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Labor and Social Activism on the Docks

Dockworker Power recounts twentieth-century activism of dockworkers in the San Francisco Bay area (USA) and Durban (South Africa), looking both at grassroots organizing and mundane everyday struggles as well as the better-known flashpoints of struggle that sent ripples across the Atlantic. The book received the 2019 Philip Taft Labor History Book Award, awarded by the School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) at Cornell University in cooperation with the Labor and Working-Class History Association. Because of the book's transnational and comparative approach, Dockworker Power deserves a much wider audience. For anyone interested in waterfront history and for anyone looking for historical examples of labor organizing under rapid technological change and under various regimes of control, this book is a must.

Dockworker Power differs from previous books on longshore workers because it is comparative and transnational. It considers Durban, a South African port city, in relationship to California's San Francisco Bay ports. The book looks far beyond institutional union and employer history to consider working-class organization both inside and beyond formal unions, including both casual and de-casualized areas of the ports. It recounts work before containerization, the introduction of containerization, and waterfront work since, integrating recent scholarship on technological change and transport engineering, such as Marc Levinson's history of containerization, The Box (2016), with the historical particulars of Southern African and West Coast North American ports.

The book elucidates the relationship between radical activism and working-class organization. Socialists of all stripes worked on the docks. While the comings and goings of ships from distant ports cultivates a working-class cosmopolitanism, the camaraderie of the “gang” system of work, Cole argues, promotes a working-class collective consciousness. Both major unions—Bay Area International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and Durban dockers’ South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU)—were close to the communist parties of their respective countries. Militant rank-and-file workers both inside and outside the Communist Party challenged their employers and the state, despite the often dire consequences for those individual “troublemakers.” When labor leaders took the wrong side, workers organized around them to build power. The first chapter
provides sufficient historical background for both ports to allow readers to better understand the context (second and third chapters) in which dockworkers participated in the long fight against racial oppression and other social movements both in the United States and South Africa. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on rapid technological changes in the ports following World War II. The last chapter, “Striking for Social Justice,” elucidates a strong current of revolutionary working-class pan-Africanism or Black internationalism.

Cole effortlessly relays the solidarity work of Durban dockers as well as the ILWU Local 10’s praxis. The ILWU has taken many important political stands over the years, siding with the global working class and the oppressed. The local has a long history of rank-and-file action fighting for justice: refusing goods destined for Fascist Italy’s war in Africa, resisting “hot cargo” of the US war machine during the Vietnam conflict, and boycotting Chilean ships under the regime of Pinochet. In 1962, after the Sharpeville Massacre and the growing calls to boycott apartheid goods, the American Committee on Africa picketed the Dutch ship Raki and ILWU refused to load it. Local 10 longshoremen again refused to handle cargo following the Soweto Uprising. The anti-apartheid activists “held a variety of socialist ideologies, among them communist, syndicalist, and Trotskyist” (p. 194) and together with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists saw racial capitalism as the source of the problem and direct action as the best way to attack it. In 1977, they organized a high-profile “strike” against the Nedlloyd Kimberly, a breakbulk vessel. These kind of outwardly directed “militant” actions of ILWU, together with the union’s support for divestment, inspired students at UC Berkeley to expand their protests.

In many ways, the book reminds me of Nicola Pizzolato’s Challenging Global Capitalism (2013), which considers labor, migration, radical struggle, and social change in Detroit and Turin. The similarities should not be surprising since the authors share overlapping interests in both leftist and academic circles. For example, based on the two books’ respective acknowledgements, both authors benefited to some extent from Rick Halpern’s mentorship.

The book would have been strengthened with charts and graphs. The timing of employer offensives and introduction of technology as well as dockworker strikes and wildcats in both countries beg for a handy chart. Such a chart might have offered readers an opportunity to quickly compare both the increased productivity and disruptions on the waterfront with overall industrial output, rate of growth, et cetera in each country and globally and, in turn, see if and how these fit into broader theories of capitalist expansion and contraction.

Perhaps the biggest weakness and biggest strength of this book lies in the South African component. Cole’s work introduces South African labor history to audiences in Europe and the Western Hemisphere, and that is laudable. (Most readers of H-Net, including myself, likely missed Ralph Frans Callebert’s 2017 book, On Durban’s Docks, which came to press just months before Dockworker Power. Cole drew on Callebert’s previously published works.) The confidence with which Cole lays out the broad contexts and writes about nuanced differences amongst US-based longshore workers is less apparent in his writing about their South African counterparts. But this unevenness is not so lopsided as to distract the reader from the usefulness of the comparative method. The difficulties that South African union organizers experienced with “race over class” politics, especially in the wake of the Cato Manor riots, might be compared to Harry Bridges’s infamous failure to organize a multiracial ILWU in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Cole does discuss the New Orleans International Longshoreman’s Association (ILA), but only as a “pragmatic” biracial union for their work sharing.
Dockworker Power successfully integrates historiographies ranging from civil rights and anti-apartheid to business, labor, and working-class histories. It argues that Black workers occupied important positions in which they successfully leveraged for racial justice and social movements in their respective countries. The book restores dockworker centrality to direct action, mass strikes, and rank-and-file participation in social movements without overlooking contradictions embedded in some of the more performative actions of union bureaucracy. The book also forces readers to grapple with the fallout from the containerization and rapid technological change that have been a victory for capitalists and have simultaneously spurred disinvestment in Black communities. The plentiful but physically difficult jobs that once provided a backbone to Black working-class communities in places like New York, New Orleans, Baltimore, and the Bay, as well as to communities in South Africa, are now a tiny fraction of the jobs that were once available. Waterfront-adjacent neighborhoods have largely undergone gentrification and Black residents have largely been pushed out. As a professor of Indigenous studies, I also appreciated Cole's inclusion of fractures among Indigenous South Africans (such as Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, etc.).

Lastly, this book also reminds us that socialists have made, and can continue to make, great strides working within organized labor on the docks. Dockworker unions’ radical tradition provides important space from which to organize in transportation and warehousing. Despite employers’ tactics, globally, workers still have real potential for power at their workplace. In a world of increasing economic integration and built on just-in-time production, the “chokepoints” of trade are still a strategic place for workers looking to leverage their position both for economic gains and in pursuit of working-class social and political power.

Robert Caldwell is an assistant professor and graduate director of Indigenous studies at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). He received a PhD in transatlantic history from the University of Texas at Arlington. He is also a graduate of the UMass Labor Studies MA Program and has an interest in labor and working-class history and the global history of the Left. He worked for a time as a casual longshoreman and maritime clerk at the Port of New Orleans and was a member of ILA Local 3000 and Teamsters Local 270.

Erratum: This review was revised on August 17, 2023, to correct an error. The Philip Taft Labor History Book Award is awarded by the School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) at Cornell University in cooperation with the Labor and Working-Class History Association, not by the Working-Class Studies Association.
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