

Politics, the party and the unions

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Jeremy Dewar reviews Rampart of resistance: why workers lost their power and how to get it back, Sheila Cohen, Pluto Press, London, 2006, 248pp

In Ramparts of resistance, Sheila Cohen, an academic and activist in the trade union movement, presents a brief, comparative survey of union struggles in the USA and Britain from 1968 till the present day. In the final third of the book, Cohen draws her own lessons, negative as well as positive, from this experience and, on the basis of this analysis, puts forward a set of principles for trade union renewal.

Such a project should be useful. A study of workers' organisations in the two most neoliberalised countries in the world could reveal not only the way forward for workers and socialists in these countries, but provide a timely warning to activists in other countries of how neoliberalism defeated the unions and how they could have avoided those defeats.

Unfortunately, Cohen's book does not provide answers to these questions. On the contrary, she is so selective in her examination and flawed in her diagnosis that to follow her prescriptions would simply lead militants to repeat the errors of the past.

A syndicalist tale

On the very first page, Cohen asserts that 'the main threat to ruling class demands and strategies has come, time after time, not from lofty political protest but from 'raw', workplace based, rank and file resistance' (p1). The first two-thirds of the book describe such acts of resistance. And entertaining, inspiring and thought-provoking they are. The point of this review is not to belittle workers' struggles despite Cohen's unsubstantiated claims that the far left stands aloof from them.

Cohen agrees with Lenin that workers cannot achieve full, political class consciousness through their own experience alone; that a struggle against a single employer or within a single industry has to be transformed into a struggle against the whole capitalist class and to overthrow capitalism in order for workers to be acting as a class-for-itself.

Correctly observing that reformism is the spontaneous ideology of the working class, seemingly backed up by its experience of the wages contract (a fair day's pay for a fair day's work), and not something foisted on workers by trade union leaders, Cohen asserts that workers can transcend this hegemonic ideology 'occasionally and in flashes' only through their own experience.

But that is as far as her 'Leninism' goes. For her such a transformation must nevertheless start from the economic struggle itself and nowhere else. So called 'middle class radicals' and the 'revolutionary left' Cohen uses the two terms indiscriminately 'are berated for trying to bring a 'broader' political agenda to the workers. Anything extraneous to the economic struggle, which does not emerge organically from it, tends to divert workers from organising workplace resistance.

Consciously echoing Antonio Gramsci, Cohen argues that 'purely industrial struggle can generate a 'philosophy' among workers which approaches (and probably surpasses, in terms of its grounded 'common sense') that of the most coherent intellectuals'¹.

Central to Cohen's thesis is the layer of shop stewards. Their shared experience with the workers prevents them from accommodating to the union bureaucracy or the employers. The relationship between shop steward and members 'direct democracy' is complex and dynamic. It provided a constant point of pressure on the workplace representatives to resist, while joint shop stewards' committees and combines brought a broader, industry-wide or even class-wide perspective to the workforce.

The employers identified the danger and attacked it. On the one hand, they gave the stewards facility time, offices and secretarial support; they moved the function of the bureaucracy down the foodchain. On the other hand, they introduced quality circles and teamworking to give workers the illusion that they could influence how the workplace was run and deal with their grievances directly. All the while leaving ownership and the profits in the bosses' hands.

Shop steward density fell dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, as did membership. How to revive the unions has since then become the key question.

The most dynamic section of trade union officials has afforded a role for the workplace rep in re-building the unions. John Sweeney and Andy Stern have developed a strategy of 'bureaucratic militancy' and 'community unionism'. Mobilising the community through civil disobedience 'in the Justice for Janitors campaign, for example' was, in the hands of Sweeney and Stern, means to an end: but that end was more of the same, 'partnership' with the employers.

Cohen counterposes to this rank and file militancy, direct democracy and a cross-union, class-wide rank and file movement. The goal of this movement is to build up unofficial and semi-official committees, which, at their height, can become like soviets. But to achieve this, the militants must only develop organisations that come directly out of their economic struggles; they must only base themselves on economic struggles, which can become 'transitional' to socialism when capitalism is unable to concede the workers' demands; in this sense only will their struggles become anti-capitalist and therefore political.

