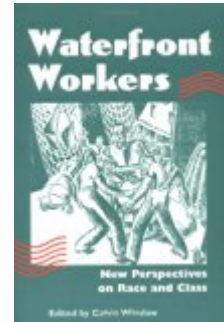


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Calvin Winslow, ed. *Waterfront Workers: New Perspectives on Race and Class*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 204 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06691-7; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02392-7.

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For those of us interested in how ethnic and racial identities affect the American working class, *Waterfront Workers*, edited by Calvin Winslow, is a welcome addition to our bookshelves. The subtitle, though, is somewhat misleading, for these essays do not provide “new perspectives on race and class” per se, but, instead, contribute to a now lively and not-so-young debate on how American workers have dealt with the often thorny intersections of class, ethnicity, and race. In fact, some of the most exciting work in recent years in American labor history, and I would say in all of American history, has been on this topic. Rather than building more walls, scholars such as Thomas Sugrue, David Roediger, Dan Letwin, and others have been breaking down barriers between subfields needlessly segregated. This trend in labor history is absolutely necessary as the American population, the working classes, and the labor movement itself become increasingly diverse. As the study of race and labor has evolved, a number of fine scholars have focused their gaze on the waterfront; truly, there are few better places in American history to look.

The type of work that the marine transport industry often required (unskilled) and the requisite locations for this work (ports) guaranteed that a diverse group of people and wide variety of ideas, as well as commodities, would circulate along the waterfront. As with any collection of essays, though, this one is somewhat uneven; of course, historians have different interests, so focus on different aspects of race and class on “the ’front.”

The book begins with a solid introduction from Winslow that summarizes the world of the waterfront worker for those not familiar with it. Although Winslow claims that race is central to understanding this milieu,

the issue is not thoroughly discussed here—a problem that percolates through a number of the essays, where the respective authors pay homage to the centrality of ethnicity and race, but then almost completely ignore the subject.

The first essay, “Biracial Unionism in the Age of Segregation,” by Eric Arnesen displays the type of keen analysis and thorough research that he has displayed in previous writings. Exploring four ports on the Gulf of Mexico and the mid-Atlantic port of Baltimore, Arnesen suggests that a host of factors explained the existence or absence of biracial unions: white longshoremen’s realization of how a racially divided workforce resulted in lower pay and weak unions; the unskilled nature of the work that allowed for easily replacing strikers and unionists; the port’s employment structure; the power of employers (especially international shipping companies and mammoth railroad companies); the diversity of a port’s commodities, and; in particular, the power of blacks to organize into their own unions. Arnesen concludes that the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), the AFL’s craft union of dockers, adopted a biracial policy that was based solely upon pragmatism, in contrast to the ideologically motivated effort at interracialism displayed in Philadelphia by the IWW’s Local 8. Thus, the ILA’s approach resulted in both the spectacular and durable biracial unions of the New Orleans waterfront amidst the rise of Jim Crow as well as the exclusion of black longshoremen from the same organization in Mobile. Arnesen’s multiple factors and the historical peculiarities of each port mean that drawing sweeping conclusions simply will not be possible. [1]

Calvin Winslow explores a fascinating, important,

and often overlooked event in his essay “Men of the Lumber Camps Come to Town’: New York Longshoremen in the Strike of 1907.” In particular, Winslow does an excellent job of bringing the world of New York’s longshoremen to life, both before and during the strike action. Winslow argues that in spite of the strike’s failure, the industrial unionist slant and diversity of the workforce demand that we reconsider this dramatic strike that literally stopped (maritime) traffic for a month and a half, beginning appropriately enough on May Day. Winslow is correct in placing this conflict into the contexts of growing waterfront labor strife and syndicalism that swept through the industrial world in the World War I era. It is less clear, however, how many of the strikers truly were committed to the “new unionism.” Winslow’s main evidence is the noteworthy demand for a universal wage scale regardless of the type of work performed, but equal pay for marine transport work does not mean that the longshoremen dreamed of the One Big Union. Further, that all of the strikers seemed equally committed to both craft- and ethnic-based locals certainly brings into question whether these workers wanted an industrial union and begs a second question of why even the radical Italians (the leaders of the strike) remained outside of the IWW’s orbit. Another issue that requires further scrutiny is how the ethnically and racially divided local unions managed to overcome the myriad difficulties involved in interracial, multiethnic unionism—perhaps the socialistic tendencies of the Italians were instrumental but it is not obvious and no information on this issue is offered. This rank-and-file uprising challenged both employers and labor leaders, but the end result is dubious. Racism and ethnic segregation was the norm before the strike, and it remained so in its aftermath. Winslow implies that perhaps an industrial union could have overcome employer power, hidebound union leaders, and a heterogeneous workforce, but such a conclusion appears to be wishful thinking—at least in New York.

