

With the Workers

Bruce Laurie

Ben Hamper, *Rivethed: Tales from the Assembly Line* (New York: Warner Books 1991)

Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its Back* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 1991).

READING THESE LABOUR MEMOIRS of Ben Hamper and Thomas Geoghegan called to mind Len DeCaux's *Labor Radical*, one of the most inspired books in this genre. In it, DeCaux charts a plebeian epic that begins in middle-class Belfast around the turn of the century and continues through Harrow, where the son of a church official began to question the stifling conservatism of his public school teachers and peers. Several forces conspired to drive the budding revolutionary inexorably leftward — a stint at Oxford during World War I where he fell under the influence of Ruskin College socialists and labourists, the Bolshevik Revolution, a fortuitous trip to Italy in 1920 to witness the factory takeovers. By mid-war DeCaux had already chosen sides in the class war, enlisting in the army of labour as a sort of aide-de-camp doing picketline duty for the miners and other union militants. It dawned on him that this was no light decision. He was, after all, a man of impeccable bourgeois credentials who chose to "identify with a class to which he didn't belong ...," a social point driven home again and again in face-to-face contact with his adoptive working-class comrades, who "treated him with reserve." A union chairman inadvertently rubbed his nose in his class pedigree by "calling me 'sir.' It rankled," recalled DeCaux with characteristic understatement. A solution to this dilemma began to emerge in conversations with American and Canadian students at Oxford, few of whom approved his project of joining the working class, but most of whom agreed that it was easier in the United States where politicians flaunted their popular origins, businessmen invented impoverished pasts, and workers needed all the help they could get. So in spring 1921 DeCaux hopped a steamer for the US, beginning an odyssey that would take him from pick and shovel work in the 1920s to the editorship of the *CIO News*. DeCaux not only signed on with the working class, he helped give it shape and form at decisive historical moment.

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Joining the working class figures in these works, but in decidedly different ways. If Thomas Geoghegan's experience is any guide, joining the working class is no longer so prosaic as in DeCaux's day. If, on the other hand, becoming a labour partisan means dealing with the likes of Ben Hamper one wonders why anyone but a fool or misanthrope would try such a stunt. Hamper's is an interior view of the shop floor from the perspective of an angry and self-pitying son of working-class Flint with a cultivated fondness for drugs, liquor, and junk food together with an ornery, independent persona that makes personal intimacy difficult and sustained friendship all but impossible. Though often described as the book version of Michael Moore's, *Roger & Me*, his memoir is more like a dose of scream therapy in print. This brooding loner stands in sharp contrast to Geoghegan, a moralistic and reflective labour lawyer unapologetically bourgeois in taste, but a genuinely sympathetic figure who likes and even admires his plebeian clients. He is a latter-day New Dealer with an institutional perspective on the economic horrors that haunt workers and the bureaucratic nightmare that is labour relations in advanced [sic] capitalist society. His mission is to sever the shackles of labour law in the name of rehearsing the labourism of the 1930s.

Hamper is an unlikely labour journalist, if not an unlikely industrial worker. He is, after all, the most recent in an unbroken line of "shoprats" that extends back to his grandfathers, who in the 1930s, worked the line for Buick and Chevrolet, respectively. His father tried without success to cheat the family legacy, doing odd jobs in and around Flint but never quite resisting the assembly line. Perhaps he was too restless to hold a steady job. If we are to believe his son, he undoubtedly was a hard living man with a drinking problem, weakness for women, and disrespect for his wife, whom he left several times and deserted for good in the midst of her eighth pregnancy. The elder Hamper was an equally feeble father, who, like many workers of his generation, insisted that he slaved on the line to spare his sons the same indignity. So determined was he to break the young buck who was his eldest boy that he threatened to send him off to a military academy but had to settle for a Catholic school, the next best thing in Flint. All to no avail. Young Hamper eluded the spit-shine regime of military school but not his destiny as a "shop rat." As a high school student in the mid-1970s, he went through drug after drug and a predictable trail of mishaps, not the least of which was impregnating his first love, which enforced a premature exit from high school and an early marriage. Forced to support his family, Hamper in 1977 abruptly dropped plans to pursue a career as a disc jockey or ambulance driver and made his peace with Hamper custom by applying for a job at General Motors. A few months later he got the call for a post on the assembly line at GM's Truck and Bus Division, a job that failed to salvage the troubled marriage but did launch a nine-year career that ended in 1986 when Hamper was diagnosed with acute "agrophobia," a form of (job induced?) anxiety that left him disabled, dependent on heavy medication, and a refugee from GM. This memoir, which consists of pieces written between 1986 and 1991, covers Hamper's hitch in the trenches of the world's largest industrial corporation, which only last

