Stefania Barca, *Workers of the Earth: Labour, Ecology and Reproduction in the Age of Climate Change* (London: Pluto Press, 2024)

The economic growth that our societies have experienced from the mid-20th century onward has caused unprecedented levels of environmental degradation. In *Workers of the Earth*, Stefania Barca discusses the role that workers and their communities play in fighting for decent and sustainable livelihoods on a hotter and increasingly unequal planet. Despite being global in reach, the destruction of earth systems has not impacted everyone evenly. Workers, and especially "those located at the bottom of the global labour hierarchy," (151) as Barca puts it, have borne the brunt of the environmental crisis.

Workers and their communities would be the first to benefit from a shift away from production models premised upon the extraction, contamination, and waste of planetary resources. And yet, we often frame the protection of work and that of the employment as two competing priorities, "as if workers do not have the right" or interest to be environmentalists. (44) This book challenges the labour/environment opposition through a collection of examples, in most cases from essays Barca has published in the last ten years, in which workers and their communities have been at the forefront of environmental struggles.

In the book, Barca presents the independent research groups through which workers and allied experts documented exposure to toxicities in Italian industrial plants in the 1970s; or the coalition of Black and racialized mothers in Bristol who, in 1988, fought against the construction of a new nuclear power station and the additional risks it would pose for already underprivileged inner-city residents. Alongside leading campaigns against the violence of contamination, workers have also promoted innovative earth-caring practices. The example of indigenous nut collectors and rubber tappers in the Brazilian Amazon is a case in point. Beginning in the 1980s, organized subsistence labourers established protected areas in the forest where sustainable harvesting guided by indigenous principles allowed workers to make a living while protecting the forest's ecosystem.

These cases demonstrate that working people can be regarded as ecological subjects. Simply, as Barca points out, their perspective "is different from that of the metropolitan middle class," (52) and is rather the expression of *working-class environmentalism*, the central concept the book revolves around. Working-class environmentalism is simultaneously a descriptive category that identifies "a unique form of environmental consciousness" (8) grounded in the lived experiences of working people; an analytical framework that reflects Barca's commitment to placing "workers and their bodies" (34) more centrally in environmental history; and, finally, a normative direction suggesting that working-class people are the "possible subjects of a more inclusive vision of how to save the environment." (44)

While the empirical chapters take readers to the sites of Barca's research, like Italy, the Brazilian Amazon, the United States, and the UK, the rest of the book delves into the traditions that have most influenced Barca's intellectual trajectory and original combination of environmental history, political ecology, and labour studies. These include different strands of Western Marxism, discussed through the works of activist-scholars such as Laura Conti, André Gorz, Raymond Williams, and Maria Mies; the idea of a Just Transition; and, finally, the degrowth movement.

Workers of the Earth makes three interlinked interventions that develop the idea of a working-class environmentalism. The first is the definition of work and workers the book relies on. Barca advocates for extending what counts as work beyond formal employment to include subsistence labour, unwaged care work, and the struggles of labouring people in and outside of the workplace. This is a classic feminist political economy argument which labour scholars can only agree with. However, since Barca draws on feminist political ecology to make this case, she offers us a definition of work as "a mediator of social metabolism" (151) that echoes Marx but is primarily derived from the work of Ariel Salleh. This expanded characterization overcomes the binary of formal/informal work, but it is also restrictive when the working class becomes what Salleh defines as the "meta-industrial labour class" formed by "those workers, nominally outside of capitalism, whose labour catalyzes metabolic transformations - be they peasants, parents, fishers and gatherers." (104) Who are the workers Barca is urging us to engage more with? They are those who "occupy the lower ranks of the labour hierarchy, making a living out of the most dangerous and most unhealthy jobs while living in the most polluted places." (41) Here, some questions remain unanswered. First, is endangerment what defines the working class? Barca takes distance from conceptualizations of class grounded in "ideas of subalternity," (40) but then uses hierarchy to extend the language of class beyond relations of production. Second, what is the political appeal and potential of the idea of a working class that makes keeping this category still worthwhile in a post-Fordist global economy? These are not easy questions, but rather inevitable ones when working classness is positioned as a condition for igniting radical transformation.

