Rebels in Industry: A Story Told Well, and One Worth Telling

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Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s
Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow, eds.
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Wordsworth's paean to the French revolution, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!" doesn't appear in *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*. It should.

The notion of rising with a people risen was as true for the radical generation of the 1960s, as it was for any period when rulers seemed incapable of ruling in the old way and the ruled — certainly a significant portion of young working people — refused to play along. Historian David Montgomery called the period of working class ferment "a rebellion from below." It was.

And it was an important decade, the long period roughly from the New York transit strike of 1966 to Reagan's crushing of the air traffic controllers' job action in 1981. In the early-to mid-1970s alone, miners, longshore, auto and railroad workers, teachers and construction workers went on both official and wildcat strikes not only for better wages and benefits but also for an end to hideous working conditions.

Jimmy Carter's calling out the federal troops couldn't get the mines working and even the air traffic controllers, whose union (PATCO) had endorsed Ronald Reagan, walked off their jobs. It took the virtual collapse of the manufacturing sector with its millions of permanent layoffs, a shift in investment away from manufacturing and the Reagan recession to drive that movement underground. It would be a mistake to read this valuable and exceptionally informed book as glorification of one more contender for the "Greatest Generation" prize, nor is it pure validation for "industrializing," one approach to labor organizing favored by some radicals of that period. With the exception of a passing reference in two of the 13 essays, no socialist groups are mentioned.

The emphasis is on, as co-editor Cal Winslow writes in his introduction, in words reminiscent of the late Edward Thompson, "a chapter in the history of an important decade," as well as "a rescue mission, a history of the workers movement in those years — from the bottom up." It charts, in 13 separate and well-informed essays covering industrial and social struggles and the larger national and international contexts, how an insurgent movement of workers was growing. It was a movement whose demands outstripped not just the politics of liberalism but the vision even of those labor leaders who — with the notable exceptions of the Machinists' William Winpisinger and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers' maverick Tony Mazzocchi — called themselves progressives.

There are lessons to be learned here for a new generation of militants, including what worked, what didn't and why. Certainly one weakness — which the authors don't adequately address because of their emphasis on self-activity, rank-and-file initiatives, and an evident reluctance to wage old wars by making convenient historical points about political strategy — was precisely the politics of the radicals who industrialized. Quite consciously guided by Rosa Luxemburg's wise maxims that "those who do not move, do not notice their chains" and that "chains must be broken where they are forged," many defined this condition narrowly, as forged only (or primarily) at the workplace.

They also prided themselves on an anti-electoral stance even as corporate America was consolidating itself around neoliberal policies that outsourced jobs and reasserted the primacy of finance capital. In effect too much of the industrialized left gave too little thought to putting forward and organizing for alternative policy programs or engaging in local political campaigns, even as many of their own prized rank-and-file militants did. Nor did they have a vehicle for selling those programs in the cases, especially in steel, where such plans were put forward.

But a more charitable view is that these young radicals (and I was one of them) were like Aesop's hedgehog — they knew one big thing. That big thing is common coin among community organizers today — that without a base of support the best plans of the most foresighted policy makers would die on the drafting table or in the seminar room or in a legislator's front office. They knew that government and corporations could only be forced to concede and initiate reforms with massive pressure, and at the workplace and not (or not just) at the ballot box. That's necessary if insufficient wisdom, but wisdom nonetheless.

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