We are all Fast-Food Workers Now

The Global Uprising Against Poverty Wages

Tony Sheather

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The obscene indulgence and unchallenged power of rampant neoliberal capitalism is trumpeted (excuse the pun) in the various avenues and corridors of power.

One of the most obscene is the Rupert Murdoch national newspaper "The Australian". Murdoch controls 60% of the Australian daily newspaper sales including 65% of the influential national and metropolitan papers. Indoctrination on an enormous scale.

Each year since 1983 this capitalist bastion has published "The List" of the wealthiest people in Australia. Here for the first time the world moved: "Nothing will ever eclipse the excitement created by the birth of Australia's first catalogue of rich people, the BRW Rich List" breathes the so-called "Oracle", financial expert Robert Gottliebsen in the introductory pages. This is Australia's version of Forbes magazine. We are informed that this expanded list (to 250 from the 200 of the previous 8 years) "marks the looming era for wealth creation in this country". The writer reveals that "around our nation…a change of incredible historic importance is unfolding." He discerns a trend similar to other Western countries where "a substantial amount of the talent that issues from our universities and tertiary institutions is being directed towards large enterprises-public companies, investment banks, law and accountancy firms and of course the public service." (16)

Gottliebsen then introduces a caveat, citing "the enormous transformation" that will take place in these huge organisations even within a decade with the acceleration of computerisation and artificial intelligence leading to the halving of people employed. He patronises the Labor Party's effort "to shift the balance of wealth creation back toward employees (as) a worthwhile objective" but warns of the dire consequences that this will only "accelerate (these corporations') huge investment…to reduce the number of people they employ and improve their cost structure."

We are left with the dystopian conclusion, the threat to recalcitrant dreams:

"We can be critical of such a trend but it is a global one and those countries and businesses that don't embrace it will face a bleak future in most sectors."(Ibid, 16)

This is the global outlook of the aeons, but one breathtaking in its arrogance, its ignorance of the plight of those broken in the creation of this elitist pursuit. The glossy magazine with illustrations of the young and the beautiful is a fiction to the horrific, cruel work existence of the casualties in both advanced and less advanced nations.

Annelise Orleck offers a vivid description of the real world. Her global embrace is not the movement of capital but a damning indictment of the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable who labor to provide the profits to gorge the corporate owners and managers. Although an academic, professor of history at Dartmouth University, she is also a long- time chronicler of the lives and working conditions of US women, immigrants and activists. While not a revolutionary in any traditional sense, her sympathetic writing and revelations of the strivings and aspirations of the world's oppressed transcends many a scholarly treatise.

The title of her work mirrors the degrading conditions of people making up the new proletariat at American giant corporations such as McDonalds and Walmart, but the exploitation is common to the majority of transnationals. Her scrutiny spans many countries although much of the focus in the first half of the book is also on the U.S. itself. As she observes at the outset, "this is not a conventional work of scholarship", she "make(s) no pretence at objectivity" (Orleck, xi).

Central to her 260 pages tome are the interviews with 140 activists, unionists. She characterises the narrative as "an uneasy hybrid: data, storytelling and analysis, politics, polemics and poetry." The author has met activists in the worst situations of the most poverty-stricken nations of Cambodia, Bangladesh and the Philippines. "What I saw in New York City and Los Angeles, Manila and Phnom Penh, were ravages of neoliberalism-the brand of global capitalism that has swept our world since the late twentieth century." (xii)

Orleck describes the origins of "wealth as a virtue" and the assault on progressive taxation and worker safety nets with the 1980's elections of Thatcher, Reagan and the rise of pragmatic "communist" Deng Xiaoping. Thatcher's infamous observation mirroring David Hume's assertion that "the nation is just a collection of individuals" resonated down the decades, with the incarnation of such pernicious "values", the World Trade Organisation, in 1995.

She incisively depicts the corporate vision that has seen the income of the poorest half of the world's population's decline by 38% and the astounding inequity whereby the richest 62 people in the world possess more wealth than the poorest 3.8 billion. (Oxfam, 2010, 2016). Orleck details the onslaught by the IMF and the World Bank to buy up the debt of the poor at the cost of health, education and other essential services. Hundreds of millions have been driven from their homes into urban slums or migrant camps by rapacious agribusinesses, timber and logging corporations.

Cited by the elites and their media lackeys as "the most powerful and the wealthiest country in the world" the stark reality for the majority of the United States population is very different from the glib rhetoric that the unemployment rate is under 5%:

"Two- thirds of the jobs created in the US since 2008 do not pay a living wage or provide benefits, job security or potential for growth. By 2014, 71% of workers earned less than $50,000 a year. More than half earned less than $30,000; 38 % earned less than $20,000. The American middle-class has evaporated." (Orleck, 7)

The beauty of Orleck's writing is that it is primarily a story told by the workers themselves. It is impossible to cite every exploited soul, every brave rebel, in a brief review but numerous examples show the ravages of international capitalism presented chapter after chapter, page after page. Forty chapters tell a sweeping yet intimate tale of physical and emotional pain, repression yet defiance. Defiance always at a cost. A McDonald's employee, Bleu Rainer, describes a typical life:

