

The Working Class Strikes Back in The Age of Neoliberal Crisis

A book review

By [Chris Wright](#)

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[Caribbean](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Reading the daily headlines, it's easy to forget that the corollary of a civilization in precipitous decline is a world of creative ferment, a new world struggling to be born. If you could have a God's-eye view of all the creative resistance rending the fabric of political oppression from the U.S. to Indonesia to Colombia, you would surely be persuaded that all hope is not lost. This conclusion is borne out in detail by a book published earlier this year, [The Class Strikes Back: Self-Organised Workers' Struggles in the Twenty-First Century](#), edited by Dario Azzellini and Michael G. Kraft. The chapters, each dedicated to a different case-study, survey inspiring democratic activism in thirteen countries across five continents. The reader is left with the impression that the global working class, while facing an uphill battle in its fight against imperialism, business and state repression, and conservative union bureaucracy, may yet triumph in the end, if only because of its remarkable perseverance generation after generation. Its overwhelming numerical strength, too, bodes well.

In their introduction, the editors concisely state the book's purpose:

"this volume aims to examine how new, anti-bureaucratic forms of syndicalist, neo-syndicalist and autonomous workers' organisation emerge in response to changing work and production relations in the twenty-first century."

Traditional unions, which they observe have been "part of the institutional setting to *maintain* capitalism" (my italics), have deteriorated on a global scale. In their place have sprung up more radical and democratic forms of resistance, such as blockades, strikes, and workplace occupations and recuperations. Workers' actions have even made decisive contributions to the toppling of governments, as in Egypt in 2011.

In this article I'll summarize several of the most compelling case-studies. Unfortunately I'll have to pass over many interesting chapters, including ones on the workers' movement in Colombia, the solidarity economy and radical unionism in Indonesia, the sit-ins and ultimately the worker cooperative at a window factory in Chicago (about which I've written [here](#)), and the South African miners who were attacked by police and massacred in August 2012. The book is too rich to do justice to.

Greece

The crisis in Greece that followed the economic crash of 2008 and 2009 saw a savage regime of austerity imposed on the population, which resulted in a “diffuse precariousness” across the labor force. Conventional unionism and national collective bargaining have been among the victims of this neoliberal regime. And yet the general strikes that the trade union bureaucracy was compelled to declare early on, particularly between 2010 and 2012, were the most massive and combative of the past forty years. “Long battles with the police, crowds which refused to dissolve and regrouped again and again, the besieging for hours of the house of parliament, self-organisation and solidarity in order to cope with tear gas and take care of the wounded—all have become part of the normal image of demonstrations during strikes, replacing the nerveless parades of the past.”



Source: New Eastern Outlook

Outside the framework of conventional unionism there have arisen exciting new forms of struggle. Since early 2013, the [Vio.Me](#) factory has operated under worker self-management, after its initial owners abandoned the site. Aside from the lack of hierarchy, the job rotations, and the directly democratic structure of the business, one innovative practice has been to run the factory in cooperation with the local community and, indeed, the whole society. After taking over the factory the workers consulted their community about what they should produce; they were asked to stop making poisonous building chemicals and instead to manufacture biological, eco-friendly cleaning products. A “wide network of militants and local assemblies” around the country has supported the effort from the start, which has enabled even the distribution of the firm’s products to be done in a completely new way, “through an informal network of social spaces, solidarity structures, markets without intermediaries and cooperative groceries.”

In general, labor struggles in Greece have become more intertwined with social movements. Early in the crisis, structures of mutual aid sprang up everywhere:

Throughout the country collectives have established community kitchens and peer-to-peer solidarity initiatives for the distribution of food, reconnected electricity that was cut down to low-income households, organised “without middlemen” the distribution of agricultural produce, established self-organised pharmacies, healthcare clinics and tutoring programmes and organised networks of direct action against house foreclosures.

Later on, grassroots initiatives became more political, in an effort to create institutions that would be long-lasting and relatively independent of capital and the government. The [Greek](#)

[squares movement](#) of 2011 spread to almost every city and village in the country, leaving behind a legacy of local assemblies and social centers. It also “unleashed social forces which boosted the social and solidarity economy and the movements for the defence and the promotion of the commons.”