Marxism and the trade unions

Sheila Cohen is not shy of Marxism. But she does not start from the basic Marxist understanding of the trade unions. Trade unions are contradictory organisations. They perform an essential function within capitalism, enabling the worker to sell her or his labour power at a price that enables it to be reproduced, to bring up the next generation of workers and look after themselves in retirement. This is the basis the workers economic struggle. But because workers must seek the maximum strength in their united numbers, to face the much more concentrated economic force of capital there is a tendency for this to spread from sections to industries and across industries. For this reason they are 'schools for socialism', organs of embryonic class struggle. As Cohen herself points out, the slogan of trade unionism, be it militant or yellow, is 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work'. This acceptance of the wages system led Lenin to call pure and simple trade unionism a bourgeois ideology.

This explains the limits of trade unionism. Trade unions cannot, on their own, overthrow the capitalist system, even if they can thwart the capitalist class's plans and indeed precipitate revolutionary crises. They tend to be less effective during serious economic downturns because the increased supply of, and lowered demand for labour power weakens its position in the market. These two facts also explain why trade unions tend to repeat the same battles over and over again; what was gained today, the bosses will try to take back again tomorrow.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels also observed that the trade unions, by their nature, recruited both too broadly and too narrowly from the working class for them to become the leading instrument for self-emancipation. Workers of all political persuasions and of none should be swept into the unions. Even reactionary or backward workers should be welcomed into the unions, since strikes need to be solid. But this makes them particularly unsuitable for the task of preparing for and leading a revolution, i.e. overthrowing capitalism.

On the other hand they are too narrow because unions are most effective for skilled workers, whose labour power is in relatively short supply, and least effective for unskilled workers, often women, youth and migrants, who tend to be among the least secure and lowest paid. They cannot represent the whole of the working class: virtually nowhere have trade unions for long organised over 50 percent of the working class. They thus have an inherent tendency to over-represent the labour aristocracy.

This provides the material basis for a bureaucratic caste of trade union officials. It is not simply that different sectors of workers? limited experience and the wage-labour form ?spontaneously? gives rise to a reformist ideology. The labour aristocracy enjoys a lifestyle similar to the petit bourgeoisie, benefits from part of the surplus value extracted from workers in the third world, and seeks to protect its social position not only from attacks from above, the ruling class, but also from below, the mass of the working class, via restrictions on entry to its trades and so on. This explains the caste rather than class outlook of the bureaucracy, which binds the left and right wings together.

While Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin disagreed on the material underpinnings of trade union officialdom, it was Luxemburg, who first pointed to the importance of the rank and file of the unions, the key to unlocking the full potential of the trade unions and winning them to revolution.

?To desire the unity of [party and union] through the union of the party executive and the general commission [i.e. leadership of the trade unions] is to desire to build a bridge at the very spot where the distance is greater and the crossing more difficult. Not above, amongst the heads of the leading directing organisations and in their federative alliance, but below, amongst the organised proletarian masses, lies the guarantee of the real unity of the labour movement.??2

Cohen specifically attacks Lenin?s What is to be done for declaring that revolutionary class consciousness has to be brought into the trade unions from the outside. She produces a few quotes to support her claim that Lenin thought the opposite both before and after the 1903 pamphlet, but the attack on one of Lenin?s central works does not bear up under scrutiny.

What is to be done embodies Lenin?s method of party building and his tactics for fusing the vanguard party with the working class movement. He never renounced it. More importantly, it is an accurate guide to how the Bolsheviks operated in the trade unions, the factory committees and the soviets throughout 1917. The Bolsheviks started out as a tiny minority in these organisations but became dominant because they brought revolutionary ideas into them, specifically the slogan: ?All power to the soviets!?