"In eight days I made no more than eight dollars and five cents an hour. I witnessed the torture of not having enough to afford rent, which led to me sleeping from house to house. I even had to sleep at bus stops because I was homeless. There were nights I had to go without food so I could

buy a bus pass (to) get to work the next day. I have had to rely on food stamps to get a good meal and when (they) run out I am back to square one-which is nothing at all. Sometimes I think: I'm working so hard every day. Why am I not making a living wage. Why can't I feed myself? Why am I still hungry?" (9-10)

Bleu Rainer became a living wage activist. Invited to an anti-McDonald's Senate hearing in Brazil, the sense of scarring reality became a literal link. As three workers from the US, Japan and the Philippines stretched out their arms "a chill passed through him as he saw the matching burns. "'They make you get orders out in twenty seconds…You're always behind. So, you're not thinking about safety. You're worried that your manager will push you.'"

In the jingoistic inhumanity of Trump's cry to "build the wall" we never hear of the devastating human crisis caused by NAFTA flooding Mexico with cheap US industrial corn. Mexican government subsidies were cancelled. "Hunger raged as millions transitioned from subsistence farming to purchasing staple foods." (15) The tragically ironic consequence of the exploited seeking refuge in the home of the exploiters.

In China, the Philippines, South Africa, agribusiness has seen vast rural evictions with the new landless flooding to the cities as the urban poor. "Cambodia, Taiwan, India, Japan, and Indonesia passed new laws in the 2010's opening their countries to foreign ownership and leasing, leaving tens of millions of people landless." The landless become slaves of big business, "undocumented workers labor in the shadows…in fear of deportation."(14) The desperate conditions provoked urgent and desperate responses. The creation of La Via Campesina (The Peasants' Way) in 1993 had developed into an international federation embracing 164 farmers' organisations in 72 countries as it supported the 2012 South African women's grape workers' strike. It represents not only poor farmers but farm workers, the landless and indigenous activists. Pay was doubled to $10 an hour.

A recurring theme in this passionate call for justice is the need to create unions to strengthen workers' rights. The words of Cambodian beer promotion "girl", Tep Saroeung, resonate with a more familial tone, "I consider the union my second mother", also the chapter's title. Often young women from local villages who had been sold or seized by rubber or sugar corporations took the demeaning job of entertaining drinkers. Tragically but unsurprisingly "alcoholism, drug addiction and STDs are rampant." After joining the union, the Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation, her wages grew from $30-40 a month to $160, holiday and maternity leave increased. Strikes against the Danish owners, Carlsberg, forced the media- conscious Danes to respond to workers' demands. Even as a company based in a labor-friendly country, Carlsberg attempted to renege on its promises, relenting after further strikes and demonstrations. The challenges for workers fighting companies without even a contrived scruple are enormous.

The enduring symbol of class division is the soaring hotel, the Hilton, Sheraton or Hyatt. While the wealthy congregate in the lounges and restaurants, they are served by the invisible ones, the waiters, cooks and "the fairies", the constantly fatigued housekeepers. Blatantly defying ILO recommendations of 10 rooms a day, women are forced to clean up to 24, wracking their bodies and exhausting their minds and spirit. "Hotel housekeepers have the highest rates of pain and permanent muscular-skeletal injury of any labor sector." (27) Equally elusive are the owners of hotels who claim their profits through faceless investment and remorseless managerial groups like Procaccianti. It is inspiring to witness the activism of UNITE HERE, the US Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union. It is less reassuring to read that the workers' demands were facilitated at the Hyatt Hotel chain because Barack Obama was about to appoint Hyatt heiress

Penny Pritzker as Commerce Secretary and the family were concerned about union protest at her confirmation hearing. Perhaps not "the huge victory" that Orleck enthuses over (27). More a win for pragmatism (and one assumes Penny Prizker!)

The foremost aim of the lowest paid workers is to achieve a minimum wage of $15 an hour, the slogan "Fight for Fifteen" a shameful cry in the richest country on earth. It is an equally obscene conjunction to turn to the Australian "Rich List" and see the least affluent of the 250 "earning" an income of $320 million (US $ 219 million). The richest, cardboard box "maker", Anthony Pratt, is credited with $ 13.14 billion (US $9 billion). It is no surprise to read that both Pratt and No.2, iron ore magnate, Gina Rinehart "are unabashed fans of Donald Trump" (The Rich List,18) Meanwhile the Canberra politicians and bureaucrats squabble about increasing the euphemistically titled Newstart (unemployment benefit) by $75 ($51 US) a week from the woefully inadequate $277.85 (US $190). Having trumpeted the conservatives' opposition to this increase, the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, condemned the Labor Party's pre-election promise as "unfunded empathy" while adroitly avoiding the question could he live on such a pittance. Morrison's annual salary is $549, 250 (US $ 376, 200).

There is a grotesque contrast in the Rich List biography titles and the chapter headings in Orleck's discussion:

"Playing for Keeps", "Monumental Goals", "Empire Builder", "Weighing the Cost", "Double or Nothing", "New World Winners", "Number One". There is a particular repugnance in the "Perfect Playground" where we learn "Byron Bay has become a magnet for the wealthy of a certain age." Byron Bay, once a peaceful small town on the coast of New South Wales was the rural destination of 1970's utopians, alternative youth.