year somehow lost over \$6 billion. How one can lose six billion of anything and still be something is a novelty we might all ponder. In any event Ben Hamper helps us account for GM's limp toward the abyss.

Hamper equates working the line to "being paid to flunk high school the rest of your life." Whatever else the rapidfire pace of production did to Hamper, it did very little for his attitude. His GM is a contemptible place run by frontline managers and supervisors whose greatest vice is drug dependency and greatest virtue is venality, by which I mean that they can be induced to flexibility. Higher levels of management, if it can be called that, avoid the foibles of their subordinates but have shortcomings of their own, not the least of which is a gift for public relations worthy of Mr. Rogers, the children's television celebrity. Their one notable contribution to quality, the new buzz word of the 1970s in a sinking industry with a well deserved reputation for shoddy production, had to do with a contest to name "quality cat," the plant mascot. A few days later management trotted out "Howie Makum," a cuddly creature in cat-like dress who paraded around the floor to the taunts and jeers of the assemblers, only to disappear for a few months because a prankster made off with his arms and legs.

Hamper does not have much of a relationship with Howie's persecutors. He runs into them at bars, wrestling arenas, and bowling alleys and sometimes at Tiger stadium, but shopmates remain shadowy figures. More often they are dark. Hamper alternately describes them as "assholes," "crazies," "rednecks," and "violent types," obsessed with hunting, mud wrestling, drugs, fast women, and, of course, cheap liquor, which can be had on the shop floor at a premium. Mostly they communicate in rough language through stale breath and a haze of Chesterfield smoke. A glaring exception is Bob-A-Lou, a quietly decent man with a big heart, alas too big and decent to make it with women; those who do score with women, in Hamper's view, tend to be "utter cretins." A few others struggle mightily to kick habits of one sort or another, only to slip into other addictions. Hank, for one, vacillated between coughing through long and tiresome discourses on "female anatomy" and naive pronouncements on the "virtues of celibacy" as taught by Christ, the lord.

Yet for all his cynicism and independence Hamper does make friends, if not out of charm then out of necessity. General Motors, after all, is no high school for adolescents to work out their fantasies, but a tyrannical workplace that can evoke the cooperative spirit of the most trenchant individualist. Hamper quickly learned what the labour historian Eric Hobsbawm once called "the rules of the game," gambits of all descriptions to ease the drudgery of work. For his part Hamper got a quick initiation to "doubling up," in which at least two workmates learn one another's job so that one can spell the other during the shift. Hamper doubled up with several fellow workers in different departments, most memorably with Dale, who became so proficient a partner that they graduated from an hour on and an hour off to "to a half day on, a half day off." Dale would sleep four hours; Hamper would use the time to draft his column for Michael Moore's *Detroit Voice*, or slip

out to his pickup truck to nurse a Bud. Foremen who caught on to the scheme sometimes broke up the teams by transferring one of the partners; more often they simply cut their charges a lot of slack. Particularly hard-nosed supervisors, on the other hand, could usually be bribed for the price of a six pack, which came easy to Hamper and easier still to the foremen, in what can only be described as a primitive form of industrial crime between consenting adults.

