

Divided by time, united by hope

Anarcho

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Fences and Windows: *Dispatches from the front lines of the globalisation debate*, Naomi Klein, Flamingo, ISBN 0 007150474

Three Strikes: *Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century*, Howard Zinn, Dana Frank and Robin D. G. Kelly, Beacon Press, Boston, ISBN 0-08070-5013-X

The current wave of “anti-capitalist” demonstrations and protests are, of course, just the most recent expression of a conflict that has marked capitalism from the start: the class struggle. For as long as wage slavery has existed, workers have been fighting against it. As long as the state has existed, its subjects have resisted it. The intensity and forms of social struggle have changed, depending on the circumstances working class people have faced, but it has always existed and always will.

These two books are accounts of such struggles. Naomi Klein, author of **No Logo**, needs no introduction. Her new book (“**Fences and Windows**”) is not a follow up but rather a collection of essays on globalisation, its consequences and the current wave of protests against it. “**Three strikes**” is history at its best. It contains accounts of three strikes in America: the Colorado Coal strike of 1913–14 (which culminated in the Ludlow Massacre), a sit-in strike by employees at a Detroit Woolworth’s in 1937 and a New York musicians strike against new technology in the late 30s.

While the books recount struggles separated by over 60 years common themes emerge: the power of working class people to resist and improve their lives, the need for democracy within the movement, the creativity of struggle, how it breaks down the barriers between what is and what could be, how struggles show, in embryo, what a free society would look like. Moreover, they indicate how far capitalism has **not** come: that capitalism (for all its talk of liberty) is based on wage slavery and economic power, the way it dictates to political power, that the state exists not to represent the people but to disempower them in order to defend property.

Klein covers a lot of ground. Her articles are well written and engaging. They cover the reality of modern capitalism, the gap, as she puts it, “*between rich and power but also between rhetoric and reality, between what is said and what is done. Between the promise of globalisation and its real effects.*” She shows how we live in a world where the market (i.e. capital) is made “freer” while people suffer increased state power and repression. How an unelected Argentine President labels that country’s popular assemblies “*antidemocratic.*” How rhetoric about liberty is used as a tool to defend and increase private power (as she reminds us, “*always missing from [the globalisation]*”

discussion is the issue of power. So many of the debates that we have about globalisation theory are actually about power: who holds it, who is exercising it and who is disguising it, pretending it no longer matters”). And how people across the world are resisting.

She quite rightly downplays the media idea she is a spokesperson of a movement. As she puts it, the movement “many [in the movement] are tired of being spoken for and about. They are demanding a more direct form of political participation.” She reports on a movement which she is part of, one which aims for a globalisation from below, one “founded on principles of transparency, accountability and self-determination, one that frees people instead of liberating capital.” She wants people to manage their own affairs and chronicles attempts around the world to do just that (many of which, as Klein notes, are anarchists or influenced by anarchist ideas, sometimes knowing, sometimes not).

As such, “**Fences and Windows**” has a distinctly libertarian thrust to it. While not an anarchist, she is aware that real change comes from below, by the self-activity of working class people fighting for a better world. Decentralisation of power is a key idea in the book. As she puts it, the “goal” of the social movements she describes is “not to take power for themselves but to challenge power centralisation on principle” and so creating “a new culture of vibrant direct democracy ... one that is fuelled and strengthened by direct participation.” She does not urge the movement (as she calls it) to invest itself with new leaders. Nor does she (like the Left) think that electing a few leaders to make decisions for us equals “democracy” (“the goal is not better faraway rules and rulers but close-up democracy on the ground”). Klein, therefore, gets to the heart of the matter. Real social change is based on empowering the grassroots.

The logical conclusion of this is the destruction of political power, not its seizure. The state is simply the power of minorities to enforce their wills. This means that a social movement that aims to create socialism cannot use it to further its aims. After all, the state (“political power”) is based on centralised power to ensure minority class rule. To argue (as Marx did) for the “conquest of political power” because “the lords of the land and of capital always make use of their political privileges to defend and perpetuate their economic monopolies and enslave labour” is to draw the wrong conclusion. By ending the regime of the powerful by destroying their instrument of rule, the power that was concentrated into their hands automatically falls back into the hands of society. Thus, working class power can only be concrete once “political power” is shattered and replaced by the social power of the working class based on its own class organisations (such as factory committees, workers’ councils, unions, neighbourhood assemblies and so on). Thus “power to the people” can only be put into practice when the power exercised by social elites is dissolved into the people. And this can only be done if we apply our ideas of self-management, direct action and solidarity in the class struggle.

Which explains her weakest chapter, “**Limits to Political Parties.**” While she is correct to argue that a new social movement must be “built from the ground up” and aim for “self-determination, economic sustainability and participatory democracy” she still seems to think in terms of political parties (even if she does not think a new one required immediately). It is a shame that this discussion on the “leap from protest to power” does not build upon the extra-parliamentary organising and direct action she reports on elsewhere in the book. Which is ironic, given that one of the best chapters is her account of the Zapatistas in which she notes that, for them, their “non-hierarchical decision making, decentralised organising and deep community democracy holds answers for the non-indigenous world as well.” In other words, we must “build the new world in the shell of the old” by building our own organisations which

can resist the power of state and capital until such time as both can be abolished. As such, her account of the Zapatistas is particularly interesting for anarchists. It is a “*movement of one no and many yeses,*” one of “*revolutionaries who don’t want power.*” Rather, the aim is to “*seize and build autonomous spaces.*” The similarities with anarchism are obvious.