The individual gratification of the wealthy is in stark contention with the noble fraternity of the tormented and oppressed:

"Brands of Wage Slavery, Marks of Solidarity", "United for Respect: OUR Walmart and the Uprising of Retail Workers", "People Power Movements in the twenty-first Century", "This is What Solidarity Feels Like", "Social Movement Unionism and the Souls of Workers".

McDonalds and Walmart are two of the dominant transnational chains on Earth. Their tentacles intrude upon the very psyche and cultural consciousness of the world. Fast food and fast purchase are apt symbols of an emotionally deprived society- contemporary reflections of Lasch's transient minimal self and Erich Fromm's depictions of a society obsessed with having not being.

It is no surprise that the conditions of the workers are bereft of any security or meaning. Facing a monster across five continents with 11,500 stores and 2.2 million workers, not including those serving its 100,000 suppliers, the world's biggest private employer was a fearsome opponent for the workers at nine Walmart stores in Los Angeles in 2012, incredibly the first strike against the behemoth on US soil. Buoyed by international support the employees have protested on every Black Saturday since. The harsh retaliation has seen Walmart's refusal to rehire activists, introduction of an anti-union hotline and hiring of defence contractor Lockheed Martin to spy on activists and facilitate evasion of labor inspectors. The enduring symbol, Alice Walton, Walmart heiress, with $33 billion to her name, reputedly drinking and smoking in her $25 million mansion while the workers protested outside. (87)

Tom Cruise complimented Walmart for "using its size and scale to improve women's lives around the world." Orleck cites this uncritically in describing the activist- attended shareholders' meeting in 2013 (32). In describing the wave of fast- food restaurant protests in the US from 2012 to 2016, activist organiser, Naquasia LeGrand, is quoted as being amazed by the "epic" global

uprising against poverty wages inspired by the first stirrings of the "Fight for $15" campaign, its high point her invitation to the White House "to witness President Obama sign an increase in the minimum wage for workers on federal contracts." (32, 34) Pragmatic corporate reform hailed by a wealthy film star, better poverty endorsed by a charismatic President, these are hardly revolutionary.

The rapacious impact of the multinational corporations worldwide is most powerfully, indeed indelibly, portrayed in Part 3 of Annelise Orleck's book. Here she paints in compelling detail the horrific exploitation of the garment workers throughout Asia, notably, China, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the most vile and deliberate disregard for the women in the garment manufacturing factories. While the most graphic testament was the 2013 Rana Plaza Building collapse in Bangladesh, the daily torment experienced by all these abused should be compulsory reading in every lecture-hall and classroom in every Western institution. Sadly, the likely reaction would mirror the detached "Interesting" appended to the copy of this book that I borrowed locally by library staff. Similarly, despite the brief consumer outrage and the eager signing of the resulting "Bangladesh Fire and Safety Accords" by 86 garment companies, voluntary enforcement has always been a pious insult, deregulation far more amenable than self -restraint. Walmart and Gap have still refused to even offer this semblance of contrition or constraint.

Despite the author's passion and illustrative and incisive critique, it is always the experience of the poor, predominantly the activists, that illuminate the crimes committed in the name of Western indulgence. The story of 18 years old Reba Sikder deserved a more humane audience than the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2014, deliberating whether or not to overturn Obama's rejection of Bangladesh's preferential Trade status:

"She looked weary, a little dazed and not a day over 14. Sikder wore a striped hoodie sweatshirt to ward off the chill of a damp DC morning. In 2013 she had worked 14 hour days for $49 a month. She couldn't afford to miss work, even for a day, she said, although she had noticed cracks spreading through the walls of the Savar building. She knew older workers were worried.

'When Sikder arrived for work on April 24, 2013, she saw her colleagues milling outside, hesitant to enter. One worker pointed to rubble by the doors. The building appeared to be dissolving. Then Sikder heard the boss yell: 'You bloody people…if you don't go inside, you won't get your salary.' Workers nervously filed in. Sitting at her sewing machine, Sikder could feel the building shake. But the bosses wouldn't let anyone leave. When the walls collapsed around her, Sikder was hit by debris and knocked unconscious." (Orleck, p.120)

It is heartbreaking that many surgeries later, suffering daily pain and with her bones never healing properly, that she should consider herself to be lucky.

In Cambodia, workers were shot for daring to protest in late 2013, five workers killed. With an extraordinary courage and invention with demonstrations outlawed, garment workers staged a fashion show. Modelling and mocking the garish world of the West, accompanied by suitably vacuous soundtracks, they wore dresses with the logos of the corporations for whom they slaved-Nike, Levi's, Gap. They carried two foot long $100 bills, theatrically tearing the bills and casting the pieces into boxes marked "Rent, Electricity, Water, Medical supplies, Food", with upturned palms as the final fragment fell. Starving on 150 calories a day is common.

