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Loss of Anti-Capitalism

James Herod

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Review: *Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals, and the Social Reconstruction of America*. Edited by Seven Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman, Houghton Mifflin, 1997, 273 pages.

Not one word about destroying capitalism! That is the most striking thing about this book. Not one word about abolishing wage-slavery. In fact the concept of wage-slavery is completely absent from this book. Instead, the assumption throughout is that working at a job for a wage is all there will ever be, the only issues being the conditions under which this work is done, its rewards, and the extent of state sponsored amelioration. Such is the depth to which the opposition in America has sunk, such is the thoroughness of the defeat of anti-capitalist forces, that radicals themselves now accept the permanence of the system of employers and employees, bosses and workers, buyers and sellers of labor-power. What a far cry from the blistering indictments of the boss system at the beginning of the century by Haywood, DeCleyre, Debs, and Goldman. You would have thought that at least Norman Birnbaum, Frances Fox Piven, Eric Foner, or Manning Marable, socialists all, could have spared a sentence or two for the ultimate goal. Not so however. Maybe they have lost sight of it.

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The book contains 21 short essays (plus an introduction by the editors), presented at the "Teach-In with the Labor Movement" held at Columbia University in New York City in October, 1996. The conference brought together "leading American intellectuals and labor movement activists" (according to the jacket blurb). Seven of the 21 represent labor; six of these are with AFL-CIO, one with AFSCME. Of the intellectuals, twelve are professors and two are writers. One of the editors is a professor and the other is executive editor at Houghton Mifflin. Thus the book is in no way representative of either labor activists or intellectuals, especially those not affiliated with large institutions.

A glance at the table of contents gives a hint about what we might be in for. There are articles on women and labor, Asian-Americans and labor, black leadership and labor, whiteness and labor, intellectuals and labor. We might surmise from this that identity politics has swamped the labor movement just like it has swamped the universities and the opposition movement in general, eradicating class analysis everywhere. But perhaps there is hope. There is an article on "Beyond Identity Politics." But we'll come back to this.

First let's take a look at the union bureaucrats. John Sweeney, in "America Needs a Raise," bemoans the passing of the boom days after World War II. "For employers back then, decent wages and benefits and high standards of corporate responsibility were seen as good business and good for business. And our leaders in government, business, and labor understood what President Kennedy said best: "A rising tide lifts all boats." Back then "*We* (my italics) were concerned with raising the standard of living for all Americans, not just accumulating wealth for the fortunate few." And things did improve – "...*a fair portion* (my italics) of the newly created wealth was distributed among the American *workforce* (my italics)." But the "Corporate irresponsibility became the strategy of choice in our new winner-take-all economy ..." "Even employers with proud histories of doing

right by their workers joined the rush to speed up work, freeze wages, slash benefits, and eliminate pensions.”

Sweeney documents the tremendous hit the American working class (he never uses this term however, saying instead “workforce”, “working people”, “American workers”, or “employees”) has taken over the last twenty-five years, and he wants to stop it. The way to stop it is to rebuild unions. Then you could make corporations stop exporting jobs, invest in America, provide training, and raise wages, and you could force the government to reform the tax laws, stop corporate welfare, and restore the safety net. “Our idea of a just society,” says Sweeney, “is one in which *honest labor* (my italics) raises the standard of living for all, rather than creating wealth for just a few.”

Of course there is zero analysis of why the boom ended, why the welfare state is being dismantled, or why factories are being moved overseas. The problem for Sweeney is “corporate irresponsibility,” not the normal functioning of capitalism. His dream is to live permanently in the biggest boom, in the richest country, in the history of the capitalist system (which he completely accepts). This is the leader of organized labor in America speaking. His speech is so pathetic it’s painful to write about it.

Robert Welsh details AFL-CIO’s program for rebuilding unions. It sounds like a good initiative, provided your only objective is to “get a raise” for “workers.”

Jose La Luz discusses new educational strategies to empower workers “to transform the existing power arrangements in order to improve the lives of working men and women.” Nothing here about abolishing workers as workers and creating a society not based on, and entirely free from, the “employment” of “workers.”

Mae Ngai outlines an informative short history of Asian workers in America, a history of exclusion primarily, and discrimination, linking this history to current debates about im-

migration. Once again though, the absence of anti-capitalism is obvious. "The real solutions," Ngai writes, "to workers' economic problems lie elsewhere [than in policing immigrants], in union representation, in living wages, in the enforcement of labor and environmental regulations, in higher workplace standards and in the retention of jobs in the United States." Isn't the real solution to workers' economic problems the abolition of capitalism – the destruction of the wage-slave system, the destruction of the labor market (the buying and selling of labor power), and the *end of exploitation*? How can there ever be a 'real solution' short of this?

