

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Buntu Siwisa**

Darlington, Ralph.

*Labour revolt in Britain, 1910-1914*

London: Pluto Press, 2023

Webster, Edward with Dor, Lynford.

*Recasting workers' power:  
work and inequality in the shadow  
of the digital age*

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2023

“...A display of temper...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wells, H.G. Labour Unrest. Daily Mirror. 1910 cited in Darlington, Ralph. Labour revolt in Britain, 1910-1914, London: Pluto Press, 2023, p. 29.

**ABSTRACT**

At the height of the South African summer this year, Ralph Darlington and Edward Webster met. It was not the first time they had met. But it was the first occasion that they gathered under the weights and glories of the thrilling new epistemologies thrown out in their respective new books: Darlington's *Labour Revolt in Britain, 1910 – 1914*, and *Recasting Workers' Power: Work and Inequalities in the Shadow of the Digital Age*, by Eddie Webster with Lynford Dor.

**KEYWORDS**

Industrial action  
Precarious labour  
Neo-liberal order

## THE BOOKS, THE TIMES, THE INTELLECTUAL PERSONALITIES

We huddled together from 5 to 7 February, 2024, at the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Association of Strikes and Social Conflicts (IASSC) at the Fountains Hotel in Cape Town. Reflecting on the condition of the worker in the face of evolving capital accumulation and exploitation strategies, the conference was organised around the theme, *Strike Activity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Implications of the Recent Global Upsurge*.<sup>1</sup> It sought to analyse and deliberate on strikes, the reconfiguration of labour, labour processes, and counter-mobilisation in the new neo-liberal economic order. Truly reflecting on these matters at the global scale, scholars and contributors came from South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Philippines, Brazil, India, Uruguay, Mexico, Columbia, Portugal, Argentina, USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Finland and the Netherlands.

As we bunched up in the Fountain Hotel, Cape Town, the South African media was abuzz with the Mining Indaba conference whose pervasive mood had rendered our deliberations unreachable, if not barely visible. Also barely noticeable was the worker in post-Covid, post-home-grown structural adjustment South Africa, facing so-called “watershed elections” in May 2024, testing the country’s political stability after thirty years of freedom and democracy. As outlined in the South African 2024 Budget Speech, the budget deficit rose from 5 per cent to 4.9 per cent of GDP. The budget deficit servicing cost for 2023/24 has been revised upward by R15.7 billion to R356 billion, absorbing 20 per cent of national revenue.<sup>2</sup>

The cost of servicing this budget deficit will be greater than the budget for social protection, health, or peace and security. South Africa has also experienced a decline in revenue collection – at R1.73 trillion tax revenue for 2023/24, R56.1 billion lower than estimated in the 2023 budget.<sup>3</sup>

South African home-grown austerity measures began in 2014 and 2015, as government’s spending on goods, services and salaries barely kept up with population growth. Government spending grew at an average rate of 1.8 per cent for the period 2015 to 2020, compared to 1.6 per cent annual population growth, compared to the previous rate of 1.6 per cent. For instance, from 2014/15 to 2018/19, government spending on health per uninsured person increased by 1.7 per cent on average. Spending on education per learner fell by 8 per cent in real terms, from R17 822 to R16 435 in 2017.

The overall effects on the lower-income earning majority of the South African population, particularly the insecure, precarious and unemployed worker are reduced affordability of food, housing, water, medical care, and other second-generation constitutional rights contained in the Bill of Rights. Also, expenses on municipal grants have been cut back, affecting school infrastructure, the low-cost housing budget, local roads and public lighting, and municipal grants for electrification, as well as urban development and public transport.<sup>4</sup>

Inequalities are becoming increasingly noticeable and challenging

in South Africa, which is facing not only a new neo-liberal economic order, but also the effects of home-grown structural adjustment measures and the long-term ‘work from home’ effects of Covid-19, which is slowly creating a powerful fourth economic centre in various cities in the country (in addition to the city centre, suburban areas, and township economic centres). This is a new economic centre promising to be an extension of another suburban economy, whiter, more race-based, and premised on a more determined cheap-labour exploitative system and cheap immigrant labour with no benefits, no labour rights, no social protection, longer hours, and no form of labour representation.

As South African finance minister Enoch Godongwana emphasised in the 2024 Budget Speech, the South African economy is not growing in the face of these socio-economic challenges. As he put it, comparing the South African economy to a pie, “Our challenge, honourable members, is that the size of the pie is not growing fast enough to meet our developmental needs”. Increasingly, inequality in South Africa is widening for the majority of the population, where the haves and have-nots difference is not just “...between individuals, groups, regions or countries... [but] about the condition that allows certain groups to dominate over others”.<sup>5</sup>

The concern here is how these economic challenges, in the face of evolving capital accumulation strategies and exploitation, directly and indirectly affect the precarious worker’s ability and capacities to counter-mobilise. It is reflecting on the precarious worker whose representation in traditional trade unions has sharply declined, and the informal economy which they have increasingly relied on as a survivalist measure for social reproduction is also under severe attack.

