups of activists conducted surprise propaganda acts in busy streets, at specific targets, or even in movie theatres, where they would shout slogans and distribute pamphlets. The goal was to retreat quickly and avoid the police. Despite communist provisions, the police often had prior knowledge of communist plans and were able to intervene and arrest protestors in cinemas or small street demonstrations. During the Korean War, communist agitators would often join crowds gathered around newspaper bulletin boards or markets and make derogatory comments about US involvement. Authorities were forewarned to be on the lookout for this type of propaganda but I have not found any record of anyone being imprisoned for this activity during the period under study.⁸

In July 1950, there was a lot of campaigning activity in Buenos Aires. Between 14 July and 19 July, the newspapers reported more than sixty people being arrested for acts related to the peace campaign. On 14 July, the communists reported arrests and raids in sixteen cinemas for the distribution of leaflets that were against the government's foreign policy and for peace in Korea. On 16 July, Chilean media reported that the police in Argentina's capital city had repressed an anti-war demonstration in front of the North American embassy hotel and detained 25 people.⁹ On 18 July, American media reported similar events taking place in Argentina. According to *La Prensa*, police arrested seven people at a cinema in downtown Buenos Aires for distributing leaflets promoting peace and calling for the withdrawal of US forces from Korea.¹⁰

El Diario reported on the same event and the subsequent arrest of five more communists the next day, raising the number of detainees to twelve within two days:

*Last night, for the second consecutive day, the "reds" held lightning-type demonstrations in the city's streets against the United States. [...] Four police officers were injured in clashes with protesters, five of whom were arrested*¹¹

On July 19, the police arrested twenty-one communist women in the downtown area who gathered, cheering for the CP and throwing leaflets.¹²

Despite intense police repression, the Argentine campaign collected 750000 signatures within a week, according to the *Daily Worker*, a communist newspaper published in New York:

Despite police terror against the collection of signatures for the World Peace appeal, 750 000 names have been obtained as of last week from trade unionists and members of various

5 Central Intelligence Agency: Probable effects op. cit., p. 9.

6 Idem, p. 2.

7 Paz, Hipólito: Memorias: Vida y política de un argentino en el siglo XX. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1999, p. 161.

8 Central Intelligence Office: Information report: Argentina police actions against communist demonstrations. August, 30, 1950, pp. 1-5.

9 Broadcast by radio station CE 1174, Santiago de Chile, 7/16/1950. The Information Service of Foreign Radio Broadcasters captured the broadcast in the United States and cited it in a report from the Argentine Embassy in Washington. General Archive of the Nation, Intermediate Archive, National Asset Recovery Collection, commission 45, file 102752, p. 10.

10 La Prensa. Argentina desea consultas sobre su posible ayuda militar en Corea. Nueva York, 18 July, p. 1.

11 El Diario. Continúan las manifestaciones de los comunistas en la Argentina. New York, 18 July, 1950, p. 3.

12 La Prensa. En una manifestación de la zona céntrica se detuvo a 21 mujeres. Buenos Aires, 20 July, 1950, p. 8.

organisations [...] In addition to the collection of signatures, peace committees are being formed [...] To counter the peace sentiments among the people, police terror and intimidation is expected to increase. Despite this, the slogan Hands Off Korea is gaining wider support.¹³

RAILROADERS' WILD-CAT STRIKE AND DEMONSTRATION IN PÉREZ AND ROSARIO

On 18 July, several newspapers reported that the Argentine government planned to send troops to Korea. However, the next day, the government denied such plans. This sudden policy change was primarily due to a massive demonstration by more than 5000 railway workers in Rosario, the third-largest city in Argentina. The workers, who played a crucial role in the protest, demanded peace and successfully compelled the government to alter its foreign policy. In his memoirs, the Argentine foreign minister, Hipólito Paz, admits that plans were already in place to send troops, along with a propaganda campaign to gain public support. However, the worker demonstration forced the president to cancel these plans.¹⁴

The demonstration was planned to avoid an official crackdown. It was reasonable to assume there would be less surveillance in the countryside than in the city centre. The movement originated in a small town near Rosario. On 18 July, at 10:30 AM, workers from the Pérez railway workshops formed columns and, accompanied by their wives, mothers and daughters, walked on the train tracks towards Rosario.¹⁵ A nurse from Rosario told Badaloni that she was at the march, invited by fellow communists. She travelled by car from Rosario to Pérez with ten other militants to participate in the movement that they knew would start in that town. Other railway workers from Pérez, interviewed by the same historian, also attributed the organisation of the movement to the CP.¹⁶ According to some reports, the workers were allowed to pay tribute to General San Martín, a national hero, in San Martín Square in Rosario, which is why the police did not intervene.¹⁷ Some press articles state the workers held posters with pacifist slogans and portraits of Perón and his wife. While I did come across photos of the slogans, I could not verify if there were any pictures of the president or his wife present.¹⁸

In Rosario, the group from Pérez went to Plaza San Martín, first passing through the Unión Ferroviaria and nearby factories where new contingents of workers joined. Pérez's column took two hours to reach Rosario. At the Unión Ferroviaria's headquarters, other unionised workers waited on the street and joined them. The workers from the Rosario railway workshops left at 11 for the Unión Ferroviaria. The workers of the next shift, who were supposed to enter at 11:45 a.m., found an invitation to the rally on the blackboards. Consequently, they did not go to work at all. When the two groups merged, they toured the streets of Rosario and stopped by several factories to invite the workers to join them. Many people, particularly women from the Minetti Mill, followed

them and headed to Plaza San Martín, where they held a rally. Upon their arrival in Rosario, the protesters were met with various attempts by the Peronist factions to discourage them. Initially, the union bureaucracy made efforts to dissuade them. The leaders of the Railway Union stationed loudspeakers in their building, facing the street, to persuade the workers to abandon the street and return to their workplaces. The local branch president of the union also asked them to return to their homes or work in an orderly fashion. He mentioned that "foreign elements" had initiated the movement in Pérez. He advised the crowd not to follow them, not to be deceived by them, and to await orders from the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) instead.

Despite some workers leaving, new ones joined, allowing the demonstration to continue.

One of the speakers at the Plaza San Martín event also tried unsuccessfully to contain the movement; later, the police also tried to dissuade the protesters and, when that failed, ended up repressing them. At 2 p.m., former senator Demetrio Figueiras, a labour leader and a railway worker who was part of the column from Pérez, spoke at the event. Figueiras was a critical Peronist, so other, more obedient leaders had displaced him. According to *Crónica*, Figueiras urged the crowd to wait in an orderly fashion and trust in the national government.¹⁹ According to *La Capital*, people sang the national anthem in the plaza. Figueiras called them to resume work, return to their homes, and not continue the march because the police had not given permission.²⁰ According to *Crónica*, this "only partly had the desired effect because groups of exalted people tried to continue the march".²¹ According to *La Prensa*, at the end of an event, new groups of protesters arrived carrying slogans related to the conflict. Despite police requests, the protesters started walking down a central street. The column continued to move forward despite several attempts to stop it. The newspapers agreed that the protest was rejuvenating itself. While some protesters left the scene, others joined the demonstration, which had the participation of around 4500 to 5000 workers at any given time. The newspaper *La Capital* describes the police's repression of the column as follows:

Police officers charged against the demonstration, forcing it to retreat. When they reached Mitre Street, the body of flamethrowers threatened them with their arms, forcing them to deviate. There was a moment of tension since the members of the police force had their weapons ready to fire.²²

Protesters expelled from one street regrouped on another and continued advancing through the city centre, making initial attempts to stop them unsuccessful.

... but new orders reached the police headquarters stating that the protesters had to be detained and dispersed in any way. Pickets from the tear gas brigade, two teams of firefighters and infantry forces were called [...] Next, powerful jets of water were

13 Daily Worker. 750.000 Sign for peace despite terror by Perón. New York, 18 July, 1950, p. 2.

14 Paz. Op. cit., pp. 160-163.

15 Hubo manifestaciones callejeras en Rosario. Rosario, 19 July, 1950, p. 5.

16 Badaloni, Laura. Control, memoria y olvido: 'Marcha de la Paz' y huelga ferroviaria durante el primer gobierno peronista. Polhis, Mar del Plata, 2013, p. 9.

17 Hubo manifestaciones callejeras op. cit. p. 5; El Orden, Los comunistas provocaron tumultos en Rosario, Santa Fé, 19 July 1950, p. 1.

18 Hubo manifestaciones callejeras op. cit. p. 5; La Capital. Hubo ayer una manifestación en la zona céntrica de la ciudad. Rosario, 19 July 1950, p. 4.

19 Efectuóse una manifestación de ferroviarios. Exteriorización de apoyo a la Paz y al General Perón. Crónica. Rosario, 18 July 1950, pp. 3-7.

20 Hubo ayer una manifestación, op. cit., p. 4.

21 Efectuóse una manifestación de ferroviarios, op. cit. pp. 3-7.

22 Aclaración de La Fraternidad. Rosario, 19 July 1950, p. 4.

directed at the protesters, who, in hasty runs, tried to avoid getting wet. Taking advantage of the moment, gases were thrown at them, and the mounted police charged at them, which completely cleared the artery, and seized insignias and flags. They also proceeded to arrest several bearers of such insignias and take them to section 3 of the police.²³

THE CONTINUITY OF THE PACIFIST CAMPAIGN

Following the demonstration of Rosario's railroad workers, protests continued in Argentina. In Buenos Aires, the police arrested twelve women on 19 July for inciting a street demonstration and five young men for the same reason on 22 July. In La Plata on 24 July, the police arrested seven people, including a woman, a student, two construction workers, a meatpacking plant worker and an attorney, for distributing communist literature and shouting in favour of communism and peace.

More significantly, in Córdoba, another key province where no demonstrations had been reported until then, sixty communists were arrested in six cities. On July 23, sixty communists were apprehended in the Province of Córdoba for disturbances in Villa María, Cosquín, Río Tercero, Río Cuarto, Alta Oliva, and Córdoba. They were accused of organising anti-Perón, anti-American, and pro-peace movements and charged with violating the public safety law.²⁴

According to the oral testimony of Martín Arista, a second worker demonstration occurred. Arista's story provides insight into how working-class sectors lived during this period. In 1950, when he was 18 years old, he lived in his rural hometown in Buenos Aires. There were rumours of soldiers being mobilised, which worried his mother as she was afraid that the government might send troops to Korea, where her son could be involved.

The young people in the town made fun of the conscripts who could be sent to war, calling them "the Koreans". Two years later, Arista moved to Buenos Aires and began working in a metallurgical factory, where he met communist workers and joined the Party. He learned about the RyCSA metallurgical factory strike in Ciudadela, led by the communist leader who opposed Peronism. According to Arista's story, the internal commission stopped the factory without permission from the union authorities and began a march to Casa Rosada, asking for peace. RyCSA had 1300 workers, and other factory workers joined their column until they reached 4000. The communists made up only 10 per cent or less of the protesters, and the rest were primarily concerned about sending troops to Korea. In party circles, Abel Caballero was highly regarded for organising this successful demonstration under Peronism. While I have corroborated the location, importance, and reference to the communist metallurgical leader, I have not yet found a written record of this demonstration. This lack of registration may be partly due to more censorship of Buenos Aires newspapers than of newspapers in the interior. The communist campaign persisted in 1950, but it gradually lost its strength. The police informed the CIA that the "hit and run"

Communist demonstrations had declined by around 60% by the end of July.²⁵ Perón's statements denying the possibility of sending troops to Korea helped to calm much of the widespread unrest. However, the increase in repression, which I will discuss in the next section, also had an impact.

In March and April of 1951, the United States began to pressure Latin American countries to support the United Nations in the Korean War. This pressure started building up before a foreign ministers' meeting, leading to the relaunch of a peace campaign. A pacifist leaflet was published in Santa Fe, the province where the railroad workers' demonstration occurred. It reads:

*From 140.000 to 1.000.000 young Americans!
Youth from Santa Fe, beware!
This is the amount that is heard mentioned to integrate what has been called the Latin American legion.
How many of us do they intend to send?
Washington will discuss this during the meeting of foreign ministers [...].
You are for Peace, against War, and you do not want to participate in this unjust massacre. Will you be able to give your opinion and express your human desire? Washington will decide that through the meeting of foreign ministers in its second point. Internal Security
Can we stop the cost of living, the low wages and mass unemployment that exist in our youth by exporting our products to the war front?
Washington will decide on the third point, economic cooperation, of the foreign ministers' meeting [...].
Argentine youth wants:
NOT to water foreign lands with our blood
NOT to feed aggressor armies with our meat.
NOT to humiliate our land with foreign military bases.
Young people, let us sign and make others sign the call of the World Peace Council for a Peace Pact.
Argentine Council for Peace. Youth for Peace.
Province of Santa Fe.²⁶*

After the Conference of Ministers, the Communist Party and the Radical Civic Union denounced the government for giving in to US pressure. The Communist Party called for action:

*Our lives were given in Washington: let's not comply!
Against the just wishes of the youth who do not want to die uselessly defending other people's interests,
What role will we play on the Korean front [...] perhaps to die in a trench [...]
The government capitulated to the pressure of the Yankee millionaire aggressors.
We call on young people to resist.
For peace, against war.
We don't want to be trench mud.
We want peace and happiness.
Against sending young people.²⁷*

In 1951, a campaign was launched to demand an end to the attempts to send troops and food assistance. In July of that year,

²³ Hubo ayer una manifestación, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁴ Central Intelligence Office. Information report, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

²⁵ Central Intelligence Office. Information report, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁶ Consejo Argentino por la Paz. Juventud por la Paz. Provincia de Santa Fe, De 140.000 a 1.000.000 de jóvenes americanos! Joven Santafecino ¡alerta! Leaflet, Santa Fe, no date, 1951. Note that the word "Americans" in the leaflet title refers to people born on the American continent, not just US citizens.

