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Reviews

Class war on new ground

- Reviews section -

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Socialists are in a hurry these days. With the idea of socialism catching on among a widening swath of the U.S. population, and class conflict showing signs of heating up there can be little time for idle talk. Rather, there is an urgent need to diagnose the current political and economic situation, identify what is new and what is not about that situation, and propose a strategy for the way forward based on the diagnosis.

This is exactly what Kim Moody sets out to do “and largely accomplishes” in his latest book, *On New Terrain*. Rather than ease the reader into his argument with the customary quirky anecdote, Moody gets straight to work on page one, deftly sketching in a terse, three-page introduction the broad strokes of the political and economic challenges facing today’s working class.

He then lays out his plan of attack for the rest of the book: 1) assesses how the US working class has changed since the 1970s; 2) assesses how capital has changed, and the challenges and opportunities this has created for working-class resistance; and 3) assesses how U.S. politics has changed, and what this portends for a revival of class politics. The result is a clear-eyed, tightly-argued account of how capitalism has changed, and what this means for the future of class conflict.

Few are better positioned to offer this analysis. Through more than five decades of engaging and analyzing left and labor movements, Moody has developed a keen Marxist analytical eye. From his early days in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), to his time as a socialist labor activist and founder and director of *Labor Notes* magazine, to his role as an author of several books on the changing working class, Moody has consistently advanced a perspective that offers sober analysis without succumbing to defeatism.

The thread tying his work together is a persistent focus on movement building and worker self-activity. While he never sugar-coats the structural obstacles that workers face, the constant renewal and reinvention of working-class resistance allows Moody to stave off cynicism.

In *On New Terrain*, a key part of Moody’s analysis involves challenging many of the commonly-held shibboleths about the so-called “new economy” and “new world of work.” Key among these are the supposed rise in precarious work and technological change. (See for example his article “Is There a Gig Economy?” in *Against the Current* 197 “ed.”)

Through careful analysis of available statistical data, Moody cuts through the conventional wisdom, showing that work casualization has not increased nearly as much as often proclaimed, and that precarious work is an enduring feature of employment relations under capitalism. To be sure, apps may be making it easier for some people to find temporary work, but this is merely the latest iteration of an enduring trend.

What has changed, Moody argues, is something more fundamental: the rate of exploitation. Simply put, capital has gotten better at squeezing more work out of every minute of every work day.

Some of this has come from new technology, which has served to intensify work as well as replace workers. It has also happened through more banal methods like shortening break times. But much has come through a combination of speedup and job standardization known as “lean production.” While this began in the auto industry, it has since spread across all sectors of the economy, including service jobs in health care, education, and retail.

This work reorganization has given management much more control over the workplace, giving them the power not only to intensify work, but to keep wages and benefits in check. The result has been a massive income transfer from workers' wages to corporate profits — often referred to with the more neutral-sounding “growing inequality” — while making work harder and less stable for almost everyone.

New Class Composition

What's also changed is the composition of the working class. Although the stereotypical white male blue-collar worker may be less prevalent than in the past, he has been joined by legions of women and workers of color.

Many work in care industries, tasked with jobs once done in the home, for free, often by women. Others work in the rapidly-expanding transportation and logistics sector. Still others do proletarianized white-collar work in offices, call centers, hospitals, and retail. This group comprises roughly two-thirds of the U.S. workforce. If we add their non-working family members and the unemployed, they make up fully three-quarters of the U.S. population.

The working class is still the overwhelming majority — but it looks different than it did a few decades ago.

It is also located in different places than it used to be. The large urban factories of yesteryear may be gone, but have been replaced by highly concentrated work settings like hospitals, call centers, and office towers. Factories are moving to rural areas, while massive logistics hubs ring the suburbs around major cities.

This job relocation is itself a consequence of the massive concentration and centralization of capital over the past four decades. Waves of mergers and acquisitions have consolidated major industries like auto, steel, transportation, media, entertainment, travel, food service and health care. Driven by an imperative of “maximizing shareholder value,” these companies are also more capital-intensive, squeezing every penny out of their investments.

This creates both challenges and opportunities for labor. The downside of work intensification, wage stagnation, and increased corporate power, is well-known.