Hamper also found himself dependent on his union, the United Auto Workers. Not that he exhibits much of a union or even class consciousness, even though he is keenly aware of the heroism of the earlier generation (his grandfathers' as it turned out) that built the UAW. His class consciousness takes the form of social ridicule closely akin to the putdown humour popularized by "Saturday Night Live," as when he donned a t-shirt emblazoned with "Roger, let's go bowling," in anticipation of a rare plant visit from GM president Roger Smith. Or when in the wake of breaking in two new partners for "doubling up," he proclaimed, "Four hours' work, eight hours' pay." Such actions not only freed up time to catch the Tigers on the big screen in Mark's Lounge, but also gave the satisfaction of "outsmarting all those management pricks with their clean fingernails and filthy bonuses." The union brought more concrete satisfactions on and off the shop floor. On the floor the UAW was the only real check on management power, a sort of last resort when Hamper's wit and cunning came up short. Intervention on the part of his union committeeman twice got Hamper transferred to better jobs and once headed off a certain firing. Hamper never was fired, but did endure four layoffs in his first few years. Here, too, it was the union to the rescue, but not by itself.

As recent historiography suggests the postwar accord among labour, capital, and government had a public and a private dimension. The first involved relatively modest pensions, unemployment, and disability benefits, supplemented in recent years with payments for job loss due to foreign competition. The second involved master union contracts in basic industry with comparatively generous wage packages as well as welfare provisions of various kinds, some of which, like supplementary unemployment payments, enhance public provisions. In places like Flint it was this second aspect of the accord that made the auto factories an irresistible force for men like Hamper and his forbears. No job in town paid quite so well, and none ever would. When in 1977 Hamper succumbed to siren assembly line, the starting rate stood at around \$12.00 an hour for a weekly income of about \$400, and for "accomplishing nothing." To hear him tell it, this was the American equivalent of the adage of the Polish working class under communism: "We pretended to work and they pretended to pay us," except that this was not pretence. More to the point, from Hamper's jaundiced perspective, it was too good to be true, all the more so given the chronic goofing off and doubling up. One day, while waiting for the line to get started, he and Dave, his co-worker and partner in doubling, stole away to Hamper's apartment for a beer break. Several six packs later Dave threw open a window to curse the "sorry bunch of losers!" in the neighbourhood, screaming

"\$12.82 an hour! I'm makin' \$12.82 an hour to drink Rivethead booze and listen to Rivethead rock n' roll."

Hamper was no less mystified by the seemingly generous benefits that accompanied unemployment. Laid off four times in his first five years, he drew an unemployment check of \$377 biweekly, plus \$80.00 in supplemental unemployment benefits, and following his first layoff, a lump-sum Trade Readjustment Act payment of \$2700. "Hell," he snorted "being rehired would effectively mean taking a cut in pay." Hamper got through the subsequent layoffs without another TRA windfall but with enough income in unemployment and s.u.b. payments to satisfy his capacious appetite for cheap beer, greasy hamburgers, and not a few drugs. Is it any wonder that Hamper thought of layoffs as "paid vacations," or that the otherwise defensible provisions of the privatized welfare state come off as a scam?

What are we to make of such a toothache of a man so adept at bearing his class injuries and making a mockery of the what remains of the welfare state? Is he a victim, and of what, or his own worst enemy? A working stiff to be pitied? An unemployment cheat bilking the system for what it will yield? Perhaps all of these and more if we are to judge from the recent news that a leading Hollywood studio bought the rights to *Rivethead* for a cool \$100,000, plus an additional \$400,000 or so if it reaches the silver screen. Who will play Hamper is anyone's guess. John Belushi's passing, I have to believe, makes Mike Ditka the likely frontrunner.