²⁷ Consejo Argentino por la Paz. Se entregaron nuestras vidas en Washington: ¡no acatemos! Leaflet 1951.

a group of female workers in the meatpacking industry filed a complaint about the shipment of Argentine meat to US troops in Korea. However, no records of sabotage in the meatpacking plants were found. But I found a reference to the boycott of aid shipping by the crew of the *Coracero*, a ship in the merchant navy: "Upon finding out that the ship would leave with cargo for Korea, they abandoned the ship, resisting transporting products from their land for the aggressors".²⁸

PERONIST REPRESSION

Communist press condemned governmental violations of human rights throughout its peace campaign. As I already described, the *Daily Worker* denounced "police terror" and intimidation campaigns. In 1951 a communist leaflet recounted the victims of repression: 100 detainees in the territory of Chaco, and arrests and torture in Córdoba, where the police had raped a female activist. In the federal capital of Buenos Aires and in Buenos Aires province, numerous women who had been arrested were subjected to torture, to the point that some lost pregnancies. The leaflet also refers, as part of the same repression, to the kidnapping of the young student Mario Bravo.²⁹

A secret report from the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) informs that most of the activists detained in street demonstrations were turned over to the Special Section of the police; it alludes to this organisation's torture practices and the orders given by the authorities. For example, on 14 July, five young men detained in a hit-and-run protest were going to "be turned over to the Seccion Special of the Federal Police for 'interrogation'". The quotation marks indicate that they were about to be tortured.³⁰ They were all 18 to 20 years old. That same day, in a second demonstration in Buenos Aires City, two other activists caught in a second demonstration were turned over to the Seccion Special, "and police sources readily admit that they are in for some extremely rough treatment".³¹ Women received the same treatment. They were also turned over to the Special Section. For instance, on Sunday, 16 July, three young women aged 16 to 20 years were arrested with a boy of 18, and were going to be turned over to the Special Section.³²

According to the CIA report, it is evident that the president had complete knowledge of the situation. During his administration, Perón publicly denied the existence of torture. He blamed isolated police elements acting on their behalf when cases became public. The CIA report indicates that Perón closely monitored daily events and provided instructions to the police.

The authorities have been anticipating communist outbreaks [...] and were not caught off guard. The President was immediately apprised of all facts by the Oficina de Control del Estado (OCE),

the top presidential intelligence agency [...] The government had indicated that it would not tolerate such gatherings and vigorous measures would be taken to discourage them.³³

A few days later, "all intelligence and law enforcement agencies were closely coordinating their activities and funneling their reports to the President through OCE".³⁴ On 19 July, the Buenos Aires chief of police received orders direct from Casa Rosada "to show no mercy against active Communist agitators, regardless of sex".³⁵

Communist activists were aware of the risks involved in street demonstrations but remained committed and displayed high morale. They often attempted to resist arrest through force. Typically, the police only arrested a few activists who participated in the demonstrations. Additionally, some police officers were injured during confrontations with activists. Even while in prison, the activists attempted to resist authority. For instance, an eighteen-year-old student named Sergio Guzman wrote the word "Peace" on the wall of his cell with his nails, and he was subsequently given an extra fifteen days in jail as punishment.³⁶

In two critical moments of the pacifist campaign, two severe events occurred. In 1950, Jorge Calvo, who was leading the communist peace movement in Argentina, and Ángel Zelly, a metallurgical union leader, were gunned down by a parastatal group with police complicity. In 1951, after the Washington Foreign Ministers' Conference, the young leader, Ernesto Bravo, was kidnapped and tortured nearly to death by the Special Section police. The police denied having him arrested while keeping him captive. Ernesto Bravo also had a prominent role in the communist campaign.

The murders of Jorge Calvo and Ángel Zelly were directly linked with the repression of the peace campaign. After the protest in Rosario, the chief of the Federal Police, Bertollo, announced on the radio that they would be taking decisive action against communist groups. Jorge Calvo was responsible for overseeing the peace movement in Buenos Aires province. He and Zeely, a metallurgical worker, and other comrades met in Quilmes City to plan the upcoming peace campaign activities. The meeting had just begun when a group of heavily armed individuals suddenly launched an attack. Survivors said that the aggressors claimed to be policemen, although they did not wear uniforms. They also recall that the police agent who guarded the communist headquarters was not present that day. It took a long time for the police and medical aid to arrive.³⁷ Recently, it has been discovered that the Special Section of the federal police updated Jorge Calvo's record ("communist identification card no. 92"), documenting his death suspiciously six days before his murder, which occurred on 4 August, 1950.³⁸

Ernesto Mario Bravo's case was also related to the peace cam-

28 Marítimos. number 7, July 1951, p. 3. See also Boletín Amigas de la Paz. Cómo luchan las obreras por la paz. number 7, July 1951, p. 3.

29 Consejo Argentino por la Paz. El caso Bravo y la lucha del pueblo argentino por la paz, la soberanía nacional y el progreso: ¡por un pacto de paz de las cinco grandes potencias! Leaflet, 1951, p. 4.

30 Central Intelligence Office. Information report, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

31 Ibid.

32 Idem, p. 3.

33 Idem, p. 2.

34 Idem, p. 4.

35 Idem, p. 6.

36 Idem, p. 7.

37 Heller, Amado. Oral testimony. February 2008, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KC_I68U2qzY&feature=emb_logo last visited February 27, 2024.

38 Furman, Rubén. Puños y pistolas. Puños y pistolas. La extraña historia de la alianza Libertadora Nacionalista. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2014, p. 246. Gilbert, Isidoro. La Fede: alistándose para la revolución. La federación juvenil comunista 1921-2005. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2011, pp. 308-310.

paign. According to the testimony of Juan García, a communist militant who was doing mandatory military service at that time, Bravo would have actively participated in the Rosario demonstration of 1950.³⁹ In 1951, he led the Argentine organisation of the Third World Festival of Youth and Students, an international event for peace that would take place in Berlin and had a relevant role in the International Peace Campaign. Bravo was kidnapped from his home by the police, who later denied having detained him. Bravo almost died under torture and was only released thanks to vast social demonstrations that included a two-day university strike. The case is well known because Bravo managed to prosecute and sentence the police agents who captured and tortured him, but not their superiors.

CONTEMPORARY SUCCESS AND HISTORICAL OBLIVION

The campaign against sending troops was successful despite official statements to the contrary. When sharing information with foreign intelligence agencies, the Argentine government tried to downplay the achievements of the pacifist campaign against sending troops to appear in control of the situation. This was consistent with Peronism's efforts to position itself as the primary barrier against communism in South America. Regarding the demonstration of Rosario, the CIA was informed that the movement failed when the CGT revealed that it had not authorised it. However, the CIA informants were unconvinced of this overall assessment and emphasised the contradictions between different sources.

The CPA was apparently trying desperately to influence Argentine public opinion against intervention in the Korean War. A source reported that the Argentine police feel that the CPA has been unsuccessful in this effort, although some governmental officials feel that the communist efforts have been extremely fruitful.⁴⁰

Ultimately, the campaign prevented the sending of Argentine troops to Korea by involving non-communist workers in demonstrations. The small actions by communist militants may have helped alert public opinion, but they were not enough to break the government's will. The government was not fazed by a month of minor street actions. However, when these activities coagulated into massive labour demonstrations and wild-cat strikes, the government changed its decision between 18 July and 19 July, 1950.

Despite the government's ability to put an end to street demonstrations, it did so through intense repression and by modifying its foreign policy. Most union leaders condemned the illegal demonstrations and strikes. However, in order not to lose support from their social base, they issued pacifist statements at the same time. After the Rosario demonstration, they celebrated the government's declaration that Argentine soldiers would not be sent to Korea. Ultimately, such enthusiastic support for the new government policy acted as a deterrent to a possible

attempt by the president to send troops later.

Although the pacifist campaign successfully prevented troops from being sent, it could not stop the supply of meat to the United Nations armies, which was the second item on the agenda. I only found one instance of transport boycott by maritime workers. However, I found no records of strikes or sabotage in the meatpacking industry. CIA reports express concern about the possibility of sabotage that would reduce shipments, and they consulted local sources about this possibility. The Argentine police deny the existence of such cases and state that they did not expect this type of action to occur.⁴¹

The campaign against food shipments failed for multiple reasons. The communists were no longer leading the meatpacking workers' union, although there were still some communist militants in the sector. Despite this, I found no records of strikes in the industry. Additionally, the communist leader José Peter, who had previously led the meatpacking workers before the rise of Peronism, was put under special surveillance by the government. One worker in the industry was imprisoned for participating in street propaganda activities.⁴² Furthermore, meatpacking workers experienced unemployment and temporary suspensions, which made them less interested in participating in a systematic boycott campaign. As such, a boycott would have worsened their lack of work. Other guilds, such as construction and textiles, where the communists had some influence, were not involved in supplying supplies. However, workers from these sectors participated individually in street agitation.⁴³

The success of the pacifist campaign contrasts with society's amnesia about it. Ironically, the reason for this may be its success in preventing the sending of troops, as the attempt made by the Peronist government was quickly forgotten. The official propaganda that attempted to deny the fact contributed to this, as it reduced the campaign to false rumours spread by the communists. The Argentine left parties have also not done much to keep the memory of these working-class struggles alive. The Communist Party after 1955 sought the Peronist vote, which resulted in previous complaints being silenced, while Trotskyism, which later became the dominant force within the left, did not care to highlight the struggles that communists promoted in previous historical moments. However, the memory of the events discussed in this paper has not been entirely lost. Last year, on its 73rd anniversary, a commemorative sculpture created by local artists was placed in Pérez, where the railway strike and march to Rosario began ■

³⁹ García was mobilised with other conscripts as part of Argentine troops' preparation for their participation in the Korean War. García, Luis. Oral testimony, April 2009, in: Cutillo, Irene. *Historias gorilas: Represión en la Argentina durante los años 1943-1955*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo, p. 305.

⁴⁰ Central Intelligence Office: Information report. op. cit., p. 8. The reference to the Rosario movement is found on p. 5.

⁴¹ *Idem*, pp. 4-5.

⁴² *Idem*, p. 7.

⁴³ Among the people detained by the police were four construction workers, a meat-packing plant worker, a tailor, an employee, an attorney and a doctor. Central Intelligence Office: Information report, op. cit., pp. 6, 7, 9.

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FROM UKRAINE TO GAZA, STOP THE WAR!

ABSTRACT

Since the 19th century, the workers' movement has often been the main social force committed to preventing imperialist wars where younger workers would be called to shed their blood and elder workers would be forced to work and starve. Since the Russian invasion and the outbreak of the Ukraine war, the urgent need for this commitment is back. At the first stages of that war, we, as members of the workers' committee of the Portuguese public media network RTP, issued a statement as our own contribution to this task.¹ The following article is an explanation and updating of the reasons for that statement.

¹ The statement was translated into Spanish and can be read at <https://www.herramienta.com.ar/confesion-de-campismo>.

KEYWORDS

Gaza
War
Genocide
Workers' movement

Nothing at all can justify an invasion like Russia's into the Ukraine. Nothing that has happened in these past two years has changed the criminal features of the invasion. Nothing in the meantime has made the anti-war protests in Russia any less valuable and right. Putin's crimes, like the murder of Alexei Navalny, always tolerated by Western governments as long as they were convenient, have no reason to be tolerated now by the international workers' movement.

But no Russian invasion can be used as an excuse to divert from the Israeli genocide in Gaza, to expand NATO to encompass formerly neutral countries, to increase military spending in NATO countries, to prepare major wars against Russia and even China, or to wage a war against the democratic rights and living standards of the working class in the West. This is all being done and this is the main problem we have to deal with.

HOW NATO WARMONGERING STIFLES PRESS FREEDOM

While the truth has always been an early victim of all wars, since the outbreak of the Ukraine war it is getting wiped away from the sight of the Western public even more than ever before. Ancient techniques such as selecting suitable subjects and silencing everything else are now combined with sophisticated new techniques such as "deep fakes" and targeting each individual's soft spots through "big data". In this regard, Western propaganda, often under a false Ukrainian flag, has been much more effective than Russia's.

Besides spreading better fabricated lies, the Western democracies resort to massive censorship, like that imposed on "Russia Today", in order to stifle anything – lies or truths – that might come from the East. Censorship does not shy away from even murder in slow motion. A broad and year-long conspiracy involving Swedish, British and US "independent" judiciaries tried to make out of Julian Assange a Western Navalny. This was designed to make a chilling example for the world of the life sentence awaiting him in the US, and was only stopped by worldwide protests. Press freedom ends where exposing imperialist war crimes starts. Censorship and judicial murder coalesce, as under McCarthyism, to make this crystal clear, precisely when war crimes are becoming fashionable again.

