

"Stayin' Alive" Versus "Getting Ahead" at Work

reviewed by Russell Harrison

Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

The subtitle of this book just about says it all. It implies that there is no longer an (American) working class. (My parenthetical interpellation is important because nowhere in the book does Cowie engage with the decidedly different working-class situations in South America and Western Europe.) As the last sentence of the last chapter says: "The chapter of the modern working class has closed" (369). But, he proceeds to say, "the page of imagination is open; and the future unwritten" (369). This is something of a cop-out as he nowhere in the book, with a late exception, does Cowie imagine much of anything that may happen. Here is the exception:

Whatever working-class identity might emerge from the postmodern, global age will have to be less rigid and less limiting than that of the postwar, and far less wedded to the bargaining table as the sole expression of workplace power. It will have to be less about consumption and more about democracy, and as much about being blue collar as being green collar. It will have to be more inclusive in conception, more experimental in form, more nimble in organization, and more kaleidoscopic in nature than previous incarnations" (369).

The book is mostly a straightforward retelling of the various post-war milestones on the working class's Calvary to powerlessness. It is arranged in two chronological parts: 1968-1974 and 1974-1982. These re-tellings are effective, although too often Cowie's writing seems somewhat glib and breezy for what is, after all, a scholarly book. Beginning with the struggle to reform the United Mine workers of America and the 1969 murder of the reforming Jock Yablonski, the book hits the succession of low spots in the various union management conflicts of the years examined: the struggle of Cesar Chavez to organize California farm workers, the wildcat strikes at the Lordstown Chevy Vega plant in 1972, through the firing of all of the Federal Air Traffic Controllers when they struck in 1981. This last conflict, of course, touches on the famous irony that the controllers had endorsed Reagan. This irony may serve as a symbol of something Cowie delineates in impressive detail: the success of the Nixon and Reagan administrations in co-opting the working class, whose power they were bent on destroying, for the Republicans. This policy was so successful that in the 1972 McGovern-Nixon election, Nixon won 57 percent of the manual worker vote and 54 percent of the union vote; (161) this in spite of the fact that, as an auto union official told McGovern at a campaign visit to Ohio: "Your voting record on measures that the UAW believes in stands at 95 per cent and Nixon's stands at 13 per cent" (117). Cowie provides a number of similar conundrums and, as have many others,

concludes that it was the Republicans' transforming of the debate from one about economic to one about cultural issues.

The classic Marxist analysis would be that what we have is yet another example of false consciousness and I think that this phenomenon is certainly at work here. But what is the reason for such a misreading of one's own self-interest? Why is it that workers in the 1930s seemed to know quite clearly which side they were on? I think a lot of it has to do with the fatal (miss) reading of the Democratic Party as the party of labor, thus obfuscating the need for such a party. That this has only gotten worse over the years is nicely expressed in Gore Vidal's bon mot that it used to be said that the U.S. had one party with a right wing and a left wing; now it has one party with two right wings. Thus there is no working class party at all. The extent to which this had become the case by the time of the McGovern campaign is shockingly clear in a statement at a press conference of George Meany (head of the AFL-CIO) during that campaign: "I will not endorse, I will not support and I will not vote for Richard Nixon for President of the United States. I will not endorse, I will not support and I will not vote for George McGovern for President of the United States" (112). (This apparently was in line with Meany's having voted for Dewey over Truman in 1948.)

That Cowie would seem to agree with respect to the shift from economics to culture, is suggested by an unexpected feature of his book. This is the substantial amount of space given over to cultural analysis, in this instance, popular music and film. I have to say that for me this aspect is iffy, though sometimes valuable with respect to film, and almost always far too glib with respect to music (although I have to admit to little knowledge of country music.) To take but one example: If the hard hats were on the right and Lordstown workers on the left, if Muskogee was country and Woodstock rock 'n' roll, then the new thing called "country rock" might have been the dialectical synthesis of the age for the labor Left. It was, perhaps, the musical equivalent of the New Left colonizers who went to the plant gates to organize workers or akin to rank and filers like Eddie Sadlowski [reforming steel union official] or Arnold Miller [reforming coal union official] who united the thirties and the sixties in their insurgencies against the official families of the establishments. (179).

As I said, such analysis is more effective with respect to film and Cowie's passages on the 1979 pro-labor film, *Norma Rae* are useful and convincing.

There are several moments in the book where one is easily (and unfortunately) reminded of the contemporary moment. Perhaps the most useful is that dealing with Jimmie Carter's turn to the right in the fight against inflation. The left in the Democratic Party were behind the Humphrey-Hawkins bill with the declared aim of full employment. Carter, an economic conservative, opted for Paul Volcker's decision to drive down inflation at all costs. But the goals of the bill let us see, today, how far away the conventional thinking, on the left as well as the right, has distanced itself from that era:

The plan the two leaders came up with in 1974 combined two key elements: nationally coordinated economic planning to bring about full employment at "prevailing" (i.e., high wages, and a federally mandated and legally enforceable right to a job for every American backed by the right to sue for employment [!] in the appropriate U.S. district court by any person who felt deprived of work. "Full employment" in the bill was not some abstract goal, but rather was explicitly and ambitiously defined as 3 percent unemployment to be achieved in an incredibly ambitious 18 months after the legislation went into effect. (270)

It boggles the mind, from the vantage point of 2011, that such a bill could have been introduced by mainstream Democratic Party members, that the *New York Times* "had given the bill a reasonably warm endorsement," and that "even the House Republican Research Committee ... went so far as to argue that full employment proposals 'underline a valid concern in an economy plagued by high rates of unemployment and concomitant social costs' (272). The bill was ultimately emasculated by liberal Democrats, especially "testimony by Charles Schultze ... Lyndon Johnson's budget director and a trusted liberal insider" (275).

All in all, the book makes for depressing reading. As noted, Cowie does not see any hope for real and progressive change, and as a historian, he sees his duty as presenting things "as they really were" (to quote the 19th-Century German historian, Ranke). Which, depressingly, he has done.

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