The second intervention relates to processes of political subjectivation. Barca identifies working-class identities as the source of unique forms of "ecological consciousness." (8)The author acknowledges that "working-class communities are far from being unified" (35) but assumes they share a specific condition of marginalization, which form the basis for articulating political demands related to work democratization and commoning. One can read this as a Marxist framework applied to the extended definition of class mentioned earlier. It is an intriguing perspective. At the same time, and borrowing from the critique Barca directs to the degrowth movement, what may be missing is "a clearer vision of what political subjects and which processes of political subjectivation can make [change] happen [...] an analysis of the social forces involved, their mutual relations, and their possible common interests." (144) Barca is likely hinting at an insurgent coalition of global workers who share experiences of dispossession and precarization, but these processes could have been theorized further.

The third and final intervention should be particularly exciting for labour scholars: the centrality of workers' agency. Barca reminds us that labouring people are not merely victims but also active agents who both resist environmental degradation and experiment with alternative ways to use and care for the earth. This attention to workers' struggles and ingenuity is a much-needed counterpoint to accounts of transition initiatives that portray workers as change-resistant actors, or as a group that must be educated, retrained, and won over. Instead of imagining workers as participants in ambitious and yet rather top-down Green New Deal programs (Huber, Matthew. *Climate Change as Class War: Building socialism on a warming planet*. London, Verso, 2017), Barca invites us to learn

https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2025v95.017

from the struggles, alliances, and life-affirming practices of labouring people. Doing so, she argues, has the potential to "expand the imagination of both ecology and labour movements" (9) toward forms of environmentalism where workers matter.

By centering workers, their lived experiences, and their situated perspectives *Workers of the Earth* makes crucial contributions to labour debates in the age of climate change.

Valentina Castellini
University of Toronto Scarborough

Jeff Schuhrke, *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor's Global Anticommunist Crusade* (New York: Verso Books 2024)

In the opening pages of Jeff Schuhrke's *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor's Global Anticommunist Crusade*, we encounter Jerry Wurf the newly elected and left-wing president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (afscme). It is 1964 and Wurf is coming to the union's headquarters in Washington D.C. for the first time after an acrimonious election battle where he unseated Arnold Zander, a founding member. Wurf discovers that there are several unidentified men working out of the union's International Relations Department on the fourth floor. He soon learns that they are cia operatives who had been helping to finance anticommunist unions in Latin America since 1958. Wurf got rid of the operatives and rebuffed government requests to continue afscme collaboration with the cia.

This anecdote frames much of Schuhrke's analysis throughout the book. The virulent anticommunism of the afl-cio and many American labour leaders during the Cold War was very much a choice and not simply a result of government interference or cia perfidy. In fact, as Schuhrke shows, the afl-cio leadership could be even more bellicose than the U.S. government in its denunciation of the Soviet Union and its allies using the era of détente and the rise of Solidarność in Poland as prime examples.

Blue Collar Empire traces this anticommunism in a chronological fashion. Schuhrke highlights how in the early 20th century, the American Federation of Labor (afl) leadership believed that capitalism so entrenched in America that its conservative business unionism was the only way forward. This led to support for President Woodrow Wilson and World War I. In a parallel to the end of the Cold War, the afl found that the gains that it had made during the war by allying with the state were quickly reversed.

From there Schuhrke focuses on the post-World War II period where the anticommunist crusade really kicked into full gear. We meet infamous figures like Jay Lovestone and Irving Brown who played major roles in funding anticommunist unions and movements across the world and had significant ties to the cia. There is also a major focus on the many pronouncements and political maneuvering of the afl-cio's President George Meany and his successor Lane Kirkland. Schuhrke rightfully identifies their anticommunism as ultimately weakening the American labour movement. Meany was making anti-Soviet speeches as early as April 1945 when the U.S.-Soviet alliance was still in existence. By 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, union density in the U.S. was in freefall. The preoccupation with anticommunism of figures like Meany and Kirkland was not simply a moral disaster with its support for right-wing dictatorships but even from a business unionist perspective it failed – unions were bleeding members and the jobs they held were lost.