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Arise: Power, Strategy, and Union Resurgence, by Jane Holgate, 2021. London: Pluto Press. 248 pages. £16.99.

Bringing together twenty years of experience as a labour researcher and union activist, Jane Holgate's *Arise: Power, Strategy and Union Resurgence* (Pluto Press 2021) provides an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the current state of, and future prospects for, the British trade union movement. Along with other recent publications for a general audience from Pluto Press (including Jane Hardy's *Nothing to Lose But Our Chains: Work and Resistance in 21st Century Britain* and Ian Allison's *Workers Can Win: A Guide to Organising at Work*), the book is essential reading for anyone interested in these issues.

Beginning with an overview of British trade union movement decline and largely unsuccessful approaches to revitalisation, Holgate examines how we got here and what can be done about it. Holgate attributes the decline of the trade union movement firstly to legal reforms from the 1970s onwards that gradually chipped away at workers' collective power and emboldened employers and the state to launch further attacks. Secondly, she faults technological changes that weakened unions' workplace bargaining power by eroding control over the labour process and replacing workers with machines. But, as Holgate explains, these external shocks only tell half the story. The trade union movement's inability to effectively innovate in response to these challenges shares in the blame. Rather than a return to the grassroots organising and social movement unionism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which had built the trade union movement, some union leaders instead turned to a series of unsuccessful strategies, including mergers, 'partnership' agreements and servicing existing members, rather than building numbers and collective power.

Even where the trade union movement adopted the 'turn to organising', beginning in the late 1990s in Britain, Holgate argues that the approach has been limited. While organisers in the United States adopted an organising model to mobilise workers to transform their working lives and the broader society, Holgate makes the case that in translating the 'organising model' to the British context, it has all too often been reduced to a narrowly construed focus on "recruitment, tactics and individual campaigns" (p. 4). In other words, in Britain, the organising model has resembled something akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic -- "rather than a strategic review of where power lies and how it can be (re-)created" (p. 4). Holgate instead argues that putting power analysis at the centre of revitalisation efforts instead has the potential to lead to "transformational change" (p. 4), whereby the trade union movement will not only be capable of winning far more for workers in the workplace but of catalysing broader changes in the society. However, this will require a "fundamental rethink about the structure and strategy of trade union organising" (p. 4).

In Chapter 2, Holgate outlines a conceptual framework for thinking about worker power, drawing from the extensive Power Resources Approach literature in Global Labour Studies. She then uses this framework to analyse British trade union movement history from the late nineteenth century to the present over chapters 3-7. Holgate persuasively argues that as challenging as things may seem today for many workers in Britain – particularly for those in precarious employment – conditions were even worse at the height of the 'new unionism' in the late nineteenth century. Then, as now, casualised workers like London's dockers and match strike girls 'were deemed to be 'unorganisable'' (53) but can in fact

succeed by aggressively using *'all the power resources available'* to them *'to rebalance the employment relationship in their favour'* (p. 55).

Holgate's prescription for change proposes a strategy of *'deep organising'* to build *'capacity and self-reliance among workers so they are able to use their own agency to effect change through collective action – or at least the credible threat of it'* (p. 15). While increased numbers of members are a component of this, the important thing is what unions *do* with their members – not the simple fact of having more of them. She argues that worker power is both context-dependent and relational, shaped by the industry, the broader political climate and the agency of both workers and employers. This is particularly evident in Chapter 5, when Holgate examines the employer and state assault on labour from the 1970s and the myriad ways in which this negatively impacted on worker power – including through new approaches to management, changes in law, and the use of violence to repress striking workers, most infamously during the Miners Strike (p. 102-103).

Against this backdrop, Holgate provides a helpful set of concepts to assist worker-organisers in understanding the potential forms of power available to them within a given context and how they can be combined effectively and deployed to win. In particular, Holgate is a forceful advocate for *'community unionism'* and *'whole worker organising'* – in which trade unionists take their struggles out of the workplace and into the community to bolster their workplace organising efforts. These arguments, developed in Chapter 7, draw from Holgate's extensive research in this area over a number of years, particularly with immigrant workers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Holgate's findings reflect her careful attention to the importance of drawing on *'culturally specific assumptions about organising'* (p. 148) – such as meeting with Asian immigrant workers in their front rooms, rather than at the workplace, in order to empower the wide range of workers in contemporary Britain. Certainly, this chimes with the US experience, where the *'turn to organising'* and *'social movement unionism'* have led to significant gains for workers, such as during the iconic Justice for Janitors campaign of the 1990s. Social movement unionism, in particular, which links together workplace struggles with broader struggles for social justice -- have their roots in unions overwhelmingly representing workers of colour, in particular, Latino immigrants in California and Black workers in major metropolitan areas across the country.

