

implicitly *are* not) inherently conservative and immune to class consciousness. Challenging Melvyn Dubofsky and other New Left historians who have found 1930s workers insufficiently attuned to Marxism, Wright makes the case that concrete material interests, rather than theory or ideology, provided the foundation for working-class activism. While the Bonus Marchers of 1932 largely rejected the foreign-sounding communist solution, they insisted on the right to a job, on the need for government socialization of industry, and on the callous indifference of the Hoover administration. Rejecting the Marxist label, a massive percentage of Americans nevertheless “shared many of the values of the Communists,” including a belief in the need for collective action to “make society more democratic, egalitarian, and indeed ‘socialistic’ in the sense of radical government interference with the market economy to protect human rights and well-being.” (196) This was evident in the unemployed demonstrations that continued well into the 1930s, in the mass enthusiasm for Huey Long, Father Coughlin, Upton Sinclair’s EPIC movement, the farmer-labour parties of the Midwest, and in the public opinion surveys of the 1930s which Wright deploys to considerable effect.

But it was conspicuously evident in the demand for a radical vision of unemployment and social insurance that the Unemployed Councils and the Communist Party advanced as early as 1930. Crystallized into the Workers’ Social Insurance Bill, the sentiment in favor of a major redistribution of wealth in American society generated tremendous interest and support. The evidence that Wright marshals to corroborate the claim of widespread support for this decidedly more radical version of what would become the *Social Security Act* of 1935 is frankly pathbreaking. As Wright puts it, “The aggregate of the [congressional]

testimonies amounted to a systematic indictment of American capitalism and an impassioned defense of the radical alternative under consideration.” (240) The pervasive support for the Workers’ Bill, the surprisingly positive response to an Earl Browder address in 1936 on CBS radio (!), the mass support for Long and Coughlin (the latter in his pre-antiseptic years): each amounts to substantial evidence of the ability of workers to resist the supposedly natural American ideological tendency toward individualism and conservatism.

Popular Radicalism and the Unemployed in Chicago During the Great Depression challenges some of the most dominant interpretations of American working-class thought and action in the 1930s. It simultaneously recovers the radical possibilities of social transformation that masses of unemployed and working-class people embraced in the 1930s. Wright has demonstrated that it was, after all, a Red Decade, but that this was no mere anomaly in an otherwise unbroken tradition of rugged individualism and anti-centralization. It is a major intervention and powerful analysis that should command the attention of any historians serious about understanding this pivotal moment in the American experience.

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Jordan House and Asaf Rashid,
Solidarity Beyond Bars: Unionizing Prison Labour (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2022)

THE CONCEPT OF rehabilitation is a central tenet of the Canadian prison system. *The Canadian Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA), the legislation that governs the Canadian prison system, contains the word

“rehabilitation” sixteen times, and states that one of the purposes of the prison system (along with carrying out sentences) is to “...assist the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into the community as law-abiding citizens through the provision of programs in penitentiaries and in the community.” Prisoner work initiatives are a common “rehabilitative” program. Despite the apparent centrality of rehabilitation to the existence and all operations of the Canadian prisons system, *Solidarity Beyond Bars: Unionizing Prison Labour* identifies that “no definition of rehabilitation appears *anywhere* in the CCRA or the Corrections and Conditional Release Regulations.” (136)

Such inconsistency is a central theme in Jordan House and Asaf Rashid’s book. Data on how many prisoners in Canada work is severely lacking. Further complicating things are the differences in how prison work is legislated between provincial and federal jurisdictions. True rates of workplace injuries and deaths are unknown, as prisoners face institutional barriers to reporting injury and receiving compensation. In some cases, such as in Ontario, they are legally excluded from provincial health and safety act definitions of worker. In addition to legislative barriers, prisoners’ ability to refuse unsafe work conditions or report employer abuses is limited by the realities of their imprisonment. Prison staff who supervise work may also mete out punishment and gatekeep access to other programming, healthcare, and essential phone calls to children and family. In general, research on and in collaboration with prisoners is subject to institutional and bureaucratic roadblocks. Many researchers and advocates – including the authors – use Access to Information requests in an attempt to access prison data and policy. This is an imperfect solution; request processes “have been widely criticized as slow and often expensive. Moreover, once

access has been granted, released documents are often heavily redacted.” (9) This purposeful bureaucratic opacity creates a significant gap in knowledge about the reality of labour in prisons across Canada, making books like *Solidarity Beyond Bars* important and timely.