All this flowering of alternative institutions has not occurred without significant problems and defeats. There has been little success in establishing solid organizations of the unemployed, and grassroots labor struggles have failed to form durable structures that can challenge institutionalized unionism. Certain victories, nevertheless, have been impressive. Social movements were able to prevent the government’s privatization of public water corporations in 2014. Even more remarkably, after the government closed down the influential public broadcaster ERT in 2013, ERT employees, together with citizens and activists, took over the production of television and radio programs by occupying premises and infrastructure. For almost two years the self-managed ERT transmitted thousands of hours of broadcasting on the anti-austerity struggle, serving as an important resource for the resistance. When Syriza came to power in 2015, it reestablished the public broadcaster.

Worker and consumer cooperatives exist all over the country. Cooperative coffee shops and bookshops, for example, exist in most neighborhoods of Athens and Salonica, functioning “as the cells of the horizontal movements in urban space and the carriers of alternative values and culture.” Broadly speaking, labor identities are becoming more socialized, “because more embedded in local communities and grassroots struggles.”

The Greek experience is of particular interest in that other Western countries, including the U.S., [are likely to replicate](#) important features of it in the coming years and decades, as economic crisis intensifies. We ought to study how Greek workers and communities have adapted and resisted, to learn from their failures and successes.

Egypt

The mass movement that felled Mubarak’s regime in 2011 received sympathetic coverage from the establishment media in the West, but the key role of workers’ collective action was, predictably, effaced. Strike waves after 2006 not only destabilized the regime but also gave rise to the [April 6th Movement](#) in 2008, which would go on to catalyze the 2011 rebellions. Even after the fall of Mubarak, the flood of labor actions didn’t let up.

As everywhere around the world, neoliberalism meant decades of pent-up grievances against working conditions, privatizations, low wages, and economic insecurity. Finally in December 2006, 24,000 textile workers went on strike at Misr Spinning. Within a few weeks, “similar strikes were spreading between public and private sector textile producers, and from there to civil servants, teachers, municipal refuse workers and transport workers.” In the next couple of years, many more strikes occurred, frequently taking the form of mass occupations of workplaces.

Workers even managed to form the first independent unions in more than fifty years, beginning with the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU), established in December 2008. The conservative and bureaucratic Egyptian Trade Union Federation was unable to cope with all the sit-ins, strikes, and waves of democratic organizing, and saw its influence over the labor movement wane. RETAU’s consolidation “accelerated the development of other independent unions and proto-union networks among teachers, public transport workers, postal workers and health technicians,” raising their expectations of what could be achieved

through collective action.

After the steadily rising wave of worker and popular resistance crested with the resignation of Mubarak in early February 2011, labor actions didn't cease. In fact, Mubarak's fall was followed by "a new tidal wave of strikes and workplace occupations, with nearly 500 separate episodes of collective action by workers recorded in the month of February 2011 alone." Strike waves ebbed and flowed over the following two years, and did much to undermine the military and Islamist governments that succeeded each other before the crisis of the summer of 2013, when, after Mohammed Morsi fell, a successful counterrevolutionary offensive was launched by the Armed Forces, the Ministry of the Interior, the judiciary, and the media.

After the fall of Mubarak, a ferment of self-organization resulted in the founding of many new independent unions, which often engaged in intense battles for *tathir*, or the "cleansing" from management positions of the ruling party's cronies. This was especially the case in public institutions. Public hospitals in Cairo, for example, "were the scene of attempts to assert workers' control over management to a much greater degree than had been possible before the revolution." These experiments weren't always successful, but in a number of cases they did at least force the resignation of old directors and were able to establish, temporarily, democratic councils to oversee work.