The United Kingdom is also facing its own “watershed elections”, most probably in the latter part of 2024, and the future of the worker, the workers’ organisation and mobilisation strategies are at stake. It is predicted that the Labour Party is highly likely to win the general election, judging by its performance over a significantly weakened Conservative Party at the polls, taking a projected 106 majority seat win.<sup>6</sup>

Facing regional inequality, recession and high cost of living, “... with working people forced to pick up the pieces”, the Conservative Party is expected to lose the election since it has been in power since 2005. Labour’s election manifesto, *Power and partnership: Labour’s plan to power up Britain*, focuses on:<sup>7</sup>

*Devolution of power;  
Improving standards of living; and  
Easier and more affordable access to public services.*

However, there is fear that Labour has moved to the centre-right of the political fulcrum, more amenable to big business interests than the interests of the working-class, as in the following commentary:

The transformation of Labour’s political fortunes since the last general election has been accompanied by a fervent romancing of business. Gone is the disdain of Jeremy Corbyn, the party’s

1 International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts. Report of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts Conference. 20 February. 2014. <https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/faculties-and-schools/commerce-law-and-management/research-entities/scis/documents/IASSC-Conference.pdf>. Visited on 10 May, 2024.

2 Godongwana, Enoch. Budget Speech by the Minister of Finance Mr Enoch Godongwana, 24 February. Cape Town: Parliament of South Africa, 2024 <https://www.parliament.gov.za/project-event-details/3358>. Visited on 15 May, 2024.

3 Ibid.

4 Sibeko, B. The cost of austerity: lessons for South Africa. IEJ Working Paper Series No. 2. Johannesburg: Institute for Economic Justice, 2019.

5 Francis, D., Valodia, I. and Webster, E. (eds.) Inequality studies from the Global South. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020, p. 4.

6 The Economist. What companies can expect if Labour wins Britain’s election: The party that aspires to lead the country is courting business. 9 May 2024. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/05/09/what-companies-can-expect-if-labour-wins-britains-election/>. Visited 15 May 2024.

7 Labour’s plan to power up Britain. London: Labour Party, 28 March, 2024. <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labours-plan-to-power-up-britain/>. Visited 15 May 2024.

former hard-left leader who planned to collectivise a tenth of every big British company. In its place, Sir Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves, the Labour leader and shadow chancellor, have spearheaded a “smoked-salmon offensive”, inviting executive to breakfast and waxing lyrical about the virtues of profit.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of these two books, it is quite a challenge thinking about the evolution of capital’s accumulation and exploitation strategies in times that have stretched a bit farther, as they have outlined. This is the resting centre of the two books: that capital’s survival ever changes, in relation to the exploitation of labour, its relationship to the state, and to the changing political economic environment.

Circling back to the conference, before us loomed a spectacle of watching and listening to engagements and deliberations on the two books. More drawing were the thrilling, exuberant contrasts in the intellectual personalities of Ralph Darlington and Eddie Webster. In his more scholarly-working-class British accent, the scholarly lucidity of Darlington’s arguments came out, sentence by sentence, as if read verbatim from a book written with a lilting prose. So carried away, we had to be stringently cautious on how we demarcated time given to his presentations.

Eddie Webster, often twitching his lips rather excitedly at the peak of his arguments, presented a more calculating contrast. Often starting his presentations with an anecdote serving as background, he launched into sequential flow of reasoning. It tapered into an intertextualised understanding of the overarching theme of his book: “There is a widespread view that labour as a counter-hegemonic force has come to an end”.<sup>9</sup> This recalls a humane, humble and thoroughly erudite “*Madala* [old man] sociologist”, who ventured nowhere without the guide of a well-theorised question. He sadly passed on and left us a couple of months after the Strikes Conference.

## THE EVOLUTION OF CAPITAL AND LABOUR’S COUNTER-MOVEMENT

As much as Darlington and Webster were contrasting intellectual personalities, *Labour revolt in Britain, 1910–1914* and *Recasting workers’ power* are united by various theoretical and thematic trends. First, laid out are the dynamics of the relationship between labour, capital and the state. While Webster with Dor show us how the evolution of capital shaped labour as a counter-hegemonic force, Darlington goes into depth explaining how this relationship forged institutionalising processes in labour mobilisation strategies.

