



Review

Working for Ford by Huw Beynon

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Reviewed by Eddie Webster

For the South African labour movement the Marikana massacre on 16 August when 34 striking workers were killed – and in some cases in execution style – may yet prove the kind of turning point that 1922, 1946 and 1973 proved to be. For the workers' movement what is clear from Marikana is that worker leaders need to go back to the shop floor, listen to the workers' voices and rebuild the kind of shop-floor movement that is so effectively analysed in *Working for Ford*.

In the wake of the largest number of killings during a strike since the white mineworkers' strike of 1922, when 153 workers died, it is appropriate that we reflect on the classics of the workers' movement. Strikes bring sharply to the fore the contradictions within capitalism and often lead to the reconfiguration of class forces.

The 1922 strike led to the 1924 Pact government that laid the basis for an alliance between white workers and Afrikaner nationalism, the 1946 mineworkers' strike led to the death of nine mineworkers and the creation of an alliance between black labour and African nationalism. It was, however, the 1973 strikes in Durban that was to lay the foundations for the emergence of a powerful workers' movement in South Africa.

The 1973 strikes were not led by trade unions – in large part it was the spontaneous collective actions of black workers responding to apartheid's cheap labour system. As young left intellectuals, we searched for ways in which we could give this surge of worker militancy a sustained strategic and organisational focus. Influenced by the powerful

shop steward movement in Britain at that time, we followed closely its development and the books that emerged from it.

The one that caught our imagination and influenced our teaching and political practice was Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford*. I received a copy in 1974 and reviewed it in the *SALB*.

Industrial Relations at the time in South Africa was dominated by the paternalistic idea that there was a basic harmony of interest between management and labour. *Working for Ford* made clear that the workers' struggle 'can only be remedied by a fundamental change in the entire basis of production. The political transformation of society...' The edition in which the review was published (June 1974, 4.3) was subsequently banned under the Publications Act for promoting 'worker unrest', mainly because of an article highly critical of the treatment of workers at British Leyland in Durban.

Working for Ford influenced the way we saw shop stewards in three ways. Firstly, was the concept of working-class factory consciousness that Beynon saw manifest in the shop stewards at Halewood. 'A factory consciousness,' Beynon wrote, 'understands class relations in terms of their direct manifestation in conflict between the bosses and the workers within the factory. It is rooted in the workplace where struggles are fought over the control of the job and the rights of managers and workers'. This led to a concentration in the early years on building support on the shop floor by winning visible concessions from management over unfair dismissals in particular.

If, secondly, the stage for this conflict is the factory floor, its organisational manifestation is not the trade union bureaucrats but the shop stewards' committee. Hence factory class consciousness finds its historical background in syndicalism – developed in Britain in the shop steward movement that occurred during and after the First World War. At the core of these emerging unions in Durban was the notion of direct democracy, of accountability of worker leaders to the rank-and-file, report back and mandates.

Thirdly, and for me this was the most important question raised by *Working for Ford*, how does one explain why some workers define their interests in collective terms and become shop stewards and others in 'individualistic' terms and become supervisors. Beynon rejected an explanation of activism in terms of different types of personalities.

'An adequate account of shop-floor activism and leadership,' he argued, 'needs to go beyond the personalities of the people involved and consider the ideology of the activists and the organisation within which they are active'. Beynon located the roots of activism in the values of shop stewards and the structural flaws of capitalism most starkly shown on the factory floor. ■

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