

Two Ages of Waterfront Labour

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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

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John Bellamy Foster

Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1988).

William Finlay, *Work on the Waterfront: Worker Power and Technological Change in a West Coast Port* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1988).

THERE ARE TWO crucial watersheds in the modern history of waterfront labour: (1) the successful struggle, beginning with the Pacific Coast revolts of the 1930s, to set-up union-dominated hiring halls; and (2) the technological revolution in cargo handling and ship design associated with the introduction of containers in the 1960s and 70s. Bruce Nelson's historical treatment of waterfront labour focuses on the first of these watersheds, with particular emphasis on the interactions between seamen and longshoremen during the "syndicalist renaissance" of the late 1930s. William Finlay's sociological study is concerned with the effects of the second watershed — the technological revolution in cargo handling — on skill levels, job control and status hierarchies within the longshore labour process.

A good sense of the dramatically different emphases of these books can be derived by comparing their dustjackets. The cover of the Nelson study shows a photograph of a march by picketing San Francisco longshoremen, during the first week of the legendary 1934 strike. Overlaid on this are photographs of two former "Aussies" who had a large impact on the US waterfront struggles of the 1930s: Harry Bridges, who was to become the dominant figure in the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), and Harry Hynes, a rank-and-file leader of the Communist-led Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU)

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and editor of the San Francisco *Waterfront Worker*, who died fighting with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. In contrast, on Finlay's cover one sees not workers but a stack of containers and part of a container crane. The focus here is not on a workers' revolt but on the effects of a technological revolution on the organization of work in a West Coast port (Los Angeles-Long Beach). Taken together, these two books therefore force us to confront the major issues associated with waterfront labour over the last half-century.

The overarching theme of Nelson's study arises out of the author's attempt to counter the recent tendency of labour historians to downplay the radical character of the class struggles during the 1930s. Thus even as gifted a labour historian as Melvyn Dubofsky now argues that Irving Bernstein's famous characterization of the 1930s as the *Turbulent Years* might be better viewed as "The Not So Turbulent Years."¹ "While acknowledging that the massive strike wave that crested in 1937 led to impressive gains," Nelson notes, "recent historiography has tended to emphasize the narrow, episodic character of worker militancy and to assert the primacy of a deeply rooted social inertia beneath the turbulent surface of events." (1) Indeed, a sign of the times in this respect is to be found in literary critic Malcolm Cowley's remark in his 1980 memoirs that labour militancy during the sit-down strikes of the 1930s may not have been "aroused by anything nobler than the hope of driving a Buick." (267)

Nelson's inquiry into the waterfront struggles of the 1930s, however, reaffirms the reality of radical struggle during the period, and argues that "to deny the richness of the past because of the paucity of the present would be to deny history its discontinuity and would, in this instance, reflect what E.P. Thompson has called 'the enormous condescension of posterity.'" (273) Thus Nelson's study belongs to the tradition identified with historians like Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery that sees the making of the working class as an uneven story with numerous setbacks, resulting from the complex interaction of community, ideology, family, race, and class — in ways that often inhibit the formation of a coherent working-class culture. On the waterfront, according to Nelson, the limits of the class revolt were largely determined by the fragile unity formed between seamen and longshoremen. And it is in the close examination of this relationship that he has the most to add to our historical understanding of the period.

Workers on the Waterfront begins with a colorful depiction of the sailortowns that constituted part of every major port and which formed the essence of the tenuous community life of sailors when away from the sea. Drawing upon the previous research of historians like Judith Fingard in her book *Jack in Port*, Nelson tells the story of the sense of abandon that frequently characterized the sailor's existence in port, and goes on to describe the linch-pin of this society — "the boardinghouse keeper or 'crimp,' who also played the vital role of shipping agent."²

Sailors of course spent much of their life at sea. Nelson emphasizes four

¹Melvyn Dubofsky, "Not So Turbulent Years," *Amerikastudien* 24 (January 1979), 5-20.

²Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns in Eastern Canada* (Toronto 1982).

aspects of this maritime existence. First, sailors lived a life of extraordinary hardship. Not only did they live in quarters while at sea that were extremely confining ("too small for a coffin and too large for a grave," in the words of Andrew Furuseth, president of the International Seamen's Union), and work under very hazardous conditions, but they were also subject historically to draconian discipline. Second, seafaring men were constantly confronted with rigid craft hierarchies. Naval tradition had created a stratified system with masters and mates above, deck men well below them, followed by men in the engine room, and then the stewards. Government licensing further institutionalized this hierarchy making it into a complex system with minute gradations. Third, maritime workers were subject to cosmopolitan influences in the formation of their distinct working-class culture. Fourth, notwithstanding intense craft jealousies, racial antagonisms, and other divisions, seafaring men had a natural affinity for radical syndicalist trade unionism. These conflicting tendencies in the socialization of merchant seamen, Nelson points out, produced a continuing contradiction within the seamen's unions between craft unionism/business unionism on the one hand, and militant syndicalism/radical unionism, on the other.

The International Seamen's Union (ISU), of which the Sailor's Union of the Pacific (SUP) was the strongest single component, was a loose amalgamation of some sixteen autonomous divisions, divided along regional and craft lines. Dominated during most of its history, from its inception in 1899 until its demise in 1937, by Andrew Furuseth and other professional unionists with a strong craft bias — men often known as "white shirt sailors" because of their estrangement from the environment of foc'sle and sailortown — the ISU clearly resembled the craft and business union structure of the AFL, and was largely free from rank-and-file influences. Under Furuseth's leadership the ISU was strongly critical of both Wobblies and later Communists, as well as being known for the violent racism that it directed in particular against African-Americans and Asian immigrants.

The first serious opposition to the ISU on the West coast in the 1930s came from the Communist-led Marine Workers Industrial Union, which, from its birth in 1930, sought to bring seamen and longshoremen together under one industrial union framework. Although bringing greater militancy and solidarity to ports throughout the coast, however, the MWIU ultimately failed to supplant the more established unions, and was liquidated in 1935. Nevertheless, it was out of this organization, Nelson tells us, that many of the leading rank-and-file labour activists emerged.

The weakness of the MWIU was evident in its inability to attract independent radicals like Harry Bridges to its ranks, and the associated failure to make much headway among longshoremen, as opposed to seamen. Born in Australia, Bridges had early turned to the life of the sea. But the pivotal experience in Bridges' life, Nelson makes clear, was the general strike based in the transportation and coal industries that spread throughout Australia in 1917 and which lasted for eighty-two days before being put down by the government. Beginning in 1920 Bridges began

to ship out of US ports and made San Francisco his base. In 1922 he switched to dockwork. "Gradually the lean, hawk-nosed "Limo" with the cockney twang," Nelson writes,

became a fixture on the waterfront. At the shape-up, on the job, and in the gin mills, he listened to the men's gripes with the air of someone who had seen and heard it all before. He greeted their complaints with a cocksure "of course," and then went on to talk about the necessity of organizing to combat the employers. (113)

While sympathetic with Communist Party organizing on the docks, Bridges refused to join not only the Party but the MWIU itself, arguing that what these groups were aiming for went right over the heads of the workers. Still, an organization that reflected a working leadership-alliance between rank-and-file Communists and other radicals like Bridges was to emerge with the appearance of the *Waterfront Worker* in 1932. Although some MWIU members were central figures among the group that brought out the new paper, the *Waterfront Worker*, Nelson argues, never strongly pushed the MWIU, and always adopted a fairly independent line. In fact, the longshoremen gathered around the *Waterfront Worker* quickly embraced the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) which reappeared in San Francisco at this time; they did so, however, on their own terms, by insisting, in contrast to the corrupt East coast organization under Joseph Ryan, that "The rank and file must run and control the ILA." (120)

