

## EDITORIAL

Labour history research reached a worldwide peak in popularity during the sixties and seventies. The prevailing "Old Labour History" with its institutional focus gradually made way for a *social* history of labour. This new trend disavowed the view that labour history was a highly specialized field and attempted to place this type of historical research in the context of society as a whole. Without ignoring the role of unions and other labour organizations, a variety of new approaches gained ground that established links with subdisciplines such as women's history, cultural history, the history of mentalities, and urban history, and applied insights from sociology and anthropology.

The field rapidly grew so diverse and complex that coherent synthesis became desirable. Unfortunately, the discipline's decline set in before anything could be accomplished towards this goal. This setback was especially serious in advanced industrial societies. Verity Burgmann provides a characteristic description of this development in Australia:

Labour history became progressively marginalised, increasingly regarded as irredeemably specialist, guilty of all the sins of the more traditional sub-disciplines, such as intellectual history or constitutional history. [ . . . ] Within history departments, labour history fell into desuetude, joining religious history as an outmoded sub-discipline consigned, if not to the rubbish bin of history, then at least to the laws of natural wastage so far as staff replenishment was concerned.<sup>1</sup>

While labour history's popularity did not always take such a dramatic turn for the worse, it certainly did end up on the defensive in many countries.

Labour history does not truly have itself to blame for its current nadir. The field has always welcomed new trends. Instead, the reasons appear to lie with external factors. First, the worldwide political constellation has undergone a metamorphosis that has caused the evanescence of the spirit of the 1960s, the collapse of 'socialism' in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the crisis of many working-class parties elsewhere. Second, the advanced countries have experienced a long-term shift in relevant standards and values. Work has "been objectively displaced from its status as a central and self-evident fact of life" and is consequently "also forfeiting its subjective role as the central motivating force in the activity of workers."<sup>2</sup>

These factors have turned historical research on labour relations and workers into an antiquarian field in the eyes of many. Both less politicized areas and new subdisciplines (such as environmental history) enjoy increasing popularity.

<sup>1</sup> Verity Burgmann, "The Strange Death of Labour History", in: Bob Carr *et al.*, *Bede Nairn and Labour History* (Sydney, 1991), pp. 69–81, 70–71.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism. Contemporary Transformation of Work and Politics* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 147–148.

This collection of essays is a scholarly attempt to further the urgent integration of labour history in the broader discipline of social history and at the same time to highlight the field's undiminished vitality.

As previously mentioned, the plethora of perspectives from the past three decades still lacks a cohesion force, thereby creating an impression of fragmentation. Theoretical integration of the various approaches is necessary. This integrated social history of labour will have to deal with many obstacles. Some of the most important are the following:

(1) Geographical, spatial, and environmental circumstances of the developments in question have been neglected. Labour historians tend to view space as something "dead" (Michel Foucault) and therefore often fail to give ecological and locational influences on human actions the consideration they deserve.

(2) There is a contrast between the history of daily life and institutional history. It is necessary to bridge the gap between historical research on *objective* events such as labour processes, wages, and housing on the one hand and research on individuals' *subjective* experiences regarding these issues on the other. A true understanding of these developments is possible only when the objective and subjective aspects are viewed as interdependent.

(3) Research currently isolates the working-class and the workers' movement to the exclusion of outside influences. The theory that it is necessary to consider trends such as the history of entrepreneurs when writing about labour history should be applied in practice.

(4) Issues involving gender, race, ethnicity, and age are treated as separate subdisciplines. Although labour history research no longer appears to focus implicitly on young white male workers, it remains difficult to find a consistent approach to the plural identities of the working class.

(5) Misleading periodization persists. Two methods of exclusion by date have had an artificial and consequently distorting effect on labour history. Developments of the early modern period are all too often considered isolated incidents (although periods analysed are beginning to start around 1700 instead of around 1800). Labour historians are insufficiently aware of the importance of the development of merchant capitalism in places such as Florence during the *quattrocento* or the Republic of the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, analyses of very recent labour relations and labour movements from the past two decades are usually the domain of scholars from other fields (such as industrial relations or sociology).

(6) Labour history research overemphasizes core countries such as the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Japan. The burgeoning labour history of the capitalist periphery merits the same consideration as the labour history of core countries. Whether developments occur in

Chile, Nigeria, India, or Malaysia, they deserve to be studied as events in their own right, rather than as early stages of or deviations from developments in highly developed countries.

The present collection of essays is a step towards carrying out this versatile programme. The authors use case studies to explore ways to integrate labour history with other historical perspectives. They focus on the first four points listed above. Topics include geography (Carville Earle), daily life (Alf Lüdtke), entrepreneurs (Gottfried Korff), race (Dave Roediger), gender (Sonya Rose), and households (Marcel van der Linden). Future publications will also examine the other issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The next *International Review of Social History* Supplement (December 1994) will deal with periodization.