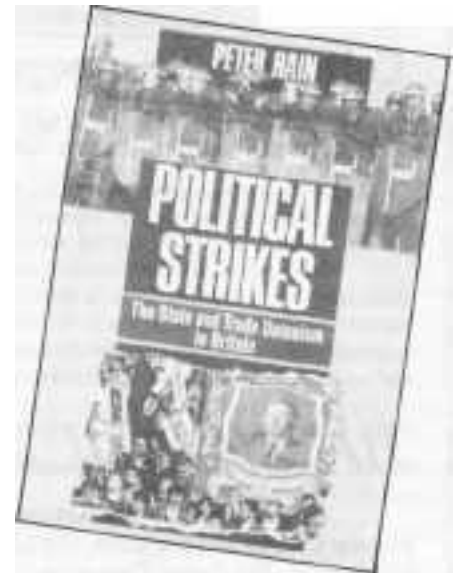


REVIEWS



Utopian Vision

**Political Strikes: The State and Trade Unionism
in Britain**

Peter Hain

Viking/Penguin, 1986£14.95, hbk.

The 1984-85 miners' strike gave fresh impetus to two critical debates within the British Left, one on the nature of the capitalist state and the other on the most effective strategy for contemporary trade unionism. Hain's book addresses both of these issues and is therefore extremely timely and important. The central (and the best) chapters in the book document both the growth of militancy, and police and judicial intervention in industrial disputes, from the early days of industrial capitalism to the turbulent years around world war one culminating in the general strike.

After the interregnum of depression and postwar boom, state intervention in disputes once again took on an increasingly repressive tone, expressed through the reactionary triumvirate of a centralised, para-military police, an anti-union judiciary and a reserve of strike-breaking troops. The purpose of these chapters is to drive home, often with graphic and telling detail, the perennial violence of class conflict

REVIEWS

in Britain and the longstanding class partnership of the British state.

The appalling violence inflicted on the miners (described in a particularly well-balanced chapter on the strike) when viewed in historical perspective appears as the end-product of many years of growing centralisation and independence amongst the repressive arms of the state.

How do these trends connect with trade union strategy and with the prospects for a more political trade unionism? This is where Hain's argument encounters a mighty contradiction. On the one hand he notes that British trade unions have rarely been moved to take action for purely political purposes. More often than not 'political strikes' have occurred either when industrial methods, such as collec-

tive bargaining, proved ineffective, or when employers and the state attacked trade union organisation and workers' living standards. Only under particular material and political circumstances, when their backs have been pressed against the wall with enough force, have trade unions been willing to engage in overtly political action.

On the other hand Hain's final chapter appeals for a 'new trade unionism', freed of all the usual vices (sectionalism, economism etc.) and linked in struggle with community groups and other social forces over a range of issues arising out of production, reproduction and consumption. This would be all very well if the previous nine chapters had provided any evidence that such new trade unionism had been matur-

ing within the womb of the old male-dominated movement, or that 'old-fashioned' economism had exhausted its potential. But Hain appears not to believe the latter, and presents only scraps of evidence for the former. Indeed the utopianism of the final chapter is graphically illustrated by the suggestion that a new trade unionism requires the wholesale reorganisation of trade unions along industrial lines, a proposal almost as old as trade unionism itself.

If the utopianism of the concluding chapter sits uneasily with the rest of the book, it should not detract from this important study of the power and violence of the British state in its relations with trade unionism.

John Kelly

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