While we learn from Darlington how the “coordinated power of federated capital”<sup>10</sup> limited and sharpened labour’s organisational and mobilisation strategies, in Webster’s book with Dor, we see highlighted the innovative capacities of precarious labour’s new mobilisation strategies. Grown out of its traditional unionist shell, the different “labour classes”, as Bernstein’s definition refuses attachment to protected, formally organised workers in contracts or to precarious or vulnerable labour, we see a labour force organising and mobilising outside of the “homogenising proletarian

condition”<sup>11</sup> in this digital age, to borrow from Henry Bernstein as cited by Webster and Dor.

The relationships among capital, labour and the state became an urgent concern, as both books highlight the circuitous journey of the evolution of capital, and its impact on labour. Webster points out that the precariousness of labour and workers’ attendant parlous working conditions in the digital age are nothing new. There is a circular journey of capital, in how it has brought back the inhumane working conditions of the industrial age to the digital age. This is the industrial age that Darlington meticulously explains in his detailed and well-researched history of labour in Britain between 1910 and 1914.

## ORGANISING AND MOBILISING LABOUR: FROM THE INDUSTRIAL TO THE DIGITAL AGE

In *Labour revolt*, Darlington provides a multi-dimensional portrayal of the context, origins, causes, actors, processes, outcomes, meanings and significance of the Labour Revolt in Britain. He explained, “It was years of pent-up frustration and collective sense of injustice at their appalling pay and conditions and lack of control or effective union representation that helps to explain the intensity and explosive character of workers activity”.<sup>12</sup>

The British working-class experienced harsh unemployment and poverty. In a period of high unemployment, a third of the British population lived in poverty. Poverty levels reached a peak in the recession of 1907 to 1909, leading to hunger marches in Glasgow and East London. By 1910, 10 per cent of the British population owned 92 per cent of the total wealth, “...making Britain perhaps more unequal than most European countries”.<sup>13</sup> Worsened by the ostentatious display of obnoxious levels of wealth and the luxury consumption and lifestyles of the upper and middle class, these conditions further agitated and conscientised the working-class.

However, some positive social development conditions also helped raise workers’ conscientisation. Some of these were the expansion of compulsory elementary school education, increased social literacy, the rise of adult education, and the rise of radical independent working-class education. Classes were organised by the Plebs League and other left-wing political groups. The expansion of mass national communication also raised workers’ consciousness.

A number of workers’ strikes took place before the labour revolt, between 1907 and 1910. Strike-prone industries tended to be large, strategically important sections of the economy. In these industries, market forces and business fluctuations made employers acutely sensitive to labour costs, increasing efficiency through work intensification and control over wages. In 1907, there was the dockers’ and carters’ strike in Belfast. In 1910, cotton manufacturing went through an industry-wide lockout. In 1910, in May, dockworkers in Newport staged a strike. In the same year in July, railway workers in Newcastle staged a strike.

These were strikes that came after the era of “New Unionism” (1889–1891), characterised by peaceful strikes and protests, distinct from the marked militancy of the labour-revolt period.

<sup>8</sup> The Economist, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Webster, E. with Dor, L. *Recasting Workers’ Power: Work and Inequality in the Shadow of the Digital Age*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2023, p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> Darlington, Ralph, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Webster, Edward with Dor, Lynford, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Darlington, Ralph, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

The labour revolt came at time characterised by two other struggles – the suffragette movement and the struggle for Irish independence. The Liberal government under Prime Minister Herbert Asquith managed to diffuse these struggles on account of their lack of coordination. Also coming to the aid of Asquith's government was the palpable disconnect between trade unionism and politicisation.

The Liberal government's "New Liberalism" philosophy and framework of legislative reforms from 1906 to 1914 tried to ameliorate the social and working conditions of the working-class. Having entered a coalition with the Labour Party, the Liberal government was wary of neglecting and alienating the working-class.

Among some of the legislative reforms, the Liberal-Labour government introduced a system of compensation for workers, covering industrial diseases and injuries, in 1906. In 1908, it introduced an eight-hour working day in the mines. In the following year, it effectively legislated on weekly pensions funded from government taxation.

In the same year, it introduced a system of labour exchanges for the unemployed to secure employment. However, these social reforms had negligible effects on the working-class. Darlington noted that "Overall, poverty and hardship remained deeply ingrained facts of working-class life, with the Liberals' social reforms showing only little effect for many and 'arou(sing) no feelings of gratitude' among many workers".<sup>14</sup>

The Labour Party, ineffective as a workers' agent in the government coalition, was regarded by the working-class as an expression of the interests of official trade unionism. Its leaders, Ramsay MacDonald and others, discouraged militant industrial action, preferring formal arbitration and adjudication processes. Darlington maintained that "The significance of the period precisely lay in the polarisations that have developed between constitutional labour politics of gradualist reform from above and the notion that the working class could achieve its goal through industrial militancy from below".<sup>15</sup>

It is this sense of workers' insecurity, their precarity in the face of capital's evolving accumulation and exploitation strategies, and accommodationist state policies that are also the concern of Webster's critique. In the new neo-liberal economic order in the globalised digital age, the Global North and African countries have experienced a sharp decline in trade union membership. From 1996, Australia's trade union membership declined from 50 to 15 per cent, the USA's from 20 to 11 per cent, Germany's from 35 to 18 per cent and Sweden's from 78 to 68 per cent.