In the end, the workers' movement was unable to impose its demands on the agenda of national politics. Its leaders "did not score victories at that level on the question of raising the national minimum wage, or forcing a lasting retreat from privatization, or even of securing full legal recognition for the independent unions themselves." Still, the authors comment that the nationwide revival of self-organization was an astonishing feat. "Factory and office workers created thousands of workplace organisations, despite conditions of acute repression and the lack of material resources. There have been few examples on this scale of a revival of popular organisation in the Arab world for decades." Memories of these uprisings will not be erased easily, and will inspire the next generation of activists.

Venezuela

Venezuela differs from the other cases in that its Bolivarian revolution has entailed a commitment to elevating the position and the power of workers. So how successful has this process been? In recent years, of course, Venezuela's severe economic crisis has undermined the Bolivarian process, with increases in poverty and less money going to social programs. But the achievements have not all been destroyed. The account in the book goes up to early 2016, well into the crisis years.



Until 2006, the Chavez government focused on promoting cooperatives (in addition to nationalizing the oil industry and expropriating large landowners). In nationalized medium-sized companies, for example, workers became co-owners with the state. Whereas Venezuela had had only 800 registered cooperatives in 1998, by mid-2010 it had 274,000, though only about a third were determined to be “operative.” It had been hoped that these businesses would produce for the satisfaction of social needs rather than profit-maximization, but the mixed-ownership model, according to which the state and private entrepreneurs could be co-owners with workers, vitiated these hopes.

By 2006 a new model was spreading, which was more communally based. Its political context was that “communal councils” began to be recognized as a fundamental structure of local self-government: in urban areas they encompassed 150 to 400 families, while in rural areas they included a minimum of 20 families. “The councils constitute a non-representational structure of direct participation, which exists alongside the elected representative bodies of constituted power. Several communal councils can come together to form a commune. By the end of 2015, over 40,000 communal councils and more than 1,200 communes existed.” Councils and communes can receive state funding for their projects, which now began to include community-controlled companies instead of cooperatives. “In these new communal companies, the workers come from the local communities; these communities are the ones who, through the structures of self-government...decide on what kind of companies are needed, what organisational form they will have and who should work in them.”

In 2008 a new model for these companies emerged, the Communal Social Property Company (EPSC). “While different kinds of EPSCs can be found in the communities today, their principal areas of activity correspond with the most pressing needs of the *barrios* and rural communities: the production of food and construction materials, and the provision of transport services. Textile and agricultural production companies, bakeries and shoemakers, are also common.” Under the initiative of workers, even some state enterprises are partly under community control, at least regarding their distribution networks.

Despite Chavez’s commitment to workers’ control, it has not been easy to shift the

orientation of a state and a private sector deeply hostile to workers. Workers' councils and struggles for worker participation can be found in almost all state enterprises and many private ones—and workers have taken over hundreds of private businesses, sometimes after the state's expropriation of the original owners—but even in the *chavista* state bureaucrats were apt to undermine the Bolivarian process. Whether through corruption, mismanagement, obstruction of financing to state companies with worker-presidents, or other means, ministerial bureaucracies and even corrupt unions impede workers' control. In many state enterprises the situation is ambiguous: workers don't control the company or even participate in management, but "they control parts of the production process, they decide on their own to whom they will give access to the plant, [and] they are in a full-scale conflict with the management."

Despite all the advances made under Chavez, the fact is that the economy's social relations of production have not really changed and capitalist exploitation remains the norm. Private interests are still too powerful and have too much influence over the government, promoting mismanagement and corruption. It is still a rentier economy. But a revolutionary process has begun and is being carried forward by communities and workers across the country. The transformation of a society from authoritarian to democratic [does not happen overnight](#).

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Like the rest of the post-Soviet world, Bosnia-Herzegovina has suffered terribly from the privatizations, asset-stripping, marketization, and rampant corruption that have attended its transition to capitalism since the mid-1990s. Unemployment and economic insecurity are at epidemic proportions. In 2014, workers in Tuzla, Bosnia's third largest city, organized a massive mobilization against their deteriorating conditions, the first since the 1992-95 conflict. While the movement didn't last, its legacy may inspire further mobilizations in the future.