Cohen either doesn?t understand Lenin?s argument or deliberately misconstrues it. It is not true that Lenin argues that trade union struggles ?prevent any opening for socialist ideas?3 only that they cannot complete the task of bringing socialist consciousness to the workers:

?The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social-Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness.?4

It was precisely the revolutionary subject, i.e. the party, that was missing in the US and Britain in the

1970s. The shop stewards were indeed fantastically militant and at high points of the struggle spontaneously socialist, but they did not know how to turn their struggles into struggles for socialism. They lacked sufficient political consciousness to do this. However this was not their fault since the working class instrument for developing this consciousness - a revolutionary party- was missing. Worse parties did exist which were not revolutionary and thus obstructed the linkage of the massive trade unions struggles into a class wide political struggle, a struggle for power.

Cohen's assertion that the far left has damaged the union struggle by bringing its own political agenda into the unions and diverting them from their natural course is a million miles away from not only Lenin, but also Marx and Engels. Not only did the pair relentlessly campaign for the British unions to support the Irish liberation struggle, Marx drafted the resolution to the General Council of the First International calling for the construction of independent workers' parties, adding that the trade unions ought to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of landlords and capitalists⁵.

How workers lost their power?

With this theoretical grounding, we can visit the territory of Cohen's book and draw opposite conclusions.

The historically high number of union members, shop stewards and strikes in the 1970s was a result of the exceptionally long post-war boom in the USA and Britain, during which trade unionism became unusually effective for workers beyond the ranks of the labour aristocracy. Bosses would rather concede on pay and conditions than lose a full order book to rival capitalists. Strikes, quickly called at shop level and quickly won, became commonplace. Women, black and Asian workers, youth flooded into the unions.

For the same reason, the need for political action seemed distant before the 1970s. Living standards were improving, unemployment and poverty receding, democratic rights gaining ground. Strong unions existed side by side with relatively weak political formations. The Labour Party was monolithic in Britain, while no workers' party at all existed in the States.

But the synchronised world recession of the mid-1970s changed all that. Employers and governments consciously took on the unions in long drawn-out strikes and lock-outs. They weakened the relationship of the shop stewards to the mass membership through anti-union laws, 'teamworking' and 'quality circles', and (not mentioned by Cohen) sacking a whole load of shopfloor leaders.

Cohen is right to say this was not inevitable. But she is wrong in her suggestions about what could and should have been done to prevent the decline. She claims that the layer of stewards should have been more conscious of its role, not only within the industries but across them. She says the policies they needed were those that could guide them towards building such an independent network, and fighting off bureaucratisation and incorporation by the employers.

Politics brought in from the outside are seen as part of the problem. Cohen quotes the various alternative economic projects, especially the Lucas Plan, as disastrous experiments, which meant militants took their eye off the ball of workplace organisation.

So where does Cohen go wrong?

First, the layer of stewards and workplace reps was conscious of its role in the unions. The Liaison Committee for the Defence of the Trade Unions, barely mentioned in the book, organised thousands of stewards across sectors. Cohen quotes the same stewards marching on Pentonville prison in 1972 to free trade unionist dockers, chanting, 'We are the working class' and Scargill's famous speech to the engineers before the battle of Saltley Gate:

?Will you go down in history as the working class in Birmingham who stood by while the miners were battered or will you become immortal? I do not ask you ? I demand that you come out on strike.?6

So a network did exist, and it was aware of its existence and specific role. It was also a battleground for various political currents, the most important of which were the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Workers Party. Their policies towards the Labour Party were crucial. As Cohen points out, it was the Labour Party that introduced the social contract, a series of ?give-backs?, which finally broke down in the winter of discontent and the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1978-79. The ?left? general secretaries, in particular Jack Jones of the TGWU, supported the policy. The CP-led LCFTU supported Jones.

In the face of such misleadership, the militant shop stewards were politically disoriented and industrially isolated. One group picked up on this discontent and grew among the stewards: the International Socialists (later to become the SWP). They launched a rank and file movement, drawing hundreds of workplace delegates to its conferences. While the IS counselled opposition to the social contract, it did so only through militant trade unionism. In fact, the IS practised what Cohen preaches: giving organisational support and a certain coherence to the struggles of the rank and file, while keeping politics ? the general strike, the question of government, etc. ? out of it.

