

Cole, Peter (2018) *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, IL.

Review by Gary Jones

In the midst of today's global capitalist crisis, Peter Cole's important new study of dockworkers in Durban, South Africa and the San Francisco Bay Area, which received the 2019 Philip Taft Labor History Book Award from the Labor and Working-Class History Association and Cornell ILR School, will almost certainly be of great interest, relevance, and inspiration to those engaged in the interdisciplinary field of working-class studies.

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Dockworker Power is a comparative labor history of dockworkers in Durban, South Africa and the San Francisco Bay Area, two of the world's great port cities, over much of the last century. Though one is located in the northern hemisphere and the other in the southern hemisphere, the differences between these locations should not obscure the strong similarities among such dockworkers. Indeed, Peter Cole's ample research demonstrates that both Durban and San Francisco Bay Area dockworkers have exhibited remarkable solidarity, power, and activism since the 1930s and 1940s. The sources of that solidarity were the collective nature of their work loading and unloading ships' cargoes, and organizing by militant dockworkers, mostly leftists, whether syndicalist, socialist, communist, or Trotskyite. It was therefore no accident, as Marxists are wont to say, that despite shifting fortunes, both Bay Area and Durban dockworkers have demonstrated such remarkable power and activism in their fight against exploitation and oppression in their workplaces, cities, nations, and the world.

Dockworker power and activism emerged in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1930s. After the 'Big Strike' of 1934, San Francisco dockworkers, led by Harry Bridges, an Australian-born working-class radical, organized the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Workers Union (ILWU). The newly-formed union decasualized their work by replacing the notorious 'shape up' with a union hiring hall, and began the racial integration of both their membership and leadership. Nor did their activism stop at the San Francisco waterfront or the East Bay, as San Francisco dockworkers protested the Japanese invasion of mainland China in 1937.

In Durban, South Africa, dockworker power and activism emerged during the 1940s, despite the fact that Zulu and Pondo dockworkers were officially denied the status of permanent workers, the right to organize unions, and the right to strike. Nevertheless, dockworkers led by Zulu Phungula, a working-class radical, used their status as casual laborers and their right to ‘stay away’ from work to ‘down tools’ (strike) against their exploitative employers and engage in anti-apartheid activism. Nor, like their fellow dockworkers in the San Francisco Bay Area, did their activism stop at the waterfront, in their case the Indian Ocean, as Durban dockworkers protested fascist Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

From the 1960s onwards, however, dockworkers in the Bay Area and Durban began to experience shifting fortunes as shipping interests and the state acted to uproot dockworker solidarity and eliminate their power and activism. Beginning in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1960s, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) began the introduction of shipping containers to transport cargo, loaded and unloaded by cranes, for greater profit and control. Without the introduction of shipping containers, Cole rightly points out, the subsequent and unprecedented increase in the volume of world trade, which is the basis of today’s global economy, would have been all but impossible.

In the Bay Area, longtime ILWU president Harry Bridges made the crucial - but controversial - decision to negotiate with the PMA over containerization rather than resist it per se. By doing so, Bridges bought higher wages and job protections for the generation of ’34 at the expense of future jobs and dockworker power. Whereas in Durban, in 1959, shipping companies and the South African state introduced decasualization to simultaneously repress dockworker strikes and dangerous anti-apartheid activism for years to come. Additionally, the belated introduction of containerization to the port of Durban in 1977, which in the continued absence of a union was followed by half of all dockworkers being ‘retrenched’ (laid-off), further diminished dockworker power and activism.

Yet containerization and decasualization failed to uproot dockworker solidarity and completely eliminate their power and activism. The ILWU – especially the rank and file - continued to resist the ongoing impact of containerization in the Bay Area and other West coast ports including by strike action. Furthermore, Bay Area dockworkers – majority black by the 1960s - also continued their support for the civil rights movement and the South African anti-apartheid movement. Bay Area dockworkers’ support for civil rights and the anti-apartheid movement explains why both Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King were honorary members of the ILWU and Nelson Mandela publicly thanked the union for its support of the anti-apartheid movement when he visited Oakland in 1990. More recently, Bay Area dockworkers have protested Israeli treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Likewise, in Durban, decasualization failed to uproot dockworker solidarity and eliminate their power and activism. Most importantly, dockworker strikes in 1969 and 1972 ended the ‘quiet decade’ and directly contributed to the revival of the national anti-apartheid movement in 1973. As if such a direct contribution to the end of apartheid in 1994 were not enough, by 2000 Durban’s dockworkers had become members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (SATAWU), and by 2008-9 they had resumed their tradition of overseas protest and activism –

emanating from their labor/left and black internationalism - by refusing to unload arms going to Robert Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe and boycotting an Israeli ship to protest the bombing of Gaza.

Peter Cole's historical analysis of Durban and San Francisco Bay dockworker's remarkable solidarity and power, antifascist and antiracist activism, and resistance to containerization, is both persuasive and compelling. Moreover, a close reading of *Dockworker Power* strongly suggests that today's Durban and Bay Area dockworkers – class conscious, antiracist, members of unions with militant, left traditions – now labor at strategic choke points in global capitalist supply chains that are vulnerable to their – and other logistical workers - collective action.

In sum, at this time of global capitalist crisis, the publication of *Dockworker Power* makes an important contribution to the development of the interdisciplinary field of working-class studies. Peter Cole is to be heartily congratulated for providing readers with such an interesting, relevant, and inspiring case study of working-class solidarity, power, and activism. For Durban and Bay Area dockworkers and their unions, SATAWU and the ILWU, not to mention other logistical workers in today's global economy, embrace of the motto 'an injury to one is an injury to all' remains as important, if not more important, than ever before.

Reviewer Bio

Gary Jones, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of History at American International College, Springfield, Massachusetts. He teaches courses on each of the major eras of the American past and themes such as labor, race, ethnicity, and radicalism. His research focuses on Gilded Age and Progressive Era Pennsylvania, the state, and labor.