

# BOOK REVIEW

**Peter Cole. *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*.** Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. xiii + 286 pp. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN 978-0-252-08376-1.


This comparative history of workers and their unions on the waterfronts of Durban, South Africa, and the San Francisco Bay Area in California follows in the distinguished footsteps of other comparative histories of South Africa and the United States, including those by George Fredrickson, James Campbell, and Robert Trent Vinson, as well as the pioneering work of Frederick Cooper on the dockworkers of Mombasa. Peter Cole, a U.S.-based historian with an earlier book on the Wobblies (“Interracial Unionism” among dockworkers in Philadelphia), brings a similar range of interests—racial struggles, left-oriented unionism, and the special power and predicament of twentieth- and twenty-first-century dockworkers—to this well-focused, carefully researched, and convincing study.

This topic dovetails with my own personal experience, as I grew up in geographical proximity to the docks of the Bay Area. They long formed part of my visual landscape, and figures such as Harry Bridges, the head of the dockworker’s union on which Cole focuses in the United States, loomed large in that time. I have memories of the long strike of 1971 and 1972; I remember seeing the container cranes spring up on the Oakland waterfront and watching the parallel relative decline of the port of San Francisco. Because of their less prominent presence in South African historiography, I was less aware of the dockers (for the sake of simplicity, Cole applies the American term “dockworkers” to both locales) in Durban. However, Durban is, of course, South Africa’s principal port, and one cannot pass along the waterfront there without noting that same type of container crane now found in every large port around the world. Also, as Cole rehearses, labor struggles in Durban, especially the strikes of 1973, have a prominent role in the story of the struggle against apartheid. Cole re-centers the dockworkers in that narrative, from which he argues they have been marginalized, and offers an engaging analysis of these waterfront workers, their collective struggles and unions, and their political involvements, from the early twentieth century through the present.

In each chapter, Cole interweaves the struggles, successes, and setbacks of dockworkers in these important locales on opposite sides of the world.

After a helpful introduction, he leads us through the historical context of each set of workers. Two subsequent chapters narrate how in both places workers sought advances against systems of racial oppression through workplace struggles and overlapping memberships in organizations and movements engaged in liberation struggles. In both cases, there were significant gains. In San Francisco, the ILWU's Big Strike of 1934 gave the union control of the hiring process, which they used to equalize work as they deliberately and quickly opened a formerly nearly all-white waterfront to large numbers of African American workers who eventually constituted a majority in the local. In Durban, without the right before the late 1970s to organize in unions, workers used their unorganized and casual (until 1959) status to engage in "strikes" by not offering their services. In 1969 through 1972, dockworkers there engaged in a series of strikes, but continued to use the tactic they had employed in previous decades of declining to nominate leaders who could be coopted or sidelined (as had happened to one important early leader). Cole shows how this wave of dockworker strikes in Durban presaged and influenced the famously "leaderless" Durban Strikes of 1973, a key moment in the resurgence of above-ground protest against apartheid after decades of successful repression. The next two chapters demonstrate how workers in each location dealt with the onslaught of containerization, which radically and thoroughly transformed the nature of waterfront work and led to a huge decline in the number of positions, even as trade rapidly expanded. The long strike of 1971 and 1972 on the U.S. West Coast was essentially a worker's revolt, unsuccessful in the end, against concessions the formerly radical union leaders had made in the face of containerization, as they tried to "gain a piece of the machine," over the previous decade. The final substantive chapter before a brief conclusion argues that these workers, now unionized in each center, have continued to prioritize human rights as well as their own workplace demands, with significant success from time to time, despite the loss of power connected to containerization in affecting struggles of other workers of color around the world.

This is very much a history of the collective labor struggles of the men on the docks and at times of other workers in adjacent industries. It is not a social history of the lives and work of individual dockworkers, a study of masculinity, of the cultural presuppositions and engagements of the workers in the two regions, or of their struggles and successes away from the docks and after work (or after retirement or permanent disability). All of those, and more, seem like fruitful ideas for future research. Cole's book is a tremendous first step in understanding the parallel struggles of dockworkers both locations and their ongoing importance in the face of global containerized trade.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Denzer, LaRay. 1982. "Wallace-Johnson and the Sierra Leone Labor Crisis of 1939." *African Studies Review* 25 (2–3): 159–83. doi:[10.2307/524215](https://doi.org/10.2307/524215).
- Oberst, Timothy. 1988. "Transport Workers, Strikes and the 'Imperial Response': Africa and the Post World War II Conjuncture." *African Studies Review* 31 (1): 117–33. doi:[10.23.7/524586](https://doi.org/10.23.7/524586).