However, the result of these authoritarian features is, rather than a new version of McCarthyism, a tremendous "peer pressure", and often self-censorship, against any potential criticism of the Israeli genocide in Gaza or of the global warmongering in Western countries. Anyone wishing to express an opinion about Ukraine in the mainstream media must leave aside the NATO expansion towards the East since the 1990s, betraying commitments to let the Soviet Union die in peace. He or she must also leave aside that a similar extension of a rival power to the US backyard would never have been tolerated (recall the Cuban missile crisis and the overthrow of several Latin American governments).

Other mandatory conditions for any voice wanting to be heard via the mainstream media are beautifying the Ukrainian regime, ignoring the many common features it shares with the Russian

autocracy and pretending it is a model democracy. It is also mandatory to deny the oligarchic nature of the Zelensky entourage, or its well-known complicity in the fraudulent scheme known as the Panama Papers, or the robbery of millions of dollars donated by Western Allies which were meant to feed, clothe and arm the soldiers in war. And, of course, it is mandatory to whitewash the persecution of labour activism by Zelensky, as well as the 2014 massacre by neo-Nazis in the Union House in Odessa and the ethnic persecution against the big Russian speaking minority. The mandatory contrast is with anything Russian, from the banned Shostakovich or Dostoevski, to the valiant anti-war protesters, whom the Western Russophobe hates as much as Putin does himself.

In short, any one saying that history did not begin with the Russian invasion of the Ukraine risks to be subjected to political lynching, as António Guterres when he said that History had not begun on the 7th October. The mainstream press became a mirror of the official propaganda, presenting a war in black and white. Any intent to understand the broader context, the contradictory motives or the dynamics of the process is immediately stigmatized as pro-Putinist "campism". There is no room for dialectical analysis, which would undermine the NATO-Manichaeism.

The most that left wing voices are allowed to distinguish is between the good Ukrainian war and the bad Israeli war crimes. But even this seems too subtle for the unwritten style book of the present warmongering, because the good Ukrainian warriors openly condone the bad Israeli war criminals. Whoever in the left and in the workers' movement says "A" today will be compelled to say "B" tomorrow; whoever gives the warmongering a little finger will soon be unable to recover their hand or even their whole arm.

HOW A WAR FOR THE UKRAINE BECAME A WAR FOR A WESTERN AGENDA

Among the more nuanced questions that should be asked at this stage is whether the Ukraine war, which started as a national defensive war on the Ukrainian side, is to remain a national defensive war forever. Finland's national defensive war in 1939 never mutated into an aggression from Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, because there was a time gap between each of them. But wasn't it close enough to mutate? How and when does a war of national defense mutate into an imperialist war? How and when does our opposition to both sides of an imperialist war start to supersede our solidarity with an oppressed nation? One common-sense argument is that there will not be a NATO versus Russia war in Ukraine as long as there are no NATO "boots on the ground" there. And, indeed, as long as the cannon fodder is only Ukrainian, this war will depend massively on Ukrainians' will to defend their country, so it will remain, up to a point, a national defensive war on the Ukrainian side.

But the cannon fodder is not everything in a war. The money, the hardware, the technology, the training and the intelligence have long been supplied to the Ukrainian side by NATO or NATO's member-countries. The policy of this war is also a lot more complex than the mere defense of the Ukraine: as far as the USA is concerned, it aims to weaken Russia, as Pentagon-chief Lloyd

Austin blatantly admitted.¹ A Ukrainian defense war can mutate to be simultaneously a NATO-proxy war.

At the very beginning of the war, the USA had suggested that Zelensky run away and build an exile government. The White House was not interested in a national defense of the Ukraine, didn't want to move a finger for that, and just encouraged the desertion of the Ukrainian president. But, as it became self-evident that the war would go on anyway, the White House and the Pentagon saw the opportunity to transform it into something that would serve their own goals.

Zelensky himself had ignored the Western suggestion to desert² but, after that initial bravado, he emerged as the most engaged politician in the transformation of the Ukraine war into a NATO and EU war against Russia. This metamorphosis in the nature of the conflict would skyrocket the danger of a nuclear war. And, no matter how weakened and corrupted the Russian Army has shown to be, in the scenario of a nuclear war, the first victims would not be the European countries, but the Ukrainian people.

The process of Zelensky going global is most clearly to be seen in his attitude towards the Middle East. As Russia invaded the Ukraine, one might have expected him to moderate his enthusiasm for the Israeli occupation in Palestine, at least as a tribute to the needs of a coherent Ukrainian war propaganda. But the iron logic of political alliances supersedes the logic of coherent propaganda. While Putin courts the European far right (Orbán with some results, Le Pen, Meloni, Salvini, Abascal, Ventura with decreasing success), Zelensky makes his support for the Gaza genocide³ the focal point for a far-right community with Latin-American fascists such as Bolsonaro or Milei.

In doing so, he is one step ahead of the US imperialist policy, which still welcomed the ousting of Bolsonaro and not the election of Milei; which still welcomes the genocide in Gaza but not yet an all-out-war against Iran; which already revoked Nixon's One China policy but is not yet ready for an all-out-war against China. Zelensky does not stand for a Ukrainian defense war against the Russian invasion, but for a global war strategy of the Western powers and a radicalization of the Western warmongering.

We should not just look at Zelensky as a free lancer, with no chance whatsoever of seeing his global war strategy adopted, sooner or later, by the main Western powers. Kiev and Tel Aviv are just the avant-garde of the global warmongering: none other than the French president, Emmanuel Macron, used his visit to Israel in the early stages of the Gaza genocide to call for a coalition against Hamas with the same allies who had been

fighting against Daesh.⁴ He might just as well have said the same allies who are coalescing against Russia, because that is what he meant. And, even if the evidence of the genocide and the broadness of the protest movement worldwide softened this kind of Western rhetoric for a moment, the drive is still there.

The drive can best be noticed in Germany, where the social-democratic Defense Minister Boris Pistorius waves the ghost of an "attack by Russia" in "a period of five to eight years" and calls for "intensive" preparation for war from now on⁵. Besides, he mentions the security upheavals and conflicts worldwide, whether "in Israel, Yemen, Syria, the Balkans, the Caucasus or the Indo-Pacific". He calls the public to support a policy of making Germany "fit for war" and openly admits to wanting to go back to having a conscripted army⁶.

General Patrick Sanders, head of the British army, also issued a statement in the same direction in front of one thousand British top military leaders.⁷ And, although the government prohibited the press from publishing Sanders' speech, it is clear that then prime minister, Rishi Sunak, found only the publicising unwise, not the idea of conscription itself. At the same time, Admiral Rob Bauer, chairperson of NATO's Military Committee, said at a meeting of top defense chiefs that it may be necessary to "find more people if it comes to war", by means of "mobilization, reservists or conscription".⁸ And Macron leaves no doubt about the use he intends for the fresh supply of cannon fodder coming with the conscription, when he admits having French troops fighting in the Ukraine.⁹ So, we can hear the sabre-rattling nearly everywhere.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE TO PREVENT A WORLD WAR?

The complex and contradictory nature of the Ukraine war shouldn't however have a paralyzing effect in a moment when action is required. Neither should the indifference of broad masses to the nature of the war stop us from doing what is right. Russian pacifists opposed the war with remarkable courage from the first moment on and paid a heavy price, meeting ruthless repression. The workers' movement in the West must target NATO and the Western governments, exactly as the Russian pacifists targeted Putin and his oligarchs. Once again, as in Liebknecht's time, the main enemy is at home.

Forgetting this would leave us at the mercy of economic policies aimed for preparing a major war. If war is a continuation of politics by other means, budgetary policy is a continuation of war by other means. No matter how sympathetic we remain, to the

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8 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/officer-issues-conscription-warning-as-nato-braces-for-all-out-war-with-russia/ar-BB1gW4HQ>

9 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/2/frances-macron-doesnt-rule-out-troops-for-ukraine>

Ukrainians who defend their country against a Russian invasion, we must acknowledge that the main Western goal is not a real free Ukrainian democracy, but the imperialist purpose to weaken Russia at the expense of Ukrainian lives.. Whenever American or European governments ask their parliaments for increased military spending in order to defend Ukraine, they really mean more money to prepare a major war, which has nothing to do with defending Ukraine. Once again, the workers' movement should stand against war credits.

The budget constraints around the Ukraine war have become still more acute since the start of Israel's war on Gaza and with the preparation of its aggression on Lebanon. This was not expected, since the main military power in the Middle East was supposed to annihilate the Palestinian resistance in a couple of hours after 7 October. Yet this huge military power, which in 1967 had beaten a coalition of middle sized powers in just six days, is still, after ten months, desperately struggling to reduce a barefoot army.

The forces on both sides are so uneven that we should rather speak about genocide and not about war. But the unexpected resilience of the Hamas-militias and the length of the fighting are such that they raise very complex problems of financing a regular war. And for the USA, it means financing two expensive wars simultaneously. The long lasting blockade of the US budget meant that both Democrats and Republicans wanted to keep slaughtering the Palestinians, but one section of GOP congress-people wished to pay all the Israeli bills but no longer all the Ukrainian bills.

For the GOP, the Gaza genocide must be propagated as Israeli self-defense, but the Ukraine war still smells too much like self-defense and therefore is not rewarding enough for the US-imperialist interests. Although a bipartisan compromise was reached in the meantime, this contradiction may come up, in a even more acute form, under a very likely second term of Donald Trump in the White House. .Now, the choice between two imperialist parties discussing how to use almost U\$80 billion for two imperialist wars should really be none of the working class' business.

For the time being, if we are to believe what is apparent from the average behavior of the male, Caucasian, American worker, most of the US working class is supporting Trump for a second term, and "Genocide Joe", while he was still on the race, and Kamala Harris now paid a heavy price among Arab-American and Afro-American voters, for whom Palestinian lives matter. But the bloodshed in Gaza still does not shake the conscience of the US working class as such. This means that the US working class will only notice what catastrophe comes upon her when the budget discussion becomes a discussion about wage cuts and cuts in social spending.

In Germany, there was no budget blockade because all three government parties agreed to massive cuts in healthcare, education, and social welfare, while they also agreed to spend twice as much in the 2024 budget on the armed forces as was spent in 2017. Although the sabotage of Nord Stream was, in the meantime, exposed as an American and Ukrainian operation, which enormously damaged German interests and enormously raised its energetic bill, the red-yellow-green coalition remains

an unshakeable supporter of both the NATO war effort in the Ukraine and the Israeli war effort in the Gaza genocide.

As said above, the Arab-Americans, the Afro-Americans and even increasing numbers of liberal Jews in the USA are standing up against the Gaza war, but the working class is still paralyzed. In Germany one and a half million came to the streets against the deportation plans of the far-right, but few demonstrate against the second Nakba. It seems the working class will only raise against the warmongering when it feels the effects of the new budgetary choices in their pockets under the spell of a policy of economic warfare.

Yet, for a socialist policy, to oppose a war cannot mean sleeping until its very eve and waking up when it is already in full motion. To oppose a war means above all to pre-empt it. The history of the workers' movement is full of pre-emptive campaigns, before would-be wars, in order to prevent their outbreak. Sometimes they succeeded, as with a Morocco war that did not actually take place between France and Germany in 1905/6, sometimes they failed, as with the First World War in 1914.

The pre-emption strategy is key today, as it was for the huge international movement against the US-invasion on Iraq in 2003, which lasted for several months and shook the Blair-government in the UK, to the point that it was facing the scenario of a very likely ousting, and the Bush-administration had much trouble with going ahead with the invasion. Now the enormous demonstrations which take place worldwide against the genocide in Gaza are also a mighty factor against the expansion of the war to the whole Middle East, in a broader context of antagonizing Russia and China.

There is no world war and no nuclear war yet, but both are in the making. Not one more dollar, not one more bullet should be supplied to the Israeli genocide or generally to imperialist wars or imperialist war plans. The workers must stand against the warmongering of their respective governments. We stand against any sacrifices that the next Portuguese government may ask the workers on behalf of a NATO-strategy ■

Lisbon, 30th July 2024

BOOK REVIEW

João Carlos Louçã

Cushion, Steve
and Moos, Merylyn.

On Strike Against the Nazis

Socialist History Society,
2021

KEYWORDS

Second World War
Occupation
Workers resistance

We are warned at the outset of *On Strike Against the Nazis* that the two texts integrated in it are a contribution to adding class struggle to the historiography of the Second World War, which both authors consider too imbued with assumptions of patriotism and class collaboration in the analysis of the resistance to occupation. In the first text, Steve Cushion discusses the workers' mobilisations in the northern region of occupied France where, from 1941, in the mining region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, they reached other industries. The region in question, designated a Forbidden Zone by the German authorities, was administered by the military command in Brussels, and the French population that fled the German invasion was forbidden to return there. At the same time, Pétain's collaborationist government took control of the south of the country, and defended not only the interests of the German occupation, but also the advantages for the French bourgeoisie who established contracts and benefited from the occupying force.

In the north of France, and also in Belgium, the extraction of minerals was a priority for the supply policy of the Third Reich and the associated military industries were obviously part of the plans of the occupation and the development of the military offensive on Europe. In these plans, the Vichy government, the French and the Belgian bourgeoisie were diligent actors and, at the same time, great beneficiaries of the situation of occupation, repression, exploitation and extreme poverty of the working classes. Surely for this reason, the analysis of Steve Cushion and Merylyn Moos takes on special significance in the analytical framework of global history by recognising the determining role of class conflicts in the resistance to the Nazi occupation.

