

***Globalization and Labour in the Twenty-First Century*, by Verity Burgmann. Routledge, Oxford, 2016, 262pp., ISBN: 9780415528535, Price £100, hardback.**

This book has a laudable aim. It seeks to identify developments challenging the widespread pessimism that has afflicted much of the trade union movement and the left internationally in the wake of globalisation.

It draws together a huge quantity of existing research to illuminate new union tactics and workers' improvisations that provide ways forward for the labour movement. The core of the book is divided into nine chapters covering strands of research such 'confronting post-Fordist production', 'confounding workforce fragmentation' and 'countering capital mobility'.

The book will be a useful resource for those seeking to map out particular terrains of research into workers and globalisation. For instance, there is a useful discussion of the impact of 'just-in-time' production, covering, in seven pages, the key examples of groups of workers exploiting the vulnerability of production networks when these techniques are used. Twelve pages cover the recent emergence of China a new centre of labour militancy.

However, there are problematic aspects to the book. The first is the theoretical framework. Burgmann explicitly draws on the works of autonomist Marxism, especially those of Antonio Negri, co-author with Michael Hardt of a trilogy of books that appeared in English from 2000 to 2008: *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*. Burgmann writes: 'Autonomism has shortcomings that are beyond the scope of this book to outline. It offers nonetheless a cogent way to comprehend globalization, decode developments within the working class and countenance the capacity of labour to contest its current circumstances' (p. 22). Yet these aspects of Negri's autonomism—its conception of globalisation as tending towards a smooth terrain of production, with states receding into the background, and its vision of sweeping class recomposition in new phase of capitalist development—are precisely those that have been contested by other radical left authors.

Negri's account, and Burgmann's, involves an ultra-subjective rendering of Marxism in which all capitalist restructuring is driven by workers' militancy, with no regard to the objective tendencies at work within capital itself. For instance, here the crisis of the 1970s is seen as a result of a 'wage squeeze' in which profits are undercut by rising wages, with no attention given to competing theories of crisis, even those emerging from Negri's Marxist critics.

Similarly, the rise of post-Fordism is viewed as a consequence of capital attempting to break up the 'mass worker' said to be characteristic of the preceding phase. In fact, Negri and his followers go further, arguing that the whole concept of the workplace as a focus of production and exploitation is overturned. Society is the new factory. Even feeling hunger or dreaming is deemed productive; any creative act can be considered as labour. In Negri's worldview it is hard to maintain the kind of focus that Burgmann does on workers.

A second issue with Burgmann's book, related to her theoretical framework, is the uncritical acceptance of a number of common sense ideas about globalisation that deserve more careful attention. For example, it is simply asserted that we now live in a 'post-Fordist period' in which

workers are in 'decentralised, smaller workplaces, with high workforce turnover created by casualised and other precarious forms of employment' (p. 43).

There is an extensive literature challenging each aspect of this picture.

Regarding precarity, Burgmann seems to accept Guy Standing's notion of a 'precariat', which, she writes, 'has moved from the peripheral position it had under Fordism to a core position in the process of capital accumulation' (p. 158). She cites Standing's view, developed in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, that precarity is not simply a condition of some workers but constitutes 'a new class that has emerged from neoliberal restructuring' without saying whether she agrees or disagrees (p. 158). Nor is there any acknowledgement of the tensions between Standing's negative conception of precarity and the autonomist vision that tends to see precarity as not simply an employment status but as a form of refusal of capitalist working patterns, which can also be embraced.

It is possible, as Burgmann suggests, that workplaces have become smaller in some countries, but the size distribution of workplaces in the US and the UK has been relatively stable over the past three decades. Furthermore, the typical employee in the UK can expect their current job to have a total duration of about 16 years, roughly the same as in 1975, so in this instance it is not meaningful to talk about the generalisation of a high turnover workforce.

Fordism was never a single, universal pattern of workplace organisation, nor is there a uniform post-Fordism applied the world over today.

Burgmann's overall aim, to identify those workers who, 'with or without established labour organizations, have acted imaginatively and ingeniously to improve their circumstances in the face of globalization' is to be welcomed (p. 237). There is certainly something to be said for the view that large numbers of workers today are in 'occupations and jobs that did not exist 30 years ago' and that it will, therefore, take time and an experience of struggle for new class forces to crystallise (p. 237).

However, the useful secondary research gathered here is squeezed into a theoretical framework that remains under-examined and which will be hard to swallow even for many readers who are sympathetic to Burgmann's aims.

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