For readers new to debates on trade union movement revitalisation in Britain, in Chapter 7, Holgate provides a helpful overview of the failures of the partnership approach (which sought non-confrontational *'win-win'* agreements with management) as well as the alliance with *'New'* Labour (which led some unions to hold back on industrial militancy in the mistaken belief that this would lead the government to reverse some of the damaging legislative changes of the Thatcher era). In addition, she examines the failed attempt to revitalise the movement through the creation of super unions through mergers (which simply increased the size of union bureaucracies without making a dent in declining numbers and power); and the servicing model (in which unions position themselves as workplace insurance policies for a passive membership). She notes that, overall, not only have these approaches failed to deliver at the bargaining table but they have also tended to decrease opportunities for meaningful membership participation at the expense of paid staff.

Chapter 8 examines why the success of the *'turn to organising'* in Britain, championed by the Trades Union Congress's (TUC) Organising Academy, has been limited. Holgate emphasises that a far lower proportion of trade union finances have been dedicated to organising in the UK relative to the US (p.

134) and organising has tended to be seen as “an ‘add-on’ to an otherwise business-as-usual approach” (p. 145). Of course, this reflects to a significant degree the very different legal context between the countries, most especially the end of the closed shop in Britain and the crisis this posed for unions’ financial viability. But as Holgate argues, excessive focus on recruitment rather than organising and mobilisation is ultimately short-sighted as “union power is dependent not on numbers alone, but on the extent to which members develop the capacity and willingness to act collectively” (p. 130). Without this power gains are limited, and without making gains at the bargaining table, newly recruited members are unlikely to stick around (p. 154).

I was less convinced, however, by Holgate’s arguments in Chapter 8 on where change comes from in trade unions, in particular, her emphasis on the importance of leadership. She argues that ‘strategic leadership’ - attuned to the need for long-term investment in organising, rather than short-term firefighting - is necessary to transform ‘sclerotic bureaucracies that are unable to respond effectively to externally changing circumstances, into organisations that develop the capacity of their members to respond strategically through exerting power to improve their pay and working conditions, or other, much broader, political or social justice demands’ (p. 158). Yet, by contrast, many of the most celebrated examples of trade union revitalisation in the United States (such as the Chicago Teachers Union) have come from *below* rather than from *above*, through the formation of dynamic rank-and-file caucuses that have built organising power on the ground *before* fielding candidates at the top. The lack of a strong rank-and-file movement in the UK today perhaps suggests change from the top as a realist approach, but at the same, the record of trade union revitalisation efforts initiated in a top down manner in the US is mixed. Most troubling, impressive short-term gains have at times been eroded and ultimately undermined through intense bureaucratisation and a return to partnership arrangements (the Service Employees International Union health care workers campaign in California has been notorious in this regard.) Even in cases where progressive candidates succeed in getting elected at the top of the union, without a strong and mobilised rank-and-file base, new leaders struggle to battle bureaucratic inertia and entrenched local fiefdoms. As a result, though it may be a steeper hill to climb, advocating the need for a strong, independent rank-and-file movement in the UK to develop democratic organising practices from below before transforming unions from above is perhaps in the end a more realistic strategy for change.

Nevertheless, rank-and-file worker activists, just as much as union staffers and labour academics, have much to learn from this compelling and accessible contribution to the debate on trade union movement revitalisation in Britain today – a debate that has never been more urgent given the current strike wave. The challenge remains how to channel this momentum into long-term, sustainable workplace organising. Holgate’s prescription for developing effective strategy through substantial investment in organising that empowers workers, rigorous analysis and deployment of worker power and centring ‘community unionism’ and ‘whole worker organising’ is right on target.

Dr. Katy Fox-Hodess, Lecturer in Employment Relations and Research Development Director of the Centre for Decent Work at the University of Sheffield