In Cushion's argument, the strikes in the mining regions in the north of France and Belgium, in addition to being driven by labour-related reasons, and in some cases having achieved significant victories, directed a good part of the workers involved to integrate structures and organisations of resistance to the German occupation. The repression to which strikes and protest activities in the workplaces were subjected meant clandestinity was the only option in many cases. Emphasis is on the responsibilities of communist militants influential in these workers' mobilisations, and who were part of anti-Nazi resistance activities and structures before it became a policy assumed by their leadership. In fact, the upheaval provoked by the German-Soviet Pact in August 1939, in the field of the left and in particular of the communist militants in the face of politics in Western countries threatened with occupation or already occupied by German troops, is described in Cushion's text in detail.

At the base of the communist organisations there would be militant workers who confronted the occupying forces, the repression of the Vichy collaborative government, and a bourgeoisie that, with rare exceptions, adapted to and benefited from the occupation. The agreement between Hitler and Stalin did not prevent them from taking positions and organising multiple strategies of resistance, even when these were not determined by the party to which they belonged. In the dynamics of the class struggle, the agreements of the leaderships can be overtaken or even ignored by the struggle of the workers and their communities. On the other hand, it was the first invasion of the USSR by German troops, in June 1941, that finally brought together the leadership of the communist parties with the resistance practices of a significant part of their worker bases. In the two cases analysed, this was the moment when there was an increase in sabotage and urban guerrilla actions against German and French collaborating soldiers. Part of this resistance and sabotage was in a factory context in which the go-slow, or one-hour strikes alternating in the different mining sectors, became frequent, in a lexicon of forms of struggle capable of responding to situations of intense repression and complete illegality of the structures and organisations representing the workers.

Marilyn Moos' contribution, in the second part of the book, delves into the case of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), led by social democratic militants from Antwerp. The ITF organised illegal resistance groups from among German seafarers, dockers and railway workers. Its intense activity resulted in boycotts and huge disruptions throughout the North Sea in the circulation of raw materials to supply the German war industry, mainly between 1933 and 1945. This federation was also responsible for a huge movement of solidarity with the Spanish Republic, in what was the civil war that prepared the Second World War. As in the case of the labour and strike movement in the north of France and Belgium, some of the ITF militants also had experience in the international brigades that fought on the republican side. The ITF also invested considerable resources in this conflict, organised fighters, and prevented ships from following the supply route of the Francoist forces. Far from being an isolated case, the ITF's performance in the Spanish Civil War was a magnificent example of the practice of class solidarity in the face of the beginning of the conflict that swept Europe.

For the two authors, the Spanish Civil War was the beginning of a world conflict, to which only the workers' organisations wanted to respond, becoming a field of experience for many internationalist militants who there acquired the combat knowledge fundamental for the resistance to the occupation of later years. Invariably, the ranks of the resistance in occupied France and Belgium were composed of many veterans of the International Brigades of the Spanish War.

On Strike Against the Nazis describes and organises information about the many struggle processes that took place before and during the Nazi occupation of France and Belgium, the internal debates within the workers' structures and the international left, and their meanings and strategic stalemate, but also the decisive influence in the post-war context and how it was the workers' strength, acquired in the effective resistance to the occupation, that prevented a greater US tutelage in the liberated countries.

Rigorously presenting the available data on each of these strikes, and their antecedents and contexts, Cushion and Moor's book also has people inside. They are the worker leaders of the

various moments, ordinary people with extraordinary biographies that the book autonomises in the form of a tribute and as an enormous contribution to the text as a whole. They are the women of the mining communities in the marches for food and dignity, they are the Polish and Italian workers in the mines of the north of France, subject to the influence of the Communist Party, the Church, and the CGT. It was also the small Belgian Trotskyist group, with the Mandel family at its centre, that carried out intense propaganda activity with the German occupying forces in the region, according to Cushion, which was the clearest example of the combination of the economic class struggle with the armed anti-fascist resistance to the occupation. It was class solidarity that knew no races or creeds and that – clandestine, collective – always resisted ■

BOOK REVIEW

Buntu Siwisa

Darlington, Ralph.

Labour revolt in Britain, 1910-1914

London: Pluto Press, 2023

Webster, Edward with Dor, Lynford.

Recasting workers' power: work and inequality in the shadow of the digital age

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2023

"...A display of temper..."¹

¹ Wells, H.G. Labour Unrest. Daily Mirror. 1910 cited in Darlington, Ralph. Labour revolt in Britain, 1910-1914, London: Pluto Press, 2023, p. 29.

KEYWORDS

Industrial action
Precarious labour
Neo-liberal order

THE BOOKS, THE TIMES, THE INTELLECTUAL PERSONALITIES

At the height of the South African summer this year, Ralph Darlington and Edward Webster met. It was not the first time they had met. But it was the first occasion that they gathered under the weights and glories of the thrilling new epistemologies thrown out in their respective new books: Darlington's *Labour Revolt in Britain, 1910 – 1914*, and *Recasting Workers' Power: Work and Inequalities in the Shadow of the Digital Age*, by Eddie Webster with Lynford Dor.

We huddled together from 5 to 7 February, 2024, at the 6th Conference of the International Association of Strikes and Social Conflicts (IASSC) at the Fountains Hotel in Cape Town. Reflecting on the condition of the worker in the face of evolving capital accumulation and exploitation strategies, the conference was organised around the theme, *Strike Activity in the 21st Century: Implications of the Recent Global Upsurge*.¹ It sought to analyse and deliberate on strikes, the reconfiguration of labour, labour processes, and counter-mobilisation in the new neo-liberal economic order. Truly reflecting on these matters at the global scale, scholars and contributors came from South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Philippines, Brazil, India, Uruguay, Mexico, Columbia, Portugal, Argentina, USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Finland and the Netherlands.

As we bunched up in the Fountain Hotel, Cape Town, the South African media was abuzz with the Mining Indaba conference whose pervasive mood had rendered our deliberations unreachable, if not barely visible. Also barely noticeable was the worker in post-Covid, post-home-grown structural adjustment South Africa, facing so-called "watershed elections" in May 2024, testing the country's political stability after thirty years of freedom and democracy. As outlined in the South African 2024 Budget Speech, the budget deficit rose from 5 per cent to 4.9 per cent of GDP. The budget

¹ International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts. Report of the 6th International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts Conference. 20 February. 2014. <https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/faculties-and-schools/commerce-law-and-management/research-entities/scis/documents/IASSC-Conference.pdf>. Visited on 10 May, 2024.

deficit servicing cost for 2023/24 has been revised upward by R15.7 billion to R356 billion, absorbing 20 per cent of national revenue.²

The cost of servicing this budget deficit will be greater than the budget for social protection, health, or peace and security. South Africa has also experienced a decline in revenue collection – at R1.73 trillion tax revenue for 2023/24, R56.1 billion lower than estimated in the 2023 budget.³

South African home-grown austerity measures began in 2014 and 2015, as government's spending on goods, services and salaries barely kept up with population growth. Government spending grew at an average rate of 1.8 per cent for the period 2015 to 2020, compared to 1.6 per cent annual population growth, compared to the previous rate of 1.6 per cent. For instance, from 2014/15 to 2018/19, government spending on health per uninsured person increased by 1.7 per cent on average. Spending on education per learner fell by 8 per cent in real terms, from R17 822 to R16 435 in 2017.

The overall effects on the lower-income earning majority of the South African population, particularly the insecure, precarious and unemployed worker are reduced affordability of food, housing, water, medical care, and other second-generation constitutional rights contained in the Bill of Rights. Also, expenses on municipal grants have been cut back, affecting school infrastructure, the low-cost housing budget, local roads and public lighting, and municipal grants for electrification, as well as urban development and public transport.⁴

Inequalities are becoming increasingly noticeable and challenging in South Africa, which is facing not only a new neo-liberal economic order, but also the effects of home-grown structural adjustment measures and the long-term 'work from home' effects of Covid-19, which is slowly creating a powerful fourth economic centre in various cities in the country (in addition to the city centre, suburban areas, and township economic centres). This is a new economic centre promising to be an extension of another suburban economy, whiter, more race-based, and premised on a more determined cheap-labour exploitative system and cheap immigrant labour with no benefits, no labour rights, no social protection, longer hours, and no form of labour representation.

As South African finance minister Enoch Godongwana emphasised in the 2024 Budget Speech, the South African economy is not growing in the face of these socio-economic challenges. As he put it, comparing the South African economy to a pie, "Our challenge, honourable members, is that the size of the pie is not growing fast enough to meet our developmental needs". Increasingly, inequality in South Africa is widening for the majority of the population, where the haves and have-nots difference is not just "...between individuals, groups, regions or countries... [but] about the condition that allows certain groups to dominate over others".⁵

The concern here is how these economic challenges, in the face of

evolving capital accumulation strategies and exploitation, directly and indirectly affect the precarious worker's ability and capacities to counter-mobilise. It is reflecting on the precarious worker whose representation in traditional trade unions has sharply declined, and the informal economy which they have increasingly relied on as a survivalist measure for social reproduction is also under severe attack.

The United Kingdom is also facing its own "watershed elections", most probably in the latter part of 2024, and the future of the worker, the workers' organisation and mobilisation strategies are at stake. It is predicted that the Labour Party is highly likely to win the general election, judging by its performance over a significantly weakened Conservative Party at the polls, taking a projected 106 majority seat win.⁶

Facing regional inequality, recession and high cost of living, "... with working people forced to pick up the pieces", the Conservative Party is expected to lose the election since it has been in power since 2005. Labour's election manifesto, *Power and partnership: Labour's plan to power up Britain*, focuses on:⁷

*Devolution of power;
Improving standards of living; and
Easier and more affordable access to public services.*

However, there is fear that Labour has moved to the centre-right of the political fulcrum, more amenable to big business interests than the interests of the working-class, as in the following commentary:

The transformation of Labour's political fortunes since the last general election has been accompanied by a fervent romancing of big business. Gone is the disdain of Jeremy Corbyn, the party's former hard-left leader who planned to collectivise a tenth of every big British company. In its place, Sir Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves, the Labour leader and shadow chancellor, have spearheaded a "smoked-salmon offensive", inviting executive to breakfast and waxing lyrical about the virtues of profit.⁸

In the face of these two books, it is quite a challenge thinking about the evolution of capital's accumulation and exploitation strategies in times that have stretched a bit farther, as they have outlined. This is the resting centre of the two books: that capital's survival ever changes, in relation to the exploitation of labour, its relationship to the state, and to the changing political economic environment.

Circling back to the conference, before us loomed a spectacle of watching and listening to engagements and deliberations on the two books. More drawing were the thrilling, exuberant contrasts in the intellectual personalities of Ralph Darlington and Eddie Webster. In his more scholarly-working-class British accent, the scholarly lucidity of Darlington's arguments came out, sentence by sentence, as if read verbatim from a book written with a lilting prose. So carried away, we had to be stringently

2 Godongwana, Enoch. Budget Speech by the Minister of Finance Mr Enoch Godongwana, 24 February. Cape Town: Parliament of South Africa, 2024 <https://www.parliament.gov.za/project-event-details/3358>. Visited on 15 May, 2024.

3 Ibid.

4 Sibeko, B. The cost of austerity: lessons for South Africa. IEJ Working Paper Series No. 2. Johannesburg: Institute for Economic Justice, 2019.

5 Francis, D., Valodia, I. and Webster, E. (eds.) Inequality studies from the Global South. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020, p. 4.

6 The Economist. What companies can expect if Labour wins Britain's election: The party that aspires to lead the country is courting business. 9 May 2024. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/05/09/what-companies-can-expect-if-labour-wins-britains-election/>. Visited 15 May 2024.

7 Labour's plan to power up Britain. London: Labour Party, 28 March, 2024. <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labours-plan-to-power-up-britain/>. Visited 15 May 2024.

8 The Economist, op. cit.

cautious on how we demarcated time given to his presentations.

Eddie Webster, often twitching his lips rather excitedly at the peak of his arguments, presented a more calculating contrast. Often starting his presentations with an anecdote serving as background, he launched into sequential flow of reasoning. It tapered into an intertextualised understanding of the overarching theme of his book: “There is a widespread view that labour as a counter-hegemonic force has come to an end”.⁹ This recalls a humane, humble and thoroughly erudite “*Madala* [old man] sociologist”, who ventured nowhere without the guide of a well-theorised question. He sadly passed on and left us a couple of months after the Strikes Conference.

THE EVOLUTION OF CAPITAL AND LABOUR’S COUNTER-MOVEMENT

As much as Darlington and Webster were contrasting intellectual personalities, *Labour revolt in Britain, 1910–1914* and *Recasting workers’ power* are united by various theoretical and thematic trends. First, laid out are the dynamics of the relationship between labour, capital and the state. While Webster with Dor show us how the evolution of capital shaped labour as a counter-hegemonic force, Darlington goes into depth explaining how this relationship forged institutionalising processes in labour mobilisation strategies.

While we learn from Darlington how the “coordinated power of federated capital”¹⁰ limited and sharpened labour’s organisational and mobilisation strategies, in Webster’s book with Dor, we see highlighted the innovative capacities of precarious labour’s new mobilisation strategies. Grown out of its traditional unionist shell, the different “labour classes”, as Bernstein’s definiton refuses attachment to protected, formally organised workers in contracts or to precarious or vulnerable labour, we see a labour force organising and mobilising outside of the “homogenising proletarian condition”¹¹ in this digital age, to borrow from Henry Bernstein as cited by Webster and Dor.

