

right in criticising the Third International's over-sanguine theses of 1919-20, and Lenin must bear considerable responsibility for the simplistic character of the Twenty-one Conditions and other Comintern theses of the period. But Lenin was not as inflexible as Miliband implies, although the sweeping generality of much early Comintern doctrine demonstrated a naive internationalism, failing to suggest strongly enough that the variables of different national situations could easily outweigh a belief in the universality of bolshevism.

Miliband, however, goes too far in his strictures on the Comintern (as he implicitly acknowledges elsewhere). He rather sweepingly asserts '...Leninism as a coherent strategy of insurrectionary politics was never seriously pursued by the Third International... it was never seriously pursued by its constituent communist parties' (Miliband, p. 169). Certainly, some Comintern theses were inapplicable to many situations, but 'insurrectionary' politics were rightly or wrongly pursued in places as different as Canton and Hamburg, and as late as 1928 the Comintern quite deliberately sought to perfect the theory and practice of armed insurrection. And this option was kept alive and proved successful in China and Yugoslavia, and played a part in communist politics elsewhere.

In spite of his generally favoring a 'reformist' strategy for the countries of 'advanced' capitalism, Miliband finally chooses to declare both the 'reformist' and 'insurrectionist' models as not representing realistic perspectives. Leaving aside his objections to the 'insurrectionist' option, in what areas does he find 'reformism' at fault? Although his detailed argument becomes slightly contradictory, the crux of his analysis involves what might be called a moderate or weak 'reformism' and a radical or strong 'reformism'. The moderate 'reformism' is outlined above, with its dangers of integration. Miliband's outline of the response of the radical or strong 'reformism' seems politically pretty sophisticated (Miliband, pp. 183-8).

His final point is made too briefly, which may reflect a failure to examine the practice of revolutionary movements in as much depth as he has assiduously examined the classical texts. However, his point is quite tantalising in its implications. He maintains that what is required is '... a flexible and complex network of organs of popular participation operating throughout civil society and intended *not* to replace the state but to complement it. This is Miliband's 'reformist' version of 'dual power'. The organs of popular participation do not challenge the 'reformist' marxist government but act as a defensive-offensive and generally supportive element in what is a semi-revolutionary and exceedingly fraught state of affairs. Such a situation, Miliband argues, would be consistent with the dictum of The

Civil War in France that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purpose'. For what would follow, if counter-revolution was to be foiled, would be '...a vast extension of democratic participation in all areas of civic life — amounting to a very considerable transformation of the character of the state and of existing bourgeois democratic forms' (Miliband, p. 188).

Marxism and Politics covers much more than the chapter on reform and revolution. It systematises splendidly several of the central issues of marxist political theory: class conflict; culture, consciousness and ideology; the state; class and party. As Miliband himself points out, much of the theoretical exploration of politics in classical marxism is unsystematic and fragmentary, and there are very definite limits to efforts to construct or reconstruct. Much of the available writing is perfunctory or simply silent on major issues of politics and political theory. Then there is the additional problem brought about by stalinist impoverishment of creative theorisation. The accent was on authoritative interpretations and non-arguable propositions. So there is a vast amount of ground to make up.

Miliband says that in marxist politics, it is essential that Marx and Engels should have textual priority. It is only then that one can usefully take up Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci and others to construct a marxist politics. Although a beginning has been made since the 1950s, mainly in the countries of 'advanced' capitalism, nothing like enough has been done to constitute a body of serious work on all the major topics of political thought and practice. Miliband, the co-editor of the annual *Socialist Register*, now the Professor of Politics at Leeds University, where he wrote *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961) and *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969), did not set out to write a comprehensive work on marxism and politics. Nevertheless, he has succeeded in writing a short, lucid book for the interested reader, which makes the distinctive features of marxist politics, and many of its problems, immediately accessible.

FILMS

Blue Collar is nothing less than a stunning American film, full of drama, intrigue, action, comic dialogue, even sex. Yet this movie, shown at the recent Sydney Film Festival, has failed to attract a commercial distributor in Australia. The reason: its unorthodox theme. It is not about the winning of the West, the conquest of space, or

conventional cops and robbers; instead, it concerns, believe it or not, the everyday life of three Detroit auto workers and their struggles — in a violent and alienating society — against management brutality and manipulation, union bureaucracy, cynicism and corruption, and sheer poverty and hopelessness. To my mind, no contemporary film has attempted so much so tellingly.

