LESSONS FROM THE PAST?

Reviewed by Ken Norling


Verity Burgmann's book In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise Labor 1885-1905 is deliberately and consciously controversial. It shows how historians of different generations and different political outlooks have sought to draw different lessons from the experience of the 1890s to support their own conceptions of the nature of Australian politics, Australian society and the Australian working class.

In Our Time sets out to rewrite from below this history of the early days of labour politics and to use this perspective to illuminate the development of both socialism and the labour movement.

Its central argument is that those early movements were created by the work of a generation of agitators, socialists or anarchists who "explained society from a working class viewpoint, who offered a critique of that society and suggested that a society should instead be created where workers were not exploited and oppressed". (p.1) Those agitators were working men and women, largely self-educated, and in a time of massive social upheaval, they found a ready audience among their own class.

Burgmann describes, thoroughly and painstakingly, the contribution made by these agitators, and the organisations they helped build up, to the early growth of the labour movement and to the formation of the Labor Party in each of the states of Australia.

It is an impressive record, one long overdue for recognition, and one which must affect our understanding of the origins and nature of Australian labour. In particular, it is a record of past socialist strength that is largely unknown. Burgmann shows clearly that wherever radical or progressive movements arose, socialist organisations or individual socialists played key roles.

In Our Time is not just an account of the organisations and public figures of the day, however. One of its real achievements is its depiction of so many of the rank and file activists, the agitators on the streets, who did so much to make socialist ideas a part of the everyday life of working men and women.

Burgmann provides numerous sketches of the careers and characters of these people — often eccentric, sometimes pathetic, but always dedicated. She describes people like Harry Holland and Tom Batho and their families, producing the socialist paper, Northern People, on a tiny press in a galvanised iron room in Newcastle, living as often as not on a diet of bananas, home-grown grapes and water, while continually facing police harassment, for the authorities then were just as hysterically hostile to socialist propagandists as at any time in our history.

It should be noted that In Our Time is very much an account of "socialist agitators and their families". Burgmann has made every effort to bring out the role of women in these movements, and the attitudes of the organisations to "The Woman Question", but politics of the day were very much a male domain, and these issues do not really make it to the centre of the stage.

And just to remind us how little some other things have changed, she provides an account of the likely career of a member of the Australian Socialist League:

A typical pattern for a new recruit was to manifest great earnestness at first, then boredom, then disillusionment, then non-attendance, then non-payment of dues until being expelled for being unfinancial. This process took, on average, about six months.

The account is based on minute books of the Waterloo branch which have survived from the late 1890s. (p. 93)

But, as members drifted away, others replaced them, and a good many battled on, year after year. They were sustained not just by a moral commitment, but also by a deeply felt belief that they would see "Socialism in Our Time". Perhaps the most eloquent statement of that conviction came from the Queensland labour journalist, H.E. Boote:

Socialism will come. The very stars in the heaven are on our side. The Future is ours. (p.175)

This certainty about the inevitability of the triumph of socialism was a persistent theme in the propaganda of the period. Burgmann provides a very good account of the different conceptions current in the labour movement at this time of how socialism was to come about. They ranged from the separatist utopianism of William Lane...
and his followers, which carried them to their sad fate in Paraguay (and inspired various efforts to establish rural socialist communities within Australia), through the co-operative movements to the various forms of state socialism which, in one way or another, foresaw the institution of the socialist millenium through legislation passed by the colonial parliaments.

But the real aim of In Our Time is to distinguish another current in the social ferment of the 1890s, a current which was consciously committed to the revolutionary transformation of society, and which had widespread support among a working class which was ready for such a transformation, only to have its energies diverted into reformist strategies, and especially into an over-reliance on parliamentary representation by the Labor Party.

A possibly revolutionary situation had not produced revolutionary change because Laborism won the day ... simply because the socialists who worked so hard to produce these parties (the state Labor Parties) were fundamentally mistaken in their belief that socialism could be reached through the parliamentary process. Though socialism sowed the seed, Laborism reaped the harvest. (p. 195)

The concluding lines of In Our Time sum up:

... too many socialists were reformists, enamored in the main of parliamentary strategies, for a mass revolutionary movement to develop. However, revolutionary strategies, unlike reformist strategies, cannot be said to have failed in their application. (p. 198)

It is a bold contention, but how far can it be justified by the experiences of the movements Burgmann describes? There are two obvious difficulties — one is to demonstrate that the basis for a mass revolutionary movement actually existed in the 1890s, the other is to define just what is meant by a revolutionary strategy. For all its achievements, In Our Time finally does neither.

It certainly makes clear that there were organisations and movements in existence in the 1890s which represented new forms of working class political and industrial activity. (One particularly interesting one was the Active Service Brigade in Sydney, whose tactics in many ways foreshadowed those of the Unemployed Workers' Movements of the 1930s.) However, to assume from this that the mass of the working class was ready to commit itself to battle for the revolutionary transformation of society, if only it had been provided with the right leadership, requires a leap of faith all too familiar in contemporary politics, and just as unverifiable in the context of the 1890s.

And before it is possible to speak of revolutionary strategies not having failed because they were not applied, it is necessary to show that there were revolutionary strategies to be applied. In fact, what is striking about Burgmann's description of the socialist organisations of this period is that while they had revolutionary dreams, virtually without exception they lacked any conception of a strategy to achieve those dreams.

They shared this uncertainty about how to achieve their goal with socialists throughout the world at that time. Burgmann devotes considerable attention to the impact of foreign socialists and socialist ideas on the Australian movement, attributing the dominance of reformism, at least in part, to an Australian cultural cringe in the face of reformist trends overseas.

But what happened in Australia was merely the reflection in a very small mirror of dilemmas that will persist as long as there is an organised labour movement within a capitalist society. Australian socialists found it no easier than any others to reconcile the struggle for revolutionary change with everyday activity which showed that the working class could improve its lot within existing society, and could improve it more easily the more democratic reforms it won within that society.

Almost a century later, socialist movements still tend to divide into revolutionary purists and ineffectual reformists, and what constitutes a real revolutionary strategy remains an issue of contention. Perhaps it would do more justice to activists of earlier periods who struggled with the same problems, without the benefit of the experience we have had, to not castigate them for failing to achieve what we cannot.

Despite these disagreements, In Our Time is a fine book. It is important that we remain conscious of how long and how hard the working class of this country has struggled for a better world, free of exploitation and oppression, and Verity Burgmann has added considerably to that consciousness.

Ken Norling is a member of the Communist Party of Australia. He works in the International Bookshop, Melbourne.