Moving to “**Three Strikes**”, we see three historical examples of the kind of struggles Klein describes. That book does point to a key weakness in Klein’s, though. She does not discuss workplace organising in any depth (although she does have a chapter on “*The war on Unions*” in Mexico). “**Three Strikes**” describes struggles which are rooted in the workplace, where labour is directly oppressed (and so exploited) by capital. They are not as “glamorous” as the current wave of protests (which Klein correctly fears may be turning into a series of “McProtests”) but their potential is much larger. Ultimately, capitalism will continue until such time as capital is directly expropriated by the working class and that can only be achieved by workplace organising and struggle. As Klein notes, the “*most powerful resistance movements are always deeply rooted in community — and are accountable to those communities.*” Unless we build militant organisations in our workplaces and communities, the current anti-capitalist movement will wither and die like a flower without roots.

Dana Frank’s account of the Detroit Woolworth sit-in strike of 1937 is particularly relevant today as that company was the equivalent of the Gap and McDonalds today, a multinational company operating in the service industry and considered impossible to organise. But inspired by the tactics developed by workers elsewhere (such as autoworkers), the strikers managed to win all their demands by occupying the store. Moreover, they inspired retail workers across America to follow their lead, organise themselves and win improved wages and conditions. In Detroit itself, bosses at other stores increased wages in fear of workers following this example and unionising.

She discusses the role of the media, which essentially trivialised the women strikers and their actions. Called “girls” (even by the radical press), the sit-in strikers were reported for their amusement value rather than for their militancy. Which, ironically, may have aided their struggle as it would have been difficult for Woolworth’s to send in private or state police to evict them. The PR would have been terrible, almost as terrible as the contrast made between the wages and conditions of the striking women and lifestyle of Barbara Hutton who had inherited the Woolworth fortune. The unions were quick to press this, as did the mainstream media itself (**Life** magazine stated that Hutton “*should forget counts who spend her money and remember the Woolworth girls who earn it*”).

Klein’s book is, in part, account an account of the privatisation of life (the “*fences*” associated with private property) and the resistance to them (the “*windows*” we create in our struggles). Howard Zinn’s account of the Colorado miners’ strike of 1913–14 gives a gripping account of this, of workers’ resistance to the feudalism at the heart of capitalism. The miners lived in the ultimate example of privatisation, the company town. Zinn summarises the regime: “*Each mining camp was a feudal dominion, with the company acting as lord and master. Every camp had a marshal, a law enforcement officer paid by the company. The ‘laws’ were the company’s rules. Curfews were imposed, ‘suspicious’ strangers were not allowed to visit the homes, the company store had a monopoly on goods sold in the camp. The doctor was a company doctor, the schoolteachers hired by the company ... Political power in Colorado rested in the hands of those who held economic power. This meant that the authority of Colorado Fuel & Iron and other mine operators was virtually supreme*”

Unsurprisingly, when the workers rebelled against this tyranny, they were evicted from their homes and the private law enforcement agents were extremely efficient in repressing the strikers, aided by the state militia (asked and paid for by banks and corporations). Without irony the **New York Times** editorialised that the “*militia was as impersonal and impartial as the law.*” It was these company thugs, dressed in the uniform of the state militia, who murdered woman and children in the Ludlow Massacre. After the slaughter the corporation hired Ivy Lee (“*the father of public relations in the United States*”) to change public opinion. Significantly, Lee produced a series of tracts labelled “*Facts Concerning the Struggle in Colorado for Industrial Freedom.*” The head of the corporation (Rockefeller) portrayed his repression of the strikers as blow for workers’ freedom, to “*defend the workers’ right to work.*” So much for the private property (or capitalism) being the embodiment of liberty.

As well as recounting popular struggles against private power, both books raise similar issues about the movements themselves, such as internal democracy. The Woolworth strikers did not even get to vote on the final agreement they won. (one union activist was purged from the local union for advocating rank-and-file voting on their own contracts!). Klein’s account of the first World Social Forum shows that this division into leaders and led exists today, with the WSF having an “*organisational structure*” which was “*so opaque that it was nearly impossible to figure out how decisions were made or find ways to question those decisions.*” There were “*no open plenaries and no chance to vote on the structure of future events.*” Unless social movements are rooted in self-managed structures, with decision making power resting at the base, then they will simply become a means for would-be politicians to gain influence. Klein argues that “*one ‘pro’ this disparate coalition can get behind is ‘pro-democracy’*” and that “*democracy within the movement must become a high priority.*” As she is aware, this is correct only if it is direct democracy, not representative. The fate of the US trades unions and their decline in the face of capitalist power and worker indifference in the face of bureaucracy show the importance of applying our ideals today and not waiting until “the revolution.” After all, how do people become capable of self-government post-revolution if they do not practice it now and during a revolution?

Neither book is perfect, but there is far more right with them than wrong. They recount attempts of working class people to resist both private and state power by organising themselves and using direct action and solidarity to improve their conditions. Anarchism bases itself on such struggles, considering them as the means by which an anarchist society will be created. To use Klein’s words, they are “*windows*” to a better world, showing that another world is possible and that we start to create it every time we resist the “*fences*” placed around our freedom by hierarchy. Klein at one point quotes the Zapatista Macros on “*the history that is born and nurtured from below.*” Both “**Fences and Windows**” and “**Three Strikes**” are great examples of this. Anarchists will get a lot out of reading them. These are works that will inspire their readers to resist and organise, to try and change the world for the better. No better complement can be given.

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Review of two books on social struggle, one on the 1930s and one on the anti-globalisation
movement.

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