

***Workers of the Empire, Unite: Radical and Popular Challenges to British Imperialism, 1910s-1960s.* Edited by Yann Béliard and Neville Kirk (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2021)**

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Imperial history has undergone something of a boom over the last two decades, labour history less so. Perhaps because of this, the place of labour in the empire is often overlooked and this edited volume by Yann Béliard and Neville Kirk aims to bring the two together by offering an integrated approach to labour and empire during decolonization.

What exactly is meant by ‘labour’ is not obvious though. The editors’ stated aim is ‘to consider labour in the widest possible definition’ (p. 2), though it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the chapters represent a traditional reading of labour history: the organized labour movement, political organizations orientated towards that movement, and prominent figures associated with it. This is not a bad thing. Political parties that held sway over large parts of the world and organizations with memberships running to the hundreds of thousands are deservedly objects of the study.

The book is divided into two broad thematic and chronological sections containing nine chapters, plus a conclusion by Kirk drawing some broad conclusions from those nine chapters and an afterword by Béliard identifying several useful areas for future research.

Chapters in the first section ‘Contesting Imperialism’ are primarily studies of prominent political figures in the British labour movement in the 1910–1940s with a welcome focus on women in that movement. These biographies detail individuals who kept anti-colonial ideas alive in organizations that were mostly proempire, or favoured ‘enlightened imperialism’ (p. 278), Kirk’s illuminating phrase for the approach of the Labour Party.

Collectively, the chapters are a good illustration of how anti-colonial ideas could shift, change, and sometimes morph into something else entirely. Marie Terrier’s chapter on Annie Besant discusses how she first went to India as a theosophist who sought to reinvigorate the country’s spiritual ideas, but this led her into the nationalist movement. Remarkably, she was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 and she appealed directly to the workers she had previously struggled alongside in Britain to support self-government in India.

Sylvia Pankhurst had a similarly complex political trajectory, ending up as an admirer of Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie. Yann Béliard’s chapter details her role in publishing the *Workers’ Dreadnaught*, a communist newspaper that circulated far beyond the radical East London milieu in which it originated. Béliard situates the newspaper in a transnational flow of information, with correspondents dotted around the world, and argues that it advocated an innovative kind of anticolonial politics that went beyond a moral critique. Nicholas Owen looks at communists in the interwar period more broadly, examining the efforts of the Communist Party of Great Britain to organize popular anti-imperialism. Poor relations with the Communist Party of India, sudden ideological shifts, and a failure to recruit Indian residents in Britain meant that these efforts had disappointing results.

Some figures were even less consistent in their politics. Matt Perry's chapter examines the visit undertaken by the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson, well-known for her role in the Jarrow March, to India in 1932 and her subsequent critique of British rule at a time when Labour's position disappointed many Indian nationalists. Her anti-colonialism, however, was subsequently reversed when she became a government minister. British Labour MP Fenner Brockway and French socialist Marceau Pivert were consistent anti-imperialists though. Quentin Gasteuil's study of the two broadens the book's focus from the British Empire and shows how both maintained anti-colonial political currents in parties officially committed to the empire and supported each other in this, though neither was able to work consistently with people within colonies.

The focus turns to trade unions and the post-Second World War years in the second section 'Labour, Decolonisation and Independence'. Gareth Curless examines the experiences of workers in Sudan and efforts by the colonial government to socialize Sudanese workers by imposing policies initially designed for industrial workers in Britain. He shows how Sudanese workers appropriated these policies in unexpected ways to make demands on the colonial government, though this movement was sharply curtailed by repression after Sudanese independence. Labour unrest also preceded decolonization in Kenya and Dave Hyde looks at the rural strike wave that spread across tea and coffee plantations in Kenya in 1960. These strikes overtook and surprised the trade unions in the colony and Hyde argues that they reveal the arrival of a rural proletariat.

Tom Sibley returns the focus to biography with a study of the fascinating figure of Albert Fava, a Spanish Civil War veteran who briefly became the leader of Gibraltar's labour movement in 1948 before his abrupt deportation. The physical removal of union militants was common practice in imperial industrial relations, and Sibley's study is a good illustration of how effective this tactic was.

The final chapter by Evan Smith looks at how communist parties in Australia, Britain, and South Africa responded to the era of decolonization and ranges impressively widely geographically. Transnational connections between these parties were influenced by settler colonialism, and the Communist Party of Great Britain claimed a leading role in combatting imperialism because of its location in the metropole, which strained relations with its Australian counterparts.

As the above chapter summaries suggest, there is tension between the stated aim of the book and its contents. The blurb claims the book 'focuses on the role played by working people . . . in the dissolution of the British Empire' and elsewhere the editors emphasize the importance of understanding the involvement of the 'labouring masses' (p. 287) in decolonization and the benefits of adopting a 'bottom up approach' (p. 274). It is only really the chapters by Curless and Hyde that do this. Most of the other chapters are actually about how left-wing politicians and political activists were involved in anti-colonialism and decolonization. Moreover, the focus is on political figures from the metropole, with the exception of the Indian communist M.N. Roy in Owen's chapter.

This book presents a series of carefully researched and wide-ranging case studies that together reveal how the British left engaged with and agitated for the end of the empire. This is a useful contribution to our understanding of decolonization. It is a political rather than a social history of decolonization though, and much remains to be said on the role of working people in the dissolution of the British Empire.