I could not resist the more depressing thought that the cynicism and ignorance that pervade Hamper's Flint are even more widespread. Thomas Geoghegan encountered timid and intimidated workers in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and West Virginia mining hamlets. He sketches pathetic profiles of steelworker wives in Pittsburgh who attribute industrial decline to union greed; Teamsters who put up with fraud and abuse for fear of losing their pensions; metal workers who believe that testifying against their employer in court will somehow jeopardize their welfare checks. Others are only dimly aware of their rights as unionists. "These guys," groaned a hard-boiled Teamster official in Chicago, "know more about the White Sox batting averages than they do about their own wages." For all of this sort of thing, Geoghegan's memoir is no replica of Hamper's. He is sympathetic, not bitter or churlish, and thoughtful in his criticism rather than dismissive. He pities the beleaguered worker, not himself, and seeks to engage some of the burning issues of the day, from the ravages of deindustrialism and liberalism's disaffection from labour to the paralysis of unionism. He's a kind of a throwback, a latter-day New Dealer cum labourist guardedly optimistic about recapturing the social democratic ethos of the New Deal.

Geoghegan should have been a likely candidate for the narcissism of the "me generation." A college graduate not especially active in the student movement of the late 1960s but influenced by it, he went to Harvard Law School possibly with the intent of apprenticing for the servants of power, then wallowing in the smug comfort of the bow tie and suspender set. All that changed, however, when in 1972 a friend invited him to the mine fields of eastern Pennsylvania to watch a United

Mine Worker election ordered by the court in the wake of Tony Boyle's corrupt victory three years earlier. The sight of broken down miners wheezing from emphysema and barely getting by on meagre pensions had a profound impact, so much so that Geoghegan joined Chip Yablonski's Miners for Democracy. He soon became an assistant to general counsel Yablonski in Washington, D.C., where he pushed legal paper by day and by night read back copies of the *United Mine Workers' Journal*. He left the miners in 1976 for a fling with the Department of Energy in the Carter administration, then moved to Chicago in the late 1970s to work on the Sadlowski campaign. When it went down to disappointing defeat, Geoghegan stayed in Chicago to practice labour law for unionists and dissident workers.

No one gets off easily in the book, not even Geoghegan himself. He routinely turns his sharp, self-deprecating humour inward in pokes at his own fruitless schemes to "get on with the guys" through awkward and clumsy imitations of working-class habits that recall Len DeCaux's earlier attempts at class ingratiation. No one at the UMW called him "sir," but neither did they call him "buddy," the working miner's term of affection for comrades and fellow workers. He never even met a real miner, only fellow lawyers, and never quite took a shine to chewing tobacco, which he was reduced to trying in hopes of gaining entre to the labour's most legendary fraternity. Even Chicago's working-class haunts proved impenetrable. Geoghegan was as self-consciously uncomfortable in south side bars and honky tonks as an adolescent boy at a CYO dance. He suffered great disappointment when a Sadlowski staffer failed to deliver on a promise to take him through a steel mill. A moment of truth came when in the course of house sitting for a friend in posh Hyde Park he realized the appeal of the bourgeois life. So he moved to the north side amid the classy wine bars, quaint coffee shops, and expensive eating places of Reaganoid Chicago, which thrived through the slowdown of the late 1980s. Indeed the market crash of October 1987 found north side watering holes packed with yuppies, and left Geoghegan himself musing that his \$60,000 a year income, "is laughably low ... to my friends, who take me out to dinner, pick up the bill, and regard me as a kind of monk." He found it all a bit "frightening" because he earned a good living by "defending the poor," and because he could "barely get by on \$60,000 a year."

