

*Ethical Socialism and the Trade Unions:
Allan Flanders and British industrial relations reform*

John Kelly,

New York/Abingdon: Routledge: 2010, £70 (h/b)

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By the 1960s Allan Flanders was amongst the foremost industrial relations experts in Britain. A key figure in the 'Oxford School', he sat on the government Commission on Industrial Relations, provided key evidence to the Donovan Commission and, particularly since his 1964 study *The Fawley Productivity Agreements*, was listened to by shop stewards and management alike. Yet his politics originated in revolutionary German socialism in the 1930s. He was schooled by the miniscule Militant Socialist International (MSI), inspired by the philosopher Leonard Nelson, which became the Socialist Vanguard Group in Britain. How to explain this unique political trajectory: a transition from anti-capitalism to working within the system; vexed by the 'indiscipline' of 1960s workers; accepting but also keen to institutionalise the role of shop stewards; and, whilst never opposed to free collective bargaining, prepared to countenance state intervention in the national interests of industrial peace and productivity?

That many revolutionaries lose their fervour, Flanders' wartime work with the TUC, and the pressures of the Cold War, seem plausible candidates. But Kelly argues it was ethical socialism, born of Nelson's vehement critique of materialism, that was the continuous thread and motor of Flanders' various works. Flanders' concern always went beyond the material benefits of trade unionism to issues of dignity and respect. Indeed he feared that unalloyed, monopoly trade union power would counter-productively push up prices and prejudice non-unionised workers. Kelly contends that Flanders used ethical values somewhat indiscriminately – dogmatically asserting their presence often in spite of contrary evidence. And whether re-thinking socialist principles or advocating a tripartite, union-state-management industrial relations system, Flanders was a devoted advocate of reason, dialogue and discussion.

There were other legacies of Nelsonism: the ethical end justified almost any means; anti-communism (for its materialism as much as anything); a focus on monopoly not ownership as the root fault in capitalism; and a scepticism about democracy and emphasis on leadership. This dovetailed with the emerging Labour revisionism in the 1950s and Kelly notes how Flanders found the elite, factional atmosphere of the Campaign for Democratic

Socialism, formed to defend Gaitskell's leadership from unilateralists, 'congenial' (p. 113). Yet the ascetic, vegetarian, moralist Flanders and Socialist Union (as the SVG had become) were always slightly at odds with the more consumerist, libertarian revisionists. Flanders, collaborators like Rita Hinden and their journal *Socialist Commentary*, were also intimate with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The extent of their knowledge and collusion with what was later exposed as a CIA-funded organisation has long been of interest. Kelly has trawled the CCF archives, but found little new or concrete evidence – not entirely surprising, as he admits. And one has to ask: had they known, would this have unduly bothered such committed international anti-communists?

Flanders' reputation fell with the collapse of the 'Social Contract' soon after his death in 1973 and the real skill of this book is in reconstructing that world of industrial relations. Kelly undertakes this not uncritically. He accepts that by the 1970s Flanders had little to counter Marxists critics like Richard Hyman and former allies like Alan Fox who argued that he failed to acknowledge the persistent power structures of capitalism; and notes how sociologist John Goldthorpe's work highlighted Flanders' paradoxical focus on the material realms of work and production, rather than to what purposes earnings were put. But in all its complexity, Flanders was an exemplar of this world, fusing academia, politics and policy. His Donovan mantra that management would only recover control by sharing it was scotched in the 1980s. Yet he might have contended his case that there was little union advantage in alternatives to institutional co-operation was also brutally proven. And in bridging the academic disciplinary gap between industrial relations and politics that has opened since, it reminds us how central an industrial vision once was to Labour politics.

If this is a narrative about the contradictions of social democratic thinking by the 1970s, it also one about the influence that a small, dedicated group of activists can obtain and an important, neglected chapter in the history of Anglo-German socialism. Willie Eichler, who headed the MSI until 1946, was a prime mover of West German Social Democrats' Bad Godesburg reformist program of 1959. In short, this rigorously argued and detailed study tells us a lot about UK industrial relations and social democracy. The price, sadly, tells us a lot about UK academic publishing.

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