

opportunities of all European workers, whether migrant or non-migrant. Disappointingly, only a few of the contributors address this. Laleh Khalali does, as does Andrew Burgin of Left Unity, who observes that eastern European seasonal farm workers in Lincolnshire and other agricultural areas are now at grave risk of the worst excesses of casualisation. He fears that ending free movement would mark a return to sector-based schemes for foreign migrants, reducing the rights of EU workers to ‘temporary stays with no rights for family members’.

Starting a discussion amongst activists about migrant rights would inevitably lead to a grounded discussion of freedom of movement divested of the distortions of neoliberalism and enhanced by principles of anti-racism and social justice. There are the seedlings of such a discussion in this book. But if a movement is to blossom, and, indeed, control the agenda post-Brexit, the debate has to gain greater depth and move away from abstraction. As Marina Prentoulis, another of the book’s more illuminating contributors puts it: Brexit has become a ‘tautological trope that shuts down discussion on concrete contents’.

Institute of Race Relations

LIZ FEKETE

November

By CHRISTOPHER WOODALL (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2016),
730 pp. \$25.00/£17.50.

It is Tuesday November 9, 1976 in the night-shift world of the metallurgy and plastics factory of Gerard Boucan in Grandgobier (actually Grenoble) southern France, where thirteen workers imbibe lungfuls of scorched plastic fumes and burnt oil and the combined scent of ‘sweat, perfumes, stale deodorant, stale food, aftershaves, bad breath and hair lacquer’.

The 728 pages of Christopher Woodall’s startling and deeply empathetic novel *November* describe two and a half hours in the lives of ‘the Portuguese, the Gypsy, the Algerian, the Marseillais and all the other misfits, subversives and delinquents who each night convened in this space’ – in the company of the quasi-fascist Jean, anti-union, anti-immigrant and supporter of the Front National. As these polyglot workers pass through the hanging plastic flaps which mark the entry into the factory’s plastics section, they also enter the neon-lit world of the ‘outsiders’, the ‘bewildered’ and the processes of soul-destroying work described with such hellish realism by Woodall’s lucid and grimly poetic prose, where ‘the plastic was hurled in molten gobs into the water-cooled metal mould which then opened to expel the hardening, steaming body’.

Who are these men whose unity through time and place is broken in sudden dramatic and critical intervals? Rachid, the Algerian, speaks to his dead infant son Mehdi killed by the moped of an unwitting young architect as the boy, walking at his father’s side, inadvertently steps into the road. Tomec, the Polish security man, living in an alternative world of poetry and potentiality, is given the

task of finding the writers of graffiti on the factory wall, accusing its owner of wartime collaboration with the Nazis. Fernando, the Portuguese ex-peasant farmer who creates an idyllic past in the Douro valley, which he left to find this factory, ties a Porto FC flag to flutter from his apparatus, still 'carrying around all this knowhow' of agricultural skills as he works his moulding machine – 'it hangs off me useless, like fucking-slack skin, like a ... fucking lizard'. Or Salvatore the Sicilian, now inheriting the shop steward role as he nervously seeks to follow union policy and persuade his fellow-workers to essay a small-scale strike. Or the Romany Bobran, a non-unionised agency worker, struggling with his illiteracy; at night in the plastics factory, during the day on a building site, trying to calculate whether he can be a witness in the case of an ex-workmate who plunged to an accidental death from a high scaffold.

Each has his story, 'each one perhaps in his own world of feeling and thought'. There is the middle-class Englishman Eric, fleeing from the bourgeois world which bred him, the Marseillais Philippe, 'a former union-rep-Commie screwball' in Jean's estimation, who reflects: 'Anyway I think it's the same machine which shook us all loose from the places we came, from – Algeria, Portugal, Marseille, the mountainside, England, Africa – and has got us all caught up here making these bits of plastic for somebody else's profit.' As Woodall the narrator comments: 'Nights are when you find things out.'

It is during work, Woodall surmises, that true human contact and the closest of company emerges, as each of his characters moves out of solitary selfhood while simultaneously delving deeper and deeper into it. For the novelist is there 'locking on to them ... sucking the person's voice from the partially dilated trap of their own mind', listening scrupulously while he works his darkened shift beside them, to record 'the man's story, his connections, all the stuff that is unique to him and all the stuff he shares with others by living alongside them. His history. The history of his history.'

For me, reading *November* was like reading again, some forty years on, *A Seventh Man*, John Berger's and Jean Mohr's unremitting account of migrant workers' lives in Europe. Except that Woodall's stark, lucid yet powerfully figurative prose has to embrace both the word and the image. Real and breathing portraits of suppurating human life and detailed descriptions of the cruelty and mental torture of alienated labour are all there in *November*. Then suddenly, like a flash of lightning insight, the would-be actor from the Ivory Coast, Alphonse (who declaims speeches from Samuel Beckett, dreams of seeing 'Happy Days' on the Paris stage and acts out scenes from *Waiting For Godot* in the breaks from soul-breaking work) out of the sullen night has his moment, as one of his white workmates asks him why he is there, in France. 'Okay. Then I'll answer you as a foreigner to a Frenchman: we're here because you're there. Simple as that. No other reason.'

As he continues at the novel's denouement to expand his argument, the Ivorian speaks for us all as much as he speaks for Sivanandan (who coined the epigram

‘we are here because you were there’) and 1976 becomes 2017 and the band of plastics workers in Grandgobier become now-times grafters in all the work-sites of Europe, of America, of London, of New York, of Paris, of Sheffield, of wherever: ‘All working people, all wage slaves are essentially immigrants, constrained to live like foreigners in a country they create anew every day for the benefit and enjoyment of their oppressors.’

November is the first novel of an upcoming tetralogy. As Woodall writes in a chapter foreword, ‘For all that, things never stopped happening.’ He’s right, of course, and such is the matter of the true storyteller.

Sheffield

CHRIS SEARLE

Labour and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago

By JEROME TEELUCKSINGH (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015),
250 pp. Cloth \$95.00.

For many years I have wondered why three of the internationally active Black political figures came from Trinidad. I am referring to C. L. R. James, George Padmore and Claudia Jones. This book provides some clues.

The Arawak residents of the islands were almost exterminated by the successive Spanish, French and then British colonisers. After the abolition of slavery, the Brits needed more cheap labourers for their plantations, so they began importing indentured Indians in 1845. Labour regulations were very strict, wages were very low, some of the indentured deserted and squatted on Crown Lands. Strikes began in 1882 – in 1884 there were twelve!

The Trinidad Workingmen’s Association (TWA) was formed in 1894 and in its early days attracted mainly African skilled workers such as masons, carpenters, clerks. It campaigned not only for workers’ rights, wages, reduced hours of work, better conditions, and so on, but also on political issues, such as the restoration of Port-of-Spain’s municipal charter in 1906. The Workingmen’s Reform Club, established in 1897, campaigned against the importation of Indians as indentured labour, which, it maintained, was akin to ‘semi-slavery’. The TWA was also opposed to indenture and in 1907 complained to the Governor about working conditions.

But as conditions were bad for all workers, and the first world war grossly inflated the cost of living, there were many strikes from 1917 onwards. Initially African and Indian workers did not get along well, but the TWA, under the leadership of Arthur Cipriani, was determined to pull all workers together, whether the division was due to ethnicity or social class. Just how many members there were by the 1920s is disputed, but somewhere around 50,000 and, by the 1930s, the estimated membership was 300,000. There were two official women’s sections by 1927 in Port-of-Spain.

From 1927 the TWA was involved in the elections for the Legislative Council, though the franchise was very, very limited – for example, of the roughly 17,000