

Working Lives and Worker Militancy. The Politics of Labour in Colonial India. Ed. by Ravi Ahuja. Tulika Books, New Delhi 2013. xvi, 328 pp. Ill. Maps. Rs 695.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859015000103

Many obituaries of the “working class” have been written (for which the *International Labour and Working Class History* journal has provided a hospitable home): as a political subject, on whom many revolutionary hopes were mistakenly pinned; as a unified economic category, whose foundational exclusions were exposed; or as a site of a more ambiguous “consciousness” than class alone. Such notices were met with fierce, and sometimes, one must admit, moralistic, reassertions of the continued importance of class as an analytical category, and as a political force.

Though such obituaries have been far less evident in India, there has no doubt been a discernible shift, and narrowing interest in questions of labour and class consciousness, whether in the political or academic domain. This is in contrast to an earlier moment. Reflecting in part the surge in working-class action between the wars, and the importance of the left in the immediate post-independence period, as editor Ravi Ahuja notes, there was an attention to labour in public life and the academy “out of all proportion to the consistently small share of factory workers in India’s workforce” (p. x). Early Indian labour historians were focused on outlining the “objective” conditions of labour’s existence (recruitment strategies, organic composition, etc.); the highest achievement of the working class was its participation in strategies of resistance, usually strikes. Within this framework, attention was paid to ideological thrusts, whether of nationalism or communism, and institutional forms, such as trade unions and the law, which shaped not only the spaces within which the working class articulated its demands, but defined and determined the conditions of possibility of its success. As Chitra Joshi’s survey of historiographical trends tells us, these early studies were driven by the teleologies of modernization.¹

Since the 1980s, historians have produced more nuanced and sensitive readings of working-class action (particularly dealing with spectacular moments of participation in communal riots in north and east India), and of working-class life and culture. Studies on the latter tried to extend beyond the workplace to the neighbourhood – beyond the articulations of a middle-class leadership to the more ambiguous powers (and services) of the *dada* (a neighbourhood boss both paternalistic and threatening), and beyond the purely economic worlds of workers to richer patterns of culture and everyday life. At first sight, the present volume thus appears to be a return to older concerns: the joint invocation of “lives” and “militancy” in the title seems to indicate an interest in combining and reviving earlier interests. Indeed, there is a strong focus on the strike, and more generally resistance, on labour militancy in late colonial India, read here as the sign of the “political”. This could consist of working-class unrest in the two crucial years of invasive plague measures in Bombay (1896–1898): Aditya Sarkar argues that this allows us to detect the “the generalized withdrawals of labour or *at least the threat of such withdrawals*” (p. 24, emphasis added) here interpreted as amounting to “general strike”.² A more particular focus on better-known moments of heightened working-class politics

1. Chitra Joshi, “Histories of Indian Labour: Predicaments and Possibilities”, *History Compass*, 6 (2008), pp. 439–454.

2. See also Aditya Sarkar, “The Tie That Snapped: Bubonic Plague and Mill Labour in Bombay, 1896–1898”, *International Review of Social History*, 59 (2014), pp. 183–214.

occur in Ahmad Azhar's reading of the railway strike of 1920 in Punjab, and Anna Sailer's interpretation of the Bengal Jute Mill Strike in 1929. Aditya Sarkar and Anna Sailer attempt to embed their accounts of what they see as amounting to general strikes in the spatial practices of the city, while Ahmad Azhar's is a return to the brief moment when plebeian and elite politics were conjoined. The result is a series of detailed descriptions of moments which reveal unexpected possibilities.