Webster argued that, in the new neo-liberal economic order, workers' structural power is constrained by four factors. These are, first, increased competition among workers globally. Second is intensified management control. Third, workers experience hostile strike regulations. Last, they face new forms of associational power in relation to traditional trade unions.

Consequently, workers in different countries have devised varied survival strategies. In Australia, they have fallen back on the modest social protection provided by the Australian wel-

fare system. In South Korea, workers resort to working harder, putting in overtime, and investing in individual insurance and pension schemes. In South Africa, workers have turned to survivalist-type strategies in the informal economy. Consequently, worker agency has markedly shifted, becoming less protected. As a result, "[t]heir 'structural power' to stop production had been weakened by increased labour competition, and so they began to look elsewhere to harness forms of 'societal power' to the new global order."<sup>16</sup>

Following Michael Burawoy's time typology of the marketisation of the global economy, Webster rests understanding of the evolution of capital's accumulation and labour exploitation strategies on his three waves of marketisation. The first wave, occurring from 1795 to 1914, saw to the marketisation of labour. The second wave, from 1914 to 1973, witnessed the marketisation of labour and the commodification of money. The current wave, stretching from 1973 to current times, is marketising nature, money, and labour. Primarily defining this new neo-liberal era is the outsourcing and relocation of production to low-wage countries. In this way, surplus value is increasingly created through low-paid, labour-intensive work in the Global South. It is appropriated by multinational companies and their financial backers sitting in the Global North.

So, capital resolves to overcome obstacles to accumulation by creating new patterns of exploitation and surplus value extraction. Webster and Burawoy, therefore, extend further theoretical understanding on the political economic evolution of capital, labour and resource exploitation, and the new forms of imperialism, from Lenin (*Colonialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*) and Kwame Nkrumah (*Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Colonialism*). Webster explains that this evolution is best understood through the theoretical lenses of exploitation (Marx) and commodification (Polanyi). As he further explains, they "...each operate as explanatory factors in the reconstruction of the new world order under neo-liberalism".<sup>17</sup> It is a neo-liberal economic order that is generating "...a rapidly globalising reserve army of labour".<sup>18</sup>

This is a reserve army of labour that is largely precarious, working under new, vulnerable forms of employment in informal industries. Webster's critique of the "end of labour" thesis is precisely about worker agency – the assumption traditionally arrived at that, with declining trade union representation, this is the end of worker agency.

However, the power resources approach posits that there are new forms of worker organisation and mobilisation that are emerging in informal economies. This is because workers on the margins or periphery continually make strategic choices in responding to new challenges and changing contexts. They conceptualise and form new structures of associational power in relation to traditional trade unions.

These new, innovative workers' forms of mobilisation and organisation grind against the perception that, in the digital age, workers are "atomised into micro or individual workplaces". In these spaces, it is then assumed that they are "not easily able to combine large numbers to bind worker power and confront employers".<sup>19</sup> As Webster asks: "To what extent they conform to

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 27–28.

<sup>16</sup> Webster, E. with Dor, L. op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

a counter-movement to liberalisation in the Global South remains to be seen. What is clear is that Southern workers are developing innovative responses to the challenge of an increasingly insecure world”.<sup>20</sup>

In the neo-liberal globalised and digital economic order, capital has become more mobile through financialisation and trade liberalisation. This has had the consequences of deskilling manufacturing processes and a growth of global logistics networks. This expansion of the new capitalist mode of production over the past fifty years led to the growth of a single labour market. Workers in the Global South entered this labour market unprotected, and without rights and benefits that workers in the Global North enjoy.

### THE NEW WORKER, THE OLD WORKER

However, critique of the new worker in the new neo-liberal economic order refuses to accept the concept of the new worker as encapsulated in the rigid perception of weakness. Webster maintains that worker categories such as worker, peasant, employed and self-employed are fluid. This is so because workers in the Global South make a living alternating among various livelihoods strategies. Henry Bernstein buttressed the point, maintaining that:

In practice what you have in African cities is a large group who simultaneously and ambiguously combine employment and self-employment [...] In the shantytowns are large numbers of individuals who are sometimes unemployed and work intermittently in wage labour in small workshops or performing services.<sup>21</sup>

Confronted with the large presence of precarious or vulnerable workers, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU) ventured to organise them. The exercise also aimed to close the gap between them and access to their rights and benefits as vulnerable workers. COSATU formed the Vulnerable Workers Task Team (VWTT).

