

view, their perspective on society and their rituals. But he fails to do so in the case of piecework. This methodological inconsistency gets him into trouble, I think, when he tries to explain the motives behind the workers' collective actions.

Workers' collective protests and struggles since 1972 are discussed in chapter 3, which is, for labour historians, probably the most interesting part of the book. I would have liked a more detailed account, especially given that information about the leaders of the actions is lacking. Talib shows that the impressive actions taken by the workers were by no means obvious and predictable. It was certainly true that working conditions were appalling, for reasons already briefly indicated, and because of the horrific dust clouds in the quarry, which caused silicosis. But misery as such is not enough for the emergence of collective action. Especially the deeply-rooted antagonisms between the three castes present seemed to prevent every kind of cooperation among workers to improve their lot. Despite this, a large cooperative movement was formed which strenuously tried to oust the *thekedars*, and contract the quarry work independently, exactly according to the principles of the *khandar* system. In these parallel developments, I think, resided the attraction of the new movement. Alas, in the end, despite successful appeals to juridical authorities right up to the Supreme Court, to NGOs, and to public opinion, a movement which could temporarily unite workers from all castes floundered – because of lack of political will, more so than because of the power of the employers. The employers were, so to speak, the laughing third party, while trade unions stayed on the sidelines throughout. I think this drama merits a thorough analysis in a further book, although Talib's account is, to be sure, already rich in information.

In summary, *Writing Labour* is an important work, qua content, method and theory – not just for Indian labour history, but also for labour historians worldwide. It shows how an empirically serious analysis combining work processes, labour relations, primordial identities (in this case, of caste and religion), and class identities can lead to deeper insight into the history of work. The few criticisms which I have, cannot detract from this achievement.

Jan Lucassen

ATZENI, MAURIZIO. *Workplace Conflict. Mobilization and Solidarity in Argentina*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke [etc.] 2010. xv, 171 pp. £60.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859012000338

The increase of “new” forms of social conflict in Argentina since the late 1990s revitalized the theoretical discussion about collective action. But in a neoliberal scenario where employment was becoming a vague notion, the *piqueteros*<sup>1</sup> and unemployed workers' movements took the centre of the scene and their forms of protest have been the most frequently studied and analysed by social researchers. At this stage of academic interest,

1. *Piquete* (picket) is an action by which a group of people blocks a road or street with the purpose of demonstrating and calling attention to a particular demand. The people belonging to that group or performing such actions are called *piqueteros*. They were the main political actors during the last two decades in Argentina.

the work of Maurizio Atzeni is an unusual discovery and cannot be ignored by readers interested in the processes of workers' struggle, especially those interested in the more classical approaches to the subject. The author does not consider original meanings invented by workers or hidden forms of resistance. He goes back to a traditional, but no less relevant, question which is: what leads a group of workers to act collectively?

It is true that there have been many efforts to explain the process of emergence of collective action. Atzeni's intention is, thus, to contribute to the debate on the theory of collective action or, in his own words, to present a "Marxist perspective on the workers' collective action". The author starts from Marx's idea that the contradictory dynamics and the structural conditions of the capitalist labour process create the circumstances for the mobilization and collective action of the labour force. It is the capital, in itself, that triggers the agency of workers. Consequently, the development of resistance and class-consciousness are inherent to the development of capital "by reference to the existence of a structure that constantly produces conditions for conflict. The same structure that has justified the historical appearance of trade unions explains the existence of daily routine struggles at the point of production" (p. 22).

Under this theoretical approach, Atzeni chooses to analyse conflicts in the workplace. There, as he stresses, at the micro level, are the links that allow him to see how workers build demands, protests, and actions. This view is certainly suggestive and novel in the historical literature of a country like Argentina, where the union presence was so strong and constituent of its history since 1945, that the prospects of this nature were always blurred in the face of more general analyses on the trade unions and labour organizations. The author thus argues a certain discomfort with most insights into "institutional collective action".

According to Atzeni – quoting Gramsci – unions are actually institutions of the capitalist system in so far as they are responsible for negotiating the price of labour (p. 8). And although the power axis of working-class strength, they still work within spaces of consensus, negotiations, and agreements. Therefore, by accepting the rules of the system, unions are functional to bourgeois ideology. On the contrary, the author feels more comfortable investigating the grassroots, the workplaces, the niches through which we can understand the forms of action, the radicalization of the workers, their own ability to mobilize, and where the spaces left for agency appear more visibly.

