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***The International Handbook of Labour
Unions: Responses to Neo-Liberalism***
**by Gregor Gall, Adrian Wilkinson
and Richard Hurd.**
A Review

Christopher Leggett *

The International Handbook of Labour Union: Responses to Neo-Liberalism (from here on *The Handbook*) opens with a reference by its editors (Gall *et al.*) to the 1999 protests against globalization in Seattle at the meeting of the World Trade Organization there as “a large scale conflagration”. More than just symbolically important as the size of the protest was, it was not a “conflagration”, no Molotov cocktails were thrown at the police, although the *New York Times* erroneously reported that some were. Is the malapropism of “conflagration” for “confrontation” caused by editorial zeal? Possibly, but the contributions to the *Handbook* though committed to challenging the neo-liberal agenda take measured and analytical approaches to its assessment and the responses of labour unions to it. The choice of “handbook” is apposite in that each country chapter offers substantial factual information in addition to analyses and assessments of labour unions’ responses to neo-liberalism.

The Handbook applies its editors’ “rough categorisation” of labour unions’ responses to neo-liberalism of “agreement and support”, “qualified and conditional support”, “social democratic opposition” and “socialist resistance” to labour unions in the nation states of Argentina (Atzeni and

* Christopher Leggett is Adjunct Professor at the James Cook University, Australia. The present review refers to G. Gall, A. Wilkinson, R. Hurd (eds.), *The International Handbook of Labour Unions: Responses to Neo-Liberalism*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK, 2011. 288 pp. ISBN 978 1 84844 862 9.

Ghigliani), Australia (Peetz and Bailey), the UK (McIlroy), China (Cooke), France (Contrepolis), Germany (Dribbusch and Schülen), India (Noronha and Beale), Russia (Ashwin), South Korea (Chang), and the USA (Bruno and Trumka). Their rationale for inviting national contributions is that in spite of globalization “neo-liberalism is not predicated upon the decline of the power and authority of the nation state, but rather the use of the nation state by internal and external forces to promote and implement neo-liberalism for international institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization et al., dating from the Bretton Woods era, as advocates and agents for neo-liberalism are insufficient in themselves to effectively promulgate neo-liberalism”. The residual distinctiveness of each nation state’s relation to neo-liberalism gives rise to nomenclatures that include Stalinist neo-liberalism (Australia), Peronism (Argentina), Rhenish capitalism (Germany) and market bolshevism (Russia).

Gall *et al.* commit *The Handbook* to union resistance to neo-liberalism but also to union support for and acquiescence in it. In addition to the international institutions as agents for neo-liberalism, they position human resource management as its agency in the workplace. In summary, they regard neo-liberalism as a means of refashioning and reconfiguring capitalism after the long boom post World War II. It is not an environment conducive to successful labour unionism. Consequently, and the thread running through the contributions to *The Handbook* and summarised in the final chapter (Turner) is that if labour unions are to revitalise themselves after the thirty or so years of neo-liberal onslaught, they have to engage in and with a wider spectrum of progressive social reformers than continue to pursue traditional “go-it-alone” strategies.

What then have been the responses in the countries selected for *The Handbook*? American unions are not equipped to resist neo-liberalism because they are basically conservative, fractured, differently affected and at different times by neo-liberalism, dependent on the Democratic Party, and ill-prepared for the challenge of the neo-liberal agenda. Argentinean unions have resisted neo-liberal policies but their alliances within the labour movement have proved temporary and devoid of unity. British unions have tended “to accept neo-liberalism in practice”, and in Australia “There is no sign at this point of a radical oppositional response to the Labour government’s revisionist neo-liberalism”. In contrast, French labour unions have maintained the values ‘that underlie activist involvement and political demands’ and sought to strengthen their ‘subversive institution’ function by externalising conflicts, and the

potential for German unions is towards a democratisation beyond the established forms of corporatist co-determination.

The All-China Federation of Trade Unions “believes that marketization and globalization are good for the Chinese economy” but urge for more protective labour legislation, and the Indian TUC’s response to neo-liberalism is equally ambivalent, varying between “a mutual gains position and support for a regulated labour market”. Russian unions’ policy is labelled “failed social democratic opposition”. The Federation of Korean Trade Unions began to challenge neo-liberalism in 2001, something the more militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions had been doing for much longer, but its militancy largely excludes the bulk of the workforce that includes irregular employees, women and migrant workers.

In addition to the editors’ introduction, “Labour unionism and neo-liberalism”, there are five non-national contributions. Kelly examines the elusive concept of union power, and concludes that the prospects of a unionism centred on collective bargaining resistance to neo-liberalism look poor but better where unions change the way people think about the economy, markets and government and are mobilised into collective action and protest. Dibben and Wood bring together the thinking on the relationship between social action and structure, accepting that there is no “magic bullet” for union revival, but there are opportunities for them to represent core workers and the more vulnerable workers by challenging governments and powerful institutions. Fletcher identifies some of the challenges facing social movement unionism, with examples from the “global south”, including South Africa, South Korea and Argentina. Munck asks who the subjects of union activity are, the main issues they face, and how these can best be addressed. In short, his answers are that the working class is fragmented and augmented by the entry of the Indian and Chinese working masses, that its main task is the (re)regulation of global capital, and that it will need to go global to achieve this. Finally, Turner while acknowledging that defensive battles by unions can contribute to reform but if the dominance of neo-liberal governance is to be undermined unions will have to join “broad local, national and global movements”.

Two chapters address neo-liberalism in the USA and Turner’s, although generalising the labour movement draws mainly on the US experience. The AFL-CIO President, Richard Trumka notes the irony of the seldom use of “neo-liberal” in a country that is “among the most neo-liberal societies in the world”. He reserves “neo-liberalism” for the ideology of free markets, an ideology that “bears little resemblance to how

governments and markets actually interact in modern societies”, and uses “Wall Street Agenda” as more appropriate for the dominant US policies. *The Handbook* is necessarily constrained in its geo-political scope by the publishing requirements and the availability of research on the editors’ selection of, and the number of, nations. Because the editors put great store by the relationship between the state and neo-liberalism, it would be of interest to the reader if *The Handbook* included labour unions’ responses to neo-liberalism in Japan in Asia, Canada or Mexico in North America, Brazil in South America, Nigeria in Africa and Greece, Spain or Italy in Europe, not to mention several Middle East countries. The selection of some of these countries would enable the regional dimension, such as the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the North American Free Trade Area, of the relationships between unions and neo-liberalism to be explored. But even without these *The Handbook* is an informative, coherent, and useful resource in its own right.

ADAPT is a non-profit organisation founded in 2000 by Prof. Marco Biagi with the aim of promoting studies and research in the field of labour law and industrial relations from an international and comparative perspective. Our purpose is to encourage and implement a new approach to academic research, by establishing ongoing relationships with other universities and advanced studies institutes, and promoting academic and scientific exchange programmes with enterprises, institutions, foundations and associations. In collaboration with the Marco Biagi Centre for International and Comparative Studies, ADAPT set up the International School of Higher Education in Labour and Industrial Relations, a centre of excellence which is accredited at an international level for research, study and postgraduate programmes in the area of industrial and labour relations. Further information at www.adapt.it.

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