

# Labour History Resurgent?

## Terry Brotherstone

**Live Working or Die Fighting:  
how the working class went global**  
Paul Mason, Vintage paperback, London, 2008

A paperback edition of Paul Mason's 'Live Working or Die Fighting: how the working class went global' is most welcome. More accessibly than anything else I know, it offers a way forward for labour historians still largely locked in an agenda established in the 1960s – when E. P. Thompson inspired a generation with his 'The Making of the English Working Class' and his call for "History from Below". When Mason's book was first published in 2007, *The Guardian* plugged it narrowly as, "required reading for the Seattle brigade". It is that, but the book also deserves serious attention from those who think they already know all that matters about labour history. By a journalist rather than by a professional historian, it is both readable and timely. The fact that the author was, and is, a BBC *Newsnight* economics commentator perhaps limits his ability to draw the theoretical and political conclusions his work points to. But that needn't stop others from doing so.

When the book first appeared, Mason was interviewed by former sociology professor, Laurie Taylor, for Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed* programme.

A cacophony of recorded noise introduced the show: the sound of protesting textile workers in Bangladesh, explained Taylor – the sort of sound we can expect to hear more frequently as workers in newly industrialising areas of the world organise to fight for their rights. Could it be, Taylor asked, that Asia, Latin America and Africa in the 21st century might become like 19th century Europe, with workers developing a similar trade union movement? This question, a critical one, was prompted by the form of Mason's book.

It has eleven main chapters, all of which begin with one of the author's early 21st century journalistic encounters with workers in different corners of

the world. Each of these accounts is juxtaposed with a well-researched retelling of an episode from the history of the European or American workers' movement. The situation of Chinese sweatshop workers in 2003 leads into an account of the 1819 Peterloo massacre (at St Peter's Fields, Manchester, four years after the battle of Waterloo). Then Indian textile workers in 2005 introduce the story of the 1831 Lyon silk workers' revolt. The third chapter time-travels from Nigerian slum-dwellers in 2005 back to the Paris Commune; and the fourth translates the reader from the struggle of Iraqi oil workers in 2006 to episodes in the US labour-movement history of the 1870s and 1880s. Interviews with Canary Wharf immigrant cleaners, organising for trade-union recognition in 2004, head up an account of the heyday of international syndicalism; and Indian car workers Mason encountered a year later are paired with the emergent Chinese workers' movement of the 1920s. The author then turns to Latin America, which he visited at various times between 2003 and 2006, giving an account of the Bolivian neighbourhood risings and comparing them to the events in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. Finally, the experiences of the Argentine working class prompt an account of movements for workers control in Italy, France and the USA in the interwar years.

Taylor began by asking Mason which of his recent encounters he most vividly remembered. Mason replied:

"[In 2004] I was sitting in ... a hotel room in China for

an unauthorised meeting with some factory workers who were represented by a labour lawyer. That's as near as you get to being represented by anybody. When they walked in ... every single one of them was missing a limb ... One of them, out of the six, had a prosthesis – everybody else couldn't afford one – and they told me the story of how they'd been injured by really crazy, avoidable accidents. And then [they were] immediately sacked because the practice in the sweatshop sector of the Shenzhen industrial sector ... is not to take out insurance for the workers... [Yet] it struck me that these guys were part of probably the most decisive social force in the 21st century – that's the Chinese, and latterly the Indian, workforces – a billion strong and making history in many senses, economically, culturally even, but not yet politically."

But what of more positive experiences of organisation rather than of impotence in the face of maltreatment? Mason responded:

"The developing world is awash with examples of workers organising both in the slums they live in and in the factories they work in... [But] very few of the struggles among the newly formed workforces of China, India, Latin America and Africa has reached the level yet of some of the historical symbolic acts that I write about [in 'Live Working and Die Fighting'] – Peterloo, the Lyon uprising of 1831. We're not quite there yet, but the reason I've written the book is I'm absolutely certain that something will happen and I don't want people to be as shocked as they were when, in 1831, the Lyon silk-workers seized the city. It provoked the first Europe-wide panic about class."