The relationships among capital, labour and the state became an urgent concern, as both books highlight the circuitous journey of the evolution of capital, and its impact on labour. Webster points out that the precariousness of labour and workers’ attendant parlous working conditions in the digital age are nothing new. There is a circular journey of capital, in how it has brought back the inhumane working conditions of the industrial age to the digital age. This is the industrial age that Darlington meticulously explains in his detailed and well-researched history of labour in Britain between 1910 and 1914.

ORGANISING AND MOBILISING LABOUR: FROM THE INDUSTRIAL TO THE DIGITAL AGE

In *Labour revolt*, Darlington provides a multi-dimensional portrayal of the context, origins, causes, actors, processes, outcomes, meanings and significance of the Labour Revolt in Britain. He

explained, “It was years of pent-up frustration and collective sense of injustice at their appalling pay and conditions and lack of control or effective union representation that helps to explain the intensity and explosive character of workers activity”.¹²

The British working-class experienced harsh unemployment and poverty. In a period of high unemployment, a third of the British population lived in poverty. Poverty levels reached a peak in the recession of 1907 to 1909, leading to hunger marches in Glasgow and East London. By 1910, 10 per cent of the British population owned 92 per cent of the total wealth, “...making Britain perhaps more unequal than most European countries”.¹³ Worsened by the ostentatious display of obnoxious levels of wealth and the luxury consumption and lifestyles of the upper and middle class, these conditions further agitated and conscientised the working-class.

However, some positive social development conditions also helped raise workers’ conscientisation. Some of these were the expansion of compulsory elementary school education, increased social literacy, the rise of adult education, and the rise of radical independent working-class education. Classes were organised by the Plebs League and other left-wing political groups. The expansion of mass national communication also raised workers’ consciousness.

A number of workers’ strikes took place before the labour revolt, between 1907 and 1910. Strike-prone industries tended to be large, strategically important sections of the economy. In these industries, market forces and business fluctuations made employers acutely sensitive to labour costs, increasing efficiency through work intensification and control over wages. In 1907, there was the dockers’ and carters’ strike in Belfast. In 1910, cotton manufacturing went through an industry-wide lockout. In 1910, in May, dockworkers in Newport staged a strike. In the same year in July, railway workers in Newcastle staged a strike.

These were strikes that came after the era of “New Unionism” (1889–1891), characterised by peaceful strikes and protests, distinct from the marked militancy of the labour-revolt period. The labour revolt came at time characterised by two other struggles – the suffragette movement and the struggle for Irish independence. The Liberal government under Prime Minister Herbert Asquith managed to diffuse these struggles on account of their lack of coordination. Also coming to the aid of Asquith’s government was the palpable disconnect between trade unionism and politicisation.

The Liberal government’s “New Liberalism” philosophy and framework of legislative reforms from 1906 to 1914 tried to ameliorate the social and working conditions of the working-class. Having entered a coalition with the Labour Party, the Liberal government was wary of neglecting and alienating the working-class.

Among some of the legislative reforms, the Liberal-Labour government introduced a system of compensation for workers, covering industrial diseases and injuries, in 1906. In 1908, it introduced an eight-hour working day in the mines. In the following year, it effectively legislated on weekly pensions funded from government taxation.

9 Webster, E. with Dor, L. *Recasting Workers’ Power: Work and Inequality in the Shadow of the Digital Age*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2023, p. ix.

10 Darlington, Ralph, p. 52.

11 Webster, Edward with Dor, Lynford, p. 33.

12 Darlington, Ralph, p. 15.

13 Ibid., p. 16.

In the same year, it introduced a system of labour exchanges for the unemployed to secure employment. However, these social reforms had negligible effects on the working-class. Darlington noted that “Overall, poverty and hardship remained deeply ingrained facts of working-class life, with the Liberals’ social reforms showing only little effect for many and ‘arou(sing) no feelings of gratitude’ among many workers”.¹⁴

The Labour Party, ineffective as a workers’ agent in the government coalition, was regarded by the working-class as an expression of the interests of official trade unionism. Its leaders, Ramsay MacDonald and others, discouraged militant industrial action, preferring formal arbitration and adjudication processes. Darlington maintained that “The significance of the period precisely lay in the polarisations that have developed between constitutional labour politics of gradualist reform from above and the notion that the working class could achieve its goal through industrial militancy from below”.¹⁵

It is this sense of workers’ insecurity, their precarity in the face of capital’s evolving accumulation and exploitation strategies, and accommodationist state policies that are also the concern of Webster’s critique. In the new neo-liberal economic order in the globalised digital age, the Global North and African countries have experienced a sharp decline in trade union membership. From 1996, Australia’s trade union membership declined from 50 to 15 per cent, the USA’s from 20 to 11 per cent, Germany’s from 35 to 18 per cent and Sweden’s from 78 to 68 per cent.

Webster argued that, in the new neo-liberal economic order, workers’ structural power is constrained by four factors. These are, first, increased competition among workers globally. Second is intensified management control. Third, workers experience hostile strike regulations. Last, they face new forms of associational power in relation to traditional trade unions.

Consequently, workers in different countries have devised varied survival strategies. In Australia, they have fallen back on the modest social protection provided by the Australian welfare system. In South Korea, workers resort to working harder, putting in overtime, and investing in individual insurance and pension schemes. In South Africa, workers have turned to survivalist-type strategies in the informal economy. Consequently, worker agency has markedly shifted, becoming less protected. As a result, “[t]heir ‘structural power’ to stop production had been weakened by increased labour competition, and so they began to look elsewhere to harness forms of ‘societal power’ to the new global order.”¹⁶

Following Michael Burawoy’s time typology of the marketisation of the global economy, Webster rests understanding of the evolution of capital’s accumulation and labour exploitation strategies on his three waves of marketisation. The first wave, occurring from 1795 to 1914, saw the marketisation of labour. The second wave, from 1914 to 1973, witnessed the marketisation of labour and the commodification of money. The current wave, stretching from 1973 to current times, is marketising nature, money, and labour. Primarily

defining this new neo-liberal era is the outsourcing and relocation of production to low-wage countries. In this way, surplus value is increasingly created through low-paid, labour-intensive work in the Global South. It is appropriated by multinational companies and their financial backers sitting in the Global North.

So, capital resolves to overcome obstacles to accumulation by creating new patterns of exploitation and surplus value extraction. Webster and Burawoy, therefore, extend further theoretical understanding on the political economic evolution of capital, labour and resource exploitation, and the new forms of imperialism, from Lenin (*Colonialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*) and Kwame Nkrumah (*Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Colonialism*). Webster explains that this evolution is best understood through the theoretical lenses of exploitation (Marx) and commodification (Polanyi). As he further explains, they “...each operate as explanatory factors in the reconstruction of the new world order under neo-liberalism”.¹⁷ It is a neo-liberal economic order that is generating “...a rapidly globalising reserve army of labour”.¹⁸

This is a reserve army of labour that is largely precarious, working under new, vulnerable forms of employment in informal industries. Webster’s critique of the “end of labour” thesis is precisely about worker agency – the assumption traditionally arrived at that, with declining trade union representation, this is the end of worker agency.

However, the power resources approach posits that there are new forms of worker organisation and mobilisation that are emerging in informal economies. This is because workers on the margins or periphery continually make strategic choices in responding to new challenges and changing contexts. They conceptualise and form new structures of associational power in relation to traditional trade unions.

These new, innovative workers’ forms of mobilisation and organisation grind against the perception that, in the digital age, workers are “atomised into micro or individual workplaces”. In these spaces, it is then assumed that they are “not easily able to combine large numbers to bind worker power and confront employers”.¹⁹ As Webster asks: “To what extent they conform to a counter-movement to liberalisation in the Global South remains to be seen. What is clear is that Southern workers are developing innovative responses to the challenge of an increasingly insecure world”.²⁰

In the neo-liberal globalised and digital economic order, capital has become more mobile through financialisation and trade liberalisation. This has had the consequences of deskilling manufacturing processes and a growth of global logistics networks. This expansion of the new capitalist mode of production over the past fifty years led to the growth of a single labour market. Workers in the Global South entered this labour market unprotected, and without rights and benefits that workers in the Global North enjoy.

14 Ibid., p. 25.

15 Ibid., pp. 27–28.

16 Webster, E. with Dor, L. op. cit., p. 8.

17 Ibid., p. 10.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. xi.

20 Ibid., p. x.

THE NEW WORKER, THE OLD WORKER

However, critique of the new worker in the new neo-liberal economic order refuses to accept the concept of the new worker as encapsulated in the rigid perception of weakness. Webster maintains that worker categories such as worker, peasant, employed and self-employed are fluid. This is so because workers in the Global South make a living alternating among various livelihoods strategies. Henry Bernstein buttressed the point, maintaining that:

In practice what you have in African cities is a large group who simultaneously and ambiguously combine employment and self-employment [...] In the shantytowns are large numbers of individuals who are sometimes unemployed and work intermittently in wage labour in small workshops or performing services.²¹

Confronted with the large presence of precarious or vulnerable workers, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU) ventured to organise them. The exercise also aimed to close the gap between them and access to their rights and benefits as vulnerable workers. COSATU formed the Vulnerable Workers Task Team (VWTT).

The VWTT was made up of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), and the Street Vendors Alliance (SVA). The VWTT approached this organising exercise with the understanding that employment status was central to changing structures of employment, and also created possibilities for organising the self-employed, the wage worker, the employer and the own account worker.

The VWTT campaigned on five decent work demands, namely (i) The right to make or earn a decent living; (ii) Work security; (iii) Comprehensive social protection; (iv) Safe and healthy workplaces; (v) Full organisational rights for all workers. It targeted three categories of vulnerable workers: domestic workers, farmworkers and street traders. A fourth group that became affected by the VWTT's work was migrant labour. Precarious work, whether formal or informal, took place in a variety of spaces, such as streets, worker homes or cyberspace.

Challenges in organising and mobilising domestic service largely arose out of the nature of these workers' work and workspaces. They were perceived as workspaces wherein it was challenging to perceive them as workers. Vendors and street traders were more concerned with how they were categorised – as street traders demanding to be seen and treated as workers. The VWTT demanded a new range of laws, whose implementation of rights asserted a sense of dignity for informal work. Consequently, these reforms sought to create a stable local economic environment. The VWTT organised and mobilised precarious workers in five other sectors, namely local government, manufacturing, the platform economy, transport, and education. Organising and mobilising workers in the local government sector came within the context of the strain brought about by the implementation of the *iGoli* 2002

policy. The premise of this policy was outsourcing labour and services of the local government of Johannesburg, because of the need to indirectly cut costs.

Coming out of the neo-liberal macro-economic policy, Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), the Johannesburg City Council implemented public-private partnerships (PPPs), privatisation, and outsourcing labour, services and benefits of the city council to the private sector. *iGoli* 2002 sought to transform the role of the local state from indirectly providing services to facilitating and monitoring service delivery through contracts with the private sector. As Franco Barchiesi pointed out, local government turned into a “contracting state”.²²

Webster maintained that “[f]or the bulk of those employed by the city council, the nature of the work was not about to change, instead *iGoli* 2002 was about to change the rules of the game by re-introducing apartheid-style contract labour”.²³ This was influenced and couched in the state's confidence in its new macro-economic policy, GEAR. Political economist Vishnu Padayachee bore witness to this new-found confidence in neo-liberalism:

It was not unusual in the early 90s to hear senior ANC spokespersons arguing that the world had totally changed, and that those arguing for more radical or alternative economic solutions in that new globalised context were simply living in a bygone era.²⁴

Indeed, former President Thabo Mbeki openly embraced and supported PPPs and contracting out the state, to the point of actively inviting the private sector to participate in local governance. In a speech in 1998, Mbeki said:

But the central component of the relationship between government and the private sector has remained vague, ill-defined [...] How do we use our collective resources in ways which can deliver basic services to all our people, create jobs and grown in the economy? [...] For instance, the private sector has a significant capacity in the field of project management and infrastructure maintenance [...] there are new ways of delivering and managing infrastructure more effectively, based on international best practice. We are working with local authorities and government parastatals to find new ways of organising projects, so that the private sector can have a role in the different stages of planning, implementation, financing and management[...] Let me take this opportunity to invite the private sector to join us in investing in the necessary infrastructure provision as one of the key pillars for meeting basic needs and economic growth.²⁵

Jo Beall, Owen Crankshaw and Susan Parnell noted the expansive negative effects of the implementation of PPPs, privatisation and outsourcing services in Johannesburg at the turn of the century. They pointed out that:

The impact of privatisation on the poor of Johannesburg and issues of conditions of employment, affordability for residents, and overall social justice are emerging as central challenges to democratic urban governance. Whether read from the macro, meso or

21 Cited in Webster, E. with Dor, p. 33.

22 Cited in Webster, E. with Dor, p. 56.

23 Webster, E. with Dor.

24 Ibid. p. 57.

25 Mbeki, T. Africa – the time has come: selected speeches. Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers and Johannesburg: Mafube Publishers, 1999, pp. 133 – 136.

micro scales, cities are not only sites of economic development, vibrant centres of social and cultural creativity, or sites of political innovation. They are also places of disadvantage and divisions, and can be divided along a range of axes, including class, race and ethnicity, gender, generation and length of urban residence.²⁶

So precarious workers, particularly in the platform economic sector, devised innovative strategies in organising and mobilising themselves. Webster and his research team detailed comparative research on platform food couriers using motorcycles in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. They often formed app-based groups in organising themselves, with the groups serving as discussion groups, organising platforms, and bases for collecting savings and dispensing credit among themselves.