Women held placards displaying annual corporation profits: "Gap $6.2billion; Old Navy (owned by Gap) $6 billion; Nike $30 billion." Other placards showed the annual salaries of CEO's: Ralph Lauren, $24 million; Walmart CEO Doug McMillon, $25.6 million; Nike CEO Mark Parker, $47 million" In a stunning perversion of ethical language one card trumpeted Nike chairman

Phil Knight's "net worth"-$22 billion- in contrast with the $2,000 "yearly net worth" of each Cambodian garment slave.

The show came to a climax with women holding signs decrying the injustices they'd endured: 'Job insecurity.' 'Poor ventilation.' 'Sexual Harassment.' 'Pregnancy Discrimination.' Then headbands 'Only $160', to commemorate their fallen comrades. The fatal scene was enacted in front of watching police. The women wore T-shirts in the final scene-"People before Profits" -and other signs also demanding acknowledgement of their humanity " 'Dignity.' 'Safer Conditions.' 'A Living Wage.'" (121-2)

Orleck has interviewed many activists and organisers in the garment labor factories and their courage and determination in the face of repression is compelling. Demonstrations and hunger strikes showed worker' anger and desperation after the final inhumanity at Rana Plaza. The wage was doubled in 2013 with the efforts of Kalpona Akter, Nazma Akhter and Moshrefa Mishu, chairman of the Garment Workers' Unity Forum, a thirty-five years veteran of radical action. In Cambodia, the shadows of Pol Pot return in the violence inflicted on union leaders. Created by Khloek Outrok, the Free Trade Union (FTU) of the Kingdom of Cambodia, has seen three of its organisers assassinated. Orleck spoke with union official, Chea Mony, whose brother was one of those killed. He bore the scars of Hung Sen thug beatings as did Ath Thorn, "the robust, gregarious former garment worker who leads the Cambodian Coalition of Apparel Workers' Democratic Union (CCAWDU), a progressive federation with over fifty thousand members." (155) Imprisonment of government/corporation opponents is common.

In deeply patriarchal societies the roles of Akter, Akhter, Mishu in Bangladesh and Yang Sophorn, President of the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions, are remarkable. These women and many like them raise the rights of women in relation to pay and conditions, the battles to gain maternity leave and fight sexual harassment and domestic violence.

The spheres of influence of 19th.century New Imperialism have been reincarnated in the proliferation of export -processing zones in 130 countries of the world since the beginning of the millennium. "By 2014 there were 4,300 export zones worldwide, employing more than sixty-six million workers." (127) Global lenders such as the World Bank and IMF have forgiven Third World loans in exchange for easier access to cheap labor and lower costs. Countries were forced to privatise essential services such as healthcare, education, energy and water systems. Bioengineered cotton seeds and pesticides have poisoned the earth, textile dyes poisoned rivers, piles of discarded clothing disfigure the environment.

The comfortably self-conscious sophisticates of New York, London or Paris should be appalled at the enormous waste of water in drought -ravaged lands. "2,700 liters (more than 700 gallons) to produce a T-shirt; 9,982 (more than 2,600) for a pair of jeans." (127) The reduction of poor workers to cyphers and the rape of their natural environments is in vivid contrast to the enormous profits they earn for the transnationals and the 'global economy'. "In 2015, annual profits in global apparel and textile production were $1.2 trillion, the total net worth of the industry, $4.4 trillion."(128)

The most graphic description of the intrusion of Western colonialism occurs in Orleck's chapter on the ravages inflicted by the Spanish, Japanese and US in the tormented Philippines. The grotesque dictatorship of Duterte is in effect the continuation of worker and popular exploitation at the hands of homegrown tyrants, Marcos the previously most notorious, ruthless at home yet pliable in the hands of transnational corporations. Orleck vividly depicts the intrusion of US cultural domination:

"Kentucky Fried Chicken and Mc Donald's dot the traffic-choked avenues, fronted by vendors selling hot peanuts, their mouths and noses masked in white to filter the smog. American R&B songs from the 1970's blare from car radios, restaurant loud-speakers, and brightly-painted open-air 'jeepneys'-Manila's version of city buses.

In Rizal Park at dawn hundreds of women Zumba dance to the beat of American pop-icon, Beyonce. The music throbs above stone busts of indigenous leaders, most of whom died fighting against the Spanish or the Americans. "'The Americans did not just colonise my land,' says labor activist, Josua Mata. They colonised our minds…the Americans eat us from the inside." (166,167)

Orleck is eloquent in depicting the "reflexive revulsion that …is so deeply ingrained it feels like blood and bone." The Philippine labor movement is soaked in that feeling of resentment, Mata says. In the Export Processing Zones the condition are far worse than in the cities, armed guards patrolling the insanitary ratholes of worker dormitories. In theory, labor laws exist as does a free press but the murder of labor leaders is frequent. The old Cold War rhetoric has been replaced by anti-Moslem propaganda as justification. Marcos used the army to break strikes in the EPZ in 1982 but the women resisted. Aquino 'revised' the labor laws in the 1980's in the wake of the international lenders' abolition of her predecessor's profligate indulgence. However, the price of foreign investment was even lower wages and more horrendous conditions.

