

## BOOK REVIEWS

The persistence of a bad idea - Review: Michael Quinlan, *Contesting Inequality and Worker Mobilization: Australia 1851–1880*, Routledge Studies in Employment and Work Relations in Context, Francis & Hope, 2020

Imaginative. Precise. Easy to read. Informative. Insightful. All these are apt descriptions of this book. Yet, they do not do it justice. It is work which constitutes a major contribution to scholarship and policy-making. It does so by inviting, no, by forcing, mainstream scholars and policy-makers to re-think their starting positions.

Let me begin with this passage from Michael Quinlan's conclusion:

Capitalism remains essentially a three-trick pony endlessly recycling these strategies to extract a surplus from labour, namely

- Work intensification – working harder within a given time span via performance pay, etc.
- Work extensification via longer hours, pseudo-self-employment (subcontracting, franchising, and home-based labour)
- Expanding labour that can be drawn upon to increase competition (like the young, the old, immigrants, and temporary workers) (p.306).

The ills these essential traits bring with them, argues Quinlan, are inevitable. 'Economic inequality is fundamental to capitalism' he states flatly at page 71.

The book shows, in vivid and extensively researched detail, that the material and personal inequalities that inhere in the relationship have always, and always will be, deeply resented by workers and cause them to rebel as vigorously as they can. There is no consensus between capital and labour, and there is no shared ideology. The fact of class struggle must be acknowledged if we are to understand our world.

Quinlan's work on a period of Australian labour resistances of all kinds offers us an opportunity to draw lessons. It can help those of us who are trying to understand and influence the world of capital-labour relations. He provides data and insights which have not been part of the work done by mainstream labour relations practitioners, policy-makers, and scholars. Conventional makers and doers and intellectual gatekeepers have focused on the legitimacy, formation, and scope of workers' organisations which survived and, over time, appeared to be at the centre of workers' resistances and pushes for reforms. They marginalised many of the types of organised and unorganised small networks, alliances, and momentary cells of rebellion that characterised the early days of Australia's emerging capitalist relations of production. If more attention had been paid to this now-recovered history, different ways of understanding, and of dealing with, the inevitable conflicts between the two classes, capitalists and workers, might have developed.

The dominant models that did develop came out of the understanding that capital-labour relations are necessarily thorny. The issues and struggles to which they give rise emerge from a context in which political, economic, social, cultural, legal, and technological spheres

interact. To come to grips with the complexity of it all, it is necessary to develop a framework for ordering thinking and acting. It must have seemed natural and efficient for the scholars and policy-makers engaged in the design of these ordering frameworks to concentrate on large movements around legislative actions and union formation. That is where all of the important action and actors seemed to be. More, that is where it would be easier to facilitate the promotion of new (hopefully long-lasting) responsive and responsible actors.

The many models which ensued, from institutionalists to the Dunlop model, to varieties of industrial relations models known as action models and, of course, the very special framework of Australia's compulsory arbitration periods, are nuanced and differ sufficiently from each other to attract different champions. There was, however, a common thread. All were based on the notion that individual bargaining between the owners of the means of production and the property-less possessors of labour power would lead to unacceptable outcomes. All revolved around workers being given *some* assistance as they formed unions with a legally endorsed ability to use the clout which *some* collectivism could give them. All believed (or, at least, hoped) that, as workers garnered a larger share of the pie produced and no longer suffered the indignity of being crassly subjugated individuals, stable and more efficient productive relations would prevail. Large employers and unions would develop a shared interest in the maintenance of a regime of private property. In sum, the eradication of irreconcilable class conflict was not only not central to these models but their conceit was that, if there had ever been such a thing as an irreconcilable conflict, it no longer existed.

For a while – a short while really given the length of time during which capitalist relations of production have held sway – the shared ideology, consensus-based models, seemed to have done the trick. This sense of 'mission accomplished' reached its zenith in the post-World War II period and lasted for about 30 years or so. Tellingly, the period is often referred to as the Golden Age of capitalism. It was, on the whole, a time during which the social wage became much more bountiful and workers, especially those in large firms, made material gains. Of course, this signified that capitalists were doing relatively less well. They launched a counter-attack. Successfully.