Directed by Paul Schrader (who wrote the screenplays for *Taxi Driver* and *Obsession*), *Blue Collar* presents a complex reality. Zeke, Jerry and Smokey work "on the line" in a Detroit auto works. Their working lives are dominated by the assembly line which drains them, physically and emotionally, with its incredible noise, and the constant hectoring of the foreman — by turns bullying and cajoling, using abuse and flattery in an exercise obviously grounded more in self-importance and management control than in industrial efficiency. Their union, presided over by an increasingly compromised old militant who earlier in his career had fought the good fight against racism, is under government scrutiny and investigation regarding union democracy, possible misappropriation of funds, etc. Although the local union representative is widely regarded by the rank and file as gutless and inefficient, the men are firmly behind their union, refusing to wash dirty linen in public when the government snooper tries to interview them.

Their private lives — for the two married men, at least — are dogged by debts and family financial responsibilities (braces, back taxes, etc.) they increasingly can't meet. The treadmill of bills and borrowing, the absurdity of forcing yourself to watch television programs you regard as crap simply because it took you three years to pay for the color TV set, and the short-lived exhilaration of Smokey's bachelor coke-and-sex parties, are so relentlessly demoralising, disorganising and downright depressing that the trio's desperate decision to rob their union office is amazing. The wonder is not that staunch union men would rip off their own organisation, but that given the fragmented, alienated quality of their personal and public lives, they could plan and execute any concerted activity at all.

In the event, the union safe is almost empty. But they discover a notebook which incriminates the union in organised crime activities, and decide to blackmail the corrupt union leadership. The union bureaucrats discover their identity and in much the same way as the management exploits racial, ethnic, sexual and class tensions in the plant, we see the union bosses plan their campaign to divide and conquer Zeke, Jerry and Smokey. Smokey, obviously the most difficult of the three to bring into line — as a tough two-time-loser and a

bachelor, he is the least socialised into union or societal mores — is murdered in an "industrial accident". Jerry, the only white of the three, is terrorised by union heavy men. Zeke, characterised by the callous union bureaucrat as a "hungry black" is bought off by promotion to foreman. Jerry remonstrates with Zeke, asking him how he can let the union off the hook after they have had Smokey killed. Zeke answers in the logic of expediency: after all, Smokey is dead and nothing can bring him back; the union-arranged foreman's job is perhaps his (Zeke's) only chance to get out of the ghetto; if Jerry would only play ball and forget the stupidity of wanting justice for Smokey, he can get a pay-off too, probably become the union rep Jerry stands silent, dumbfounded, in the shattered remnants of their comradeship. Pressured by the union thugs, afraid for his family's safety, abandoned by Zeke, Jerry makes a deal with the FBI man, getting "justice" for Smokey and protection for himself, by dobbing in the union. The film ends on a freeze-frame of Jerry and Zeke screaming racial epithets at each other in the assembly-line din.

Some reviewers have criticised this film as anti-union. It certainly exposes the big business aspects of big unions, something which all of us both recognise and deplore. But far more important is the film's positive attitude toward the labor movement, and the possibilities it provides for caring, constructive lives. In no way is *Blue Collar's* clear, if caustic, presentation of American working class life cynical, sensational, or glib. The political "message" — that solidarity and comradeship are hard to come by, and that they don't necessarily reside in organisations privileged by history and rhetoric as repositories of "struggle" — is both important and timely. Most significant, for me, is the insight the film gives into the capacity of the most unlikely people, in the most unpropitious circumstances, to struggle.

It is true that the alternatives presented in *Blue Collar* are bleak: union/management/government — all are repressive and co-opting; the strategies for coping forced on Zeke and Jerry are so horrific they can't even be called "compromises"; the film's ending is bathed in racism and hate. Yet notwithstanding the apparently impenetrable walls boxing in the characters, the film's whole underlying emphasis is on the fundamentally unobtainable, uncontrollable, unbeatable nature of the men's responses to their imprisonment, and on the rebellious energy which stalks the bureaucratic, industrialised world. Divide and rule, no matter how traditional a tactic, can be at best a short-term stratagem in these circumstances.

Whenever and wherever you can, be sure to see this film.

— Kathie Boehringer.