[Review of: H. McQueen (2011) We built this country: builders' labourers & their unions, 1787 to the future]

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Published in:
CLR News

Citation for published version (APA):

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Fair and Green Deal (FGD). In the title and its lay-out the publication refers to a reform-plan (Het Plan van de Arbeid – The Employment Plan) that was formulated in the 1930s by the Dutch social democratic party as an answer to the global crisis of that time. In the book the ecological and social dimension of the actual crisis are seen as a consequence of the neo-liberal ideology that has reigned over three decades. The book stresses the urgency of a fundamental reform of our economy. In the chapter dealing with the necessary transition, the authors refer to Terra Reversa. An important difference with the Terra book is the improved analysis of the socio-economic dimension of the actual crisis.

For Dutch readers the works reviewed can be recommended as a useful introduction to the debates among progressive researchers and activists in the Netherlands and Belgium.


In almost twenty years of existence CLR-News has only rarely reviewed books that tell the history of the building workers’ trade unions. Humphrey McQueen’s book *We Built this Country* is an exception. The reason why we have picked it up is rather simple. McQueen, who calls himself a Canberra-based activist and freelance historian, has written a remarkable book that covers more than 200 years of building workers’ experiences and thus opens ‘a window into the making of the Australian working class’. Although the research and writing was commissioned by the Construction Division of the Australian CFMEU (the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, the successor organisation of the Australian Building Labourers’ Federation), the financing of its publication owes nothing to the union.
The building labourers entered the CFMEU in 1994 but it took a while before this unofficial history that wants to be ‘sympathetic to the union’s difficulties but not apologetic for their failures’ could come on the table. One of the reasons was that the twenty-five years before the merger had been a period of bitterness, with media-highlighted de-registration, criminal convictions and internal conflict. McQueen’s book includes defeats as well as victories because ‘nothing is gained by recounting only the good side’. Some of his used concepts are extremely topical. For instance, the notion that the expansion of capital depends on the disciplining of labour-time or that re-skilling around concrete gave the labourers the chance to lift themselves from the bottom of the labour market. The book is rich in stories and case studies. Therefore, a review is an incredible challenge; it is easier to recommend reading. Nevertheless, I want to highlight a few parts.

In the early days of British colonialism tradesmen landed with ideas about who should do what on a building site and found out that it was impossible to maintain these rules in a society where the demand for craftsmen outran the supply. Assistants learned how to manage the job alongside the tradesmen and started chasing contracts. Subcontracting increased sweating. Changes in materials and methods in the late 1890s opened more pathways for labourers. However, the temporary and mobile nature of the work on building sites and the fluctuations in urban development with ‘men following for two weeks at the job’ and labourers shifting between industries and trades remained the key characteristics of the building sector. The history of the ABLF, created in 1910, and the preceding organisations and initiatives, therefore, was a history of ‘ups and downs’ and sometimes of ‘stumble and fall’.

An interesting chapter is dedicated to the appearance of ‘weird mobs’ (named after They’re a Weird Mob, a popular book in the 1950s about an Italian journalist moving to Aus-
tralia and finishing up laying bricks). If Australia was a country of migrants, than construction was the main industry for people to end up in. For ABLF officials building labouring was the work available to men at the bottom of the heap, irrespective of colour. Therefore, they took pains to make sure that the newcomers got their right money under decent conditions. In 1966 ABLF leaflets on the Sydney opera house site were in English, Spanish, Greek and Italian. Notwithstanding this basic principle of equal treatment, there were also times, most often coinciding with a downturn in the economy, with rumours about foreigners on sites.

For reasons of space McQueen has posted longer extracts from the words of workers and detailed accounts of several matters on his website. Here also information can be found of his other book Framework of Flesh (see the report in CLR-News 2-2008). Visit: http://home.alphalink.com.au/~loge27/


*The Precariat* offers an intriguing and comprehensive insight into the plight of dissatisfied young, migrant women workers and unemployed around the world today. Breaking with stereotypes of laziness and lack of discipline or work ethic, Standing shows that the opportunities open to a growing group of people in our societies are, in fact, far from satisfactory. Forced to change jobs, functions or occupations time and again, the precariat lives in a chronic state of insecurity, never knowing whether next month’s income will suffice to pay the bills. In seven chapters, Standing discusses the phenomenon of precariousness in the 21st century, the global developments that led to its spread, those affected by it, their biggest issues as well as two future scenarios (the politics of inferno and paradise).