It failed.

The onset of recession in the 1970s changed the rules of the game. For the bourgeoisie, it no longer became pragmatic to concede workers? demands, or nationalise ailing industries in order to keep production rolling. The bosses needed to break the post-war consensus: destroy unproductive capital; increase unemployment; reduce the share of surplus value accruing to the working class via wage freezes and rampant inflation; use the state machinery ? social security, police, courts, judges and prisons ? to stamp on trade union rights. It was called monetarism then, but was in fact the foundation stone of neoliberalism. And it was pioneered in New York and under the Wilson-Callaghan governments in Britain.

Faced with a situation where pure trade unionism was weakened by the economic downturn, workers turned to politics. The problem was the kind of politics they turned to. When Ted Heath called an election in response to the miners? strike in 1974, under the campaign slogan, ?Who rules the country?? the response was a definite, ?Not you!? However, beyond this negative, the only answer available to millions of trade unionists and tens of thousands of stewards was another Labour government. This ? far more than the Lucas Plan ? proved the fatal weakness of the unions.

? and how to get it back

The failure of the militant 1970s? shop stewards? movement and, in the US, reform committees, like Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Hot Wheels, to transform themselves into something qualitatively better continued to be felt during the defeats of the 1980s and 1990s, and to dog attempts at recovery in the 21st century. For Cohen the answer is: return to basics. Rebuild shopfloor workers? democracy, the creative relationship between the rep and the workforce. Create a network from this layer. Unionise new sectors on the basis of winning workers directly to militant action and democratic structures.

Fine. But, even as Cohen herself admits, the unions are built through victories. How can we end the cycle of defeats and begin again on a new cycle of victories? Only by seizing control of the unions. This can and should be done from above and below. The rank and file need to be organised to place clear demands for action on the leaders ? left as well as right. When those leaders hesitate, demobilise or do secret deals, the rank and file membership must be able to take action without and against the official leadership.

A rank and file movement should also stand candidates in elections on a clear programme of both union

reform and action on the major issues of the day. Cohen does not give her idea of thorough-going union reform, but we will: regular election of all union officials; all officials to be instantly recallable by a majority of those they claim to represent; all officials to be paid the average wage of the members; all disputes, strikes and negotiations to be under the democratic control of those in dispute through mass meetings and the election of strike committees.

By leaving union reform at the level of a network of shop stewards and workplace reps and merely bemoaning the failure of various attempts to elect left wing officials, Cohen leaves the rank and file movement as a parallel union structure. While correctly castigating the Broad Left strategy of focusing solely on electing left wingers, Cohen romanticises the workplace meeting:

‘Their delegate-based committee structure, typical of ‘spontaneous’ working class organising, ensured a closeness and accountability to the membership lacking in ‘representative’ democracy.’⁷

Not only does Cohen have no policy to expel the parasitic bureaucracy from the unions, she downplays the importance of doing so. The bureaucracy, gratefully using the anti-union laws, stifle disputes, like the Gate Gourmet lock-out at Heathrow in August 2005. It is responsible for passing up countless opportunities to turn over the Labour government since 1997. While rebuilding of the unions, militants cannot skirt round the bureaucracy, they must confront it.

Cohen’s fear of the bureaucracy is linked to her fear of politics. She castigates a Nalco branch in the 1980s for launching a campaign of strikes to smash the rate-capping legislation. But this legislation was at the heart of the cuts. It could have and needed to be smashed. The problem with the campaign was not that it was over an overtly political issues, but that it was limited to a series of one-day strikes, and to a few local authorities dotted around the country. To overcome these obstacles and to link the fight to the other disputes taking place, most importantly the miners’ strike, the workers needed more policies, different policies, not simply to strike on the economic issues, for more pay and jobs, which could only have been ‘won’ by the council closing down services and facilities elsewhere. Cohen’s strategy is a recipe for isolation.

The migrant workers’ strikes of 2006-07, the potential and impact of the anticapitalist and anti-war movements on the unions, the struggles of unions across the world during this time-span – from Argentina and Venezuela’s factory occupations and workers’ control movements through to the great French and Italian general strikes this century – show that workers’ struggles do not mechanically travel from economics to politics.