Some of them in Johannesburg managed to stage a protest in December 2020 on twelve demands. Some of these demands were increased delivery fees, safer routes, a halt to arbitrary suspension of courier accounts, improved safety and better in-trip support, to ban labour brokers, for Uber Eats to supply delivery bags and other equipment, and to be able to choose not to accept cash trips.

Although this protest was well-reported by the media, it failed to engage Uber Eats management with any degree of success, a point which further emphasizes comparisons of working conditions in the digital age with those of the industrial age. On this, Webster maintained that:

For all its app-enabled modernity, the gig economy resembles the early industrial age, where workers worked long hours in a piece-meal system, workplace safety was non-existent, and there were few options for redress. Despite payment systems and review systems, the sharing economy is truly a movement forward to the past.²⁷

These similar forms of workers' organisation and mobilisation are well-documented in Darlington's *Labour revolt* in the industrial age. Following disillusionment with the Liberal-Labour coalition government's social reforms, industrial action in Britain between 1910 and 1914 took a decisively militant turn.

The Labour Revolt was defined by specific social, labour and political characteristics. Four out of ten working men were disbarred from the electoral support system, particularly young men, unskilled men and unmarried men who still lived with their parents. This provided fodder for workers' "...collective willingness to flout, challenge and defy established authorities".²⁸ Considering that this category of young workers constituted the rank-and-file, it was particularly them who drove militancy in industrial action.

It was also especially the rank-and-file who had become disenchanted with traditional trade unionism, one of the hallmark features of the Labour revolt, and with the traditional bargaining processes. The Trades Board (1906–1914) resolved only 75 per cent of labour disputes. These bargaining and arbitration processes were also slow and generally unable to resolve workers' grievances.

The positive relations developing between traditional union officialdom and the state further drove a wedge between rank-and-file workers and trade unions. The state institutionalised and expanded its co-option policy to trade union officials, as it moved more union officials into full and part-time posts in government departments. In 1912, the government created 374 posts for trade union officials in the Home Office, Board of Trade and National Insurance administration. In these posts, they administered social welfare services, making themselves intrusive into the workers' personal and social lives.

Consequently, various militant strikes took place between 1910 and 1914. There was the protracted strike of the South Wales coalfields in 1910 to 1911. In the summer of 1911, seamen, dockers and railways workers staged strikes. In Liverpool, general transport workers staged a strike. In 1913, there was the Midland metal workers' strike. In 1914, London building workers staged a lockout. These strikes were characterised by intersectional trade solidarity among workers from different factories.

There were also unity and amalgamation pacts among trade unions, which strengthened their collective power in strikes, bargaining, arbitration and negotiations. In 1910, the establishment of the National Transport Workers' Federation brought together numerous trade unions organised in ports across Britain. In 1913, the amalgamation of three existing trade unions created the National Union of Railwaymen. In 1913 and 1914, a formal attempt to link 1.5 million workers from mines, transport and railways into a Triple Alliance raised the prospects for coordinated strike action among its three affiliates.

These characteristics made these prospects collectively deserving to be termed the "labour revolt". Darlington reasoned thus:

...with its overall characteristic features of unofficial rank-and-file insurgency, solidarity action, defiance of trade union and Labour Party leaders, violent social confrontations, and challenges to the Edwardian economic and political system, the strike wave deserves to be termed a "Labour Revolt".²⁹

THE LEFT AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN THE INDUSTRIAL AND DIGITAL AGES

Labour revolt strikes and leadership were also markedly influenced by various leftist and socialist groupings. The radical left was disillusioned with the inadequacies of the Labour Party and trade union officialdom. Although socialist policies did not capture the Labour Party and the trade union movement, they augured well with the activities and outlook of many workers.

Among the various leftist and social groups that influenced the labour revolt, there was the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Formed in 1893, it had 700 branches, with 28 000 paying members by 1913, and 1070 local government representatives by 1914. However, there was a section that was dissatisfied with the ILP's weak performance in parliament, and its sacrifice

26 Beall, Jo, Crankshaw, Owen and Parnell, Susan. *Uniting a divided city: governance and social exclusion in Johannesburg*. London: Earthscan Publications, 2002, pp. 8–9.

27 Webster, E. with Dor, L. p. 13.

28 Darlington, Ralph, p. 7.

29 Ibid.

of socialist policies to assuage trade union officialdom and the Liberal Party.

The Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was the largest revolutionary Marxist organisation in Britain, formed in 1881. The SDF had resigned from the Labour Party in 1901 after it had failed to secure the adoption of a socialist programme. It then changed its name to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1908, and then to the British Socialist Party (BSP) in 1911. The Socialist Unity Conference of 1911 formed the BSP, with representatives from the SDP, some left-wing branches of the ILP, a network of clubs associated with *The Clarion* newspaper and various local independent socialist societies.

Old-guard leadership in the BSP disapproved of unofficial strikes. They believed that workers should focus on the ballot box and political action, through revolutionary-led parliamentary action. On the BSP, Darlington noted: “While they believed the party should support strikes on principle, they also insisted unions were of limited value in the struggle for socialism, with the impossibility of making any real gains while the capitalist system lasted.”³⁰

The Socialist Labour Party (SLP) came out of a breakaway from the SDF in 1903, formed by Scottish branches. It opposed working with existing trade unions because they were “hopelessly craft-based”³¹ and were led by bureaucratic and conservative trade union leaders who sabotaged workers’ struggle. Rather, it advocated for the formation of new revolutionary industrial unions that could serve as a means for fighting capitalism, and as the basis of a future socialist society. As Darlington noted, the SLP

...insisted that although political action and organisation was important, the main battle the working class had to fight was to organise industrially until it became strong enough to ‘crack the shell of the political state and step into its place’.³²

The labour revolt also constituted a strong women’s movement, thus highlighting the “horizontal and mushrooming diversity”³³ of workers’ struggles. Prominent amongst women’s trade unions was the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), an all-women federation founded in 1906. When it was formed, it was regarded as “...a separate national women’s federation as a necessary temporary form of organisation through which women could gain a sense of solidarity and overcome their fragmented and isolated position”³⁴.

The NFWW had the largest concentration of membership in Scotland, with more than 55 000 women involved in industrial protest between 1911 and 1913. In May 1910, it staged a strike over pay rates, with 150 non-union women textile workers involved. Other women-led strikes were the Kilbirnie Curtain Net Workers’ Strike from April to December 1913; the Bermondsey Strikes of August 1911; the Bridport Grundy’s Strike of February 1912; the Dundee Jute Workers’ Strike from January to April 1912; the Chipping Norton Tweed Mill Strike of December 1913 to June 1914; the Garston

Wilson’s Bobbin Workers’ Strike from May to August 1912; and the Young Workers’ and Schoolchildren’s Strikes of 1911.

OF WORKERS, VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

The presence and role of violence in the relationship between capital, labour and the state appears and vanishes in astonishingly contrasting ways in the industrial and digital ages. It is both a clear confirmation of the Weberian relationship between the state, violence and the dominant class, and a theory not quite apparent in the post-colonial digital Global South.

Darlington describes in meticulous detail the willingness of workers to defend themselves from police brutality during the labour revolt. The Liberal government released legions of baton-charged policemen to break up protracted militant industrial strikes. These were apparent in almost all the strikes of 1910 to 1914.

In these organically worker-led strikes, the authority and leadership of traditional trade unions were eschewed. They found themselves tailgating the tempo of the strikes, “... either swept aside or desperately trying to ‘ride the wave’”.³⁵ For instance, the 1911 Manchester and Salford’s two days’ strike was carried out in defiance of trade union leaders.

In the 1911 two-day Liverpool seamen’s strike, police brutality led to 100 injuries. This had been a strike joined by members of the National Union of Ships’ Stewards, Cooks, Butchers and Bakers. It resulted in “...united action of workers ‘above’ and ‘below’ the ships’ docks”.³⁶

Violence and police brutality clearly characterised the national miners’ strike (February – April 1912); the Westside strikes (1911 – 1913); the North-East Lancashire cotton workers’ lockout (December 1911 – February 1912); the Clydbank Singer strike (March – April 1911); the London tailors’ and tailoresses’ strike (April – June 1912); the London motor cab drivers’, hotel workers’ and musicians’ strike (January – March 1913); the Cornish clay workers’ strike (July – October 1913); and the London corporation strike (December 1913 – January 1914).

Capner, a trade unionist, encouraged striking workers to defend themselves against police brutality. In the same breath, he appealed against excessive police brutality. He goaded and pleaded thus: “If it comes to violence, for God’s sake do it well. If it comes to a fight and the police use their batons, then by God we will use something too. If it comes to batons, then let them have batons for all you are worth”.³⁷

These patterns were equally apparent in many women’s strikes. Women and young girls on strikes were also subjected to police charges and imprisonment. These were apparent in the women workers’ strikes (1910 – 1913); the Neilston Textile strikes (May – June 1910); the Vale Leven United Turkey Red strike of December

30 Ibid., p. 42.

31 Ibid., p. 44.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 141.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p. 77.

36 Ibid., p. 88.

37 Ibid.

1911; the Kilbirnie Curtain Net Workers' strike (April- September 1913); the Bermondsey strike of August 1911; the Bridport Grundy's strike of February 1912; the Dundee Jute Workers' strike (January – April 1912); the Chipping Norton Tweed Mill strike (December 1913 – June 1914); and the Garston Wilson's strike (May – August 1912).

Often, women's strikes were spontaneous, and this was because:

...it was the release of suppressed frustration that gave the strikers their wild enthusiasm: they could not even voice their grievances, they knew nothing of how to run a strike; they just knew that the conditions of their existence were intolerable and they would no longer put up with them without protest.³⁸

What particularly triggered the state to allow violence to be meted out against workers was how economically expansive the effects of the strike were. The militant industrial actions almost crippled the economy. During the London Transport strike of July to August 1911, 77 000 London transport workers participated. A joint strike committee that had been set up issued permits to restrict movement of goods. Only essential goods to hospitals, orphanages and public health bodies were allowed to move. This strike "... represented a vivid display of power exercised within the transport disputes".³⁹

Consequently, perishable goods quickly got rotten, particularly in the early August 1911 heatwave with temperatures of 98.6°F (36.7°C). This particularly affected meat, butter, vegetables and fruit, which quickly rotted in ships and on wharfs, as 10 000 workers marched in the heatwave.

There was even fear that newspapers would stop printing because of newsprint shortages as a strike of distribution workers joined in. Also, there was a threat of petrol shortages affecting private and commercial motor vehicles and the London Underground. The strike, directly and indirectly, caused approximately 200 000 Londoners to cease work.

To that effect, the *Daily Mirror* commented that London was "almost face to face with famine, the docks of the longest part in the world a wilderness, parts of the city in a state of siege, food supplies cut off".⁴⁰ The editorial of the *Daily Mirror* of 11 August, 1911, further protested that, "six or seven million of people cannot be expected to submit to starvation at the behest of a comparatively small minority who have chosen to proclaim war on their countrymen".⁴¹

And yet in the digital age in the Global South, there is almost a mute on violence in workers' industrial actions. Whether it is workers employed in the formal, mainstream economy, or precarious workers earning livelihoods in the informal economy, there is a mute on violence, despite the state's readiness to unleash violence on them.

Webster and Dor maintain that, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, this is due to the co-option of trade unions into the state. Trade unions in the past allied in principle with the liberation movement against the apartheid system, forming a strong and united

anti-apartheid front. This resulted in the trade unions' identity fusing with the post-apartheid former liberation party turned ruling party in the post-apartheid government.

In this alliance after apartheid, trade unions had relied, for a long time, on sectoral bargaining to secure their power. On that route:

They became prisoners, as it were, of the institutional framework they negotiated, losing their ability to question the wider social organisation of society, the increasing numbers of precarious workers, and the rapidly deepening inequalities of the neo-liberal period.⁴²

Also, they became embedded in political battles and leadership political ambitions, to the neglect of basic workers' interests and organisational work. Trade union officialdom also became beneficiaries of the new neo-liberal economic order through investment companies formed on their behalf, and on the backs of their financial contributions. Investing in property insurance, electronics goods companies, luxury hotels and rental cars, trade union leaders, past and present, became ridiculously wealthy.

CONCLUSIONS

Recasting workers' power and *The labour revolt* are lessons on the evolution of capital's accumulation and exploitation strategies, and how labour insists on its organisation and mobilisation strategies, and invest new possibilities in the face of the crippling neo-liberal order that has produced precarious workers. However, more importantly, they are lessons on the circular journey capital takes in its evolution. While Darlington shows us this in the labour-capital-state battles, Webster highlights how the working conditions of the worker in the digital age are as harsh and enfeebling as they were in the industrial age.

Labour revolt is written with an astounding mix of archival research and challenging and challenged secondary material. *Recasting workers' power* comes out with theoretical clarity, grounded in solid empirical evidence, on the new, clever and innovative ways precarious workers organise and mobilise themselves in an age where it is assumed that labour has ended.