Taylor's second guest on the programme was a research fellow from Sussex University's Institute of Development Studies (an academic field less popular today than it was in the 1960s when 'development' – then based on the idea that the miscalled Third World would follow the 'model' of the already-industrialised world – was all the rage). Was there perhaps a 'top-down' answer, which would offset the need for the disruptive 'bottom-up' struggles Mason seems to be predicting? And could the independent study which the developmentalist had been involved in (a study which produced the 2006 Ethical Trading Initiative's 'Ethical Trading Report') point the way? Already one could hear – knocking metaphorically at the studio door – those figures so beloved of troubleshooting liberal academics, 'progressive' employers (versed in the jargon of 'partnership') who see commercial advantage in 'their' workers feeling content and properly represented. Sure enough these shining knights soon entered the discussion, with Mason joining in by recounting a debate he had chaired in which one such multinational employer called for trade unions to become global so that he would have a representative 'interlocutor' to mediate his relations with an international workforce.

The BBC discussion was a sign of new times, in which the fashion for a sociology that declared the "end of class", and sustained the nonsense that "there is no alternative" to neo-liberal, global capitalism, is fading, or certainly losing credibility; and it is a tribute to Mason's book that it has brought this into the open. But there is also an echo of a more radical discourse in his work. In 1892, when Frederick Engels agreed to a reissue of his 'The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844', he wrote a new preface recognising that times had hugely changed over the intervening 50 years, but defending the relevance of his book on the grounds of his approach to what was often called 'The Social Question'. And he observed that the response of the middle classes to the threat of social upheaval had changed too; that one-time 'abomination of abominations', socialism, "has not only become respectable, but has actually donned evening dress and lounges lazily on drawing-room *causeuses* [French 'love seats' or mini-sofas]. This shows the incurable fickleness of that terrible despot of 'society', middle-class public opinion,

and once more justifies the contempt in which we socialists of a past generation always held public opinion."

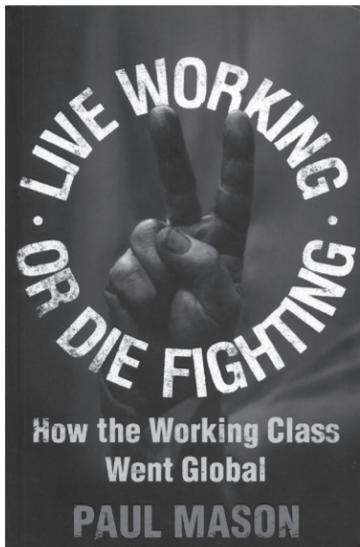
As a symptom of something real beneath the surface of 'public opinion', Engels wrote, serious socialists should pay attention to these changes, but, he argued:

"What I consider far more important than this momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism, and even more than the actual progress Socialism has made in England generally ... is the revival of the East End of London. The immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpor of despair, has returned to life, and it has become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism'..."

One of Mason's chapters deals with the 'New Unionism', the organisation of the unemployed in trade unions in Britain in the 1890s, which led to major class struggles and, early in the 20th century, the foundation of the Labour Party, a radical step in its day and one that was to ensure that a form of class politics – albeit a pale reflection of the reality of the class struggle – was to prevail in Britain's parliamentary politics until the 1970s or 1980s. Mason brings out – as Engels who died in 1895 could not have done – the way in which the new phase of capitalism emerging at the end of the 19th century found its opposite in the internationalisation of the labour movement. For Mason, the London dock strike of 1889 – introduced with his account of how, in 2004, the immigrant Canary Wharf cleaners knew nothing of the Wapping printers' strike of 1986, far less the history of Tom Mann and "the dockers' tanner", and how powerful they found even a smattering of that knowledge – is only part of a much wider story.

The chapter moves on to France: Victor Griffuelhes and the radical Paris shoemakers, Aristide Briand and Fernand Pelloutier's 'Revolution Through General Strike' and the formation of the 'Confédération Générale des Ouvriers'. It visits the 'Red City' of porcelain-producing Limoges, where the violent events of 1905 were triggered by workers in an American-owned factory standing up against managers who thought they had inherited the *droit de cuissage* (the right to get between the legs) from feudal times. It covers the syndicalist movement in pre-World War I France, before moving to contemporaneous actions in Latin America, and on to Big Bill Haywood and the Industrial Workers of the World in the USA. Thence to Tom Mann's career in Australia and the strike, and battles, at the Broken Hill mines in 1908-09; to the Europe-wide unrest that began in Barcelona in 1909 and lasted until the eve of World War I; and to the Wobblies (IWW) 'Bread and Roses' strike in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912.

