

Martin Comack, *Wild Socialism: Workers Councils in Revolutionary Berlin, 1918-21* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012). 108 pp. \$26.99 Paperback.

Until recently, the workers councils that appeared during the turmoil of the German Revolution of 1918-19 were given scant attention. After all, they were objectively failures and offered little in the way of inspiration for the typical European Social Democrat or doctrine Communist. Still, there has always been something intriguing about a project, no matter how brief and ultimately unsuccessful, that appeared to promise a bottom-up, democratic form of worker self-emancipation. This had always been the dream of syndicalist thinkers from the Industrial Workers of the World in the USA to the early CGT in France. Comack shows that for a time this dream stepped forth as reality in the Berlin factories.

At the heart of this project was the Revolutionary Shop Stewards led by, among others, a lathe operator named Richard Müller. In short of a hundred pages, this book brings to life a time when it seemed as if a new revolutionary form was being born alongside the existing political parties and trade unions. In the heady atmosphere of revolution in the autumn of 1918, Germans witnessed the birth of, and many joined, councils throughout the country. From the euphoria of red Berlin, it was easy to think that these new organisations were as revolutionary as those in the capital. Some were but most were not.

The council movement developed in the void created by the trade unions and German Social Democracy when they imposed a class truce during the war. This meant the traditional working class institutions that might have managed grievances and promised to force change in unpopular policies were absent. As a result, “spontaneous, wildcat strikes became common through 1916 and 1917, despite the official characterization of them as criminal, treasonous activities” (38). In this vacuum the council movement arose, led by mainly highly skilled, male workers. As the movement was overwhelmingly among men, it would seem to have made but few connections with women workers. It was a fraternity of and by the labour aristocracy even if it thought of itself as a movement for the class as a whole—not that traditional proletarian organisations were any better.

When the time came and the Kaiser’s regime was overthrown, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards allowed themselves to be implicated in a coalition government with pro-war socialists. Then in a lunge to the left, they fell into what may well have been a deliberate provocation and turned to physical force. This was the move that the reformist socialists needed to call in right-wing gangs

called the *Frei Korp* to beat, bloody and murder Berlin radicals of all shades of red. After this tragedy, the councils “would never again regain such direct influence over government policy” (55). It is commonplace for those on the Left to draw the lesson that this was inevitable in a movement refusing to organise a political party. Of course, this complex and tragic situation cannot be reduced to the need to build a political party, no matter how often some will say it. The party question, as it is often labeled, is beyond the scope of this work.

Many questions remain to be examined: Can a movement based upon the most skilled (and largely male) workers come to represent a diverse and multilayered working class? Can an organisation dominated by men reach out to and win over female workers situated in a different historical experience? How can a movement among relatively secure and better-paid unionists incorporate those in less privileged, casual employment? How can workers toiling on the home front forge a relation with soldiers in the trenches?

This exciting and well-written work brings alive a period that people would do well not to forget. Brief and free of the sort of academic jargon that often frightens non-specialists, this is a work that deserves a wide readership despite any limitations. For those who wish to explore this important and interesting period in more depth, they would be well advised to read the recently published *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller and the Origins of the Council Movement* by Ralf Hoffrogge. While the two works have similar ideological sympathies, Hoffrogge goes into much greater detail and has a wealth of new sources that were not available to Comack. All the same, *Wild Socialism: Workers Councils in Revolutionary Berlin* is, in many ways, a ground-breaking book for the English reading public. One hopes that it inspires further innovative studies.

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David Harris, *Civil War and Democracy in West Africa: Conflict Resolution, Elections and Justice in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (New York: IB Tauris, 2012). 320 pp. \$45.00 Paperback.

Since Edward Blyden’s seminal work, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887), which characterised Liberia and Sierra Leone as twins whose fortunes will remain inextricably linked, the two contiguous countries have been attractive subjects for comparative analysis. Liberia and Sierra Leone indeed share much in common: they are roughly of equal size, their origin as colonies for repatriated former slaves is unique in West Africa, and they share a more recent history of anarchic civil wars, state collapse, and massive international intervention. But these obvious similarities mask more profound differences – in their historical trajectory, their polit-