\$60,000 as subsistence for a single male! How does one even begin to take seriously anyone who would confess to such madness? And a lawyer no less! The appeal of this book lies partly in such candour and mostly in its considered and sometimes penetrating observations on the current labour scene. Its history is another matter entirely. Students of the labour movement will wince at Geoghegan's casual regard for facts (the Pullman Boycott occurred in 1894, not 1893) and will question his interpretation of the 1930s. This poor fellow is convinced that John L. Lewis and the Wagner Act, and mostly Lewis, were the forces that created the CIO. Nowhere does he mention the labour left or the Popular Front in the 1930s. Indeed he's dismissive of the left in general, completely

overlooking the purge of the CIO in the late 1940s and likening the vanguardists who carried Sadlowski's water in the 1970s to a pack of "Moonies." He also tends to invest the law with magisterial force, insisting that it was the Taft-Hartley Act alone that blunted the CIO and bureaucratized the unions. A fuller and more complete analysis would consider the bureaucratizing force of the war years, along with the contracts signed between then and early 1950s that required unions to discipline members, work and grieve simultaneously, and bring unresolved disputes to arbitration.

Nonetheless there is much wisdom in Geoghegan's emphasis on the strangulating force of the law. He correctly reminds us again and again of the tightening noose of the courts and the National Labor Relations Board, reviewing decisions and rulings in the 1970s and 1980s that made strikes virtually illegal and gave employers wider and wider latitude to restrict labour's freedom of expression, fire at will, and shred contracts. This growing hegemony of the law reduced labour relations to paper wars between staffs of squabbling lawyers. Legal hassles sometimes pitted union lawyers against rank-and-filers, as in the bruising miners' strikes of the mid-1970s when UMW militants ignored back-to-work orders in defiance of judges and their own attorneys. For their part, fewer and fewer lawyers in private firms showed much sympathy for rank-and-file workers aggrieved by their employers or their unions. Geoghegan discovered as much in the 1980s when a New York law firm coldly rejected his request to handle a suit for Teamsters for a Democratic Union on a *pro bono* basis. The firm's older lawyers, who were liberals, referred it to their younger colleagues, who declined because they resented the fact that the truck drivers earned \$40,000 a year. Shortly thereafter a telling Labor Day parade took place in Chicago, one of the few cities to even have such an event. Only a handful of workers bothered to march, and they were nearly as numerous as lawyers, who waved to a thin crowd from floats. A confused onlooker mistook it for an Armed Forces Day celebration.

Such is organized labour in retreat, a wounded and corrupted force too submissive to recognize class war from above and too weak to mount much of counterattack even if it did. This dismal state of affairs discourages Geoghegan, but does not defeat him. He hasn't submitted his dossier to a corporate headhunter and is unlikely to do so anytime soon, sustained as he is by his buoyant sense of humour and residual social democratic spirit. He also refuses to personalize things or dwell on the seamier aspects of working-class life, as Hamper is wont to do, not because he is a Pollyanna but because he often comes across workers with a lot of decency and even more spunk. He even wins a case every now and then. Small, tactical victories in a larger, strategic war can go a long way.

Geoghegan also seems to believe that the laws that knocked labour on its back can be undone. Indeed some reviewers argue that when he calls for repeal of all labour laws, and a return to the days of Norris-LaGuardia (which in 1932 outlawed federal injunctions in labour disputes) he really means it. It is more accurate to observe that he wisely pulls his punch. Geoghegan is too shrewd of an observer to

believe that organized labour would have much of chance head to head against monopoly or even entrepreneurial capital without the protective mantle of government. What he means is that laws detrimental to labour, like Taft-Hartley, should be repealed and the purview of the courts restricted. This would surely help to level the field. Whether it would ignite a fire in labour's belly is questionable. It is equally questionable that a new John L. Lewis would do the trick, though a new Walter Reuther vintage 1946 shorn of his anti-left animus might be nifty. In any event Geoghegan is on firmer ground when lauding Lewis's strategy of running against big, complacent labour as well as big, exploitative capital. As in the 1930s there is no single source of revitalized labour, and whatever their choreography, some of the players will of necessity have to come from outside the ramshackle house of labour.

It is hard to imagine a new insurgency, however, without a companionate political force to clear the way. Neither of these works offers much of a clue about a new labour politics. Come to think of it, neither has anyone else.