If it was the onset of this great movement in Britain that made talk of 'socialism' fashionable amongst the late-19th century middle classes (a 'socialism' that would act as a means of social *control* rather than 'bottom-up' universal liberation), in the Britain of the 1990s it was recognition that rampant neo-liberalism was endangering social stability that gave rise to another middle-class fad, this time echoed vociferously in key sections of the tabloid press. 'New Labour' thinking created the conversational buzz that contextualised a politics designed to rescue red-in-tooth-and-claw Thatcherism from its own implosion. 'Public opinion' found its latest fad to keep the dinner parties alive and consumerist luxury on the go. The term 'Socialism', emptied of its theoretical content by decades of bureaucratic welfarism, was now discounted; but the oxymoronic idea of a socially responsible capitalism (in which 'ethical business' has a central prominence) took its place.





But the link between Mason's book and Engels' preface goes beyond mere comparison. Theoretically speaking, Mason is no Engels, nor would he claim to be. But, in the socially explosive 1840s, when writing about the condition of the working class from his base in Manchester, Engels personally got to know the conditions at work and at home of the class he was writing about. Mason – taking advantage of his international journalistic remit – has visited, spoken to, and in a limited way perhaps, got to know workers all over the world in their homes and workplaces. By pursuing this method, he points the way to the sort of deeper empirical work that is needed as the basis for theorising the *agency* that can make “another world possible”. This may be of little interest to those concerned only with the excitement of simply *asserting* (often, to be sure, in courageous and creative ways) that ‘possibility’, far less to others locked into the rhetoric and forms of organisation of the 1960s and 1970s that centred on that long-tried and universally unproductive concept of “building the (revolutionary) party”. But Mason's work – and once again perhaps that of Engels – will be read more carefully by everyone who understands that there is empirical groundwork to be done to establish the nature of the (global) working class as it is *now*.

It was Engels who played a key part in assisting Marx to show how the working class is the creation and victim of capital, but is also capital's structural antagonist – an antagonist that can only assert and defend its own humanity by struggling against and ultimately overthrowing its oppressor. Further, they showed, for the first time in the history of class struggle, the interests of the oppressed class coincided with the needs of humanity as a whole to transcend the exploitation of class by class and create the conditions for the co-operative commonwealth (or ‘communism’ as properly understood). But simply to state that today is to reduce theory to dogma, a barrier to real human progress rather than an enabler of it. What does it mean in practice in the early 21st century, after all the defeats, false starts and disillusionments of the decades since this theorisation of agency was first understood in the 1840s? ‘Live Working or Die Fighting’ is the work of an individual (one constrained by the codes of the BBC, by whom he presumably wants to remain employed), Mason could hardly be expected to answer that question alone. To do so, must be both a *collective* task, and a *political* task, not one merely confined to journalistic description and commentary. ‘Live Working or Die Fighting’ gives an inkling of at least one aspect of what has to be done.

Mason's particular declared objective is to address the loss of historical knowledge that is taking place because of the sense (the illusion) that, in the very exceptional period from the 1940s to the 1980s, the Western labour movement had

accomplished the goals it was fighting for in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Canary Wharf workers need to know about Wapping and about the ‘New Unionism’, but they don't. Now that the storms are gathering over globalised capitalism – and it becomes clearer than ever that, if there really

is “no alternative”, then there is no human future in view at all – it is surely for those who recognise that we have entered a quite new period to find ways to accomplish in a 21st century way the task Engels set out on in the 1840s, and Mason hints at over a century and a half later.

To recognise the reality of the period – what the Marxist political theorist István Mészáros has defined as the *structural*, the truly *historic*, crisis not just of 19th and 20th century industrial capitalism, but of the much longer-lasting capital system itself – is to see that the forms of political organisation apparently appropriate to the 20th century, modelled on an often limited understanding of the 1917 Russian Revolution, are now entirely inappropriate. The protests of the “Seattle brigade” show that the will to fight remains, but perhaps not the theoretical perspectives to take the fight beyond protest. ‘Live Working or Die Fighting’ is not a programmatic statement for new forms of socialist organisation that can meet the needs of the emerging global working-class movement he writes about, but it is certainly relevant to those who want to participate in creating them.