The 2014 demonstrations were a response to the wretched situation of workers in a laundry detergent factory, DITA, which at one time had provided 1,400 jobs. After its privatization in 2005, things started to go downhill. The company paid them minimal wages, issued meal vouchers only in bonds rather than cash, and eventually stopped paying them pension funds and health insurance. In 2011 they began a long strike, but in December 2012 the firm closed, having ignored all their demands.

Picketing the factory and filing lawsuits didn't secure justice for the workers, so in February 2014 they teamed up with their counterparts from four other nearby factories to stage demonstrations in front of Tuzla's canton court. All five workforces had similar demands: investigation of the questionable privatization processes that had destroyed their livelihoods; compensation for unpaid wages, health insurance, and pensions; and the restarting of production. Their demands didn't get a very sympathetic hearing: during one of the demonstrations, riot police secured the entrance of the canton building and fired teargas and rubber bullets. This brutality only further inflamed the workers, who kept up their resistance the following couple of days. The number of demonstrators rose to 10,000 as students and other citizens joined the protests, finally setting the government buildings on fire.

Chiara Milan's summary of the ensuing events is worth quoting:

The action [of burning government buildings] resonated throughout the

country. Within days, rallies in solidarity with Tuzla's workers took place across Bosnia-Herzegovina. Increasing discontent among the social groups suffering under government policies led tens of thousands to join in the main cities of BiH [i.e., Bosnia-Herzegovina]. Like a domino effect, the rage spread and the revolt escalated. On 7 February the government buildings of the cities of Mostar, Sarajevo, and Zenica were set ablaze by seething protesters. While politicians tried to hide the plummeting economic conditions of the country by constantly playing the ethnic card, the workers of Tuzla triggered wider social protests, arguing that rage and hunger do not recognise ethnic differences. The protests spawned a mass movement of solidarity that overcame the ethno-national divisions inside the country, travelling across the post-Yugoslav space. Rallies in support of the workers were reported in nearby Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia...

Soon, directly democratic assemblies called plenums were set up across the country. "The citizens gathered in leaderless, consensus-based assemblies where everybody had the right to one vote and nobody could speak on behalf of other people." Each plenum had working groups addressing such issues as media, education and culture, and social problems. "Demands that arose during the plenums were collected and delivered to [these] working groups, in charge of reformulating them in a coherent way. Once reformulated, the demands typically returned to the plenum for a final vote [after which they were submitted to the cantonal government]. All the plenums were coordinated through an organisational body called interplenum..."

A new labor union was also formed in the wake of the protests, called Solidarnost, which quickly reached 4,000 members from dozens of companies. It was intended as an alternative to the conventional unions that had so signally failed to protect the interests of their rank and file. While it didn't succeed in winning the battle for the workers, it did keep fighting for years afterwards, as by staging weekly protests in front of the canton court.

The moment of collective outrage slowly faded away, especially after the flood that hit the country in May 2014 turned into a national emergency. The workers at the DITA factory, however, still did not give up: in March 2015 they occupied the factory and [restarted the production of cleaning products](#), publicly appealing for international support. Shops and retail chains decided to sell the "recuperated factory's" products, and groups of activists volunteered to help the workers optimize production.

In general, Milan comments, the uprisings left a legacy of solidarity and activist networks, which challenge "the dominant rhetoric of ethnic hatred" and may be drawn on in future struggles.

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The path forward for the working class in an age of neoliberal crisis is tortuous and uncertain. Given the near-collapse of mainstream trade unionism and many left-wing political parties, it's necessary for people the world over to forge their own institutions, their own networks, to fight back against the rampaging elite and construct a new, more equitable society. The stories collected in *The Class Strikes Back* are an encouraging sign that workers everywhere are already waging the war, that democratic institutions can germinate in even the most crisis-ridden of societies, and that the ruling class's hold on power is in fact, ultimately, rather tenuous. The next generation of activism is sure to bring major changes to a morally corrupt civilization.

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Chris Wright has a Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and is the author of [Notes of an Underground Humanist](#), [Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States](#), and [Finding Our Compass: Reflections on a World in Crisis](#). His website is www.wrightswriting.com.

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