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Book review : Bob Crow : Socialist, Leader, Fighter : a political biography

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Bob Crow: Socialist, Leader, Fighter: A Political Biography. Gregor Gall. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2017., ISBN: 978-1526100290, Price £20, hardback.

During his term of office as general secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) during 2002-2014 until his early death at the age of 52, Bob Crow became one of the most widely known British union leaders of his generation. His stress on the virtues of militant resistance towards employers and government contributed to RMT members on the railways and London Underground organising (on a proportionate basis) probably more ballots for industrial action, securing more successful 'yes' votes, and taking strike action more often than any other union. In the process, Crow became the *bête noire* of the tabloid media, with the *Evening Standard* claiming he was 'The Most Hated Man in London'.

So Gregor Gall's attempt to provide, from a sympathetic but 'critical Marxist' analytical standpoint, the first in-depth study of Crow's leadership of the union is to be welcomed. The first six chapters of the book provide a chronological account of Crow's life, beginning with his family background and early childhood in a working class east London/Essex family, influenced by his trade unionist and communist father. After leaving school at the age of 16 without any qualifications, Crow started work on London Underground, joined the Communist Party, and after becoming a local rep of the National Union of Railwaymen (predecessor of the RMT), developed into a confident radical leader who rose up the ranks. He built a base of support that led first to his election to the union executive, then assistant general secretary, and

finally general secretary in 2002 (to which he was subsequently re-elected unopposed twice). His victory, Gall argues, highlighted membership desire for a more forceful opposition to employers and government in an era of privatisation of the railways and part-privatisation of the tube. Once elected, he set about rebuilding the union with the development of a militant 'fighting union' brand and an Organising and Recruitment Centre.

The book convincingly argues that Crow was one of the most 'effective' union leaders of his time, bucking the stagnant/declining trend of other unions overseeing a growth of 25 per cent in the RMT's membership, and successfully improving pay and/or defending the conditions of his members, even through the years of austerity. To explain this effectiveness and impact, Gall adopts the analytical 'troika' of person, politics and power and their interaction. He posits it was Crow's combative and left-wing radical (self-described 'communist-socialist') *politics* that provided his motivation to act and lead, and a strong, confident *personality* and 'transformational' style of leadership that influenced how he did this. However, crucially, both of these features were anchored on the potential powerful strategic bargaining *power* of his union's members in a favourable and distinct industry-specific context (monopoly nature of rail services provided, immediate and dramatic impact of strike action, buoyant passenger market, etc), as well as relatively small, homogeneous and cohesive union with high levels of union density and union/occupational identity.

The book recounts not only Crow's *industrial* activity, but also his *political* associations, leaving the Community Party for a brief spell with Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, then as an independent leading the RMT away from the Labour Party with a view to trying to cultivate a new radical left party by supporting projects such as the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, No2EU electoral coalition, and National Shop Stewards Network. Although Crow's calls beyond the RMT for wider working-class resistance often had little resonance, Gall contends that under Crow 'there was a sense that the RMT went as far as an individual union could without becoming a political party as such', becoming the embodiment of radical Left oppositionism to neo-liberalism, the 'New' Labour project, and the age of austerity, with Crow as its figurehead (p.12).

The final three chapters assess Crow's importance, impact and legacy, drawing out some broader lessons from his leadership, as well as insights into the issues of power, ideology and material interests in employment and trade unionism. A number of interesting themes are explored, including the limits and potential of the power resources of workers both industrially and politically; the relationship between industrial militancy and political consciousness; the relationship of unions to the Labour Party; and the apparent mismatch between the behaviour of left-wing union leaders like Crow and classic theories of union bureaucracy.

Alas, there is an important methodological limitation that constrains the multi-dimensional nature of what is otherwise an admirable analysis, namely the paucity of original substantial empirical evidence. Gall reports he has long been an avid 'RMT

watcher' (p. 7) and journalistic commentator, and that the book's genesis was around for a long time, albeit it was Crow's death that spurred on the study. But unfortunately there is no direct interview testimony with Crow himself on which many issues could have been explored. More significantly, following a request from Crow's family after his death, the RMT's refusal to co-operate with any biography not commissioned by them meant Gall had no access to Crow's personal papers or the union's extensive internal documentation, nor access to interview the union's HQ staff, national officers, and leading lay reps such as national executive members, sections reps, AGM delegates, local reps, activists and members (apart from just twelve who are only briefly quoted). Plus, there are no interviews with managers or other key external figures such as previous London mayor Ken Livingstone. Instead there is an overwhelming reliance on material from mainstream newspaper articles (via an exhaustive list of statements/quotes) that has its own potential limitations of accuracy and bias.

As a consequence, notwithstanding the explicit attempt to locate Crow's leadership of the RMT within a wider context of a layer of left-wing union officers, reps and activists within the union nationally, the book is not really able, from this reader's point of view, to adequately convey the way in which their activism, militancy, and politics directly influenced Crow's own leadership style, as well as being reciprocally shaped by it, in a way that could put flesh on the bones of Upchurch et al's (2012) notion of 'political congruence' that Gall briefly mentions. So while Gall draws out the way in which Crow provided inspiration and encouragement to members to take action, and skillfully fronted strike ballots/action to win concessions, he does not

explore the central role of other union officers and lay reps/activists themselves in framing grievances, pushing for strikes, winning ballots, and mobilising members to take action to defend jobs and conditions.

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