It is crystal clear that the circumstances which gave us the Golden Age of capitalism no longer prevail. Profits are up, wages are down. Ever-increasing inequality, the inevitable consequence of capitalists' drive to exploit and subjugate the working class, has come into plain view. Scholars and policy-makers are looking for ways to reverse some of the outcomes, for ways to re-gain some of the respect for the working class which had been won during the good years, during the period when the varied mechanisms of adjustment seemed to have worked very well. Lawyers are engaged in redefining labour law to develop instruments which can address the new milieu; some non-lawyers build their remedial efforts to construct a new framework around theories about the varieties of capital which demand different responses in different settings; many look to the giant corporations – which appear to them to set the tone for all and sundry – to behave with a greater sense of social responsibility or, more positively, to comply with new formal corporate governance rules which will force corporations to take the social good (including the well-being of workers) into account; others still, conscious of the impact of the globalisation/internationalisation of productive activities, focus on international machinery, such as the ILO, while yet others concentrate on trumping the apparent reign of economic thinking by concentrating on human rights; an increased amount of attention is being paid to how the plight of precariously placed workers should influence the framework designed to deal with capital-labour relations.

The basis for much of this work is that the changes wrought on behalf of capital were necessitated by significant changes in the modes of production (impelled by the coming of practical age of innovative technologies) and by political re-alignments which favoured the engineering of a system we often refer to as globalisation. There is an acceptance of the

notion that new circumstances should give rise to new capitalist arrangements while remaining capitalist ones. But, the reformers believe, this logic was unfortunately taken to unacceptable extremes by zealots (Pinochet, Reagan, and Thatcher) and by governments' overreaction to the so-called new realities – for instance, New Zealand's Rogernomics and Australia's removal of trade barriers and establishment of the Accords. The many reformers, then, see the facts on the ground which caused the previous labour regulation models to fall into desuetude as having led to overcorrection, as permitting some egregious antisocial, anti-worker behaviours. Now tools must be found to re-civilise capital–labour relations.

This understanding of the way scholars and policy-makers see the problems they are setting out to solve differs a lot from that of a much-listened-to guru of capitalism, Warren Buffet. He told CNN: 'There has been a class war going on for the last 20 years and my class has won'. If that is true, the pursuit of remedies on the basis that there is no irreconcilable class struggle, that there is a shared ideology, are likely to prove ineffective. If the neoliberalism period in which we find ourselves is one in which class struggle from on high has succeeded, it behoves progressive thinkers and activists to think about how class struggle from below might reverse the worsening of life. We are seeing a remarkable increase in inequality in wealth between nation states and within nation states, a rise in the increased numbers of people living servile lives which approximate the plight endured by workers during the evil British-invented Master and Servant regimes. Enter Michael Quinlan.

He takes the first syllable of 'mobilization' seriously. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'mob' as a disorderly crowd of people or an unruly crowd; The Everyday Thesaurus defines a mob as a lawless crowd, riff-raff, a vulgar herd. Quinlan, in the tradition of historians like Rude (1964), Linebaugh & Redekin (1990), Thompson (1991), and as he had done in his own work in the *The Origins of Worker Mobilization*, treats the mob very differently. He sees the demands, the reactions of bunches of people without any means to look after their own well-being and who thus are forced to rely on those who own the means of production, both as inevitable and crucial. Inevitable because all of them hate the inequality and the subjugation to which these forced relationships lead; crucial because these uprisings, small, spontaneous, short-lived are intimately linked to the development of more formal, more formidable, more coherent, longer-lasting organisations of the working class as it confronts capital. What Quinlan tells us is that we must see the importance of bottom-up struggles. The mob is an essential component of mobilisation.

He tells the story by telling many stories. His painstaking research leads him to newspapers, colonial newspapers, death notices, obituaries, editorials, speeches, records of organisations, unions' documentations, draft government bills, magistrates' records, specific vessels' logbooks . . . These herculean efforts enable him to document countless incidents of resistance by workers, often in tiny groups. He is able to show why a series of formations arose as he takes into account how the modes of production adopted in different spheres of the economy, inflicting different hurts on workers, led to distinct and overlapping reasons for rebellious conduct. Thus, sometimes it was the hours of work which impelled workers to act in unison; sometimes it was the fact that their physical safety was at risk, or that their employers found it too easy to undercut their wage rates by importing cheap labour; sometimes, it was truck practices leading to wage theft; and, on other occasions the needs which arose because of deaths, injuries, and unemployment which demanded mutual aid responses. Sometimes, it was all of these at once. The responses were as varied as the varieties of problems and specific industrial settings. For instance, seafarers suffered great, often brutally imposed hardships because of the nature of their employment. One constant response was absconding which the law forbade. Often this required coordination and planning, a need to act in solidarity. At times, their choices were influenced by opportunities to make a living in some other way. For example, Quinlan points to the impact of the effect that the boom in gold mining had on people's behaviours.

Here is one of the strengths of the book: it is a historical study which is conscious of the need to take the political economy of the times into account. This is how he is able to explain why the informal, small-time, often short-lived alliances, were naturally and organically linked to more formal union-based resistances.

