

## Walmart's World?

**Leo Panitch, Greg Albo and Vivek Chibber, *Registering Class: Socialist Register 2014*, Merlin Press, 2013, 352 pages, paperback ISBN 9780850366433, £16.95**

The *Socialist Register 2014* is the 50<sup>th</sup> edition of the journal which was founded by Ralph Miliband and John Saville in 1964 to advance socialist analysis and discussion. It was an offshoot of the New Left, but reflected a different approach from that of the New Left Review editors, Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn. Over the years, it has produced a rich collection of contributions on socialist ideas.

The 2014 number focuses on the issue of class and argues that the power to achieve socialist change is dependent on the possibility of mobilising the working classes against current austerity policies, which are supported by the upper social echelons of our society. It examines in detail the restructuring of the capitalist class across the world and indicates that this will be continued in the 2015 volume, with the aim of showing what the working classes are up against. It discusses whether or not there is now a transnational capitalist class reflecting the development of multinational companies.

Following the period 1920-1970, when social inequality was diminished, inequality over the past four decades has soared throughout the world. Fewer than 100,000 people (0.001% of the world's population) now control 30% of the world's financial wealth. In Britain, 5% of adults

owned 40% of all marketable assets, but universal benefits are being undermined and austerity has reduced living standards for the mass of working people.

The contribution from Colin Leys spells out some very disturbing facts about Britain. The manufacturing sector of the economy shrank from 1945 onwards and only the discovery of North Sea oil and the development of the City of London as the world's largest centre for currency transactions and international business saved the country from a catastrophic fall in living standards.

The balance of payments deficit created by the decline of manufactured exports was offset by oil self-sufficiency and a positive trade balance achieved by the financial services sector. Working class living standards rose thanks to tax credits, a steep increase in household debt from 105% of income in 1997 to 170% in 2008, and women taking jobs.

However, the deficit on trade in goods rose to twice the size of the surplus on services. In 2006, the total deficit was £45 billion – 3% of Britain's GDP. The banking collapse led to massive public borrowing, quadrupling public debt from 36% to 150% in 2010/11. The impact on working people today is only too apparent.

As this volume makes clear, the opportunities for fighting against the trend are more limited than in the inter-war period. The contribution by Ann Gupta, 'The Walmart Working Class', outlines the difficulties faced by employees of Walmart, the retail enterprise which accounts for 13% of US retail trade and employs 1.3 million workers – 1% of the US workforce.

In America the unions have been in retreat and the majority of workers are in branches of the economy not primarily concerned with production. The service sector, education and health have more union members than production and, as of 2009, half of all members were in the public sector, with two-thirds of these in local government. Unions are, in some cases, adopting strategies which encompass social needs in the community as well as workplace needs.

In Europe, with the exception of Greece where the left-wing party, SYRIZA, has overtaken PASOK, the traditional representative of the Left, there has been no marked shift to the Left within the social democratic parties. At the same time, most attempts to establish new Left organisations have failed despite the economic crisis. Slumps and recessions do not result in a boom for socialist ideas. On the contrary, there is some evidence that, to some extent, they promote right-wing or anti-political trends such as Marine le Pen in France, UKIP in Britain, Beppe

Grillo's MSS movement in Italy, and the Pirate Party in Germany.

Only the working class can emancipate itself, but it has undergone significant change. Heavy manual work is a minority occupation; women have become very much more important; migration has transnationalised workers. It is of little use to seek to go back to the past. The Stop the War Coalition showed it was possible to draw people together in a common movement. Socialists and the trade unions need to reach out and promote new projects like the People's Assembly. Launching new parties is not the way forward.

The 2014 volume of *Socialist Register* includes two contributions on Brazil which highlight the emergence of Brazilian-based multinationals on to the global challengers' list and give an account of the huge wave of workers' demonstrations which spread to the middle classes in June 2013. It points out that the press stoked the unrest but there was no demand for socialism. The conclusions illustrate the problems faced by the Left today. In Brazil it must support the Workers' Party (PT) President, Dilma Rousseff, but develop initiatives to put pressure on the government to bring in more reforms.

The situation in Brazil illustrates the general problem of the Left across the globe. Although the case for socialism is an integral part of the message of the *Socialist Register*, we are living through difficult times. This volume charts many of the features of the present political, economic and social scene and discusses how the Left should react. It is, however, clear that there is no magic formula to overcome the forces ranged against us in the current situation.