But as Moody points out, there are upsides: Workers tend to be grouped in more integrated, capital-intensive workplaces, linked together by potentially vulnerable supply chains. This creates new opportunities for leverage. Similarly, corporate consolidation along industry lines means that organizing particular employers can have effects across entire industries.

Labor's Challenges

The question is whether or not workers have the capacity to take advantage of these opportunities. Here there are grounds for skepticism.

U.S. unions have struggled to adapt to this new terrain, adopting defensive strategies like agreeing to concessions and trying to “partner” with management in an ever-failing effort to save jobs. They too have consolidated, with the idea that “bigger is better.” More far-seeing elements pursued innovations like “neutrality agreements” that pressured employers to bypass union elections and bargain directly, but these have achieved limited success.

Missing from these strategies, Moody argues, is a focus on rebuilding labor's ultimate source of power: its membership. Indeed, many official revitalization strategies like mergers and negotiating neutrality agreements have drawn attention away from member mobilization in favor of leadership- and staff-driven research and negotiations.

Strikes have largely disappeared, even though some groups of workers have shown that militant action can still win gains.

Much of this is a consequence of the model of postwar business unionism, which largely eliminated the "militant minority" of shop-floor leadership that formed labor's backbone for much of its history. It also instilled a bureaucratic culture within labor that has proven difficult to dislodge.

Nonetheless, Moody sees in today's rumblings the seeds of "a wave of rank and file rebellion" that shares more of a common program for transforming labor than the previous upsurge in the 1960s and '70s. Their focus on workplace-based organizing and direct action, while far from a sure-fire recipe for success, is a necessary component of any labor turnaround.

But labor's challenges are not limited to the workplace. Capital's reorganization of production has accompanied and been abetted by its reshaping of the political realm. The accession of Trump, a billionaire real estate developer, to the presidency is but the latest chapter in this broader story.

Central to that story is the growth and corporate takeover of state-level government. As state legislatures became more professionalized, fulltime bodies, they became a target for business, which played states against each other in an ever-intensifying search for tax breaks and other incentives.

At the same time, more state legislatures were taken over by committed rightwing ideologues, who use the fiscal crisis created by corporate giveaways to implement austerity measures, cutting social programs and public sector jobs, all while attacking teachers and public sector unions as the source of the states' financial troubles. Together with union decline and a rightward drift at the federal level abetted by Republican and Democratic administrations alike, workers' political voice has been muffled.

Changing The Democratic Party?

But what of the Democrats? Leaving aside its corporate wing, is it not possible for activists to take over parts of the party organization and pull it in a more leftward direction? This indeed has been the goal of several generations of activists, whose efforts have consistently come to naught. Is there reason to think that things could be different this time around?

Moody is skeptical. While the structure of the Democratic Party gives the appearance of a "hollow" organization ripe for takeover, the reality is that much of the formal organization is hollow precisely because it doesn't matter. What does matter for the party is its fundraising apparatus and its ability to serve as a source of jobs.

The professionalization of politics over the past several decades has meant the disappearance of the smoke-filled rooms and machine politics of the past. But in its place has not come a more responsive, representative Democratic Party. Instead, it has become a "professionalized, well-funded, and elite-run multitiered conglomerate with a permanent bureaucracy at its core." (130)

That structure is much less permeable, while also being necessary for any candidate to have much hope for winning office. Meanwhile, more centralized control of legislative caucuses means that even those few leftwing candidates who can run the gauntlet and win office still face tremendous obstacles to moving any kind of left political agenda when they enter the legislature. The result, as Moody sees it, is a Democratic Party “cul-de-sac.”

Is there a way out? If there is, Moody argues that it must start with “sustainable, dense, overlapping grassroots networks capable of bringing companies, industries, and cities to a halt when needed to disrupt “politics as usual.” Simply put, “without social upsurge in the cities there can be no electoral breakthrough.” (165, 167)

Problems of Resistance

On *New Terrain* offers a provocative, thoughtful analysis of how capital has reshaped the political and economic terrain over the past several decades, and how this changes the tasks faced by those who seek to challenge capital’s rule.

Clearly, those tasks are daunting. But they are not impossible. Moody’s analysis shows how the very processes that have consolidated capital’s power have also created points of contradiction and crisis. These in turn create new openings for organized resistance.