Nelson devotes a whole chapter to the landmark eighty-three day strike of 1934, through which longshoremen, reinforced by seamen, managed to throw off the tyranny of the shape-up (the practice of hiring off the wharves) and establish their own union-dominated hiring hall. Taking the reader step by step through such familiar events as Bloody Thursday, the funeral march, and the San Francisco general strike that followed, Nelson also goes on to discuss the role that seamen played in the strike and the larger solidarity that emerged as a result. Although the ISU tried to keep sailors aboard their ships, the spontaneous walkout of the Portland steam schooner men on the very first day of the strike, plus the part that MWIU played in giving these walkouts a more organized character, combined to extend the strike to the seamen. Within a few weeks all the seafaring unions on the U.S. Pacific coast were on strike.³

Although arbitration in relation to the 1934 strike eventually gave longshoremen the control over hiring that they had been seeking, the arbitration award with respect to seamen gave full power to the employers in this area. Moreover, Furuseth and the leadership of the ISU actually opposed the establishment of a hiring hall system controlled by the sailors themselves, preferring instead to promote the idea of job opportunity for the so-called "competent minority." But the rank-and-file seamen were not to be stopped. Disregarding both the arbitration award and the dictates of their own craft conscious international union, they went ahead and

³For a brief but colourful depiction of the 1934 strike that complements the account provided by Nelson see David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor* (New York 1982), 40-52.

unilaterally established hiring halls from California to Seattle. As Nelson explains, "Harry Lundeberg, a Seattle militant, who was emerging as the sailors' leading spokesman, declared that any man caught shipping off the dock would be 'classed as a fink and treated as such.'" (165) So strong was the solidarity of seamen on this issue that the employers had no way of countering such actions.

The atmosphere of militant syndicalism extended across international boundaries. In 1935 50 longshoremen at Powell River in British Columbia were locked out when they demanded wage increases and better working conditions. And when longshoremen belonging to the Vancouver District Waterfront Workers' Association (VDWWA) refused to load paper from Powell River they too were locked out by the employers, and the critical strike-lockout of 1935 in BC began. The confrontation in BC reached its highest point in the famous "Battle of Ballentyne Pier," resulting in 28 injuries after mounted police charged into a group of 1,000 longshoremen.

Meanwhile, remembering that BC longshoremen had refused to handle "hot cargo" from the US during the 1934 strike, seamen immediately set up a picket line when a ship carrying lumber from Powell River docked in San Francisco. Longshoremen then refused to cross, creating, as Nelson tells us, an escalating crisis on the US West coast in the early Summer of 1935. With the US longshoremen under attack from both the waterfront employers and the government, Harry Bridges called for a coast-wide vote on the issue of hot cargo from BC and an overwhelming majority of the men voted to stand with the BC strikers, presenting a united front so strong that it forced the Waterfront Employers' Association to back down temporarily. Meanwhile seamen extended the controversy by tying up ships scheduled to work hot cargo in BC that were also carrying the US mail. Although seamen and longshoremen, after a second referendum among the latter, eventually went back to working BC cargo, and even though the VDWWA lost to the combined force of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the government, the international solidarity exhibited in this period was to create a climate for the affiliation of all BC longshoremen with the ILWU by 1944. (194-5)⁴

The solidarity among maritime workers reached its climax with the rise in 1935 of the short-lived Maritime Federation of the Pacific Coast (MFPC). "What is most compelling about the Maritime Federation," Nelson contends, "is not its institutional history but rather the development of a split between 'Communists' and 'syndicalists' that ultimately doomed the organization to extinction." (189) The story here is one that revolves primarily around the developing conflict between Harry Bridges and his Communist allies within the workers' movement, on the one hand, and Harry Lundeberg, a Norwegian born Seattle seaman who became president of the MFPC and his anti-Communist allies in and out of the labour movement, on the other. Nelson's somewhat questionable interpretation of

⁴See also International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) Local 500 Pensioners, *"Man Along the Shore": The Story of the Vancouver Waterfront, as Told by the Longshoremen Themselves, 1860-1975* (Vancouver 1975), 85-5; ILWU, *The ILWU Story* (San Francisco 1963), 46-50.