The VWTT was made up of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), and the Street Vendors Alliance (SVA). The VWTT approached this organising exercise with the understanding that employment status was central to changing structures of employment, and also created possibilities for organising the self-employed, the wage worker, the employer and the own account worker.

The VWTT campaigned on five decent work demands, namely (i) The right to make or earn a decent living; (ii) Work security; (iii) Comprehensive social protection; (iv) Safe and healthy workplaces; (v) Full organisational rights for all workers. It targeted three categories of vulnerable workers: domestic workers, farmworkers and street traders. A fourth group that became affected by the VWTT’s work was migrant labour. Precarious work, whether formal or informal, took place in a variety of spaces, such as streets, worker homes or cyberspace.

Challenges in organising and mobilising domestic service largely

arose out of the nature of these workers’ work and workspaces. They were perceived as workspaces wherein it was challenging to perceive them as workers. Vendors and street traders were more concerned with how they were categorised – as street traders demanding to be seen and treated as workers. The VWTT demanded a new range of laws, whose implementation of rights asserted a sense of dignity for informal work. Consequently, these reforms sought to create a stable local economic environment.

The VWTT organised and mobilised precarious workers in five other sectors, namely local government, manufacturing, the platform economy, transport, and education. Organising and mobilising workers in the local government sector came within the context of the strain brought about by the implementation of the *iGoli* 2002 policy. The premise of this policy was outsourcing labour and services of the local government of Johannesburg, because of the need to indirectly cut costs.

Coming out of the neo-liberal macro-economic policy, Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), the Johannesburg City Council implemented public-private partnerships (PPPs), privatisation, and outsourcing labour, services and benefits of the city council to the private sector. *iGoli* 2002 sought to transform the role of the local state from indirectly providing services to facilitating and monitoring service delivery through contracts with the private sector. As Franco Barchiesi pointed out, local government turned into a “contracting state”.<sup>22</sup>

Webster maintained that “[f]or the bulk of those employed by the city council, the nature of the work was not about to change, instead *iGoli* 2002 was about to change the rules of the game by reintroducing apartheid-style contract labour”.<sup>23</sup> This was influenced and couched in the state’s confidence in its new macro-economic policy, GEAR. Political economist Vishnu Padayachee bore witness to this new-found confidence in neo-liberalism:

It was not unusual in the early 90s to hear senior ANC spokespersons arguing that the world had totally changed, and that those arguing for more radical or alternative economic solutions in that new globalised context were simply living in a bygone era.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, former President Thabo Mbeki openly embraced and supported PPPs and contracting out the state, to the point of actively inviting the private sector to participate in local governance. In a speech in 1998, Mbeki said:

But the central component of the relationship between government and the private sector has remained vague, ill-defined [...] How do we use our collective resources in ways which can deliver basic services to all our people, create jobs and grown in the economy? [...] For instance, the private sector has a significant capacity in the field of project management and infrastructure maintenance [...] there are new ways of delivering and managing infrastructure more effectively, based on international best practice. We are working with local authorities and government parastatals to find new ways of organising projects, so that the private sector can have a role in the different stages of planning, implementation, financing and management[...] Let me take this opportunity to invite the private sector to join us in

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Webster, E. with Dor, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Webster, E. with Dor, p. 56.

<sup>23</sup> Webster, E. with Dor.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 57.



investing in the necessary infrastructure provision as one of the key pillars for meeting basic needs and economic growth.<sup>25</sup>

Jo Beall, Owen Crankshaw and Susan Parnell noted the expansive negative effects of the implementation of PPPs, privatisation and outsourcing services in Johannesburg at the turn of the century. They pointed out that:

The impact of privatisation on the poor of Johannesburg and issues of conditions of employment, affordability for residents, and overall social justice are emerging as central challenges to democratic urban governance. Whether read from the macro, meso or micro scales, cities are not only sites of economic development, vibrant centres of social and cultural creativity, or sites of political innovation. They are also places of disadvantage and divisions, and can be divided along a range of axes, including class, race and ethnicity, gender, generation and length of urban residence.<sup>26</sup>

So precarious workers, particularly in the platform economic sector, devised innovative strategies in organising and mobilising themselves. Webster and his research team detailed comparative research on platform food couriers using motorcycles in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. They often formed app-based groups in organising themselves, with the groups serving as discussion groups, organising platforms, and bases for collecting savings and dispensing credit among themselves.