If there is room to challenge Moody’s analysis, it is precisely in his assessment of these openings. Here I see him at times too sanguine, and at others too pessimistic.

In the “too sanguine” department, take for example his discussion of logistics.

Aside from the oft-mentioned point that tightly-integrated supply chains create possible “chokepoints” in the global circulation of capital, Moody argues that they have also created new concentrations of workers in strategic locations, particularly in the suburbs surrounding Chicago and Los Angeles, and stretching along the New Jersey Turnpike.

This is certainly true. But Moody underestimates the gap between the potential and realization of this new source of worker power. Part of this, as Moody knows well, has to do with the multiple layers of contractors and sub-contractors that organize and atomize the logistics workforce. These types of challenges are common to many organizing campaigns and far from insurmountable, but any discussion of organizing logistics must confront this head-on.

Another part of Moody’s underestimation has to do with eliding the divide between cities and suburbs. He often speaks of “metropolitan areas” or distribution centers “in or adjacent to” such areas. (60) This makes sense when contrasting logistics to manufacturing, which has often relocated to rural areas “but it ignores the political and geographic space that separates cities and suburbs.

At a basic level, the location of logistics hubs well outside city limits imposes large time and transportation costs on those city workers who can make the commute, while fragmenting workers gathered from a wide swath of surrounding communities.

Further, the fragmentation of the U.S. political system means that there is little coordination across city and suburban governments, and the latter tend to be more conservative than the former. This limits opportunities for community-based political organizing.

These challenges have confronted those who have tried to organize logistics workers for the past few decades, and their limited success so far suggests that the challenges persist.

Possible Political Openings

More generally, though, Moody has an astute analysis of the political challenges that workers face, as explained in part 3 of the book. The problem, as he recognizes, is that examples of the kind of organizing that might overcome these challenges are few and far between.

He points to some positive cases at the municipal level, like the Richmond Progressive Alliance in California, the (now-defunct) Lorain Independent Labor Party in Ohio, or United Working Families in Chicago. Meanwhile, he is critical of most other efforts, including most notably the Bernie Sanders-affiliated Our Revolution, the New York-based Working Families Party, and other efforts to pull the Democratic Party leftward.

To a large extent this problem is not of Moody's making. Rather, it is a function of what remains a constrained U.S. political landscape. Nonetheless, Moody is too pessimistic in his assessment of that landscape. Specifically, he misses an opportunity to engage more fully with the complex challenges that socialists face in the electoral arena today.

Certainly, his criticisms of efforts to reform the Democrats are warranted and backed up by a century of failed attempts to do so. Likewise, as limited as they are, it is important to highlight the few local success stories, even if they are not sufficient for the kind of thoroughgoing political revolution he wants.

Still, it is hard to shake the sense that something different is going on in the post-2016 election world. As Moody observed while writing the book, the post-election explosion of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has been a watershed event for the Left. Now with well over 50,000 members, it is the closest thing to a mass left force that the United States has seen in decades.

While there must be many caveats in considering DSA's rise and longterm prospects, it is symbolic of a broader left shift in US politics. Policies once considered beyond the pale, like a \$15/hour minimum wage, Medicare For All, and a federal job guarantee are now considered mandatory starting points for all 2020 Democratic Party presidential contenders.

Beyond Sanders, a small crop of self-identified "democratic socialists" are running for office and winning. Socialism as an idea is being taken more seriously, and enjoys broader public support than it has in decades.

These are positive developments for the left. Even if these policies and the idea of socialism risk getting watered down, the mere fact that they are part of mainstream political discourse is promising. We are far removed from the days when labeling an idea as "socialist" was enough to remove it from the realm of acceptable debate. It is hard to imagine that these developments would have been possible without Sanders and others running as socialists on the Democratic Party ballot line.

Does this mean that Moody's sophisticated and very concrete analysis of the obstacles of working within the Democratic Party is off-base? Far from it. But it does call for a serious reckoning with the tension between this analysis and the hard fact that these political campaigns within the Democratic Party are expanding the audience open to socialist ideas and helping to build socialist organization. Moody's analysis, as incisive as it is, falls short of

that strategic reckoning.

This is a small criticism of a masterful and much-needed book. For those readying themselves for battle on the new terrain of capitalism today, one would be hard-pressed to think of better preparation than this.

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