Global garment giants like Ann Taylor, Ralph Lauren, Gap and JC Penney continue exploitation but the Philippine people are resisting as best they can. Mata shared in the creation of the Alliance of Progressive Labor in 1996, embracing all walks of working life including "jeepney drivers, street vendors, hotel cleaners…fast -food workers, students and teachers, street kids and squatters." (173) The principles of democratic socialism and non-violence were ingrained also in the SENTRO, a federation of public and private sector workers as well as garment, metal, automobile and service workers established in 2013. Orleck credits SENTRO's birth as initiating a worldwide revival of the "One Big Union" of the IWW, but the adherence to democratic socialism would suggest reformist aspirations, understandable with brutal assaults on insurgent efforts, but committed to working within a corrupt and repressive system. With workers drained by 6 day weeks and the indignity of $7 a day payment, union militancy is stifled. The exodus of millions of people from the country is almost recognition of futility. Almost but not quite, as passionate outbursts of defiance endure. Lifelong union official Sion Binon expressed her amazement at the women "summoning up the nerve to raise their hands (to join the union) while a few feet from them there were men with machine-guns."(176)

The term coined in this post-industrial age to describe the workers living on the edge of society, on the fringes of life itself, is "precariat". As Orleck notes, many have claimed credit for inventing the word but the word is evocative enough. It is redolent of a world of insecurity and poverty where national or international employers, be they corporations or government agencies, hospitals or even universities "evade legal responsibility for meeting minimum wages, maximum hours, and safety standards by classifying them as 'temporary' or as 'contract' employees…" (67)

Gone are the achievements of the first half of the nineteenth century as labor unions fight for existence in the face of remorseless impermanence. "Few people are classed as fulltime employees these days. Suddenly almost everyone is an independent contractor" (67-68)

In the chapter entitled "Contractualization", Orleck illustrates the pernicious nature of this new world. McDonald's worker, Benedict Murillo, in Quezon City, Philippines, shares his experience with young workers and activists of the RESPECT Fast Food Alliance:

"'You sign on for four months at a McDonald's. When four months is up they move you to another. You never get to stay in one place. You never get to be a regular worker. That's contractualization. It was seven years of four months here and five months there, and I didn't even know anything was wrong until I heard RESPECT people shouting for their rights. Now I'm in the streets shouting too!"(99)
In the US two -thirds of workers earn less than the twenty dollars an hour perceived as ensuring a "comfortable" existence for a couple with two children. The cheerful vision painted by the corporate world of "precariat" workers is false.

"Precarious workers are not plucky free agents creatively making their way in the 'gig econo'. They are victims of what should be considered a vast criminal conspiracy. The Economic Institute estimates in 2016 alone, US workers were robbed of $50 billion in wages. Meanwhile, wealthy companies around the world were systematically denying their precarious workers their rightful earnings-in fast-food restaurants, factories, nursing homes and farms."(100)

I almost went into convulsions of black humour on observing the travails of the Australian "Rich List": "This publication is not just a celebration of success. Many of the rich grapple with succession plans and how to carve up their hard-earned wealth. Billionaire Paul Lederer reveals that his temper can get the better of him, and Jonathan Hallinan (a mere $866 million Aust., 593 million US) discusses how insulating his life has been and how anyone who admires his single-minded focus should think again." (The Rich List, 14) A loathsome list of indulgence and obsequiousness.

In my own life, I was first confronted with the world of impermanence in the late 1980's, a few years after Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke had entered the world of deregulation, some years before the iniquitous Enterprise Bargaining, union -breaking endeavours of conservative, John Howard.

I had returned to the family home in early 1988 to care for my elderly father following my mother's death after 14 years of serious, incapacitating illness, at the same time resigning from 15 years in the public (state) secondary school system and assumed two things. That a carer could do fulltime work and that jobs would be readily available to a man just turned 37. Wrong on both counts. Completely isolated and unsupported, the years passed with some part-time and voluntary work while the hundreds of applications fell on deaf ears and perhaps hard or just unknowing hearts. My father died at 91. My health declined. I had not realised the crucial self-esteem that a work life engenders. It was a period of 11 years before I again gained a job. From there the temporary world of contracts carried me through many cities and towns of the vast state of Queensland, a few brief appearances back in the capital, Brisbane. The furthest "appointment" was to the silver, lead, copper and zinc mining town of Mt. Isa, 1563 kms. direct route from Brisbane, 1824 kms. by road.

Finally, in 2002, a position opened at my birthplace, Warwick, a mere 160 kms. from Brisbane. Permanence at last! But no, a few years later with the drought affecting private- school boarding numbers, a new principal suddenly installed, four teachers received the dreaded knock on the door. Last in, first out, "my own men"? Profuse apology and great references do not a new job make at 53. The world of impermanence continues. Finally in 2007, another contact. 8 months with the possibility of renewal. A 12 month contract …then the blessed words-"continuing". Until retirement.