Some of them in Johannesburg managed to stage a protest in December 2020 on twelve demands. Some of these demands were increased delivery fees, safer routes, a halt to arbitrary suspension of courier accounts, improved safety and better in-trip support, to ban labour brokers, for Uber Eats to supply delivery bags and other equipment, and to be able to choose not to accept cash trips.

Although this protest was well-reported by the media, it failed to engage Uber Eats management with any degree of success, a point which further emphasizes comparisons of working conditions in the digital age with those of the industrial age. On this, Webster maintained that:

For all its app-enabled modernity, the gig economy resembles the early industrial age, where workers worked long hours in a piecemeal system, workplace safety was non-existent, and there were few options for redress. Despite payment systems and review systems, the sharing economy is truly a movement forward to the past.<sup>27</sup>

These similar forms of workers' organisation and mobilisation are well-documented in Darlington's *Labour revolt* in the industrial age. Following disillusionment with the Liberal-Labour coalition government's social reforms, industrial action in Britain between 1910 and 1914 took a decisively militant turn.

The Labour Revolt was defined by specific social, labour and political characteristics. Four out of ten working men were disbarred from the electoral support system, particularly young men, unskilled men and unmarried men who still lived with their parents. This provided fodder for workers' "...collective willingness to flout, challenge and defy established authorities".<sup>28</sup>

Considering that this category of young workers constituted the rank-and-file, it was particularly them who drove militancy in industrial action.

It was also especially the rank-and-file who had become disenchanted with traditional trade unionism, one of the hallmark features of the Labour revolt, and with the traditional bargaining processes. The Trades Board (1906–1914) resolved only 75 per cent of labour disputes. These bargaining and arbitration processes were also slow and generally unable to resolve workers' grievances.

The positive relations developing between traditional union officialdom and the state further drove a wedge between rank-and-file workers and trade unions. The state institutionalised and expanded its co-optation policy to trade union officials, as it moved more union officials into full and part-time posts in government departments. In 1912, the government created 374 posts for trade union officials in the Home Office, Board of Trade and National Insurance administration. In these posts, they administered social welfare services, making themselves intrusive into the workers' personal and social lives.

Consequently, various militant strikes took place between 1910 and 1914. There was the protracted strike of the South Wales coalfields in 1910 to 1911. In the summer of 1911, seamen, dockers and railways workers staged strikes. In Liverpool, general transport workers staged a strike. In 1913, there was the Midland metal workers' strike. In 1914, London building workers staged a lockout. These strikes were characterised by intersectional trade solidarity among workers from different factories.

There were also unity and amalgamation pacts among trade unions, which strengthened their collective power in strikes, bargaining, arbitration and negotiations. In 1910, the establishment of the National Transport Workers' Federation brought together numerous trade unions organised in ports across Britain. In 1913, the amalgamation of three existing trade unions created the National Union of Railwaymen. In 1913 and 1914, a formal attempt to link 1.5 million workers from mines, transport and railways into a Triple Alliance raised the prospects for coordinated strike action among its three affiliates.

These characteristics made these prospects collectively deserving to be termed the "labour revolt". Darlington reasoned thus:

...with its overall characteristic features of unofficial rank-and-file insurgency, solidarity action, defiance of trade union and Labour Party leaders, violent social confrontations, and challenges to the Edwardian economic and political system, the strike wave deserves to be termed a "Labour Revolt".<sup>29</sup>

## THE LEFT AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN THE INDUSTRIAL AND DIGITAL AGES

Labour revolt strikes and leadership were also markedly influenced by various leftist and socialist groupings. The radical left was disillusioned with the inadequacies of the Labour Party and trade union officialdom. Although socialist policies did not

25 Mbeki, T. *Africa – the time has come: selected speeches*. Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers and Johannesburg: Mafube Publishers, 1999, pp. 133 – 136.

26 Beall, Jo, Crankshaw, Owen and Parnell, Susan. *Uniting a divided city: governance and social exclusion in Johannesburg*. London: Earthscan Publications, 2002, pp. 8–9.

27 Webster, E. with Dor, L. p. 13.

28 Darlington, Ralph, p. 7.

29 Ibid.

capture the Labour Party and the trade union movement, they augured well with the activities and outlook of many workers.

Among the various leftist and social groups that influenced the labour revolt, there was the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Formed in 1893, it had 700 branches, with 28 000 paying members by 1913, and 1070 local government representatives by 1914. However, there was a section that was dissatisfied with the ILP's weak performance in parliament, and its sacrifice of socialist policies to assuage trade union officialdom and the Liberal Party.

The Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was the largest revolutionary Marxist organisation in Britain, formed in 1881. The SDF had resigned from the Labour Party in 1901 after it had failed to secure the adoption of a socialist programme. It then changed its name to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1908, and then to the British Socialist Party (BSP) in 1911. The Socialist Unity Conference of 1911 formed the BSP, with representatives from the SDP, some left-wing branches of the ILP, a network of clubs associated with *The Clarion* newspaper and various local independent socialist societies.

Old-guard leadership in the BSP disapproved of unofficial strikes. They believed that workers should focus on the ballot box and political action, through revolutionary-led parliamentary action. On the BSP, Darlington noted: "While they believed the party should support strikes on principle, they also insisted unions were of limited value in the struggle for socialism, with the impossibility of making any real gains while the capitalist system lasted."<sup>30</sup>

The Socialist Labour Party (SLP) came out of a breakaway from the SDF in 1903, formed by Scottish branches. It opposed working with existing trade unions because they were "hopelessly craft-based"<sup>31</sup> and were led by bureaucratic and conservative trade union leaders who sabotaged workers' struggle. Rather, it advocated for the formation of new revolutionary industrial unions that could serve as a means for fighting capitalism, and as the basis of a future socialist society. As Darlington noted, the SLP

...insisted that although political action and organisation was important, the main battle the working class had to fight was to organise industrially until it became strong enough to 'crack the shell of the political state and step into its place'.<sup>32</sup>

The labour revolt also constituted a strong women's movement, thus highlighting the "horizontal and mushrooming diversity"<sup>33</sup> of workers' struggles. Prominent amongst women's trade unions was the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), an all-women federation founded in 1906. When it was formed, it was regarded as "...a separate national women's federation as a necessary temporary form of organisation through which women could gain a sense of solidarity and overcome their fragmented and isolated position"<sup>34</sup>.

The NFWW had the largest concentration of membership in Scotland, with more than 55 000 women involved in industrial protest between 1911 and 1913. In May 1910, it staged a strike

over pay rates, with 150 non-union women textile workers involved. Other women-led strikes were the Kilbirnie Curtain Net Workers' Strike from April to December 1913; the Bermondsey Strikes of August 1911; the Bridport Grundy's Strike of February 1912; the Dundee Jute Workers' Strike from January to April 1912; the Chipping Norton Tweed Mill Strike of December 1913 to June 1914; the Garston Wilson's Bobbin Workers' Strike from May to August 1912; and the Young Workers' and Schoolchildren's Strikes of 1911.

## OF WORKERS, VIOLENCE AND THE STATE

The presence and role of violence in the relationship between capital, labour and the state appears and vanishes in astonishingly contrasting ways in the industrial and digital ages. It is both a clear confirmation of the Weberian relationship between the state, violence and the dominant class, and a theory not quite apparent in the post-colonial digital Global South.

Darlington describes in meticulous detail the willingness of workers to defend themselves from police brutality during the labour revolt. The Liberal government released legions of baton-charged policemen to break up protracted militant industrial strikes. These were apparent in almost all the strikes of 1910 to 1914.

In these organically worker-led strikes, the authority and leadership of traditional trade unions were eschewed. They found themselves tailgating the tempo of the strikes, "... either swept aside or desperately trying to 'ride the wave'".<sup>35</sup> For instance, the 1911 Manchester and Salford's two days' strike was carried out in defiance of trade union leaders.

In the 1911 two-day Liverpool seamen's strike, police brutality led to 100 injuries. This had been a strike joined by members of the National Union of Ships' Stewards, Cooks, Butchers and Bakers. It resulted in "...united action of workers 'above' and 'below' the ships' docks".<sup>36</sup>

Violence and police brutality clearly characterised the national miners' strike (February – April 1912); the Westside strikes (1911 – 1913); the North-East Lancashire cotton workers' lockout (December 1911 – February 1912); the Clydebank Singer strike (March – April 1911); the London tailors' and tailoresses' strike (April – June 1912); the London motor cab drivers', hotel workers' and musicians' strike (January – March 1913); the Cornish clay workers' strike (July – October 1913); and the London corporation strike (December 1913 – January 1914).

Capner, a trade unionist, encouraged striking workers to defend themselves against police brutality. In the same breath, he appealed against excessive police brutality. He goaded and pleaded thus: "If it comes to violence, for God's sake do it well. If it comes to a fight and the police use their batons, then by God we will use something too. If it comes to batons, then let them have batons for all you are worth".<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

These patterns were equally apparent in many women's strikes. Women and young girls on strikes were also subjected to police charges and imprisonment. These were apparent in the women workers' strikes (1910 – 1913); the Neilston Textile strikes (May – June 1910); the Vale Leven United Turkey Red strike of December 1911; the Kilbirnie Curtain Net Workers' strike (April– September 1913); the Bermondsey strike of August 1911; the Bridport Grundy's strike of February 1912; the Dundee Jute Workers' strike (January – April 1912); the Chipping Norton Tweed Mill strike (December 1913 – June 1914); and the Garston Wilson's strike (May – August 1912).