In the hands of a lesser researcher, the extensive detailing of so many practices and so many incidents in so many differing sectors might have turned into a turgid set of lists, useful but boring. Not so here. The data are divided between industrial and occupationally related sectors and, in each compartment, the impulses leading to mobilisation are set out, identifying the priorities of the resisting workers. The rise of brief alliances (the length of association being around 4 days in the earlier periods covered) is not allowed to diminish their significance. Their efforts and members are shown to be connected as individuals with those who played roles in the formation of the more permanent unions as the same problems persisted and required opposition. The participants in these small groups, acting informally (in the sense of having no legal status, no bureaucracies, and no concretised form) often were parts of networks that sought more permanent, more formally, more long-lasting organisations (whose lifespans ranged from 162.5 to 305 days during the period 1850–1870). At p. 29, Quinlan notes how this on-again, off-again evolution occurred. There were group and individual encounters which played roles. Quinlan points to certain taverns and public houses where like-minded individuals met. This spontaneity, of formations, of dissolutions, the continuity between the mall/localised and more formal organisations, the fluidity of it all, is a refreshing way to bring out the constancy of labour's inferior position in a system of capitalist relations of production. It also highlights that many of the same problems afflict workers in all sectors of the economy, then and now. Workers have similar problems because they all belong to one class: the working class. The overlap of actors and agitators and the things they act and agitate about is central to the Quinlan message: the small, informal groupings and activists are integral to class struggle.

One of the strengths of this work is his evident respect for the bravery and inventiveness of these historically marginalised activists. He expresses his admiration for both the informal and linked formally organised workers at several junctures. One example is furnished by the fights around the hours of work, early closing, half-day issues. He cites from a Sydney Stonemasons pamphlet arguing for more unionisation. It contended that it eschewed the narrow chase for wealth because there were more worthwhile goals for human beings than the quest for more money. And Michael Quinlan reminds readers, as he does throughout the book, that the goals which animated both informal and formal organisations of workers often transcended narrow economic ones. Thus, those who fought for the 8-hour day made their case, in part, by arguing for social progress and improved family life, goals impeded by the length of time spent labouring merely to survive and to allow employers to maximise profits. Quinlan compares this approach favourably to today's 'disingenuous corporate mantra of promoting work/life balance while simultaneously extending hours, precarious work and 24-hour technological surveillance of workers' bodies' (p. 62). As part of those hours of work, half-day and early closing fights (all extensively recorded by Quinlan) he notes that the Melbourne activists, by 1878, got parks and reserves where families could gather and picnic, fought for the democratisation of sport, leading to the creation of four football teams (St. Kilda, Brighton, North Fitzroy and South Yarra). In the same vein, he relates how retail workers fighting for half-day closures and/or early closing, also stressed the need for leisure to improve the opportunities to exercise, to be healthier, to lead more moral lives in line with better social values and goals. He centres the role of women in these fights and their spirited agitations and reactions.

And inasmuch as the hardships and hurts done to workers suggested an overlap of interests, this overlap revealed that employers shared strategies: there was a commonality of means used to exploit workers across the varying sectors. And, from the perspective on the question as to whether old-time class struggle persists today, it is tell-tale that the very

same employer strategies are still in vogue. Thus, Quinlan finds that, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia, the use of subcontractors in the building industries was rife, leading to disappearing employers and wage theft. This has echoes in today's world. In mining, Michael Quinlan observes, 19<sup>th</sup> century workers knew what strategies to maximise profits led to the calamitous physical carnage workers suffered. He cites John Trevena, a Ballarat union advocate who, talking like a 21<sup>st</sup> century man, stated that 'Three-fourths of the fearful accidents which occur in our mines are attributable to . . . men being compelled to work at such reckless speed in order to earn a crust'. Again, the modernity of the complaint is familiar to us.

It is impossible to give examples of the huge number of worker organisations, large, small, informal, formal, the number of no strike action demands and strikes . . . the book simply has to be read. It is all so contemporary, it makes those fights from the bottom-up so relevant to the politics of today's workers. But one additional point needs to be emphasised.