Relying largely on official sources, Sarkar, Azhar, and Sailer focus on the contingent, the relatively "unexpected" and "unfinished" nature of the events forcing classes together (as Sarkar and Azhar suggest) or bringing about a greater unity within the class (as Sailer suggests) to open up, without fully realizing, the potential of the labouring masses. Clearly, these contingent flashes did not alter or change the prospects of labour in enduring and irreversible ways. Here, the assertions waver: from the admission that such micro-moments only allow a glimpse of the relations in which labour was embedded (p. 126, Ahuja) to conceding that the historiographical attention to hardened differences (or no less than separation) between different social groups has obscured the possibilities that were, however briefly, invoked (pp. 185–186, Azhar). These events were not, in other words, the "tipping points" which would lead to cascading, and irreversible, effects.

There is much here that acknowledges historiographical moves of the last three decades. In this sense, the richness of detail, and the deliberate turn to the "micro" or the "event" cannot sustain an unreconstructed return to the celebration of militancy. To move from detailed descriptions to the level of theorization is, however, a more difficult task. Indeed, it may be that such accounts work against the more structural readings and emphasize the inherent unpredictability of the "political" in their attention to detail.

Ravi Ahuja's access to an unusual source (Amir Haider Khan's memoir, an extraordinary find in the south Asian context, and we are doubly fortunate to have another such memoir by Ahmed Bakhtiar also included in this volume) allows for creative theorizing on the wage-labour form as articulated in the free/unfree-labour debate, though one wonders whether the source (and indeed the micro) has not been unduly weighted in this analysis. His focus on the micro-event, via the memoirs of Amir Haider Khan about his journey on the ship *SS City of Manila*, is by far the most theoretically ambitious article in the volume. It is a sustained reflection on the (im)possibility of free labour within the constrictions of a service contract among seamen that amounted to servitude. Here too, the focus is on the rich possibilities of the micro (whether event or politics) as revelatory of possibilities, rather than the actual threat that these possibilities may have posed to the labour regime/relations. Through a close reading of the memoirs – a textual reading surely aided by the much maligned "linguistic turn" – Ahuja places the shipboard conflicts of "hirelings" against the conditions of their work on board, and analyses the meaning of their service contracts within a long discursive history of the "freedom" and "unfreedom" relation.

It is their focus on the intersections between caste and class, once more acknowledging the work of the past few decades, which make two other contributions to this volume noteworthy. Shahana Bhattacharya considers the contradictions that were posed by the expanding opportunities offered in late nineteenth-century India for hides and skins, with links to an international market. How colonialism destabilized these fixities, in part through a redefinition of custom, is at the centre of her argument, with the new regimes

for controlling and managing labour indicating both the limits to lower-caste agency and their capacity to “bring employers” to their knees precisely because of the stigmatized labour that they performed. It led not only to the reinscription of what had been stigmatized as low-caste labour but to entirely new forms of criminality. The relative “freedom” enjoyed by workers to abscond from their arduous labours, which created an acute crisis in an industry bound by strict time schedules, was therefore determined by the lower-caste status and the virtual “monopoly” of labour that they enjoyed.

Precisely the link between the forms of labour which were embedded in caste and their indispensability in the modern city created the contradictions in which the scavengers of Calcutta were placed. Tanika Sarkar describes the world of these workers, quite a large proportion of whom were women, their conditions of work, and the emergence of a form of political consciousness which superseded and challenged caste norms, since “the union, by exemplary action if not through caste focused discourses, played the role of a caste reformer” (p. 182). While the transient nature of the relationship is emphasized (p. 198), Sarkar argues for a transformative role played by unions in teaching scavengers a language of rights. In a sharp challenge to the coruscating characterization of the paternalistic relationship between (trade-union) leaders and the led in colonial India by labour historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (particularly when talking about “outsiders” such as Prabhavati Dasgupta), Sarkar reads the relationship as an empowering one (p. 201).

One cannot help feeling that, overall, there is a purposive mission to recover the rebellious subject which may have disappeared in the far more ambiguous, if challenging, writings about labour in the recent past. Old certainties about the virtues of trade unions, and the necessity of organizational strength, were shaken by research on how workers were drawn to movements and political associations that were not avowedly in their class interests (and of which many early labour historians disapproved). This collection of writings reasserts, in very nuanced and detailed ways, the capacity of workers to recognize their class strengths, however momentarily or fleetingly.