Lundeberg — which he counterposes to Irving Bernstein's characterization of him as the "classic business agent" — highlights the militancy of Lundeberg's first few years as a labour activist and downplays what Nelson himself refers to as Lundeberg's "eventual tendencies — his anticommunism, his craft particularism, his alleged antipolitical syndicalism." (192) At times Nelson almost seems engaged in special pleading in emphasizing Lundeberg's syndicalism given the main thrust of his subsequent career.

The decisive break between the two men and the two groups of maritime workers arose in connection with the ninety-nine day strike that began on 30 October 1936 on the Pacific coast, and which quickly spread in the form of seamen's strikes on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts under the leadership of Joseph Curran and those who were to build the National Maritime Union (NMU). At a time when not only the employers and the government, but also the ISU leadership and Ryan's ILA, were arrayed against the striking Atlantic and Gulf seamen, Bridges took the position that a united front should be established, with workers belonging to the MFPC staying out on strike until there had been a satisfactory resolution of the Atlantic coast seamen's dispute. Violently opposed to Bridges' stance, Lundeberg and the leadership of the SUP joined with the AFL, the national leadership of the ISU, the East coast ILA, the government and the employers in raging against what Lundeberg referred to as the "self-appointed Commissars."

Thus began within the maritime workers movement on the Pacific coast the great divide that reflected the split within the union movement nationwide. Bridges and the Pacific coast ILA (later the ILWU) sided with the industrial unionism of John L. Lewis and the CIO, and with the rank-and-file leadership of the National Maritime Union, while Harry Lundeberg and the SUP allied itself with the craft unionism of the AFL and the East coast ILA. Lundeberg himself became president under AFL sponsorship of the Seafarer's International Union (SIU) — replacing the now defunct ISU — which immediately proceeded to go to war with the CIO's NMU. Still, it would be a mistake, Nelson argues (not entirely convincingly), to underestimate the extent to which Lundeberg, along with sailors generally, remained committed to militant unionism. What drove the SUP (and SIU) leadership to take the positions it did was a parochial commitment to the interests of the sailors.

And it is here that the main lesson of Nelson's penetrating assessment of the class warfare fought by waterfront workers in the 1930s is to be found. Those who currently wish to deny the radical character of those struggles do so primarily on the grounds that the workers' movement subsequently lost its militancy. But the "enormous condescension of posterity" reflected in such interpretations forgets that class consciousness is not a transcendent reality but one in which community, gender, ethnic, racial and religious loyalties and conflicts are inscribed from the start. The historian is properly concerned only with the latter — the tangled, grubby realm in which class consciousness can be perceived in its making — and not with the former. Without denying the significance of the maritime workers' struggles Nelson also helps us understand why the power of labour waned so abruptly — the

answer lying in the fragile nature of its coalitions.

In sharp contrast to Nelson's study of inter-class (and intra-class) conflict, Finlay's book is concerned with technological change and job control on the contemporary waterfront. His main thesis is that the Braverman tradition — as represented in the analysis of longshoring primarily by the research of Herb Mills — is wrong in contending that the container brought with it both "deskilling" and a net loss of job control for the workers. "Indeed," Finlay states,

I will argue that mechanization and modernization in the West Coast longshore industry has not deskilled workers or weakened their autonomy or job control. In some respects workers have gained increased skills and strengthened their control of the work process. While containerization, for example, has certainly made longshoring more routine and has reduced the demand for longshore labor, there is no evidence that it has resulted in the substitution of low-skilled labor for high-skilled labor. In fact the handling of containerized cargoes has produced a demand for a new kind of skill — the skill of container crane operating. The work of a container crane operator seems repetitive, yet it must be accomplished with speed, dexterity, precision and delicacy under conditions that are not so uniform as they appear. (8-9)

Instead of siding with Braverman and Mills, Finlay therefore takes his stand with "empowerment" theorists like Robert Blauner, Larry Hirschhorn, Shoshana Zuboff and Michael Piore who argue that there has been widespread "reskilling" of workers. For Finlay dockworkers involved in container loading and unloading have developed new "intellective" skills to replace the physical abilities of low-skilled labour. He says such conclusions are based on his studies of longshoring in the port of Los Angeles and Long Beach in 1981. In the process of conducting this research, Finlay worked as a non-union casual labourer loading and unloading bananas (at the very bottom of the dockworkers' hierarchy), and sat in the cabs of container cranes looking over the shoulders of crane operators (at the very top of this same dockworkers' hierarchy).

