

Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area

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In *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and San Francisco Bay Area*, historian Peter Cole compares the union histories of two port cities, the militant struggles of dockworkers against racial discrimination, their response to technology (in the form of containerisation), and their solidarity actions with freedom struggles around the world. The chronological focus is on the post-war period, until about the 2010s, but Cole reaches further back to show the longer tradition of union activism on this port. Throughout the book, Cole keeps 'one eye on local histories and another on global trends in studying two important ports, one in the global North and the other in the South'. Chapter one of the book traces the story of these two port cities and provides essential context for readers perhaps unfamiliar with the histories of each place. As Cole notes, Americanists may be less familiar with the South African context and vice-versa. In doing so, Cole not only traces the colonial history and legacy of each nation and the history of the port towns that were central the development of capitalism in each nation, but also their social and union histories of each city. It's a sweeping, panoramic narrative that addresses the larger histories of a single port. Cole provides important context to both US and South African labour history before the 1950s as well as addressing the daily rhythms of life of dockworkers in each port. Dockworkers in both cities developed an occupational subculture, one reinforced by the collective nature of work on the ports; working on ports in 'global cities' workers were also 'international in their thoughts, and, occasionally, their actions' (p. 35) and this point is returned to and demonstrated in the final chapter. But Cole also notes the differences between each port and workforce, the most important being the housing situation for those on the Durban port. While San Francisco workers went home each day to their own homes, black South African workers were compelled to live in hostels close to the port as the apartheid restricted the movement of black South Africans in cities

After providing this context, chapters two and three address the first major theme of the book: the role of dockworkers in fighting racial oppression. While chapter three focuses on the 'classic periods' of each nation's struggle for civil rights, chapter two traces the pre-history and the lesser known involvement of union in campaigns for racial equality. Cole introduces the terms 'social justice unionism' and 'civil rights unionism', terms in South African and US historiography respectively, and which capture the modes of unionism that played a role in fighting racism before the 'classic' period of the civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid movements, or what Cole calls the 'nascent' movements. But on the Durban waterfront, this was social movement unionism 'without a union'. Dockworkers fought for better wages and conditions and against apartheid during a period in which the state was beginning a major clamp down on anti-apartheid related activism. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, organising workers became impossible. Nevertheless, by tracing the stories of several key activists, Cole points to the ways in which such leaders 'exemplified the interconnections of the anti-apartheid and labor movements' and how 'labor and political activism were part and parcel of the same struggle' (p. 64). But not all struggles were successful. A 1959 strike by Durban dockworkers resulted in a brutal suppression, the firing of the entire labour force (and hiring of a new workforce from rural KwaZulu), the de-casualisation of the workforce and the reorganisation of the labour regime, an event that 'foreshadowed wider repression' over the next decade (p. 65) when anti-apartheid activism was banned and most activists arrested, driven underground, exiled, imprisoned or killed. Nevertheless, Durban dockworkers played a crucial role on efforts against apartheid; they were the first suppressed, but would play a crucial role in the 1970s when the movement was 'reignited'.

Meanwhile in San Francisco, ILWU Local 10 committed itself to racial equality, 'setting the bar for civil rights unionism', according to Cole. While endemic racism existed in San Francisco, and in the country more broadly (including in most workplaces), Local 10 were well ahead of their time in instituting new rules that promoted racial integration following the Big Strike of 1934. This occurred against the backdrop of a massive wave of migration of African Americans from the South to the Bay area in the 1930s and 1940s. But while the wartime boom saw opening in shipbuilding, the end of the war saw such opportunities closing up. While unions down the coast in LA and across the country become less willing to accept African Americans, Local 10 maintained its inclusive policies and rejected the 'logic' of zero-sum racial capitalism (the idea that if black workers benefited, white workers suffered). Cole claims this was largely to do with the politics of the original union leaders and rank and filers, including Harry Bridges (who was the subject of the anti-communist crusade and an attempt to deport him for about 20 years). Thus, in the context of the second red-scare, Local 10 held out and was ahead of its time. As one 1955 ILWU pamphlet quoted by Cole read: 'the ILWU banned racial discrimination and segregation twenty years before the United States Supreme Court found the courage to do so' (p. 72). Cole draws on numerous historians who point to the decline of interracial unionism in the post-war period and concludes that 'Despite the numerous factors that undergirded the failure of the union movement to embrace racial equality, the ILWU remained committed to this goal' (p. 73). In turn, African American workers became the most ardent defenders of union activist Harry Bridges and others ILWU members accused of being communists in the second red scare of the 1950s.

Cole then moves to the better-known period of social activism, union upsurge, and global movements against racial discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s. The role of unions in general in these developments are largely neglected, Cole suggests, especially in the US. Discussing the array of social movements in the US during the 'long 1960s', Cole notes that organised labour is left out of histories of social movements and the 'working-class background of countless movement participants is regularly ignored in a society where class analysis remains rare' (p. 85). By contrast, in the South African historiography, the role of the labour movement is rightly emphasised, though Cole does suggest the specific role of dockworkers in the lead up to the famous Durban strikes of 1973 are neglected. In Durban, dockworkers were emerging from the defeat of 1959 and de-casualisation as well as the broader state suppression of the anti-apartheid movement following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre. But Cole notes, just as the suppression of dockworkers foreshadowed a broader state response, a decade later 'Durban dockers helped lead a resurgent black working class back to the metaphorical barricades' (p. 86). Cole's main argument is that Dockworkers laid the groundwork for the famous Durban Strikes of 1973 which in turn reignited the movement against apartheid. In the US, ILWU Local 10 continued a long history of social movement unionism, even as much of the labour movement veered away from political currents of the time. Local 10, by contrast, became involved in an impressive array of movements and Cole selects only a few (p. 102) of these.