Often, women's strikes were spontaneous, and this was because:

...it was the release of suppressed frustration that gave the strikers their wild enthusiasm: they could not even voice their grievances, they knew nothing of how to run a strike; they just knew that the conditions of their existence were intolerable and they would no longer put up with them without protest.<sup>38</sup>

What particularly triggered the state to allow violence to be meted out against workers was how economically expansive the effects of the strike were. The militant industrial actions almost crippled the economy. During the London Transport strike of July to August 1911, 77 000 London transport workers participated. A joint strike committee that had been set up issued permits to restrict movement of goods. Only essential goods to hospitals, orphanages and public health bodies were allowed to move. This strike "...represented a vivid display of power exercised within the transport disputes".<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, perishable goods quickly got rotten, particularly in the early August 1911 heatwave with temperatures of 98.6°F (36.7°C). This particularly affected meat, butter, vegetables and fruit, which quickly rotted in ships and on wharfs, as 10 000 workers marched in the heatwave.

There was even fear that newspapers would stop printing because of newsprint shortages as a strike of distribution workers joined in. Also, there was a threat of petrol shortages affecting private and commercial motor vehicles and the London Underground. The strike, directly and indirectly, caused approximately 200 000 Londoners to cease work.

To that effect, the *Daily Mirror* commented that London was "almost face to face with famine, the docks of the longest part in the world a wilderness, parts of the city in a state of siege, food supplies cut off".<sup>40</sup> The editorial of the *Daily Mirror* of 11 August, 1911, further protested that, "six or seven million of people cannot be expected to submit to starvation at the behest of a comparatively small minority who have chosen to proclaim war on their countrymen".<sup>41</sup>

And yet in the digital age in the Global South, there is almost a mute on violence in workers' industrial actions. Whether it is workers employed in the formal, mainstream economy, or precarious workers earning livelihoods in the informal economy, there is a mute on violence, despite the state's readiness to unleash violence on them.

Webster and Dor maintain that, particularly in post-apartheid

South Africa, this is due to the co-option of trade unions into the state. Trade unions in the past allied in principle with the liberation movement against the apartheid system, forming a strong and united anti-apartheid front. This resulted in the trade unions' identity fusing with the post-apartheid former liberation party turned ruling party in the post-apartheid government.

In this alliance after apartheid, trade unions had relied, for a long time, on sectoral bargaining to secure their power. On that route:

They became prisoners, as it were, of the institutional framework they negotiated, losing their ability to question the wider social organisation of society, the increasing numbers of precarious workers, and the rapidly deepening inequalities of the neo-liberal period.<sup>42</sup>

Also, they became embedded in political battles and leadership political ambitions, to the neglect of basic workers' interests and organisational work. Trade union officialdom also became beneficiaries of the new neo-liberal economic order through investment companies formed on their behalf, and on the backs of their financial contributions. Investing in property insurance, electronics goods companies, luxury hotels and rental cars, trade union leaders, past and present, became ridiculously wealthy.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Recasting workers' power* and *The labour revolt* are lessons on the evolution of capital's accumulation and exploitation strategies, and how labour insists on its organisation and mobilisation strategies, and invest new possibilities in the face of the crippling neo-liberal order that has produced precarious workers. However, more importantly, they are lessons on the circular journey capital takes in its evolution. While Darlington shows us this in the labour-capital-state battles, Webster highlights how the working conditions of the worker in the digital age are as harsh and enfeebling as they were in the industrial age.

*Labour revolt* is written with an astounding mix of archival research and challenging and challenged secondary material. *Recasting workers' power* comes out with theoretical clarity, grounded in solid empirical evidence, on the new, clever and innovative ways precarious workers organise and mobilise themselves in an age where it is assumed that labour has ended.

Both books open vistas into new research challenges on how to question and research the new multiplicity of challenges facing the worker today, in the Global South and North. How do we question and find the worker in a post-Covid, home-grown structural adjustment South Africa, where even the informal economy's existence is challenged? Has the worker resorted to parliamentary democracy in the UK to organise and mobilise, further rendering themselves invisible as a counter-hegemonic force? Will the Labour Party prove itself not too dissimilar in its reformist commitments to the Liberal government, prioritising capital? These are, perhaps, some of the questions *Labour revolt* and *Recasting worker's power* have opened up as vistas for new research on the working man and woman in the digital age returned to the industrial age ■

38 Ibid

39 Ibid., p. 93.

40 Ibid., p. 96.

41 Ibid.

42 Webster with Dor, p. 32.