I learned the harsh lessons of isolation, worse than many because there was little or no family and community support. The life of an unemployed man or "itinerant contractor" is not one that

encourages intimate relationships or enduring friendships. Living in a motel room in tiny remote Gin Gin, worker's cottage in far-flung Mt. Isa, a converted hospital at the old gold- mining town of Charters Towers, caravan park at coastal Sarina, tough pub in the sugar port of Bundaberg, a men's hostel back in Brisbane, these were testaments to the solitude of segregation.

In Part 4 of her investigation, Orleck moves from a discussion of workers exploited by corporations in the city and industrial world to examine the massive trauma inflicted in the 21 st. century on agricultural workers. In 2017 farmworkers around the globe protested against the barbaric "land expropriations, forced migrations and slave like conditions for the people who plant and harvest food…"(182). The murder of seven activists in 2004 at Hacienda Luisita in the Philippines was a tangible reminder of the despotism of the elites as well as their complicity with foreign companies. This, the country's largest sugarcane plantation, is owned by the family of two former presidents, Corazon Aquino and Benigno Aquino 111. While indigenous Lumad groups from Mindanao protested against the government violence wreaked upon them in the name of terrorism and plantation expansion in Manila in 2015, the ASEAN leaders led by Obama "sang the praises of free trade and global agribusiness." With sickening hypocrisy, "No bullets were used (at the ASEAN conference), out of sight, violence continued on Mindanao." (181) Placards in 2017 demanding Duterte "Stop Killing Farmers" were a reaction to the killing of four workers opposing plantation expansion.

In Brazil, women from Women Without Land (and the Movement of Landless Workers -MST) highlighted the injustice that private and public corporations owed the government $150 billion in social tax while the latter had introduced austerity measures. The same month farmers demanded debt forgiveness as their subsistence plots became the target of free trade and bioengineered seeds. People demonstrated throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas as their torment increased. The Asian Peasants' Coalition and Pesticide Action Network (PAN-AP) co-ordinated international action on March 30. A global Peasants' Right Congress called for global unity and pronounced their critical role as "guardians of Mother Earth."

Orleck explores in characteristically meticulous detail the origins of this most recent incarnation of capitalist evil. With hunger intensifying in countries in Africa, Asia and even Europe, further escalated by the 2008 GFC, the World Bank prescribed its usual solution. Let the corporations in and we will let agribusinesses introduce their new magic "Green Revolution." Farmers were forced to move to cash crops, contractors for the big players. Debt, foreclosure and migration were the predictably tragic result. The reader is greeted with statistics making tangible the enormity of the land thievery: up to 30 million hectares, the geographical equivalent of Italy in food production plantations alone; tens of millions of hectares in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea in search of palm oil, sugar and rubber; 70% of Cambodia's arable land taken since 2003 for the latter two industries; 9% of the Sub Sahara's fertile land, the last primary rain forest in West Africa, sold for logging. The ever- eager prostitute Philippines government will expand oil production by 1.2 million by 2020. Orleck rightly observes: "Mindanao and its people are for sale." (pp.188-9)

The landscape changes and we are transported to the continuing iniquities experienced by migrant laborers in Vermont's milk industry symbolised by the tragic strangulation of 20 years old Joe Obeth Santiz-Cruz, his clothing caught in an unsafe machine. The activists in Migrant Justice rallied support from students and consumers in demanding improvement in conditions. This is an industry so dangerous that 61 workers had been killed in New York between 2006 and 2014.The pattern emerging throughout the globe of alternative unions rallying to present

the grievances of the most marginalised saw the creation of The Coalition of Immokalee Workers. While "hardly revolutionary in the 21st.century" (198-9), the victory over retail giant Ben & Jerry's in signing the Milk with Dignity agreement in 2017 guaranteed one day a week off, a minimum wage of $10 an hour, 8 hours between shifts, electricity and running water.

The memory of Cesar Chavez is invoked in the ironically titled "Like the time of Cesar Chavez-Strawberry Field Exploitation Forever." We admire the unionising courage of Californian berry picker Bernadino Martinez, isolated by fellow-workers' fear, for his resolution in the face of company thugs, his determination to urge the huelga (strike) as a strategy. It is a sad testament to the resilience of oppression that the average life-expectancy of Californian migrant farm workers-49 in 1970, in contrast to the 73 of American men- in 2015 had not changed although the latter were living 3 years longer.

In our radical youth we marched in 1971 against the South African all- white Springbok Rugby team. A state of emergency was declared in Queensland and the footballers played behind police lines and barbed wire fences. Some protestors were injured in the police charge outside the players' luxurious motel. Since the official end of apartheid, stories in the West concentrate on the killing of white farmers amid black demands for their land. Australia has been one of the favoured destinations for white "refugees." Certainly, South Africa struggles with ANC corruption and the poor remain poor. However, Orleck's chapter on the slavery conditions perpetuated in the Western Cape wine district is a place where Afrikaan rule still holds sway.