Chapters four and five shifts focus to the second major theme of the book: de-casualisation and the impacts of containerisation. It returns to the aftermath of the Big Strike of 1934 during which unions de-casualised the ports in San Francisco, achieved a union controlled hiring process, and greater security of employment for workers. By contrast, the Durban ports were de-casualised 'from above' in 1959 when employers scrapped the casual (or *togt*) system and maintained control over the hiring process, in response to strikes in the late 1950s. Thus, Cole concludes, de-casualisation was 'neither pro-worker nor anti-worker' (p. 119). In San Francisco, the 'bottom up' de-casualisation was introduced following a strike and a favourable federal ruling, while in Durban it was imposed after a failed strike and used to contain anti-apartheid activism. Containerisation, on the other hand, was always driven by the employer. This is Cole's major contribution, as so much that has been written about dockworkers has been about the period before the 1970s and before containerisation. Historians have revealed little about what happened to dockworkers, who were for so much of their history a militant workforce, following containerisation. Before detailing how these workers responded to employment and technological change, Cole also places these developments within the broader context of the last quarter of the 20th century, when a new phase in global capitalism heralded wage stagnation, union membership decline, and increasingly precarious work. In South Africa, the period saw the arrival of multi-racial democracy, which Cole calls the 'greatest social movement victory of the postwar world'. But, he adds, no 'second revolution' came, and dockworkers, like other (black) workers 'found themselves dominated by global economic forces beyond their control' (p. 149).

Cole focuses on San Francisco to discuss how the union negotiated the introduction of containers, a development that was essential to globalisation after the 1970s and ‘remade the world economy’ (p. 133). Harry Bridges and the ILWU attempted to negotiate its introduction with the aim of having at least some control or influence over the process, a decision that has seen Bridges ‘castigated by some in and around the ILWU for betrayal’, according to Cole (p. 133), while others saw him as adapting to the inevitable. By contrast to Durban workers, San Francisco dockers were much better placed to negotiate the introduction of technology and give workers ‘a share of the machine’. The 1971-2 strike (lasting 134 days) was largely about the conflicts over containerisation. But while ILWU won significant economic gains, Cole argues, they were unable to prevent the loss of ‘workers and, thus, unionists and political influence, which continued through the 1970s’ (p. 162). Containerisation came later to Durban, in 1977, but within three years half of the dockworkers on the port lost their jobs. As a result, while Durban dockworkers had sparked the post-1970s anti-apartheid upsurge, they were ‘no longer in vanguard’ (p. 149). Durban workers were far less able to negotiate the process as containers arrived on the Durban waterfront. Cole concludes that containerisation had some ‘awful consequences’ on dockworkers lives and work cultures, but asks whether resistance was futile. Technology, Cole adds, is neither anti-worker or pro-worker, but the question is who controls the process, and who reaps the benefits? Cole concludes that despite the impacts of containerisation, dockworkers remain among the most heavily unionised and militant workers in the world, and ‘though weakened, dockworkers in both ports lost neither their will nor their ability to use their power on behalf of global solidarity struggles’, which is the focus of the final chapter (p. 180).

Chapter six returns to dockworker political activism but focuses on the transnational solidarity actions by Durban and San Francisco dockworkers, and begins with two astounding vignettes: in 1984, Local 10 workers refused to unload goods from South Africa aboard a Dutch Cargo ship in the aftermath of Ronald Reagan’s election victory, and in 2008 Durban dockworkers refused to unload a Chinese ship carrying weapons bound for Zimbabwe which would have been used by Mugabe’s military and police to crush opposition. After dockworkers in other Southern African nations refused to work the cargo, the ship returned to China. Such actions, Cole notes, ‘challenge the notion that workers are powerless to shape their world’ (p. 182), especially in the current climate where the global domination of neoliberalism and decline of unions are the dominant narrative. Before focusing on more recent actions, Cole provides us with an overview of dockworker labour internationalism from late-19th-century global dockworker unions (the first global unions) through to political boycotts of fascist nations in the 1930s and he reminds us again that dockworkers ‘interpreted their lives, work, and world through a global lens’ (p. 184). This review will not detail the extent of the activism, but the chapter focuses largely on the two vignettes described above: Local 10 anti-apartheid activism, and Durban worker support for Zimbabwean democracy. The chapter also ends with a brief discussion of worker boycotts for Palestinian independence.

From the outset, Cole also makes a compelling case for the study of race and technology, for the comparative histories of Durban and San Francisco, and for the study of dockworkers as a workforce that lay at the center of importance developments in capitalism and global protest. While the history of dockworkers (known in different nations as longshoreman, waterside workers etc.) has received much attention, Cole notes the lack of studies that engage with the history of such workers in the era of containerisation, which he calls the ‘most significant symbol and components of global capital’. Such a focus, Cole suggests, remains as relevant as ever as workers continue to negotiate the impact of technology of work. Above all, Cole makes a compelling case that, as he writes in the opening line, ‘Dockworkers have power’, and the book is largely aimed at demonstrating this point. Closing the book, Cole channels the approach of the late Howard Zinn, demonstrating how ordinary people ‘have stood up to oppression and spoken truth to power, denouncing bigotry and challenging powerful employers and the state’. This book will have wide appeal, for historians of South Africa and the US, for those interested in workers struggles in a global context and how technology transforms the lives of working people, and for those looking for evidence that workers maintain power, even in our increasingly connected globalised world.

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