The inclusion of a complete memoir of a trade unionist from undivided Punjab, Bashir Ahmed Bakhtiar reiterates this recovery. The memoir belongs to a moment when the importance of the autobiography was largely to record and list the triumphs of a public life: Bakhtiar’s life is a breathless round of setting up unions through several sectors and regions of Punjab. The introductory comment on this text provided by Ahmad Azhar, while focusing on the “inner tensions within communism” (particularly between the attractions of revolutionary terror and more thoroughgoing trade unionism, p. 264) does little to disrupt the narrative of the making of a “genuine trade unionist”. For instance, resisting the more literal interpretation of the photographs included in the memoirs, which could starkly reveal the gulf between the leader and the led, Azhar prefers to assert, though we are not sure on what basis, “the everyday acts that consciously and demonstratively leveled these hierarchies, which in turn led to the workers creating new ones on their own terms” (p. 266).

Given the paucity of records of the labour movement, the inclusion of the memoir, as well as the detailed use of Amir Haider Khan’s memoir in Ahuja’s contribution, provide refreshing new insights on the worlds of labour. It is striking however, that while caste is fully acknowledged in some of the narratives in this volume, with all its contradictions and ambiguities, questions of gender, particularly as they animate the lives of male and female workers and leaders, and mark the struggles of workers on the streets of Bombay

or Calcutta or Lahore, are curiously absent. Still, the authors of this volume have produced an important addition to the larger body of Indian social history.

Janaki Nair

School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi 110067
Email: nair.janaki@gmail.com

American Labor's Global Ambassadors. The International History of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War. Ed. by Robert Anthony Waters, Jr. and Geert Van Goethem. With a foreword by Marcel van der Linden. Palgrave Macmillan, New York [etc.] 2013. x, 302 pp. £ 60.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859015000115

American Labor's Global Ambassadors includes fourteen well-researched articles which, taken together, largely counter the view that the AFL-CIO's foreign policy initiatives were always and everywhere an obstacle to working-class progress. As co-editor Geert van Goethem makes clear in his opening essay, which explores the origins of the American labor movement's "active interventionism" in the wake of World War II, US trade unionists played significant roles not only in determining how a staggering sum of money was spent to fight fascism, but also in encouraging the direction of post-war, and post-colonial, reconstruction efforts. Moreover, far from dictating the course of events, the Americans were as often dictated to. On the evidence of this collection at least, with the possible exception of Solidarnosc in Poland, it is hard to find a movement or organization whose success or failure was decided on the basis of American labor support, or its lack thereof. In each of the countries and regions discussed here, American ambitions were regularly trumped by local requirements. It was a case of things being "more subtle than we knew" (pp. 165, 173), as the volume's other co-editor, Robert Anthony Waters Jr, titled his own essay on AFL policy in British Guiana (now Guyana) and British Honduras (now Belize) in the early 1950s.

The fourteen principal contributions are grouped into four sections. The first includes three essays focused on the international priorities and practices of the US labor movement at the national level, primarily the AFL but also the AFL-CIO. The second looks at the role of the AFL in Italy and France during the immediate aftermath of World War II, and at the AFL-CIO's involvement in Poland during the 1980s. The third consists of five perspectives on the evolving engagement of US unions with their Latin American counterparts from the 1950s through the 1970s. And the fourth provides three views of American labor's support for and complicated relationships with movements for decolonization and national liberation in Asia and Africa. In addition, there is an introductory overview from the co-editors, which aptly describes the AFL-CIO's foreign policy as "one of the last overlooked subjects in the field of Cold War studies" (p. 1); and a foreword from Marcel van der Linden, which notes that we lack not only comprehensive histories of labor's Cold War in many particular places, but also a global history of labor's