It is a place where "the farmer seems to see the worker as subject and property."(Henriette Abrahams, Sikhula Sonke Farmworkers'Union).The centuries-old saga of "starvation wages, abysmal living conditions, brutal mistreatment and poisoning from pesticides" provoked a widespread strike across the Cape. Police and farmers shot into striking protestors, the workers responded by barricading roads, fighting hand- to- hand with police and burning vineyards. The demands for basic human working conditions gained some progress but the conditions in 2016 were still "dismal." Perhaps the most heartening development was the rise of the feminist social workers' union, empowering women and giving a voice to the smaller, less financial unions. In the mainstream rhetoric so familiar to anarchist affinity groups these were characterised as 'leaderless'. The appellation "organic" intended to disparage, unwittingly incisive and complimentary.

The creation of independent grassroots unions as the exploited endeavour to reform aspects of their lives, to demand at the very least a basic recognition of their humanity, clearly characterises Orleck's travels. From "Families United for Justice" replacing the "corrupt, government dominated, 'yellow' unions long controlling the farmworkers" of Northern Mexico, to MICOP (Mixteco/Indigena Community Organising Project), the community service assisting all areas of workers' lives including healthcare and benefit acquisition as well as translation services and legal advice in California since 2001. Former UFW organiser, Juvenal Solano, says that while the Mixtecos don't like the word union the Triqui are more comfortable with this form of advocating for their rights. A fellow activist speaks the powerful words one never hears in the immigration debate: "We did not cross the border …the border crossed us… (it)is meaningless." (Arcenio Lopez, MICOP director, Oxnard, California; Orleck, 2021). Another recurring theme in this story of repression and defiance is the identities of the oppressive international corporations: Walmart, Driscoll's, Cosco…

There are many enduring images in the final chapter of the body of Orleck's work. The image of Vicky Carlos Garcia's older brother's murder at the hands of Marcos's henchmen in 1972 for

organising a union at Cavite's garment factory in the face of Levis and Wrangler mistreatment is indelible:

"' My brother was shot twenty-one times. Then he walked home so he could see my mother one more time. His will was so strong. His heart was so strong, he made it home, walking the crooked streets. Before he died, he told me about the shooting. I was with him, holding him.'" (234)

What would have deterred an adult from militancy spurred 12- year- old Vicky to become a lifelong activist. Her primary focus has been on restoring the organic agroecology of the rice seeds of Cordillera in Luzon, the largest of the Philippines islands. The exquisite sophistication of the Cordillera rice communities, a millennia -old understanding of soil conservation and herbal pest control, yielded 300 heirloom rice varieties. Luzon's biodiversity was intricately maintained through small forests at the terraced tops above the fields, replete with hundreds of species of native plants which filtered rainwater and replenished the soil while supporting a variety of animals, fish and food crops.

What greater contrast could there be when this intimate and ecologically profound vision is contrasted with the hideous "reality" existing throughout Africa and Asia. The genetically modified rice since the green revolution of the 1960's has here as in many countries of Asia seen industrial farms, funded by the global seed and pesticide industry, ravage the lives and environments of the small farmers. An exporter of food in the 1960's, Africa is ruined by the new overlords, now importing 25% of its food. China is a rice importer and the Philippines itself the world's largest importer. It is also the world's greatest exporter of people, torn from the land to the urban slums of Manila and the hotels and mansions of the rich overseas.

The final section of this book is the briefest, just three chapters and 20 pages long. In some ways it is the most critical. Yet I was left with mixed feelings. There are practical instances of human achievements through worker defiance, most conspicuous the dramatic success of the Bangladesh Fire and Safety Accords, the two hundred deaths each year in the garment factories reduced to none in just 4 years by 2016-7. However, the author's grand passion and vision throughout the book seem to dwindle to the "Flashes Of Hope" (Title, Ch.39) more than the "We can Turn Around the Labor Movement" (Title, Ch.38) or the "Local Victories, Transformative Visions" banner underpinning the final section proclamation, "They Said t was Impossible." (Part V) This may be partly due to the conclusion's concentration on "successes" in the US in contrast to the global sweep of the text, even the realisation that small steps are not sensational. Primarily, it is the realisation, hinted at throughout the book, that societal change is assumed within the parameters of the existing society.

After the exodus of garment factories to cheaper climes, Knights Apparel, the Collegiate -licensed sportswear company "opened a new factory (in the Latin American town of Vila Alta Gracia) with a radical vision". Orleck enthuses, "Knights owner Joe Bozich wanted to show that you can profit by supporting worker justice." Now supporting 800 US colleges and manufacturing their logo- wear a worker says. "This has allowed us to dream". About their own college future, we wonder? The fact that Bosnich was moved to improve workers' conditions inspired by "personal tragedy" is worthy but a faulty template, and his slogan "Changing Lives one Shirt at a Time" hardly uplifting for the world's poor.(249-50) It is also unlikely that the involvement of Prince Charles as a leader of the negotiations in the 2017 Sustainable Cotton Accord with transnationals such as Ikea, Nike and Marks and Spencer will be greeted with the same significance that Orleck accords it, let alone sighs of relief and rapture in the Third World.

Affirmations like "Branding and marketing labor justice is key to the success of small to mid-size models like…Alta Gracia" reek with capitalist odour and ignorance of the very origins of the exploitation the author vividly portrays. She describes a "union or labor justice label" and ascribes the growth of popular consciousness "on the willingness of entrepreneurs to commit to farming and manufacturing fairly, and on consumers' willingness to research and pay for these products." Adam Smith would nod sagely.

