

Review of “SOLIDARITY – Selected Essays” by Dan Gallin

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This collection of essays and presentations by Dan Gallin starting from his youth as a young socialist, through his 30 years as General Secretary of the IUF and his continued involvement in new forms of worker organisation after his retirement, provides an insightful overview of the state of organisation of the working class over the years from the 1940s to the present day. The democratic socialist lens of this history, not to mention the person involvement of the author in it, infuses it with a liveliness and spark which is often missing in the more turgid texts that we usually have to wade through in searching for historic accuracy. The author depicts himself as having started his activist life as somewhat of a misfit in most of the movements he threw himself into – something which must have contributed to his sharp analytical skills, and continued ability to step back and critically analyse the movements he was part of throughout his life.

It is not always interesting to read about the trade union movement *per se*, but these essays provide a fascinating insight into the development of the trade union movement in changing political contexts. Starting with joining the Socialist Youth League of the Independent Socialist League in the Americas, the author describes how his political activism took him into the IUF. Returning to Europe, he analyses the state of the French Left, the colonial revolution in Algeria and broadly analyses the state of Europe after the World Wars, Spanish Civil War and post-Stalin Soviet Union with reference to the memoirs of Victor Serge.

There is then a chronological jump to the 1990s, when the author’s time at the IUF was drawing to a close after 30 years as General Secretary. In several essays spanning 1994 to 2013 he analyses the global economy, the global labour market and changing world of work, and applies his mind to the changing needs of the labour movement in this context. His historic perspective enables a keen analysis of the growing informal economy and new forms of work, the role of women within this, and critical look at the appropriateness of the responses of the trade union movement to these changes. This is not always very comfortable – but as a seasoned activist the author does not hold back from expressing his frank views about the strategic errors and misjudgements even of his closest allies.

For the organisers of workers in the informal economy who are the latter-day allies of the author, it is instructive to understand where the staunch support of such activists originates and what it is based on. For traditional trade unionists, this collection hopefully inspires an introspection and enthusiasm to innovate and develop new ways of organising workers in the new work of work.

The final piece, a presentation about “Rebuilding Unions from Below”, offers sober advice to SYRIZA in Greece after their heady victory at the polls, reflecting an infectious optimism that democratic socialist practice which takes heed of the lessons of history is still a viable alternative for building a better future.

The book can be ordered through Amazon:

<http://www.amazon.com/Solidarity-Selected-Essays-Dan-Gallin/dp/1497345618>