



**Review of MILLAN, Matteo & SALUPPO, Alessandro
(eds), Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and
Strikebreaking, 1890-1930. In Defence of Freedom
(Routledge, 2021)**

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Matteo Millan and Alessandro Saluppo (eds), *Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strikebreaking, 1890-1930: In Defence of Freedom*. London: Routledge, 2021, pp. xxv + 271, h/b, £96, ISBN 9780367374129. (The open access version of this book is available at <http://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780429354243>, under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 License.)

Co-edited by two historians from the University of Padua, here is a remarkable book on a neglected topic, crowning years of research by a truly international network on 'The Dark Side of the Belle Époque – Political Violence and Armed Associations in Europe before the First World War'. This European Research Council project, coordinated from beginning (2015) to end (2022) by Matteo Millan, has already led to the publication of a special issue of the *European History Quarterly* (vol. 49 (4), October 2019), entitled 'The most formidable weapon: Work replacement, armed strikebreaking and private police in Europe's Belle Époque social conflicts'. But the present volume, stemming from a conference held at Oxford on 23-24 October 2018 ('Industrial vigilantism, strikebreaking and patterns of anti-labour violence, 1890s-1930s: A comparative and transnational perspective'), is more ambitious still, covering a longer period and a vaster territory.

Labour historians working on the half century under consideration – a period characterized by the global expansion of capitalism and the connected growth of working-class movements across borders – are familiar with anti-labour repression, its diverse forms and protagonists. Yet, as pointed out by Millan and Saluppo in their excellent introduction, strikebreakers and industrial vigilantes rarely hold centre-stage, in spite of repeated invitations – by Kenneth D. Brown in 1974, by Marcel van der Linden in 2005 – to make the topic more central. As Martin Conway rightly stresses in the concluding chapter, there are archival reasons for that: employers hiring professionals to violently crush workers did not wish to leave traces of such practices. There is also an obvious historiographical reason for that neglect, the deeply ingrained tendency to give prominence to labour activists to the detriment of other actors of industrial conflicts, such as employers, the State or the 'scabs' and 'blacklegs' that this book successfully resuscitates as key participants in the class struggle.

What this volume demonstrates is that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the use of brutal methods against labour unrest was by no means an American exception, even though the United States did offer some archetypal features. Inevitably, and justifiably, one chapter focuses on the 'the wild west of employer anti-unionism'. But the 'wild east' is also studied here, with chapters on Egypt, India and the Indian Ocean, as is the European continent, from Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, to the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, not to forget Great Britain. The variety of cases examined here testifies to the universal character of the novel problem faced by capitalists around the industrializing world in that era: confronted with the progress of labour solidarity, with movements contesting their power in the workplace, such as strikes, and outside of it, including revolutions, what could be done when attempts at neutralizing or integrating proletarian resistance did not suffice to preserve order? With or without concerted plans, a 'common repertoire' emerged.

The book is structured in three parts ('I: Institutional responses'; 'II: Strikebreaking tactics and practices'; 'III: Civic and industrial vigilantism') that emphasize the diversity of responses elaborated by the defenders of so-called 'free labour', as well as the commonalities. The police and the army could be brought in but, in an age when growing sections of the working class were obtaining the right to vote, politicians could be reluctant to appear too openly as siding with the industrialists. The options left for the bosses were thus either to recruit their own reserve force to replace striking workers, or to sign a contract with independent agents willing to fulfil that task or less respectable ones, from espionage to physical assault. The book confirms that strikebreaking was a tool used above all in

settings where workers could easily be replaced because unskilled workers formed the majority, notably in the maritime industry. But the volume broadens that scope, with telling examples from the agricultural and mining sectors, from the steel, iron and cigarette industries.

As almost every chapter illustrates, the borders between public and private coercion, between legal and illegal methods, were seldom clear-cut. Private detectives and civic vigilantes often acted with tacit support from the authorities. But that partnership was not without difficulties, some apostles of free labour having their own political agenda, generally on the far right, which statesmen on occasion saw as too disruptive. One of the merits of this collection is indeed to remind us of how blurred the lines could be. This does not stop Geoff Eley from making a sharp distinction, in his foreword, between pre-1914 forms of anti-labour repression and their post-First World War avatars, marked in Italy and Germany by the transmutation of old style strikebreaking groups into unified fascist movements organized to seize control of the State. The degree of continuity between those two phases, however, remains a contested issue.

Readers of the *Labour History Review* will probably be particularly interested in the chapters devoted to the British world. Prerna Agarwal's study of 'the murky world of labour politics in Calcutta's docklands', for instance, explores the unlikely collaboration between the colonial State and the Bengal Muslim League, equally preoccupied in the 1930s with the rise of a red-flag union. As for Alessandro Saluppo's thorough analysis of the London-based Volunteer Police Force and its interventions between 1911 and 1914, it comes as a precious complement to this *Review*'s special issue on the Great Labour Unrest (vol. 79 (1), April 2014).

From a methodological point of view, two contributions stand out: Charles Bégue Fawell's chapter on steamship workers, because of his daring attempt to revive the invisibilized struggles taking place at sea; Pierre Eichenberger's essay on the 'transnational mobilisation of industrialists around World War I' and their 'illiberal business internationalism', which the editors did well to place at the very heart of the book. Analysing 'the counter-mobilisation of capital' as a 'a truly global phenomenon', this is a broad-sweeping piece likely to appeal to both lecturers and their students.

In conclusion, the editors and the authors are to be thanked for their efforts to make the comparative and transnational approaches more than catchphrases, and for meticulous studies that fill a gap in the historiography. Though one might regret the absence of chapters on the French-speaking world and on the 'White Dominions', with this edited volume the historians attempting to cover those areas in the future have solid foundations on which to build.

One final comment, inspired by Millan and Saluppo themselves: industrial relations may have become more institutionalized in the Global North between 1945 and the 1970s but the violence encountered in these pages never disappeared from the Global South. This makes the understanding of anti-labour repression in the past all the more important to anyone sympathizing with today's 'workers of the world'.

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