



Peter Cole. *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area.* Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 310 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-04207-2.

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Commissioned by Khal Schneider

Peter Cole's superb examination of dockworkers in San Francisco and Durban, South Africa, provides an excellent model of how to write comparative labor history, weaving together a compelling tale around issues of racial justice, international labor solidarity, and resistance to job-destroying technological change. Building on his previous book on interracial unionism among Philadelphia dockworkers, Cole tells a story about some of the world's most militant workers fighting for justice through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. What differentiates these workers from other laborers is their global perspective developed from loading and unloading products from around the world, creating a militancy regardless of where they toiled that is perhaps unprecedented among the world's workers.

These dockworkers have strikingly different histories. In San Francisco, the Australian immigrant radical Harry Bridges organized one of the greatest strikes in the twentieth-century United States when dockworkers walked off the job in 1934, leading to a general strike, federal mediation, and eventually the creation of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), a left-leaning union heavily invested in workplace democracy and international labor solidarity, especially Local 10 in the Bay Area. In apartheid

South Africa, Durban workers had no such ability to form recognized unions, lived in shacks near the waterfront, and experienced dire poverty under a racist regime that tightly controlled their actions.

Yet no matter their nationality, dockworkers also have tremendous power. At least in San Francisco and Durban, they used that power to promote racial justice, both at home and abroad when possible. Durban workers shared an ethnic background (most were Zulu), and their tight quarters created a culture of solidarity amid great poverty that coalesced into collective action for higher wages. That sense of outrage and justice could lead to expressions of power on the waterfront, in support of both their own rights and the rights of other workers struggling with oppression. San Francisco workers managed to gain their own hiring hall and integrate their workforce well before mandated by civil rights legislation. The Bay Area workers made connections with Martin Luther King Jr., acted in solidarity with the United Farm Workers, had many members who were also Black Panthers, and spoke out against apartheid themselves, even refusing to move cargo heading to South Africa. Shortly after Nelson Mandela left prison, he thanked the ILWU by name while speaking in Oakland.

Cole credits Durban dockworkers with a similar history. They played a critical role in the Durban fight against apartheid, laying much of the groundwork for the 1972 mass movement against the South African government that put a new jolt into a lagging anti-apartheid movement. As early as 1935, Durban dockworkers refused to load meat to feed the Italian invaders of Ethiopia and in 2008 refused to unload a shipload of weapons and ammunition headed for Robert Mugabe's murderous regime in Zimbabwe.

Sure, Cole engages in just a little bit of cherry-picking to make his case. Cole does not hide that the workplace democracy of the ILWU could lead to dockworkers promoting white supremacy, as happened in Portland and Los Angeles, where Bridges refused to intervene on the principle of union democracy. But then this is a story about what is possible with organized labor, not its limitations, and in that it is incredibly valuable. Many on the left talk about international labor solidarity as a goal, yet we have precious few studies really exploring how it has happened. Cole usefully shows how these workers have made that happen in both the past and present, providing stories that can inspire and challenge contemporary activists.

Cole's emphasis on containerization in the second half of the book might seem somewhat incongruous with the first half if not for his storytelling skills in demonstrating how the response to technological transformation reflected dockworkers' preexisting militancy. He is correct that scholars have not paid enough attention to this revolutionary technology, which has arguably done more than anything outside of the internet to shape modern capitalism. It revolutionized a history of dock work that went back thousands of years. Cole argues that employers used containers as a strategy to defang their radical unions. The ILWU had the internal organizing and institutional power to negotiate how containerization would impact them; Durban workers faced greater dev-

astation due to their lack of power. Eventually, the union's rank and file had an internal revolt against Bridges's acquiescence to containers in the 1971-72 strike; Durban dockworkers lacked the organizational ability to engage in such a direct action. Yet despite the size of the workforce plummeting in both places, dockworkers manage to maintain their cultures of militancy and labor internationalism.

What might be most sobering about the book is that the response to containerization by Local 10 is the outlier among organized labor's reaction to automation, which could be a grim look at the future. If a union with a remarkable culture of solidarity can barely make a dent into the automation of their jobs, what is the future for the rest of us? Cole makes a point for a labor politics that reduces the standard forty-hour work week in response. I have argued in print for a government job guarantee while many others advocate for a form of universal basic income. What everyone has in this debate is an understanding of just how devastating rapid technological change can be for a workforce, even one as tightly organized as the ILWU.

Finally, it is worth thinking about this book in terms of the larger trajectory of the field of labor history. Thirty years ago, this book likely would have been a rather lengthy deep dive into the details of ILWU Local 10. The labor histories of the 1980s and 1990s taught us much about workplace culture but also were largely inaccessible for the nonspecialist. But reflecting the recent trend back toward writing for a more general public, Cole has provided a politically activist and accessible comparative history of two very different places in 221 pages of text. In doing so, not only has he made a strong case for international labor solidarity based around specific working-class cultures, but he has also created a tool for contemporary activists to use to create their own campaigns. For this, not to mention for the history itself, Cole deserves a great deal of credit.

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