

Sarah Graber Majchrzak, Arbeit – Produktion – Protest. Die Leninwerft in Gdańsk und die AG „Weser“ in Bremen im Vergleich (1968–1983)

Böhlau: Köln 2020. 564 Seiten, € 65,00

This is a welcome bottom-up comparative history of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk (Poland) and the AG Weser Shipyard in Bremen (West Germany). It crosses the Iron Curtain that still exists in labour history. The two case studies are well chosen, as there are more similarities between the shipyards than their geopolitical positioning in rival socio-economic systems would suggest. Both introduced Taylorist-Fordist production methods in an industry that had long relied on artisanal skill, both underwent an unfinished modernization process during the 1960s and 1970s, and both were occupied by their workforce as the global shipbuilding sector entered dire straits in the early 1980s. There were also important transnational links between the shipbuilding industries in the two cities, with a ten-strong delegation of the Solidarność chapter at the Lenin Shipyard visiting the Bremen docks just as martial law was declared in Poland on 13 December 1981. Stranded in West Germany, they went on to set up the Coordination Office of Solidarność in Bremen, making the city the focal point of relations between the Polish opposition and their West German sympathizers (which, as this book makes very clear, did not necessarily include the trade unions).

The book, which focuses mostly on the boom and subsequent crisis years from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, is structured around the three core themes that make up its title: work, production, and protest. In terms of production, the account raises the question to which extent the Fordist model of standardized and repetitive production can be applied successfully in the shipbuilding industry. Ford had tried his hand at

shipbuilding during the 1920s, but quickly found that the methods that had brought him such success in the automobile industry could not be employed profitably in a sector where the number of produced units was small and the level of expertise required substantial. To be sure, the Lenin Shipyard (at that time still called the Gdańsk Shipyard) had some success with a Fordist approach in the 1950s, but that was when a steady supply of Soviet orders for a limited number of prototypes of fishery ships was coming in. The author also demonstrates that, compared to their counterparts in factories, managers at the Lenin Shipyard had limited control over the workforce on the massive and poorly-organized premises of the docks. This sort of control was achieved at AG Weser after the shipyard was modernized in the mid-1960s, with the aim of mass producing just two models of tankers. This turned out to be a fateful mistake, as demand for these types of ships dried up in the wake of the oil crisis, forcing the company to implement massive redundancies and revert to a more diverse and specialist portfolio. More attention could have been paid to the link between production methods and protest forms in this context. There is a brief passage (p. 457) about how increased shop floor surveillance rendered collective resistance more difficult, but it remains unclear whether the loss of worker autonomy in the Fordist workplace was itself a contributing factor to the protests of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The same is true of the links between labour relations and protest forms. The modernization of the shipyards was accompanied by a decrease in worker income differentials, as the individual piece wage (*Akkordlohn*) gave way to collective performance payments if larger (e.g. monthly) team targets were met in a timely manner (*Programmlohn*). This meant that underprivileged groups of workers such as migrants or women, who had mostly not received the allowances and special bonuses accorded to pieceworkers, managed to improve their position relative to their skilled male colleagues. What is left unaddressed are the effects this had on the cohesion of the workforce during both the boom and the crisis years. Could the protest movement not be

viewed in part as a re-assertion of the dominance of such skilled male workers on the shop floor as well as in the labour movement? Migrant workers were often the first to be dismissed in the redundancy waves in West Germany, with little in terms of trade union support. And, as Padraic Kenney, whose work is a notable omission from the book's bibliography, has demonstrated, the struggles between regime and opposition in communist Poland had a gendered logic too. Kenney has pointed to a graffito adorning the Lenin Shipyard during the August 1980 strike that spawned *Solidarność*: "Women, don't interfere with us, we are fighting for Poland." There are strong echoes of such a discourse, which viewed women as a support system for male-led industrial action at best, in the words of a German social democrat in the run-up to the occupation of the AG Weser Shipyard, who urged activists to tell their "wives to start sewing *Solidarność* banners, as in Poland the entire movement emanated from the shipyards" (p. 497).

It is here that the real strength of the book lies. For it demonstrates that the events in Gdańsk had a real impact in Western Europe not only in a political sense, but also as a template for industrial action in the shipbuilding sector during its crisis years. The works council activists who led the September 1983 occupation of the AG Weser Shipyard specifically solicited the guidance of the *Solidarność* exiles in Bremen and acted on their advice never to abandon the shipyard and to insist that negotiations take place on site (a bitter lesson shipyard workers had learned during the December 1970 upheavals in Poland, when the security services raided the Lenin Shipyard as the workforce left for a demonstration). It was for this reason that the West German Trade Union Federation and its Metal Union, both of which were opposed to the workplace occupation as a method of struggle and feared the militancy associated with the Polish model would derail their negotiations with employers and the government, took a distinctly ambiguous attitude towards *Solidarność*. In this sense, the book offers a valuable fresh perspective on recent "solidarity with Solidarity" literature (Idesbald Goddeeris et al.), by showing that transnational dealings

between the Polish opposition and the West were not a one-way street: East-West relations cannot be understood properly without taking transfers from East to West into account.

Jan de Graaf

DuEPublico

Duisburg-Essen Publications online

UNIVERSITÄT
DUISBURG
ESSEN

Offen im Denken

ub | universitäts
bibliothek

Dieser Text wird via DuEPublico, dem Dokumenten- und Publikationsserver der Universität Duisburg-Essen, zur Verfügung gestellt. Die hier veröffentlichte Version der E-Publikation kann von einer eventuell ebenfalls veröffentlichten Verlagsversion abweichen.

Link: https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00075866

Erschienen in: Sozial.Geschichte Online 31 (2022), S. 186-189



Dieses Werk kann unter einer Creative Commons Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 3.0 Lizenz (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0) genutzt werden.