Part of his argument is based on dialogue with the work of J. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Longwaves* (London, 1998), and his concept of injustice. In that sense, Atzeni dismisses this notion because he believes it is moral (thus subjective), individualist (consequently relative), and anchored within the values of the capitalist system. Injustice, as seen by Kelly, also has strong links with the action of leaders and unions. As a result, Atzeni stresses that it is not a useful validation criterion of a general theory.

Atzeni prefers to use the concept of solidarity, since he sees it as central to understanding the emergence of collective action. Solidarity, which he analyses in terms of a process and not something static or given, is closely linked to the contradictory nature of capitalist relations. Solidarity is built in the quotidian of the labour process, in the interstices of certain unquestioned "moralities" of labour relations within the workplace. As a consequence, the workers' struggle is shaped in the juxtaposition of the contradictions of the labour process and the appearance of solidarity and the collective change in consciousness that solidarity implies. In my opinion, the main contribution of the book lies in this idea: the recovery of solidarity as a concept, "intended as the social relation that

expresses the collective nature of the labour process" (p. 134), and also the ways in which the action is triggered through active solidarity. But it is also its main weakness. Solidarity is understood as a process resulting from the dynamics of daily interaction, cooperation among workers, the "comradeship" (*compañerismo*) in the factory. However, the book does not reveal how solidarity is consolidated and what the parameters are for its analysis. Solidarity sometimes simply appears in an active form in the case of one factory (FIAT) or is missing in the case of another (Renault).

So far we can say that its main focus is on the theoretical aspects of the issue. However, the author bases his conclusions on an empirical investigation. To study workers' protest in the workplace, the author selected two auto plants in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, located 700 km from Buenos Aires, with a long tradition of workers' unrest. During 1996 and 1997, the city was the scene of labour conflicts in two car factories. But both, Cormec-FIAT and CIADEA-Renault, developed different cases of mobilization in the workplace. The first struggle, at the FIAT plant, was entirely self-activated and was maintained over time, creating a new type of consciousness in the workers. "People were now different, the same person was not the same as before, he had 'jumped', and this happened to all of us, to all of us" (p. 119). Meanwhile, the second conflict, at Renault, was led from above by what might be called a bureaucratic trade union, SMATA (Mechanical Workers). The aim was to stop the outsourcing of maintenance employees, one of the main forms of labour flexibility. Unlike the case of FIAT, when the conflict ended, the workers' activism dissolved.

With FIAT, the management had abruptly confronted the workforce with a new flexible employment contract and reduced salaries by 50 per cent. This impelled an unexpected mobilization of workers "spontaneously, without any previous organization or militant activity". As one worker said, "They forced you to fight." New leaders emerged from that conflict, while the traditional union leaders lost their legitimacy. Thus, contrary to general interpretations of the conflict, the author states that the protest gave rise to the leadership and not the reverse. The leaders were not the proponents of protest, says the author, but rather the dynamics of capital that targeted the interests of workers and disrupted the whole system of values and traditions that had been building their faith in FIAT. By contrast, in the Renault plant, union leaders with a bargaining and bureaucratic tradition, such as SMATA, led the actions and the protest was not successful, because there was no gap for solidarity to emerge.

Looking through the interstices of comparative labour relations, the author finds, in this comparison, the different forms of acceptance, resistance, rejection, or dependence for survival that workers have in relation to capital. The aftermath of military dictatorships and implementation processes of neo-liberal policies in the country can also be seen in his description. They appear in the stories and arguments of the workers. The traces of the history of a country where workers have always mobilized for their rights can be found in the voices of the workers made visible by the author. These testimonies are test cases of a deep process of labour flexibilization that radically transformed the world of work in an Argentina that until that moment still maintained protective criteria.

The book presents itself as an example of how solidarity plays a major role in the birth of collective action. However, Atzeni claims that, in actual fact, each case must be studied with its own specific characteristics, because solidarity emerges from a unique combination of factors which differ in each case. To draw wider conclusions, many more cases should be studied.

Maurizio Atzeni's work, although it does not discuss the extensive literature on collective action produced in Argentina, offers an intensive dialogue with Marxist theory, with the forms of labour action, and with researchers dedicated to studying it. The book's structure harmoniously combines a more general theoretical discussion with a specific proposal and a case study that ultimately suggests the traces of the labour history of a country and says, together with R. Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), that solidarity is the only path to reorder human relations in a better way.

*Maria Ullivari*