Great upsurges in trade union history usually come about in periods of great political and social crisis – the rise of fascism and spurred millions to flood into the unions. At the root of the growth of shop stewards movement in the period before and during the first world war were anarcho-syndicalist political ideas and militants. Later communists built the Minority Movement. In the 1960s Left Labourites, Stalinists and Trotskyists competed to build up the election of Popular Fronts in France and Spain in 1936, of Roosevelt in the USA.

First, someone has to agitate for this progress. Second, there is no law that dictates that workers become class conscious because of economic issues first, and political issues later. The war on Iraq (not mentioned in the book) politicised millions of workers in the USA and Britain. It could have led to general political strike action, the breaking of the anti-union laws and a political crisis for neoliberalism and globalisation.

The Socialist Workers Party, having counselled against bringing big politics into the unions in the 1970s,

found itself at the head of the antiwar movement in 2003. Yet it failed utterly to agitate for such action for fear of frightening away the left bureaucrats, who had joined the Stop the War Coalition. The SWP even turned this method ? economistic tailism plus passive propaganda ? into a general strategy for the unions.⁸

What is missing is the means to build a bridge between workers? consciousness and the historic goal of the working class: the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of the rule of workers? councils and workers? militia, and the opening up of the path to socialism. Again, Cohen is long enough in the tooth and well read enough to know what such a bridge should be: a transitional programme, updated and applied to today?s conditions. But bizarrely, rather than explore what this might mean, she simply refers to Hal Draper?s totally inadequate and wrong definition of a transitional demand:

?Simply to ask for, or organise around basic issues like reasonable wages, shorter hours, safety at work and (particularly in America) pensions and health benefits is to invoke the potentially transformative logic of ?transitional demands?? ?The demand for more becomes revolutionary when it goes beyond the capabilities of the system to provide the more. That is the link between the fight for reforms and social revolution??⁹

Leon Trotsky?s conception of the system of transitional demands was completely different. He advocated:

?a system of transitional demands, stemming from today?s conditions and today?s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat? the essence of [this system of demands] is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very foundations of the bourgeois regime.?¹⁰

The transitional programme does not simply consist of demands for more. It is a system of demands, which are interlinked. It does not simply reflect workers? conscious need for more; it seeks to transform that consciousness by raising the need to conquer political power by the working class. It prepares for this by encroaching on the bourgeoisie?s political and economic rights, and establishing elements of workers? control and democratic bodies to establish and maintain that control. At each stage of the struggle the ruling class is faced with a choice: escalation or capitulation.

It is this that makes the transitional method superior to simply demanding more. If Cohen looked at the programmes of the German Social Democracy and the Mensheviks, she would find demands far more militant in their reach than the ones she lists as transitional in today?s conditions. But for Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, they were insufficient because they were not linked to the fight for workers? control and the seizure of power. This is the essence of socialists? tasks in relation to the trade unions. As Marx put it:

?Apart from their original purposes, [the trade unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad sense of its complete emancipation. They must carry every political and social movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men in their ranks? They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.?

Endnotes

1 Luxemburg, R. The mass strike, the political party and the trade unions, 1906, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/ch08.htm> ^[1]

2 Cohen, op. cit. p196

3 Lenin, V.I. The reorganisation of the party, 1905, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/> ^[2]

lenin/works/1905/reorg/i.htm#v10pp65-029

4 Marx, K. Resolution on working class political action, 1871, The First International and After, Penguin p270

5 Cohen, op. cit. pp20-22

6 ibid, p166

7 See Smith, M. The Awkward Squad, New Labour and the Rank and File, Bopokmarks, 2003

8 Cohen, op. cit. p218

9 Trotsky, L. The transitional programme for social revolution, 1938, Pathfinder Press pp114-15

10 Marx, K. Trade unions: their past, present and future, Marx and Engels on the trade unions, Lapides, p65

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Links:

[1] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/ch08.htm>

[2] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/>