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Labor’s Centrality Revisited

This volume of essays represents a fitting *festschrift* to the work of O. Nigel Bolland in the area of labor studies, more specifically, the politics of Caribbean labor. Not only is he deserving of such honor, but this volume typifies the kind of analytical, conceptual and thoroughgoing research which has been the hallmark of his own work.

What cannot be overlooked in this book is the absolute centrality of the role of labor. The fire-giving form of labor in the Caribbean has been foundational to the material and social lives of the richly diverse people of the region. In this book, as in the work of Nigel Bolland, there is no mistaking the contribution of labor to the making of Caribbean freedom and the lived experience of social justice.

Equally important in *Revisiting Caribbean Labor* is the unequivocal statement it makes about the pivotal contribution of women to the historic labor struggles of the region—contributions long marginalized by the orthodoxy of historiography in the region. Not only do these essays all address this lacuna in Caribbean labor history, but Constance Sutton, Rhoda Reddock and Lynn Bolles provide compelling arguments for rethinking traditional methodologies of historical investigation, to account for the silences imposed on the contributions of women and other marginalized constituencies.

This book also represents a good mix of new and updated scholarship on labor. Sutton, Reddock, Bolles and Jean Stubbs all use the main theme of the volume to reassess their earlier work in light of Bolland’s mediations on the politics of Caribbean labor. In addition, Antonio Lauria-Perricelli, John Dumoulin and Karla Slocum add new chapters to this ongoing discourse on labor in the Caribbean.

Lauria-Perricelli in looking at Puerto Rico in the 1930s powerfully draws our attention to the Caribbean perspective on labor struggles and protests. He argues that the significance of the strikes of that period is that they belong to a rich tradition of labor militancy on Caribbean waterfronts. As with all other contributions to this volume, he makes the point that class consciousness was not limited to men. Women in the tobacco industry and in the needlework shops struck and demonstrated throughout the decade of the 1930s. Indeed, Lauria-Perricelli argues that women were instrumental in planning and executing many of the building blocks of real class consciousness in Puerto Rico and the region. It would have been helpful, however, if Lauria-Perricelli had provided more sources to help his readers pursue some of the conclusions he was drawing from his interpretation of historical events.

In reviewing her earlier work on women’s struggles in the British colonial Caribbean, Reddock reveals the role played by Indo-Trinidadian women workers in central Trinidad. These struggles not only highlight the importance of their contribution, but disavow popularly held stereotypes about Indian female passivity. Reddock also provides similar evidence of the crucial role of African-Trinidadian female struggles in the defense of
labor leader Uriah Buzz Butler, which ultimately led to three weeks of national unrest in that country.

Sutton provides a richly textured ethnography of the 1959 sugar workers wildcat strike in Barbados. The workers were not yet convinced of the nascent indigenous leadership’s ability to confront planter power on the island or to act autonomously. The 1959 wildcat strike proved that the workers rejected representative democracy, believing that only direct action of workers could challenge elite power. It empowered them and affirmed their dignity as workers. What is also richly significant here are the ethnographic accounts of how people socially reproduced themselves during the course of the strike and how this unofficial action was sustained.

Focusing on sugar workers in Cuba, Dumoulin’s contribution is an important ethnographic study of agrarian reforms, which took place between 1959 and 1966. He observes, for example, that the status of women before the agrarian reforms was characterized by few avenues for cash earnings in the rural area of La Niña. These circumstances carried over to the subordination of women. Sugar workers in Cuba felt a sense of empowerment as a result of the agrarian reforms. Dumoulin’s work therefore provides us with some insight of how sugar shaped community life before and after the agrarian reforms of the period.

Bolles’s contribution raises the vexing issue of how the trade union movement could have such a blind spot about gender equality. She points to how the contribution of women to trade union formation in the region was rendered invisible. Her arguments resonate with those of Reddock’s in this regard. By the 1980s, however, Bolles records significant changes in the status of women trade unionists, particularly with the establishment of the Project for the Development of Caribbean women in trade unions. She also observes that by the 1990s several women in Caribbean trade unions had risen to top positions of leadership.

Slocum in her chapter discusses the pervasiveness of the banana industry in St. Lucia and tracks the emergence and industrial practices of the Banana Salvation Committee (BSC), particularly its no-harvest strikes. This industrial action helped to redefine the status of banana growers in class terms as quasi-laborers rather than self-employed farmers. As with Bolles’s work, Slocum also exposes the contradictions around gender, but notes the failure of the BSC to attend to matters of class dynamics internal to the farming population. She makes a strong case for being sensitive to the globalizing imperative, while being attuned to local dynamics.

Finally, Stubbs’s contribution to this book is a return to the theme of labor and Cuban tobacco. The importance here is Stubbs’s concentration on the dynamics of the intersection of race, class and gender in the tobacco industry between 1850 and 2000. She expands her work to take into account both on- and off-island cigar history. Stubbs then looks at the rise and demise of the Cuban cigar industry in Florida, in the process of tracking the critical role race played in bifurcating the Cuban community and exacerbating class tensions.

In a touching afterword, O. Nigel Bolland reflects on the importance of history, political consciousness and the continuation of the struggle for human emancipation. He, like C. L. R. James, whose work influenced Bolland, remains convinced of the absolute centrality of Caribbean workers to global developments. Bolland argues further that, as scholars, our understanding of history could contribute to clarifying the issues and offering solutions to the problems that plague the region of the Caribbean. Then in his characteristically quiet yet firm way he offers the following admonition: “To achieve this [capacity for clarifying and problem-solving] we must write without jargon, nuance our studies so as to make them relevant to these problems, and make our work accessible in the region” (p. 140).

Revisiting Caribbean Labour is a small book, but clearly it delivers a powerful message.

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