House and Rashid contextualize this current opaque understanding of prison work in Chapter 4, where they provide an overview of the historical evolution of Canadian prison labour. Though the concept of labour as punishment has been phased out, the ideology of work as necessary for moral reformation lingers in modern day prisons. Positing that prison labour is a necessary part of punishment (or in modern policy parlance, “rehabilitation”) removes the onus on prison work programs to treat prisoners as workers, with the associated protection and rights that status may allow. Although prisoners may not be legally defined as workers, there is no question that they work. They mainly work for the prisons themselves, doing “the cooking, cleaning, clerical, and other work necessary for prisons to function.” (2) The authors highlight this conflict plainly in Chapter 1: “If free workers were brought in to do the work that prisoners do, suddenly the same activities, called ‘rehabilitation’ for prisoners, would be transformed into employment.” (2) A key event in House and Rashid’s history is the establishment of the federal work program CORAN in 1980. The authors clearly illustrate how CORCAN has been instrumental in legislating away the potential for prison workers to be called workers. For example, CORCAN calls work “employment and employability skills training,” and justifies (meager) pay for programming as “(...)some form of reward for participation or social assistance to support prisoners for their eventual release, rather than wages.” (137)

House and Rashid make a valuable contribution to an ongoing debate

between prison abolition and reform. While some advocates call for the abolition of all prison work, the authors argue that “the abolition of prison labour without major reforms to the prison system would have severe and negative effects on prisoners.” (111) Such major reforms are near impossible without a radical shift in the way we think about prisons and punishment. Consider the high cost to the prisoner of any length of incarceration. Work is necessary for prisoners to afford phone calls home, basic hygiene products, and supplements to low-nutrition meals. Consider also the general lack of programming in prisons, exacerbated by COVID-19. The outright abolition of prison work would require free phone calls, a significant investment in food, the provision of all necessary health and hygiene products as needed, relevant programming, and substantive support upon release. As prison justice advocates, we understand that the carceral system as it stands will not allow for such dramatic restructuring. House and Rashid call for a nuanced understanding of prison abolition that aims to improve the immediate conditions of prisoners through “non-reformist reform.” (113)

House and Rashid focus the second half of the book on these “non-reformist” alternatives to the current modes of prison work. The authors discuss several public campaigns to boycott and shame companies who use prison labour that resulted in the company severing their correctional contracts. These kinds of wins have no impact on the rights and working conditions of prisoners and are strikingly out of touch with the demands of the workers themselves that are shared throughout the book. For example, the 1976 Archambault Institution strikers asked for less make-work jobs, more access to trades education, prisoner representation in work program leadership, access to workplace insurance, and pay

increases. The authors call instead for the serious consideration of prison labour unionization. As mentioned earlier, prisons rely on prisoner labour to perform necessary administrative tasks. Thus, prison workers have significant bargaining power to improve both working and overall conditions. Through their overview of prison unionization efforts (with one successful example of abattoir employees at the Guelph Correctional Centre forming a Canadian Food and Allied Workers Local), the authors provide a blueprint for the external and internal barriers organizers will have to overcome to include prisoners in labour movements.

Solidarity Beyond Bars is a short and impactful book. While much of the information on human rights abuses in prisons and the class, race, and gender distribution of incarcerated people will be familiar to prison justice advocates and researchers, it serves as an accessible introduction to those new to the topic. The authors effectively argue for the potential power of a shared prison labour movement to both improve the quality of life of prisoners without falling prey to piecemeal reformist “wins” and begin to revive unions lacking radical class sensibility. It will be of interest to prison justice and labour researchers, organizers, and advocates, and calls for them to act in solidarity and consider their shared aims to advance the rights of the working class.

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Jamie L. Bronstein, *The Happiness of the British Working Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023)

IN *THE HAPPINESS of the British Working Class*, Jamie Bronstein asks “of what did happiness consist for working British