In contrast, Howard Kimeldorf explores the increasingly well-known Wobbly longshoremen of Local 8, who managed to form a powerful industrial union along a very diverse Philadelphia waterfront. Ironically, considering that perhaps no union in the World War I era was more successful at overcoming the difficulties seemingly inherent in a heterogeneous workplace, “Radical Possibilities? The Rise and Fall of Wobbly Unionism on the Philadelphia Docks” focuses its attention upon the question of durability rather than diversity. True, Kimeldorf has dealt with this issue elsewhere (and does deal with it somewhat here), but considering the nature of this col-

lection, this article is a bit disappointing even though it is very well-written. It seems clear, though, that Philadelphia’s dockworkers only succeeded at forming a powerful union when successfully crossing racial and ethnic divides in 1913 and declined when racial splits returned in 1922, but Kimeldorf devotes insufficient space to these crucial issues. Instead, Kimeldorf traces the basic outline of Local 8’s story, effectively explaining how Local 8 overcame the myriad obstacles in their path, including employer, governmental, and social opposition. There is not an adequate discussion, however, of the IWW’s commitment to racial inclusivity or why the longshoremen vote to join the Wobblies in 1913. And considering his previous book, in which he assailed New York City’s Irish Catholic longshoremen for a corrupt and conservative union, it would have been appropriate for him to analyze why Philadelphia’s Irish Catholics committed themselves fully to Local 8’s cause. In fact, Kimeldorf’s essay is far too “black and white,” ignoring the many differences among the longshoremen, including, yes, European versus African descent but also native-born versus immigrant and Protestant versus Catholic. There were more Poles and Lithuanians on the Delaware than Irish Americans, but the reader would not know it from this article. [2]

Colin Davis tells the dramatic story of the 1949 New York City longshoremen’s strike in “All I Got’s a Hook: New York Longshoremen and the 1948 Dock Strike.” This New York story is the basis for the stereotype which, unfortunately, most Americans associate with all (waterfront) unions, one of corrupt union officials collaborating with gangsters to line their own pockets at the expense of both shipping companies and longshoremen. Davis’ essay suffers from some of the same faults as Kimeldorf’s. Although race and ethnicity is ever-present in New York, you would not know it from this essay—again surprising considering the theme of the collection. Davis never even tells the reader what the racial composition of the workforce is in 1949, instead only footnoting an article by Calvin Winslow on the 1919 New York strike. Davis does include some interesting information on the role of Catholicism, especially “labor priests,” in this chapter of what could be a book on the massive rank-and-file rage that periodically erupted in New York. However, there is little else on ethnicity and race in this essay, thereby missing an opportunity to explore how the Irish-dominated union interacted with the many Italian American, German American, African American, and other groups who worked in the mammoth New York harbor.

The collection ends on a strong note in Bruce Nelson’s

essay “The ‘Lords of the Docks’ Reconsidered: Race Relations among West Coast Longshoremen, 1933-61,” which discusses how the celebrated progressivism of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehouseman’s Union (ILWU) stumbled on the race question in its large San Pedro (Los Angeles) local. Nelson’s excellent essay dovetails nicely with Arnesen’s opening one, investigating how biracial/interracial unionism was quite a mixed bag, depending so much on local conditions. There are clear differences, as the ILA’s approach was pragmatic and the ILWU’s was ideologically based, but in both essays the power of a well-organized white workforce succeeded in preventing blacks from advancing on the job and in the union. Nelson’s essay is very well-researched, benefiting from the many oral histories gathered by fellow historians (we all should have such resources at our disposal!). Nelson reconsiders some issues that he only briefly dealt with in his book on the west coast longshoremen. There, he, as had many others, lavished praise upon the ILWU for their commitment to racial inclusivity. As Nelson shifts gears and starts grappling with the fundamental issue of race and ethnicity in the American working class, however, his interpretation changes somewhat—we now see race as a far greater obstacle to class-based social movements. In San Pedro’s Local 13, a white majority effectively prevented black longshoremen from attaining work and union membership, while the international’s leadership, including Harry Bridges, essentially allowed this exclusion for fear of losing the large and important port to the rival ILA. The only place where Nelson stumbles somewhat is when discussing the Mexican American longshoremen, who occupied a world in between the powerful white majority and weak black few. Nelson inadequately explains why the Mexican American longshoremen were less objectionable than the African American ones, even though few participated in the seminal 1934 Big Strike and prejudice against Chicanos was rampant in Los Angeles during this era (e.g. the Zoot Suit Riots during World War II). Despite this issue, Nelson’s essay is quite provocative, proving just how racist and obstinate white workers have been and how even well-

meaning white leaders quite easily went along with exclusionary practices at the local level. Truly, this tale is a cautionary one.[3]

All told, the collection is a worthy contribution to the exciting and growing field of race and labor. The essays touch on the largest and most important ports in the land from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. Due to the nature of the work, longshoring has been one of the most heterogeneous types of work in America, including large numbers of African Americans and European immigrants. For those interested in seeing how ethnicity and race play out in this, one of the more heavily unionized and diverse, industries, *Waterfront Workers* is a good book.

#### Notes

[1]. Eric Arnesen, “‘It aint like they do in New Orleans’: Race Relations, Labor Markets, and Waterfront Labor Movements in the American South, 1880-1923,” *Racism and the Labour Market: Historical Studies*, ed. Marcel Van Der Linden and Jan Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 1995).

[2]. Howard Kimeldorf and Robert Penney, “‘Excluded’ By Choice: Dynamics of Interracial Unionism on the Philadelphia Waterfront 1910-1930,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 51 (Spring 1997): 50-71; Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Peter Cole, *Shaping Up and Shipping Out: The Philadelphia Waterfront during and after the IWW years, 1913-1940* (Ph.D.: Georgetown University, 1997).

[3] Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

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