

Andrée Lévesque provides another bridging essay with her useful survey of state repression in Quebec during both the Labour Revolt and the Great Depression. Her descriptions of the repressive policing by both the Montreal Red Squad and its provincial equivalents remind us to look beyond the RCMP, although archival sources remain scant. While Duplessis' Padlock Law and the virulent anti-communism of the Roman Catholic Church might seem *sui generis*, the activities in Ontario surrounding the 1931 prosecutions of the Communist Party of Canada leadership under Section 98 of the Criminal Code, and strikingly similar behaviour on the part of Toronto's Red Squad and their Ontario Provincial Police equivalents later in the decade, demonstrate the prevalence of the ideological assault on labour radicalism and the strength of the defence of capital. Dennis Molinaro provides an excellent chapter on *Rex v. Buck* making a strong case for viewing section 98 as a wartime measure permitting political policing that became normalized in peacetime:

The most important issue regarding the section 98 trials was not whether or not they were fair, which they clearly weren't, or whether they constituted violations of civil liberties, which they clearly did. It was the way in which a wartime emergency had become a part of everyday Canadian society, allowing the government to equate the expression of ideas and thoughts as criminal acts (352).

The implicit prosecution of Bennett's Iron Heel continues in Bill Waiser's excellent chapter on the On-To-Ottawa Trek and the Regina Riot. As he so eloquently and unequivocally writes: "The government and the police chose brute force over a reasonable solution to the Regina impasse and provoked one of the worst riots in twentieth-century Canadian history." "The real crime" was the failure to address the needs of the "thousands of single, homeless unemployed," one of whom he notes was his father (432).

Wright, Tucker, and Binnie have done all Canadians a significant service in continuing the work started by Greenwood in the 1990s. We look forward to volume V on the events of World War II and the Cold War with enthusiastic expectations.

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John Tully, *Silvertown: The Lost Story of a Strike that Shook London and Helped Launch the Modern Labor Movement* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014). 288pp. Hardcover \$28.95.

In constructing an entire narrative around a negative—a defeated strike—Tully has taken on an unusual challenge, and meets it with zest. Yet, while impressive in its historical detail and commitment to the strikers' cause, *Silvertown* ultimately refuses to acknowledge the failure of this poignant struggle. The book's bold title cannot

be backed up by any evidence that the strike “shook London,” or, indeed, did much to “launch the modern labour movement.”

Nevertheless, any detailed account of a strike—successful or otherwise—will uncover hidden treasure in the form of dedicated activists whose commitment and courage is rarely acknowledged elsewhere. As we read in an Introductory Comment by UEL history professor John Marriott, during “moments” like the Silvertown strike, “local leaders tend to spring up as if conjured”; and of these, “the remarkable Fred Ling was one” (19). Ling recurs as one of two Strike Committee delegates appealing for support at a London Trades Council meeting in late November, 1889 (178), and is later described as “a lifelong labour activist” (192). However, Tully appears less concerned with the central role of key activists than Marriott (or indeed, many other labour historians). While noting that “a significant minority of Cockney workers were socialists,” (38) his account fails to offer any hint of activist leadership within the Silvertown dispute.

In fact, much of this history demonstrates only too clearly that the valiant Silver’s strikers could never have won their dispute. For Tully, a “more direct reason” than employer ideology for the defeat was that Silver’s enjoyed a high ratio of constant to variable capital (48), meaning that the action of semi-unskilled workers could have little serious impact on the firm’s profit margins. Tully labours (as it were) the point: “Silver’s had to extract the maximum possible surplus value from their labourers” (unlike other companies?) and “This meant that unions had to be excluded from the plant at all costs” while “on the factory floor despotic rules and harsh supervision prevailed...” (49). Again, show me a company where they did not (and do not).

‘Pre-Revolutionary Petrograd’?

More usefully, Tully questions the argument of “radical” historians like Stedman Jones that “the culture of the unskilled workers of the inner East End had tended to be apolitical” (49). By contrast, he insists that “working-class consciousness was to develop quickly in rapidly expanding West Ham, where the workers were to flock to the New Unions and socialist parties” (49-50). So far, so plausible. But this is followed by a rather startling citation of Trotsky in support of the comment that “West Ham was similar to pre-revolutionary Petrograd, where the Bolsheviks found their greatest level of support in large factories” (50). Set against the situation at Silver’s, this analogy appears risible.

At Silvertown the employers’ obduracy, rather than the strikers’ strength and/or support, was the dominant factor. Almost as important, and much more demoralizing, was the fact that skilled ASE members at the plant “scabbed” throughout the dispute (153), a failure of solidarity which was fundamental to its defeat. Another key factor was, simply, Silver’s enormous profits. In 1914 the firm’s aggregate capital amounted to £1,150,000—a healthy sum even today, and well over six billion in 2014 figures. And, as Tully is forced to acknowledge, the semi-skilled

workers' stoppage failed to 'dam the river of profitability.'

This is all true, and to be deeply regretted. Yet the lack of chronology in Tully's account makes it difficult to follow; while the strike may indeed be "a lost story," that story is told without any recognizable periodization. Chapter V, "A Time of Hope," appears to begin the tale with the sentence "Buoyed up by recent union victories [presumably the dockers], the strikers took action with great optimism and verve" (85)—but exactly when, and even more importantly, why? The reader is left in ignorance, meaning a whole tranche of potentially riveting detail on shop-floor decisions, local discussions, and "festival-of-oppressed"-style celebrations is lost to us.

The linked question of which union might have been involved—if any—receives only the comment, and that not until page 190, that "the NUG&GL was only months old when the strike began..." Here we do find a worthwhile point: "The Silvertown workers had to build their own organisation as they went" (190). Yet this, which goes no further, appears to be the only comment on the chronology and internal dynamics of the dispute. Curious, to say the least, in a book of over 200 pages.

Better lives for the working class...?

Given that more or less from the beginning these courageous strikers were battered into the ground by their millionaire opponent, virtues like "courage," "tenacity" and "principle" easily emerge when describing their stand. Yet, unfortunately, there is nothing efficacious about either courage or principle per se. While Tully recounts in graphic detail the half-starved state of the working-class heroes of Silvertown, heroism and suffering alone do not a victory make. In many ways the Silvertown workers were simply unlucky. Workers at Silver's parallel plant in France refused, lamentably, to down tools in solidarity. The massive Australian bounty which had nurtured the dockers was unavailable to these strikers, and Tully shows in brutal detail how significant numbers of workers were literally starved into submission (or worse). Many were women with children, and would have experienced agony far worse than their own in seeing those children starve.

In his Epilogue, Tully muses that "The Silver's workers lost their battle, but their sacrifices contributed to better lives for the working class as a whole, including future generations up to today" (214). Unfortunately, the reviewer is obliged to ask: "How?" No one can doubt that these strikers were courageous and principled beyond belief. But their strike was lost, and it would be a better service to "future generations" to analyze the reasons behind that loss, and how they might be overcome in a very different future.

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