Mason himself contextualises his book, explains how he came to want to write it, in an instructive and moving way; his conclusion is highly personal and the book's inspirational logic is thereby clarified. His father was a truck driver at a Lancashire electrical engineering factory by day, who played in a dance band by night. He was a trade unionist conscious that some of the separately-organised machine workers made twice the wages he did, and probably voted Tory. By the time he fathered Paul in 1960, he had bought their home – the first in his family to do so – but it had an outside toilet. Paul lived with his parents in this working-class community until he was 18, meeting no one who was not a trade unionist. He was used to Labour winning every election in the area. He lived through many industrial actions, including two miners' strikes, the second of which brought down a Tory government, but never saw a political demonstration or the waving of a red flag. The demands he was aware of were for decent working conditions, pensions, health care and sports facilities. Recounted memories of the Depression of the 1930s told him more about the meaning of history than any textbook or film, and formed the background to the demand articulated in various ways in the community for “socialism through evolution”.

This labour movement as it existed from 1945 to 1989, Mason argues, was very different from the one his book describes that stretched from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to World War II. The unions, allied with the employers and the nation states in the 1940s war against fascism, were rewarded, more or less effectively, with welfarism and an implicit social contract in which they

played a key role. The industrial democracy that had been built as an instrument of class struggle, with national variations, in the interwar years, for the most part continued only as a “parallel lifestyle, separate from but not opposed to that of the upper classes”, and even this eventually withered away, except perhaps in a few areas such as “the Welsh valleys ... the Tuscan hill towns [and] the Buenos Aires docks”.

By the time Mason's father died in 1986, the threat of mass unemployment had returned and governments were responding to shop-floor militancy by abandoning consensus, freeing capital to seek cheap labour transnationally, and – in the symbolic case of the air traffic controllers in Reagan's America – chaining trade unionists hand and foot. In Britain the last battle for “progress and evolution” was fought by the miners and lost in 1985. By the 1990s, neo-liberal policies were being pursued in the post-Stalinist states and even by governments that continued to call themselves ‘Communist’ in China and Vietnam.

In this self-conscious (but modestly presented) ‘life-story’ so much is encapsulated; it is a small-scale, very personal (but also typical) account of the sea-change in social opportunities and political attitudes that reflect, in an ‘advanced’ country, the underlying shifts in the tectonic plates of the capital system that have been at work since (say) the early 1970s. Such stories matter, particularly if they can be told in a way that – as Mason succeeds in doing – relates them to the much wider history of labour from which they have come. And even more do they matter if they can sharpen our minds in developing the theory necessary for us to understand the reality of the point in history that humanity has arrived at, in order to develop the thinking and forms of organisation that will enable the emergent ‘global’ working class to take ‘global’ society (in Mészáros's words) “beyond capital”.

Mason himself ends on a rather different and more romantic note. In his chapter on the Paris Commune he writes a good deal about Louise Michel, the poor poet-schoolmistress from bohemian Montmartre who, a prosecuting lawyer claimed, “from her lectern in her spare moments ... professed doctrines of free thought, and made her young pupils sing poems she had written, among which was a song entitled ‘The Avengers’.” He returns to her in conclusion, recounting a vision he imagined when covering the violently attacked protests at the 2005 G8 summit in Scotland. Against riot police got up like robocops were ranged, amongst many others, Latin American musicians, and dancers clad as fairies – symbolising the human rhythms to which the future must move and the touch of utopian magic that movement needs.

What Mason claims he saw in his mind's eye was “the young Louise Michel dancing to a samba band in a field outside the Gleneagles summit: her face ... painted and ... wearing pink fairy wings.” “She still,” he concludes, “has a lot to learn.” But the real value of his book is that it tells all of us with ears to hear and minds open to new thinking: “So have we all!” If ‘labour history’, so optimistically embraced by a generation of E. P. Thompson-inspired postgraduate students in the 1960s as a way to fight the class struggle from the archives, is to be rescued from the strangling embrace of the academy and the uncertain insights of postmodernism, it could do worse than to start with this book. And political activists too might take it as a set of signposts, not to all they need to know, but to one important area of essential knowledge.