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Cybèle Locke, *Comrade: Bill Andersen: A Communist, Working-Class Life*

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Cybèle Locke, *Comrade: Bill Andersen: A Communist, Working-Class Life* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2022), 412pp. Paperback. NZ\$49.99. ISBN: 978-1-9885-8789-9.

This book makes a sterling contribution to the study of labour and social history in Aotearoa New Zealand. Cybèle Locke, a trade unionist organiser and professional historian, is renowned for her studies of working-class life and the labour movement. Making creative use of oral interviews in particular, she seeks to discover and commemorate marginalised voices in Aotearoa New Zealand history. Her latest book is a biography of Bill Andersen (1924–2005), a leading Aotearoa New Zealand communist and trade unionist.

Locke situates Andersen's life in the broader context of Aotearoa New Zealand communist and working-class history. The book is, therefore, very much a history from below that shows how key historical events and themes affected Andersen, his family, and other working-class activists and persons. Locke's research is top-notch as befitting her reputation: she conducted dozens of oral interviews and scoured other available primary sources. Locke does justice to the primary sources, respecting and contextualising people's opinions while highlighting relevant areas of disagreement or contradiction.

The book sheds new light on Aotearoa New Zealand communist and working-class history. Locke narrates Andersen's life with great sympathy; she also does a good job explaining the historical context. She first explains how Andersen – a poor working-class sailor – became a communist during the Second World War after experiencing the class hierarchies of the British Merchant Navy. She then describes his immediate post-war career as a waterside worker; his role – and his family's struggles – in the 1951 Waterfront Dispute; and his movement into the land-transport sector after being blacklisted. She then explains how, from the 1960s to the 1990s, Andersen was a noteworthy leader of both the Northern Drivers' Union and the Aotearoa New Zealand communist movement (first in the Communist Party of New Zealand and later in the Socialist Unity Party). Locke splits her chapters into short sections; this helps keep readers abreast of the myriad of union struggles and internecine conflicts of Aotearoa New Zealand's communist organisations. Particularly interesting was her discussion of how Andersen was a trailblazer in raising awareness within the union movement – heavily blue-collar, Pākehā, and male before the 1960s – about 'Māori, Pasifika, and women's rights' (p. 4). Finally, Locke explores Andersen's life after the defeat of the unions following the 1980s neoliberal reforms and the retreat of the international communist movement following the Soviet Union's demise in 1991.

However, the book has a significant shortcoming. As a left-wing trade unionist, Locke is openly sympathetic to Andersen's life and work. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, she stresses how important he and other communists were for defending workers' rights and protesting Western imperialism. Yet, Andersen displayed 'absolute loyalty' to the Soviet Union (p. 74), a country notorious for trampling on the rights of other nations and of its own citizens. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956 to crush a popular uprising against Soviet imperialism, Andersen towed the party line, defending the 'ultimate rightness' of the Soviet cause (p. 74). When the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 for the same reasons, Andersen again towed the party line. Indeed, throughout his life, Andersen maintained remarkably close contact with the Soviet authorities. Even after the Soviet Union had collapsed and knowledge of Bolshevik brutality became better

known, Andersen remained a committed Marxist-Leninist, even keeping a bust of Vladimir Lenin on his desk.

From my perspective, Andersen's close links to the Soviet regime raise certain moral questions that Locke does not really formulate, let alone answer. She tends to gloss over Anderson's reactions to Soviet tyranny. Of course, I recognise that the historian's job is principally to explain and memorialise the past rather than utter moral judgments about it. However, because of Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial past, its historians have experience in making nuanced evaluations that highlight moral ambiguities while still acknowledging the achievements of their forebears. For example, scholars have described in a balanced fashion how Pākehā settlers, yearning to create a new society free from the squalidness of the Old World, ended up violating Māori land rights and demonising Chinese immigrants. It would have been helpful for Locke to apply this nuanced principle to her biography of Andersen. Alternatively, if she regards Andersen's support for Soviet communism as entirely justified, she should have been more incisive when discussing it.

Nevertheless, Locke is an outstanding historian, and her biography is a wonderful addition to Aotearoa New Zealand history.

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