It is the respect Quinlan has for workers, a respect he asks the readers to share. The occasional use of violence by workers, the internal disputations inside worker movements, the apparent racism that coloured some workers' conduct: he documents them and then urges us to consider the circumstances in which the workers found themselves. One of the recurrent examples is how he deals with the instances where workers exhibit hostility to 'othered' workers, to Polynesians, Chinese, European workers. Quinlan notes, again and again, that these kinds of apparently ugly racist tendencies and seeming indifference to the plight of 'other' kinds of workers must be understood as reactions to the way in which the employing class used its clout. Employers were the ones who brought in those 'others' to drive down the bargaining power of the domestic working class. And, as he does repeatedly, he reminds us how the dominant class still uses these repellent methods of retaining control and maximising profits. He writes: 'Racism cannot be ignored but nor can the use of Chinese workers as low-wage option in Australia and elsewhere (like building the west-coast end of the Canadian Pacific railway where they were paid half the going rate of European workers) . . . the Chinese riot should be viewed in this wider structural context . . . (at p.147, in reference to a nasty anti-Chinese action in the mining sector); and at p. 84, dealing with seafarers' resistance to flogging, being forced to wear stones around their necks, even killings or being left to die, the book records that there were violent objections to the Australian Steam Navigation Company hiring Chinese workers to break strikes in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The workers attacked Chinese workers as scabs. Quinlan notes that accounts of these dramatic incidents often focus on the racism and writes that this is a result of 'largely ignoring capital's strategy of introducing hyper-exploitable labour to undermine organised labour - still evident today'. We hardly need reminding ourselves of the MUA strike whose on-the-ground facts validates this view. Or, in an illustration from a different sphere, Quinlan discusses the way in which domestic female servants were seen as too uppity by their mistresses, using the language of 'servantgelism', so obviously undesirable that they resorted to looking for immigrant workers who would be more malleable, 'mirroring Gulf States importing servants from poor countries today' writes Quinlan rather trenchantly (at p. 224).

In brief, he sees worker resistance as admirable, as springing from a desire for survival and, more, dignity. His message is that these desires still exist and are still not satisfied and that, in order to find ways to do so, we must understand the depth of these material and sentient needs. His detailed, painstaking and colourful documentation of so many struggles hammers this point home. We should internalise the history of the battles from below, not be blinded by episodic institutional and social engineering fixes which do not recognise the insupportable inequality which inheres in capitalist relations of production and which legitimate the superior-inferior nexus that exists in work-for-wages

relationships. The ‘mob’ whose stories Quinlan documents understood this in a way that our governments and policy-makers and scholars do not.

This is a book which should be read by all of us who are students of, and activists in, capital–labour relations. We will profit in the best way: we will be enriched intellectually and, perhaps, inspired to do better.

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Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck, *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice*. Cambridge, UK, Hoboken, USA: Polity Press, 2023, pp. 180, ISBN: 978-1-509-54899-6, AUD \$32.95 (paperback).

A spectre is once again loitering in the imagination of capital (if not yet haunting it) – industrial democracy. Ever since its inception in the work of Proudhon and the Webbs, the concept of industrial democracy has seemed to go through something of a rinse-and-repeat cycle: for a time it gains purchase in the mainstream political discourse and animates working-class ideology and practice, then recedes in the face of some type of political-economic shift, lies in quiescence for a decade or two, before re-emerging and kicking off the process anew. After the last flowering of industrial democracy withered on the vine of the neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a promising sign of new life in the 2020s. Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck’s *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice* is a welcome contribution to this new wave of thinking about industrial democracy, one that will hopefully help us reverse the historical trend and meaningfully implement industrial democratic principles into our political economy.

Dukes and Streeck begin with an observation that has typified the common sense of labour law/industrial relations scholarship of the past several decades: that labour law is ‘no longer fit for its original and defining purpose of protecting workers from unfair and unequal treatment at the hands of employers, ensuring decent work and a decent standard of living’ (Dukes and Streeck 2023, 1). In order to plot a future where labour law may once again resume this protective function, they foreground the necessity of investigating the evolution of industrial relations and its legal regulation over the last century, particularly from the end of World War II and the rise and fall of the Fordist–Keynesian compact that emerged in its aftermath. To trace this history, Dukes and Streeck arm us with a suite of concepts, including *contract* and *status*. Exploring the distinction between them, they argue that:

‘[t]he concepts *contracts* and *status* have long been used to signify different types of social relation, with ‘contract’ referring to voluntary agreement and the free stipulation of terms by the parties to the relationship themselves, and ‘status’ referring to the right and obligations, privileges and duties, capacities and incapacities accruing to the parties by reason of their belonging to a particular social or legal category . . .’ (Dukes and Streeck 2023, 6).

Against a teleological account, prevalent in the nineteenth century, that status-based relations (understood as feudal relations at that time) would give way before contractually grounded ones, Dukes and Streeck offer a nuanced, dialectical understanding of contract and status as inherently intertwined and, indeed, co-constitutive. A free contract, they argue, cannot form without at least some status-based categories framing the relationship,