Karen Nussbaum presents a standard discussion of the role and position of women in the labor market, and discusses recent organizing efforts. Her goal though is merely "... to restore balance in our world – between the rich and the rest, between work and family, between men and women..." Balance? Between the rich and the rest? Under capitalism? Give me a break.

Saddest of all though is Ron Blackwell's piece on "Globalization and the American Labor Movement." Blackwell complains that corporations "have escaped the reach of public authority and are pursuing their private objectives at the expense of the rest of society." Have they *ever* done anything else? He seems to think the problem "is not globalization itself but the irresponsible actions of corporations in regard to workers, unions and other social movements, and to governments ..." "Without countervailing power," he writes, "from other social forces [e.g., unions] or effective governmental regulations, there is no way to make private corporations fulfill their public responsibility ..." Well why not just *get rid* of private corporations? "Without effective regulations, corporations pursue profit with no regard for the wider social or environmental impact of their activities." "The challenge to the American labor movement is not to stop globalization but to restore a balance of power between workers and their employers and to make corporations

formative analysis of how recent legislative changes in Social Security, Medicaid, food stamps, welfare (especially AFDC), etcetera, are forcing millions of people back onto the labor market, thus expanding the "reserve army of labor" and weakening the power of labor vis-a-vis capital. She focuses especially on "workfare" and shows how this program is undermining unions and undercutting organized labor. Fonder and Birnbaum both present very interesting thumbnail sketches of the history of intellectuals and labor. Rorty reminds us that workers' struggles have not all been sunshine and flowers but usually have been rather brutal and bloody. Marable analyzes the differing strategies black leaders have adopted, stressing alternatively race or class, in trying to improve the conditions of African-Americans.

So there you have it. In short, there is not one audacious thought in this whole book.

If ever there was an urgent need for the infusion of anarchist ideas into the American left it is now. The total bankruptcy of statist strategies, whether Leninist or Social Democratic, could not be more glaringly apparent. Fortunately, there are revolutionary currents not noticed by the essayists in this book. The burgeoning anarchist movement in many countries, the autonomia in Italy and elsewhere, native and peasant uprisings like the Zapatistas in Mexico, the rediscovery of anti-Bolshevik communism, the continued development of autonomous, non-sectarian marxism, the still active anarcho-syndicalist organizations, mass anti-statist communists parties in India, localist movements in Africa, the regionalism of radical environmentalists, plus revolutionary theorists like Ellen Meiksins Wood, Colin Ward, Cornelius Castoriadis, Antonio Negri, David McNally, Carole Pateman, Immanuel Wallerstein, Silvia Federici, Harry Cleaver, David Noble, Selma James – all these point the way to the renewal of the anti-capitalist war and the liberation of humanity from the bondage of wage-slavery.

ism is – the domination of the market and commodified relations over all realms of life; and (2) that democratic citizenship in the workplace is incompatible with capitalism since capitalism by definition is precisely the monopolization of the means of production by the accumulators of capital. But how many are going to, or can, read between the lines like this? And the statement is marred in other ways, by his reliance on "the nation," for example, as if creating the nation-state system wasn't how capitalists managed to set up the market in the first place, and send its tentacles out over the entire world. Also, for a radical scholar to be still speaking of "American democracy" is very disheartening.

All the authors included here hope for the revival of the labor movement. What they seem to have forgotten is that for over a hundred years, from the 1830s until World War II, labor struggles were rooted in an anti-capitalist working class culture. Of course, there were reformist unions, what we now call business unions, from the very beginning, but they were surrounded by communists, anarchists, socialists, and anarcho-syndicalists. All this anti-capitalism has been swept away. At some point the term 'labor movement' was substituted as a euphemism for communism and anarchism by unionists who wanted to disassociate themselves from their more radical comrades, choosing instead to agitate only for small gains within capitalism, rather than for its overthrow. Can the "labor movement" be revived in the absence of anti-capitalist sentiments? Will workers fight again just for a raise? I have my doubts. I think we have passed through the welfare state phase, never to see it again. Workers, and their associations, will have to become revolutionary again, that is anti-capitalist, before they can hope to organize anew and fight effectively. A raise is not enough. *Freedom*, from drudgery and bondage, will have to be desired.

There are moments of relief in the book. Piven (and also Fletcher, the best of the labor pieces) offers a detailed and in-

accountable again to government and the people." Well golly gee! I must have been asleep to have missed this golden age of capitalism when corporations were accountable to the people. When was it? Even during the heydays of the post WWII boom, most countries of the world were being gutted and impoverished, toxic dumps were being laid down by the thousands, native and peasant cultures were being destroyed everywhere, whole nations were inflicted with artificially induced famines, whole huge sections of the working class were living on subsistence wages even in the rich countries, hundreds of millions of acres of land were being grabbed, the commodification of everything was proceeding at a furious pace, militarism was rampant, tens of thousands of species were being exterminated, rain forests obliterated, oceans polluted. When have capitalists ever behaved responsibly? Tell me that.

