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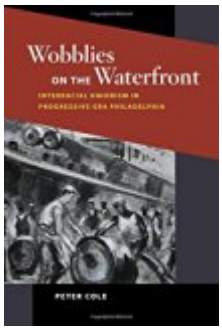
Peter Cole. *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. x + 232 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03186-1.



Reviewed by Robert Bionaz

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Prior to the advent of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the mid-1930s, interracial industrial unionism was virtually nonexistent in the United States. The rare instances of interracial cooperation on the job featured unions that almost invariably accommodated or even desired segregated workplaces, delegating African American and other non-"white" members to the most difficult and undesirable jobs, and keeping them on the lower rungs of the pay scale. These conditions reflected a society permeated with racism and a labor movement dominated by craft-based American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions unwilling to organize African Americans.

In marked contrast to these prevailing racial attitudes, Peter Cole tells the story of a Philadelphia union that created and sustained for nearly a decade an organization based on an egalitarian interracial alliance among its members, which featured a significant number of African American leaders. In an era in the United States marked by an exceptional level of racism, xenophobia, and concerted and successful attacks against labor organizations by employers (who were often aided by the state), the largely African American and immigrant members of Local 8 of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were able to control the majority of Philadelphia docks and better their working conditions. The local's affiliation with the IWW proved critical to the union's success, as the IWW provided an ideological blueprint for egalitarian race relations in the context of industrial unionism and a set of "radical" job action tactics which the more conservative AFL unions eschewed. Defying prevailing social conventions and resisting the steady erosion of what gains labor had achieved during World War I, Local 8 often used these radical direct job action strategies to achieve more conventional "bread and butter" economic gains for its members. As Cole demonstrates in his chronologically organized narrative, their use of this blend of interracialism, radical tactics, and the quest for more traditional economic goals to gain and hold power on the Philadelphia waterfront marks Local 8 as unique among labor unions in the pre-CIO period.

Leading a waterfront strike in 1913, IWW organizers attracted striking dockworkers, a diverse

group including in about equal parts African Americans, "new" immigrants, and native-born Americans, mainly Irish Americans who had historically controlled jobs on the Philadelphia docks. By the 1913 strike, the composition of dockworkers in Philadelphia had begun to change from a primarily white European workforce to one that would be mainly African American by 1920. Although attempts had been made to organize the waterfront workers in the late nineteenth century, employers had been successful in keeping their workers unorganized and divided racially. Like the more conservative AFL craft unions, the IWW, since its inception in 1905, had made little effort to organize African American workers, although its constitution "declared that anyone, regardless of color or creed, could join" (p. 52). The 1913 creation of Local 8 marked the first sustained test of the IWW's commitment to equality. For more than nine years the local flexed its muscles on the Philadelphia docks, despite the purge of its leadership by the federal government in 1917, consistent efforts by the AFL-affiliated International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) to undermine Local 8's position and fragment its membership, and ideological conflicts among IWW leaders, especially the "Philadelphia Controversy" of 1920. Ultimately, the concerted power of the forces arrayed against the union fractured the racial unity that had sustained Local 8 for nine years and the union was basically destroyed during a lockout in 1922.

During its nine-year existence, Local 8 provided a model of the power of egalitarian industrial unionism, creating alternatives to some of the most abusive parts of a work environment that had helped keep the dockworkers separated and under the control of their employers. Prior to the Local 8's creation, Philadelphia dockworkers toiled under a draconian system of job placement known as the "shape up." Any man wishing to work on a particular day had to report to a specified point in the city where he was eyed by the hiring bosses who would make the decision which men would be given work and which would be sent home. In an industry in which labor surpluses were the rule, this system encouraged favoritism and bribery, and pitted one worker against another for the opportunity to toil long hours in a back-breaking and dangerous job. Local 8 eliminated the shape up. During its ascendancy in Philadelphia, dockworkers were hired at the union hall and no worker was permitted to work without proof of union membership, enabling the union, not the employers, to control hiring and job placement at the work site. Local 8 also eliminated the segregated work gangs that had existed on the Philadelphia docks prior to the 1913 strike. This differed markedly not only from workers' previous experiences in Philadelphia, but also from the practice of other so-called integrated unions of the time, which assigned workers to specific jobs based on race. In the white-hot racist climate of the United States in the mid-1910s, this bold policy underscored the IWW's belief in its message of racial equality.

Local 8's workers also used "radical" IWW direct action tactics to control their work environment. Although discouraged by the more conservative AFL, wildcat and sympathy strikes played an important role in dockworkers' control of the waterfront. Employees could demonstrate their dissatisfaction with conditions on the job by walking off at any time. Members of Local 8 also struck in sympathy with other unions several times during the 1913-22 period. These tactics reflected the anti-capitalist and radical nature of the IWW local, which did not sign contracts with employers and thus was not hamstrung in the workplace the way the AFL unions were. Unfortunately, while the union enjoyed success during this period, the seeds of its eventual destruction were being sown. In 1917 and 1918, the federal government moved aggressively against the IWW and the leaders of Local 8, arresting several and, despite a complete lack of evidence and the union's exemplary performance during World War I, convicting them

for "conspiring to hinder" the United States' war effort.

Ultimately, a set of internal and external factors weakened the union's hold on the docks. After World War I, a number of factors contributed to Local 8's demise, including the union's leadership vacuum, renewed efforts by the federal government to destroy the IWW, continuing attempts by the longshoreman's association to supplant the IWW on the Philadelphia waterfront, the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the resulting ideological conflicts within the IWW, the growth of racist and self-styled "One-Hundred Percent American" organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, and the rise of black nationalism. An ill-conceived strike in 1920 and a lock-out in 1922 broke the union's power and resulted in the return of segregated work gangs and deteriorating work conditions for waterfront workers.

In his treatment of Local 8, Peter Cole is careful to link events in Philadelphia to national and even international occurrences and historical currents. Continually placing the Philadelphia story into its historical context enables Cole to highlight the singular nature of Local 8's brand of unionism and allows him to overcome gaps in the historical record. In particular, there are no rank-and-file voices in this story, a disappointment to both Cole and the reader. Nevertheless, Cole skillfully integrates material from IWW leaders, government documents, newspaper accounts, and oral histories with secondary literature to produce a superb case study, one that should appeal to anyone interested in the IWW, the intersection of work and race, waterfront work, or race relations in the United States during the World War I period.

While Cole's case study offers a first-rate treatment of a truly interracial union in the 1910s and 1920s, the unrealized goals of those workers and the federal government's repressive response to their attempts to improve their welfare through control of their workplace has contemporary resonance. Today, the anti-union, pro-business climate is, most likely, even stronger than it was during the "open shop" and anti-radical campaigns against labor unions in the 1920s. Instead of the Bolshevik menace we now have the threat of terrorism as a catalyst for hyper-patriotic fervor used as an excuse to undermine individual constitutional protections. Instead of the "American Plan" or open shop anti-union attacks of the 1920s, we now have disingenuous "right to work" laws designed to cripple attempts to organize in the workplace. Finally, the internecine quarrels of today's labor movement are reminiscent of the ideological split between the IWW and the AFL that helped put organized labor on the defensive in the late-1910s and through the 1920s. In the current profoundly anti-labor environment, it seems appropriate to view Cole's work as a cautionary tale, particularly for organized labor in the United States. As he writes, while Local 8 embodied an "organization that lived up to the promise of America" (p. 6), its short-lived success and ultimate demise demonstrates "what can be accomplished when workers overcome racial and ethnic differences," as well as the strength of "the myriad and powerful forces that can defeat such efforts" (p. 176).

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