Both books open vistas into new research challenges on how to question and research the new multiplicity of challenges facing the worker today, in the Global South and North. How do we question and find the worker in a post-Covid, home-grown structural adjustment South Africa, where even the informal economy's existence is challenged? Has the worker resorted to parliamentary democracy in the UK to organise and mobilise, further rendering themselves invisible as a counter-hegemonic force? Will the Labour Party prove itself not too dissimilar in its reformist commitments to the Liberal government, prioritising capital? These are, perhaps, some of the questions *Labour revolt* and *Recasting worker's power* have opened up as vistas for new research on the working man and woman in the digital age returned to the industrial age ■

38 Ibid

39 Ibid., p. 93.

40 Ibid., p. 96.

41 Ibid.

42 Webster with Dor, p. 32.

Report of the 6th International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts Conference

6th Conference in Cape Town, South Africa from 4-7 February 2024. The conference was organised around the theme, "Strike Activity in the 21st Century: Implications of the Recent Global Upsurge" considering the strikes and protests which spread across the world since the Arab Spring of the early 2010s. The objective of the conference was to explore the nature, dynamics, trajectory, limits and potential, and implications of strikes and protests of the 21st century. The conference solidarity partners, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Southern Africa) and Lo-Norway had made a meaningful subsidy to ensure a successful and dynamic conference. More importantly the conference took place in the context of global protests against the genocide in Palestine and the case brought by South Africa to the International Court of Justice against Israel.

INTEREST IN THE CONFERENCE

As the 2022 conference in Rotterdam mainly drew interest from Europe, the members meeting agreed that the conference in South Africa would target 70 people and would ensure more representation from countries of the Global South. An initial total of 47 abstracts were received with 62 participants. Due to the inflationary spiral in the second half of 2023 combined with budget cuts of university faculties many participants especially from the Global South withdrew their participation from the conference with some provision made for online presentations. Interest in the conference came from;

Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, Philippines, Brazil, India, Uruguay, Mexico, Columbia, Portugal, UK, USA, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Turkey and Finland.

In the final programme the presenters came from; Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mexico, Philippines, India, Columbia, Argentina, US, Portugal, UK, Germany, Spain and Holland. The total number of participants of the conference including walk-ins was about 60 people.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF THE CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

On the basis of the collective judgement of the conference organising team and feedback provided at the Association's general meeting, as well as more informally, the quality of conference presentations was very high throughout. This was evident in the broad range of strikes and social conflicts that were explored within different countries globally, across both historical and contemporary times frames, and often of a comparative nature; the combination of both (with varying balance of emphasis) extensive analytical and empirical dimensions within each contribution; and the wide variety of scholar-

ly methodological approaches adopted and justified. In the process, across the different scheduled sessions there was extensive evidence of probing questions, reflections, argument and debate, further enlivening and enriching conference proceedings. The presentations revealed that labour is not on an eternal downward spiral and that gains including labour reforms indicate that labour is engaged in a fightback in both the Global South and the Global North.

MOVING FORWARD

The International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts (IASSC) is now in a new phase of its international profile and growth thanks to those who participated, its long-standing members and new solidarity partners. The diversity of the conference participants, the high quality of the presentations and engagement which all point to an overall direction in assisting progressive struggles, and the forging of a new discourse as we enter a new historical phase of global capitalism and geo-political change.

The IASSC board agreed to hold the next conference in Baltimore, USA in September 2025 ■

Karl von Holdt
(Senior Researcher, Society Work
and Politics Institute, University of the
Witwatersrand)

Edward Webster: South African intellectual, teacher, activist, a man of great energy and integrity, and the life and soul of any party



Johannesburg, February 2024. Photo by Ralph Darlington

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Eddie Webster (82), sociologist and emeritus professor at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, who died on 5 March 2024, lived a huge life, applying himself to many different arenas with great energy and insight.

His achievements are quite extraordinary. He was an intellectual, a teacher, a leader, an activist for social change, a builder of institutions, a rugby player and jogger, a man of great energy and integrity, and the life and soul of any party.

As an intellectual and activist he was always independent and critical, and always engaged, whether working with trade unions or with South Africa's new democratic government. It was important to get your hands dirty working for change, he always said, but as important to retain your autonomy and intellectual integrity. This held for the university itself, an institution to which he was wholly committed but at the same time found deeply disappointing when it came to social justice. His life was shaped by these kinds of tensions.

Eddie was one of that pioneering generation of scholar-activists at the university, white academics who identified with and supported the black resistance movement, and who saw the world in new ways and pioneered the production of new knowledge: his close colleague, feminist and environmental sociologist Jacklyn Cock, anthropologist and democratic activist David Webster (assassinated in 1989), and distinguished historian Phil Bonner.

Eddie inspired generations of us with his vision and practice of critically engaged scholarship – not only in South Africa, but across the world.

INDEPENDENT STREAK

In 1986, believing that the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was out of touch with the majority of South Africans, he drove an investigation called the Perspectives on Wits with his colleagues. They explored the views of trade unionists and community activists about the university. The university had agreed to fund this investigation. But it was unhappy with the results. These revealed that the institution's own narrative about its liberal opposition to apartheid was not shared by black South Africans, who saw it as serving white and corporate interests.

A few years earlier, at a time of great repression of unions, he and Phil Bonner had attempted to set up a worker education programme on campus. But the university refused to

let it happen. The university's main funders, such as Anglo American, would have been greatly displeased by such a programme – a nice illustration of the point made in the Perspectives document.

A decade later the indomitable Eddie was able to establish a branch of the Global Labour University at Wits, and bring trade unionists into the heart of the institution. He was not someone to give up easily.

INSATIABLE CURIOSITY

Eddie worked closely with South Africa's emerging trade union movement in the mid-1970s. At the time black workers were a tightly controlled source of cheap labour for South Africa's booming industrial economy, and the unions were not recognised legally and suffered severe repression by employers and the state together. Eddie believed that a strong trade union movement democratically controlled by workers would be a powerful force for change.

He contributed to educational programmes for trade unionists, advocating for the recognition of the unions whenever he could. He co-founded the South African Labour Bulletin, which served as a forum for the interaction between academics and trade unionists, and the Industrial Education Institute with his comrade Rick Turner and others. Turner was assassinated by the apartheid government in 1978.

Eddie went on to support the unions, and conduct research with and for them, his entire life. Generations of union shop stewards and organisers knew him through his support, teaching and research, and he was widely loved and revered as "comrade Prof".

As an intellectual Eddie was insatiably curious about the world and how it worked and about new possibilities emerging for progressive change. While the sociology classics were a foundation for his thinking, he kept up to date with new literature and ideas.

He founded Industrial Sociology at Wits and established the Sociology of Work Unit (now the Society, Work and Politics Institute SWOP) as a research unit in the early 1980s as a way of stimulating labour research and deepening his work with unions. The unit organised and financed research, held seminars and workshops, provided a home for students, and increasingly collaborated with colleagues at other universities and overseas.

Eddie loved working with others, whether students or colleagues or trade unionists. He knew that ideas arose from wide reading, discussions and interactions, and frequently said "there is no such thing as an original idea". For its students, staff, colleagues and associates SWOP stood out as a place of vibrant intellectual exchange and curiosity about each other's work: it was an intellectual home and a place of comradeship and critique that felt unique in the university.

ACADEMIC AND TEACHING LEGACY

Eddie was also a great teacher, bringing all of his passion for ideas and his vivid sense of history and change and struggle into the classroom, exciting students about the life of the intellect and the

life of struggle. At SWOP he established the first internship programme for black postgraduate students to support and encourage them in what they often experienced as a hostile environment.

Eddie regularly undertook large-scale research projects and recruited numbers of students to participate in field research. This was another learning opportunity, where students immersed themselves in the collective quest for knowledge and began to see themselves as researchers.

In the midst of a multitude of projects, Eddie remained committed to his academic work, publishing a great volume and range of articles and books, and achieving honours and recognition globally.

His first book, *Cast in a Racial Mould*, based on his PhD, provided the intellectual foundation for the new discipline of industrial sociology in South Africa, developing an analysis of changing workplace technology and its impact on trade unionism – specifically the workings of race and class. This provided a material basis for understanding the emergence of the new black mass unionism.

His co-authored book *Grounding Globalisation* provided a new account of globalisation and trade unions through a comparison of South Africa, Korea and Australia. Global scholars were inspired by it and it won a major prize from the American Sociological Association.

His most recent book, *Recasting Workers' Power*, written with Lynford Dor, returns full cycle to the themes of his first book, exploring the impact of technological change on the nature of work in the gig economy, and drawing lessons from forms of worker organisation and collective action that have been emerging across Africa.

Each of these books extends the boundaries of our knowledge by exploring the cutting edge of social change – in a sense helping us see the future and, indeed, helping to make it.

A GREAT LOVE FOR LIFE

It is impossible to think about Eddie without thinking about Luli Callinicos, historian and biographer, and the great love of his life. Indeed, she was the rock on which he built his achievements. I remember with great fondness the Greek Easter feasts shared at their home, and the many other gatherings with family, friends and colleagues.

Michael Burawoy, the great American sociologist and lifelong friend of Eddie, once told me that he had never laughed as much as he did when he was with Eddie and his colleagues from SWOP. Eddie enjoyed people and was deeply generous; he was a great raconteur, he loved being alive. Three weeks ago he was celebrated for his 200th Park Run in one of Johannesburg's large parks. Whatever he did he did fully, heart and soul. He was not bigger than life, he was big with life.

In later years he introduced himself as "a living ancestor". Now he is simply our ancestor, one who has given us a huge legacy, a living legacy. It is time for us to reflect on his inspiration, burn imphepho, slaughter a cow and pour out the wine ■

Raquel Varela Michael Roberts
interview:
Time is running out

Michael Roberts (1946) is a leading Marxist economist. Michael Roberts has worked in the City of London for more than thirty years as an economist and financial adviser. He is author of several books including *The Great Recession*, *The Long Depression* and *Marx 200*. He blogs at thenextrecession.wordpress.com. With his charming British humour, and his highly pedagogical style, we interviewed him in the New Forest, a beautiful area in the southwest of the UK where he now lives.



HOW HAVE YOU BECOME A MARXIST ECONOMIST, A CRITICAL ECONOMIST?

Well, I come from a middle-class background. The family were doctors, generally, a lot of doctors! My father was a research chemist. But he died young, when I was only five. So my mother brought up myself and my sister. My mother was an art teacher and artist.

We became a bit separated from the rest of the family, who were conservative middle-class people in the north part of Britain and we didn't live there. And my father was always a bit of a rebel or "black sheep" from the rest of the family. And my mother was an orphan and rather bohemian. So after my father's death, we travelled around the world. So although I came from a very middle class background, my sister and I didn't have quite the same childhood development that most British middle-class people would have. That probably made me open to different ideas.

At school, I was probably a little bit of a rebel, even though I was obviously doing reasonably well in class and so on. I was always interested in politics. In fact, the "doctor family" was also interested in politics, only on the other side of the barricades! When I was at school, I thought I would be a Conservative and so read conservative newspapers at sixteen. At seventeen, I decided I was more of a liberal and so I would read the liberal newspapers. At eighteen, I decided I was a socialist and supported, as I come from Britain, the social-democratic Labour Party, when it was just coming into office after a decade or more of Conservative governments. I moved gradually further to the left. At school, when I was studying for my university entrance exams, the master said, well, what subjects do you want to do? Because you could do science, or you could do arts, you're not bad at both of them. So why don't you choose this new-fangled subject called economics? It's sort of in between. So I said, okay and I did economics and economic history for my university exams.

Now my father had gone to Oxford University, so I was applying for the Oxford and Cambridge and some other universities, like the London School of Economics. The master said at the time, said, well, that's good. But I just want to tell the class here that under no circumstances should anybody apply for this radically dangerous new university called the University of Sussex. This place is full of people who do not recognize traditional values and you shouldn't be going there. So I immediately applied for this college rather than go to LSE, which I could have gone to, or even possibly Cambridge. So I ended up going to the University of Sussex.

HOW WAS UNIVERSITY AT THE TIME?

For those of you who are very young, you won't realize that the mid-1960s was a period of quite radical, sharp change, particularly in mass pop culture, of young people having sufficient money and backing from a British welfare state to enable them to do so. When we went to university in the mid-60s, we didn't go to university looking for a job. That's the last thing we thought of because we had free tuition. We had grants (not

loans). And we had all kinds of other support from the state to enable us to go to university.

So we went to university basically to learn things and have a bloody good time! There was the idea of a wider, if you like, university for the right purpose, which was to develop your ideas in a free expression. And lots of the lecturers and even the officialdom of universities supported that idea. The idea that you had to join a business or a management school and get a job in finance, which is what everybody has to do now in this particular field, was completely ignored. If anything, if people wanted to get a job, they wanted to join the public sector. They wanted to work in government or in councils, to do socially good things. They didn't want to work in the private sector. It never entered their heads.

So it's a completely different transformation that we've seen over the last fifty years in the way that university students see what careers they should have and what direction they should take. This narrowing of their liberal arts understanding has come about in the drive by capital to ensure that it gets students to do things that are profitable.

At university, I'd moved already fairly far to the left. And then I came to read various Marxist works. And of course, at university, you find lots of people who are similarly thinking along those lines, particularly in the mid-60s. So there were lots of Marxist or socialist groups being formed in the university, which you came into contact with.

BUT YOU CAME INTO CONTACT WITH TROTSKYIST GROUPS IMMEDIATELY?

Yes, mainly Trotskyist groups. It's a matter of chance sometimes, it depends which university you go to. At that time, if you went to a different university, you would have got a different set of Trotskyist groups or maybe the Communist Party or no Trotskyist groups at all, just maybe ordinary social democratic clubs and so on.