This essay is so preposterously naive, so thoroughly unaware of the fierceness with which capitalists defend, on a daily basis, their mechanisms of theft, so completely ignorant of the structures of capitalist rule through five hundred years of murder and plunder, that it is a shame the piece was ever printed.

Now let's take a look at the academics. First Todd Gitlin's "Beyond Identity Politics." Any hope we might have had that Gitlin would return to class analysis is quickly dashed. Gitlin likes identity politics; he just thinks it has reached its limits of effectiveness. Far from seeing it as having helped eradicate class analysis from the American left, he thinks it has accomplished a lot. That he sees "workers" as just another identity betrays his deep embeddedness in identity politics. He thinks it's time to add this identity, that of worker, to the others: women, blacks, gays and lesbians, Native Americans, Latinos, and so forth. This identity, of worker, gives us a new "commonality" he says, and will help us overcome "poverty" and "inequality."

But of course "worker" is *not* an identity category. It does not refer to a personal characteristic like gender or race, nor to a cultural characteristic like language or ethnicity. It is an an-

alytical concept used by radical theorists to dissect capitalism. It is inextricably linked with capital – labor and capital – as the two poles of the profit system, “worker” being a name for one location in this system. It is a *relationship*, not an identity. And it is a relationship of subordination and exploitation, whether workers are aware of this or not. But it is only rarely that workers *have* been conscious of themselves as workers, let alone as wage-slaves. This consciousness was more widespread in the nineteenth century. It can be argued that this was because capital then had not yet fully colonized the consciousness of the working class. Workers then were still in possession of cultures predating capitalism, and still retained some non-commodified relations. Be that as it may, workers have long since stopped thinking of themselves as workers. It is questionable whether this consciousness can ever be revived, or whether it is desirable to even try. Capital itself, as part of its ideological defense, has destroyed this consciousness. Also, however, I believe that workers themselves have sloughed it off. Who wants to think of themselves as just a worker, a wage-earner? We are more. We are human beings, or at least citizens. Working at a job is something we have to do to survive, but it is not us. We have lives of our own to lead, and many interests outside work. So this can be turned to advantage in the anti-capitalist struggle. The original goal after all was to abolish workers as workers. So we have sloughed off the label, but we are still trapped in the relationship, a relation of abuse and slavery. It is this bondage that has to be sloughed off now. And it can be.

But Gitlin says none of this. His goals are merely “shorter work weeks, work-sharing, democratic controls over corporate policies [sic], health care, worker protection, [and] a reversal of the thrust toward inequality.” Gitlin is a New Leftist who never made it to a class analysis and an understanding of capitalism, but remained encased in the old liberal, pluralist theory of democracy, which he then, along with thousands of others,

imported into the radical movement and renamed identity politics.

The only sustained discussion of class in the book is in Lillian Rubin’s “Family Values and the Invisible Working Class.” This essay is a plea for keeping the category of “working class” and not lumping everyone in the middle class. But once again the pernicious influence of mainstream social science is quite evident. For Rubin, class is a matter of income or occupation level, not a question of your relation to the accumulators of capital, that is, of whether or not you have to sell your labor-power to live. So although she believes that there is still a working class (contrary to popular belief), she also believes that most Americans are in the middle class. Actually, income has nothing to do with class. That is, it is the source of income that determines class, not the amount. Workers who sell their labor-power for \$100,000 a year are still in the working class. They can only escape the working class if they use some of that money to buy real estate, stocks and bonds, or profit-making enterprises, and thus begin to live off rent, interest, dividends, and profits, rather than wages or salary. But if they spend it all on houses, cars, boats, vacations, clothes, and entertainment, they remain workers, although rich ones. Many thousands of middle level managers have learned this all too painfully in recent years as they have been fired from their good jobs, and, unable to find another buyer of their labor at a similar price, have rapidly lost everything, ending up on the unemployment line or on welfare. They learned the hard way that they are workers who, in order to survive, have only their labor to sell.

The closest anyone comes in this book to rejecting capitalism is Norman Birnbaum, in the following sentence: “The subordination of the market by the nation and the extension of citizenship to the workplace remain the unfulfilled tasks of American democracy.” This is a rejection of capitalism only for those who realize: (1) that the “subordination of the market” implies the destruction of capitalism, since that is precisely what capital-