Undoubtedly, the improvements in working and living condition gained by the activism of groups such as The Los Angeles Alliance for A New Economy (LAANE) in establishing Community Benefits Agreements are exceptional. However, it is not necessarily a sign of a radical citizenry that one of the 1992 founders, Madeline Janis, "won…a seat on the LA Redevelopment Agency Board, the largest in the country, with a billiondollar annual budget." (256) Perhaps not surprising that she says "I'm an old time Communist" and applauds the importance of "leverage" in working with governments to redirect money to the shopfloor. LAANE director Roxana Tynan states: "We believe in mass- organising…That means reaching regular people, not sounding insane, not being blinded by ideology." (258) One wonders at the ideology and strategies of the 'warriors for workers' that LAANE co-founder Miguel Contreras exhorts to replace the mostly Democratic representatives in "using the power of governments" (255)

Ideology is fleetingly referenced in this book. Orleck passionately asserts: "The Occupy movement changed the conversation burning a simple indelible image into our collective consciousness." The revolutionary zeal is diluted somewhat in the subsequent sentence, "There were always haves and have nots", a retreat little salvaged by "But the idea of 1 percent and 99 percent endured long after the ragtag Occupy camps were broken up by militarised police." "Ragtag" and the Occupy's "ragged eloquence" may have spoken more to radical change than Orleck's approbation of the subsequent (worldwide) "broad coalition-building." (4)

There is brief praise for the Communist Manifesto from hotel worker Mirjaam Prada, who is writing an annotated English/Spanish translation of Marx's clarion -call, deploring the philosopher's distortion and misrepresentation by communist dictators and capitalist politicians, asserting that Marx's interpretation of history is correct and emphasising her determination to make it accessible to workers. (86) Orleck's comparison of the Filipino labor federation created in 2013 to IWW based on its global vision is similarly fleeting and equally questionable. (174)

Orleck does dwell a little longer on the Zapatistas opposing the break-up of common land and the expropriation of millions of Mexican peasants in the 1980's and 90's, their resorting to myriads of forms to oppose the global reach and diverse tactics of the transnationals, their creation of "vibrant …autonomous communities in Chiapas." Nonetheless, there seems something patronising in her observation "The Zapatistas weren't quite the machine-smashing Luddites, but they offered indigenous community and traditional knowledge as resistance and solution." (46)The "Zapatista Rebellion" inspiring the Mexican dairy workers of Vermont should surely warrant more than the lone sentence. (196) Greater exploration of the revolutionary aspects of both modern Zapatistas and the traditional movement of the early 20th.century would have offered a more radical dimension to her discussion.

The essence of the critique is practical and if any ideology does exist it is perhaps best illustrated by her comparison of Filpino union activist and Senatorial aspirant Walden Bello with Bernie Sanders for his "impassioned rhetoric and the devotion of his young supporters." (45) Sanders is an interesting character but a social-democrat to the core. It was revealing to read Janet Biehl's trenchant criticism of Sander's pragmatic, even manipulative politics as Burlington

Mayor in her biography of Murray Bookchin, before her philosophical return to reformism where Sanders was hailed as "a superb US Senator." (*Ecology or Catastrophe,* 216-222 cf.277) It may have been apposite for this author (Orleck) as an academic and labor historian in the same state of Vermont, to cite former activist and social philosopher Bookchin but perhaps this omission is revelatory. She is clearly aware of fellow-Vermont inhabitant Sanders' impact.

While ideas can become dogma or pervert their original intent, integration and reform can be equally beguiling. When the richest Australians are applauded for their "creativity, tenacity, hard work and perseverance" (Stensholt, Introduction "The Rich List, Australia, 14), the post-modernist denial of objective truth, right or even context becomes a dangerous homogeneity.

Orleck's narrative is an inspiring narrative of courage and solidarity in the face of global oppression. The author has evoked the spirit of rebellion through the stories and battles of the poor and repressed throughout numerous countries of the world. It is a tribute to the seemingly eternal struggle for social justice. It is also a depiction of new forms of international organisation, new forms of unionisation with greater imagination and more varied strategies than the old, these under threat of extinction through class-collaboration or capitalist assault.

This is a book describing the enormous efforts of the poor to elevate their mutual consciousness in order to raise their standard of working conditions and as a consequence their manner of living and human self-esteem, indeed as the title proclaims, it is a "global uprising against poverty wages."

It is not a radical or revolutionary attack on capitalism or the state. The evils of the two are manifest and Orleck strikes repeated blows at the perfidy of both. She does not confront the essence of either institution, indeed the tome's very title speaks to the parameters of her discourse. This is a book about reform and dignity. It perceives the roots of evil in forensic detail, but does not launch an attack on the very existence of the causes of the evil, nor paint a manifesto or describe the form and nature of an alternative society. With all their flaws or varied even contrary voices, anarchism, utopianism and social ecology offer such a vision.

Tony Sheather
We are all Fast-Food Workers Now
The Global Uprising Against Poverty Wages
2020, Winter

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