There were many Trotskyist groups then, the "57 varieties". I came into contact with different ones, but at the University of Sussex at that time, the two main groups were International Socialists, now called the Socialist Workers' Party in Britain, and Militant, which was the name of the newspaper for another Trotskyist group.

THE MILITANT GROUP WORKED INSIDE THE LABOUR PARTY?

Well, that was not the only difference between the two particular Trotskyist groups we're talking about.

Militant had differences with what was now the Socialist Workers' Party, In particular, it didn't consider that the Soviet Union, which of course still existed at that time, was a "state capitalist" or capitalist economy. Militant saw it as what it would call a workers' state that had become degenerated by bureaucracy. That meant you should support the Soviet Union against US imperialism, while criticizing the Soviet bureaucracy. The posi-

tion of the IS at the time on that issue was “neither Moscow nor Washington”. As far as they were concerned, they were equally bad imperialist powers, which was a view that was not adopted by the Militant tendency. I tended towards Militant from an economic point of view. There was a fundamentally different way of organizing the economy in the Soviet Union in the mid-60s than there was under American capitalism, in my view.

I think the other thing also was perhaps tactics. I think the Militant felt that there was a long period of boom ahead and therefore, you couldn't expect dramatic change in working class struggles (although, of course, in the 1970s that changed). The IS at the time was basically saying that there were workers' protests everywhere, and it's going to explode. I found that a bit unrealistic. That lack of realism was also found in the Socialist Labour League, which didn't appear at my university. It was quite large at the time. It was another faction of Trotskyism, which had split from the Fourth International. They called for a general strike nearly every day. I thought all these were unrealistic approaches. And I thought that the people who were running the tendency called the Militant in that university were the most serious people. So I tended to align with them and participated in their activities.

And as you pointed out, one of the tactics of Militant was to work inside the British Labour Party on the grounds that this was a trade union party. There were Labour Party activists, particularly younger ones, who were sympathetic towards Marxist ideas. So it would be wrong to reject anything to do with them because they were in the Labour Party, but also because the Labour Party had the mass support of the working class.

Therefore it was inevitable that there was going to be a battle for the ideas on what working class organisations should do. That would also take place in the Labour Party [rather] than just in the trade unions.

HOW LONG DID YOU STAY IN THE MILITANT?

Well, I suppose I became a member in the mid-60s. But I left in 1990, I think. So for those of you who can count, that is about 25 years.

DURING THAT TIME, WHAT WAS YOUR ROLE AS A MILITANT?

Well, being an activist. After a certain period, I actually became a full-time worker for the Militant. They paid me, listeners might like to know, a massive salary, living life basically of a billionaire mogul (ho, ho).

AND YOU WERE DIRECTED TO GO AND TRY AND RECRUIT PEOPLE TO THE TENDENCY IN THE UNIONS AND IN THE LABOUR PARTY?

I initially moved to the Midlands of England, the main centre of

which, for those who don't know the UK, was a city called Birmingham, where we had no support whatsoever, no contacts or anything. So I moved there and began to try and build a group in Birmingham. I had reasonable success. I managed to recruit some important shop stewards at the major auto factory. And I helped built a youth section in the Labour Party which was basically supporting the position of the Militant.

CHINA: THE TWIN MEETINGS - THE BIG FLOP

So in this period I wasn't doing economics, I wasn't doing any job at all, from the period leading the university right through the volatile period of the 1970s.

There were a lot of working class struggles in the UK in the 1970s, because that was a period when capitalist economies began to collapse as profitability fell in Britain and elsewhere. So capitalists began to reverse previous labour gains and instead try to crush labour movements.

In particular in the case of the UK, they wanted to defeat the miners who were seen as the most militant in the trade union movement. So there was a series of miners' strikes before the famous one of 1984. There were two big miners' strikes in 1972 and in 1974. And in 1974, by the way, they closed the mines down so much that electricity was reduced to three days a week. That's how powerful the miners were. Both of those strikes were won by the miners.

In 1974 the miners' strike led to a general election and the defeat of the Conservative government. At this point you could see a labour movement riding high. In the auto workers too, there were a number of strikes, with shop stewards in control of trying to maintain the position of wages and conditions in the big industries in the 1970s.

In the 70s it was then that we had these series of major confrontations, and it was only in the 80s that the miners were defeated under Thatcher. She came to power in 1979 and one of her key aims was to defeat the miners, which they'd failed to do in the 1970s.

In the early 1970s, Thatcher was the minister of education. Then kids used to have free milk and orange juice so that kids got to keep up their calcium etcetera. Kids had free hot meals at lunchtime. Thatcher ended all that.

Then from 1974 to 1979, the Labour Party was in control. They did not restore anything Thatcher had removed but they did not make any further cuts until the cost of living crisis in 1979, which led to the defeat of Labour in the election.

For those who know about the history of the 20th century labour movement in the UK, the miners' leader that we know of in the 1980s was called Arthur Scargill. He became the leader of the miners' union, as a radical socialist leader. But in the early 1970s, he was just the leader of one sector, the region of Yorkshire miners.

In Birmingham, there were mining areas all around and Bir-

mingham had a big coal depot where all the coal would come and then [be] distributed around the country. When the miners had a strike in 1972, nothing was done to stop the flow of this coal coming in and out. The depot had huge stocks and therefore could have maintained coal supply to industry and so on for the government for months.

I happened to notice that trucks were still going in and out of what was called the Saltley depot. So I went to the local trades union federation and I said, you know, they're breaking the strike, all this coal's going through. And they said, just go away, little boy (because you've got to remember I wasn't very old and they were venerable trade union leaders). They said, "No, no, there's no problem, you're talking nonsense." So I thought, well, I don't really think that's right. So I made a phone call to the Yorkshire miners. And lo and behold, I got Arthur Scargill on the phone.

And I said to Scargill, look, there's this coal depot and all this coal's going in and out. Within two days, they had thousands of miners there. And it was a major confrontation in that strike. During the picket, one lorry tried to barge its way through and hit an inspector of police and broke his leg.

YOU PLAYED A VERY IMPORTANT ROLE IN THAT STRIKE?

Well, I'd like to think so, there are pictures of me standing on the picket line looking like a little bit of an idiot alongside all these miners.

YOU EDITED THE MILITANT NEWSPAPER FOR A WHILE?

Yes, I became the editor of the paper for a while, which was extremely strenuous. It used up all your energy because it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You couldn't do anything else.

I was eventually burnt out a bit. So I stopped working full time and got myself a job and then a series of jobs through the 1980s onwards.

WHAT KIND OF JOBS?

Well, I started off becoming an trainee income tax inspector. I left that. Then I started doing, basically economics jobs.

I was working in various bank organisations as an economist of sorts in various occupations right through the 1980s into the 1990s. So really, often on my blurb, it says Michael Roberts worked for thirty years in banking in the city of London. But it that started really in 1980s, onwards.

YOU WERE AN UNDERCOVER TROTSKYIST IN THE CITY OF LONDON?

Well, it's a good question. In the daytime, I was being an econ-

omist for various finance capital institutions and telling clients whether they should buy or sell the dollar or invest in this or not. And in the evening, I'd be doing work for the left organisations or writing articles and doing that sort of thing.

I didn't start the blog, which maybe many readers may know about, until 2005, or writing in that sort of material and producing things while I was still working in banks at the same time and in investment.

WHY DID YOU START THE BLOG IN 2005?

Well, I decided that it was time to do something a bit more useful in terms of developing my understanding of the world economy and Marxist economics. And I felt that, for me, the best contribution I could make to developing the ideas of socialism and furthering the movement was to deal with economics; not just explaining Marxist economics, but also criticising mainstream economics to try to explain to people when they read in the newspapers, what it all meant. What are the theories adopted by the conventional economists who work for banks that I was working for and for universities, but also to explain what Marxist economics is.

In my view, the litmus test of the difference between conventional economics and Marxist economics was that Marx had a labour theory of value, i.e. why things are valued as they are, prices, that differs from all other theories. His theory of value is based on the idea that we have a mode of production in modern society where production isn't for what people need. Yes, it has to be useful, otherwise people wouldn't buy it. But the owners of capital and the means of production employ people not to make things that people need; they produce things to make money. General Motors did not build cars because it wanted to give everybody a car, it built cars to make profit, to make money out of it. So there's a basic contradiction between social needs and values and the private profit of capitalists. That is the essence of Marx's theory of value. It differs from any other theory of value.

YOU HAVE DEVELOPED IN A VERY PEDAGOGICAL WAY AND, IN MY VIEW, A VERY SERIOUS WAY IN THE RIGOUR OF DEBATE. YOU ARE NOT AFRAID OF DEBATE WHICH YOU KEEP IN DEBATING IDEAS, NOT PEOPLE. DO YOU THINK THAT YOUR MILITANCY AND BEING OUT OF THE ACADEMIC CIRCLE HELPED YOU TO DO THIS?

Well, there are two things that came from being a revolutionary activist, if you like. That is, you learn how to do things, you learn how to speak, you learn how to organise. Because anybody who's had an experience of this knows you've got to do your own thing, you've got to do your own articles, print your own paper, you've got to sell that paper, you've got to be able to speak at meetings, maybe you have to intervene at meetings when you're not on the platform and you're just trying to make a point from the floor. And you learn, or at least I tried to learn, not to get up and speak for 15 minutes and drive a everybody mad but try to make one or two points, and how to present a speech and how to write. All these are skills

that you can learn from being a revolutionary activist.

On the other side, by not being an academic, I also learnt to remember what I am trying to do here. I'm trying to get people who want to be active to change society.

Yes, we need to understand theory as rigorously as we can and the evidence and so on. So we need an academic approach to many issues, but we don't need an academic approach that completely obscures and confuses people and is written in language that makes no sense, if it's too convoluted for any activist to get any idea of what it means. So I felt that my task was to try and give us a view about where we're going, economically primarily, but of course from economics everything else flows, in my view, and also to do that from the point of view of the activist.

The things I write, particularly on the blog, are often quite theoretical or very empirical with lots of charts and so on, because I want to make sure that it's strong enough to combat the position of conventional economics, and it's not just saying, oh, they're all capitalists. That's not very helpful to an activist. We want to know why we have slumps, why we have inflation, why is there inequality in the world, why are we not solving the question of climate change. These are theoretical, scientific things that we can analyse, and those questions we must explain as best, as plainly, and as clearly as possible, and not in academic language.

There's too much academic language which is too obscure. As we're talking now, I've been looking on the computer at some academic conferences coming up, and when I look at some of the papers being presented, I can't understand them. What use are they to anybody that's trying to change society if they're not clear about what they mean? And they're not. And that intellectual academic thing exists in the academic world. Academics want to make their niche, I can understand that. So they're going to say something which they think is special, and if they can coat it up in a language we can't understand, then it sounds special. That's a bit unfair, but of course not all academics are like that. But in sum, I think it has been an advantage not to have been a university lecturer.

WHAT DO YOU FORECAST FOR THE WORLD? HOW DO YOU SEE THE WORLD NOWADAYS? HOW DO YOU SEE IT AS AN ECONOMIST, AS A MILITANT, AS A SOCIALIST? HOW DO YOU LOOK TO THE WORLD AT THIS MOMENT? WITH HOPE? WITHOUT HOPE?

Do I have hope or am I pessimistic? Well, I'm realistic. In short, world capitalism is in the worst state that it has ever been. It is not delivering on raising the living standards of the majority of the world's eight billion people. Inequality between the rich and the poor globally is widening; global warming is causing substantial damage to the climate, the general environment and the planet's species.

Even on capitalism's own priorities, namely the profitability of capital, things are worsening – the profitability of capital on average globally is very low. So the likelihood of regular and recurring slumps in production and employment has risen. In the 21st century, we have just experienced the worst crises

in the history of capitalism (2008, 2020) since it became the dominant (even the sole) mode of production and social formation globally. Moreover, the struggle over which country or elite controls that production, investment, trade and finance is taking a more dangerous turn, with wars and growing conflict between the imperialist powers led by the US and resistant powers like Russia and China – in Ukraine, Israel and Asia.

I argued in a book back in 2016 that the world economy had entered a long depression where economic growth, living standards, investment and profitability of capital would stagnate. Previous such depressions have either ended after a series of severe slumps which eventually enabled profitability to be restored (late 19th century depression) or because a world war broke out (1930s). I am not sure which option will be taken this time as capital attempts to break out from the current depression. Either way, it won't be good for 'the many'.

Do I have hope? The only viable agency for change is the working class of the world, i.e. all those who work for a living and cannot live off rents, profits or interest from the ownership of things. The working class constitute more than 90% of the world's adults and families. It is in their interest to cooperate to end capitalism. So objectively, they are the agency for change. And the working class has never been larger: "we are many, they are few". In that sense, I have hope.

But that objective power has not been turned into sufficient conscious collective action to change the world. Yes, class struggle is daily in strikes, protests, boycotts, etc. But mass actions (revolutions) are few and far between. And as we enter the third decade of this century, revolution seems a distant prospect – in that sense I am pessimistic.

But things can change. The major capitalist economies may get a new lease on life from new technologies that could inject a period of boom that actually strengthens labour, particularly in new industries, leading to new working class forces as agents of change over the next decade.

Alternatively, the forces of reaction could strengthen, as they did in the 1930s, weakening working-class struggle and opening the door to military or fascist regimes that could send us back to the dark ages.

These are the hopes and fears. As realists, we must navigate our way through these alternatives towards a better world for humanity and nature, based on collective cooperation and control of world's resources and human endeavour. Time is running out ■

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