

# book @ bedtime

In the latest instalment of DAVID GROVE's exploration of novels with a political message he looks at Jack London's "The Iron Heel",

Alexei Sayle's railwayman father became a socialist after reading *The Iron Heel* by Jack London (1876-1916). Many others must have had a similar experience, especially in North America, where London's proletarian novel was the equivalent of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Both were written in the first decade of the twentieth century, a period of rising working class militancy across the capitalist world.

*The Iron Heel* is an imaginative description of a failed attempt at socialist revolution. It takes the form of a memoir written by Avis, wife of leading socialist Ernest Everhard, which has been discovered in the socialist future after several centuries of fascist dictatorship. The opening chapters are a moving account of how Ernest converts middle class Avis to socialism through her own observation of exploitation and corruption in the factory in which her father has shares. She meets a worker who lost an arm through managerial neglect; his claim for compensation fails because his workmates dare not speak out, and his lawyer is in the company's pocket. Avis tries to get the newspapers to report the truth, but they too are on the bosses' side.



At the start of the action, Everhard is at odds with the dominant leaders of the socialist party. They have been gaining votes in elections, and believe that monopoly capitalism will somehow morph into a cooperative commonwealth, as it does in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, then a popular utopian novel. Everhard is convinced that the ruling class will not give up power without a bitter struggle. He is vindicated when the rulers (whom London calls the Oligarchy) destroy democracy and bring in the dictatorship of the fascist Iron Heel. Everhard plans and leads a workers' revolt that is defeated and he is murdered.

The enduring strength of London's book is his grasp of the nature of fascism, and his warning that it would be the last resort of a desperate capitalist class, threatening the working class with centuries of industrial serfdom and degradation.

London didn't live to see fascism come to power in Europe, helped by the limited and purely parliamentary opposition of the social democrats, just as he had predicted. And he didn't foresee how the

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October revolution and the building of the Soviet Union would defeat the first wave of fascism.

The book has its weaknesses. Despite describing Marx as the great intellectual hero of socialism, London's

account of capitalist exploitation is not a Marxist one. He writes: The working men furnish the labour. The stockholders furnish the capital. By the joint effort of the working men and the capital, money is earned. They divide between them this money. This fails to recognise that all value is created by labour, and that surplus value is generated in the course of, and as a necessary result of, the capitalist productive process. The Marxist historian A L Morton thought that London's theoretical deficiencies may be the result of having absorbed Marxism in the vulgarised De Leonite form which prevailed in the USA of his time.

Perhaps the weaknesses also owe something to London's individualism; he lifted himself out of extreme poverty by intense self-education, and became a successful writer of tough adventure stories. He never lost his admiration for Nietzsche's superman, and he believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race.

But despite London's contradictions, *The Iron Heel* remains a great read, and in this time of rampant reaction and a revival of fascist groups, we can still learn a lot from its insights.