In order to put Finlay's argument in context it is essential to look briefly at the course of development within the industry over the last half century. As a result of their victories in the 1930s, which included the creation of a union-controlled hiring hall, longshoremen, particularly on the West coast, obtained a degree of control over work relations that most unions in other industries envied. Faced with such a powerful labour movement, management naturally resorted to the main strategic variable open to it: technological innovation. This led to the revolution in cargo handling that began in the late 1950s. The most important innovation was the container, a rectangular steel box that can hold some 20 tons of freight, making it unnecessary for longshoremen to handle cargo individually in the old piecemeal, "break-bulk" basis. Seeing the writing on the wall while the technological revolution was still in its infancy, the ILWU under Bridges' leadership crafted the famous Mechanization and Modernization (M&M) Agreement in 1961, which was designed to eliminate obstructions to productivity growth in return for employment/income guarantees. As Herb Mills and David Wellman have explained, the technological changes ushered in after the M&M,

literally transformed the operational circumstances of longshoring. Instead of being labor intensive, it became increasingly capital intensive and the work began to resemble factory tasks. Compared to conventional longshoring, it became increasingly routinized and machine paced. Control of the labor process became centralized, traditional skills unnecessary and the sequencing of ship work preplanned by computer.⁵

The result of such changes was a drop in the number of dockworkers on the US Pacific coast by about 50 per cent between 1960 and 1971 even though the amount of cargo handled per manpower had risen by over 130 per cent. Meanwhile, a 1963 M&M Agreement in BC reduced the number of longshoremen by approximately 20 per cent between 1963 and 1979. Similar developments have occurred in Eastern ports. Thus 12,000 longshoremen in the New York-Jersey area now move more cargo in a year than was handled by 48,000 men in 1950.⁶

The most dramatic changes in the nature of the work were the result of containerization. As compared with break-bulk cargo handling, the labour process was enormously simplified at each phase of the operation: the movement of cargo to and from shipside, the hoisting of cargo by cranes, and shipboard work. To quote Herb Mills on the role of the container crane operators,

As compared to the driving of conventional shipboard winches, the work of a crane driver in any modern operation is routine. There are no unusual circumstances. There is no rigging and re-rigging of the gear. The hoist is always the same. There is no need for initiative and innovation. The range of experience and skill is by comparison very narrow.⁷

Throughout his study, Finlay, in opposition to this interpretation by Mills, attempts to cast doubt on what seems to be an obvious case of deskilling. His main source for this is his interaction with the crane operators themselves. "I mentioned," Finlay writes, "Mills's unflattering views on crane operating and Arnie [a container crane operator] commented":

A couple of days ago a girl asked me if putting a container in a hole over and over again was boring. I don't think it's boring. Is it boring to play golf or shoot pool or shoot basketballs or race cars? That depends. I mean, golf sounds like a crazy game, chasing a little white ball all over the place to knock it into a hole. Some people enjoy it. It's the same with driving a crane. What Herb Mills hasn't done is play the game. (127)

On the basis of such evidence, Finlay concludes that there has been no significant deskilling. As he writes, "In my view...the picture is not so bleak as it

⁵Herb Mills and David Wellman, "Contractually Sanctioned Job Action and Workers' Control: The Case of the San Francisco Longshoremen," *Labor History*, 28 (Spring 1987), 192-3.

⁶See Paul T. Hartman, *Collective Bargaining and Productivity* (Berkeley 1969), 12; Gil Green, *What's Happening to Labor* (New York 1976), 98; Donald Garcia, "Management and Labour in Waterfront Industries," in R. Gordon Hutchinson, ed., *Western Canadian Ports* (Vancouver 1977); William DiFazio, *Longshoremen* (South Hadley, MA 1985), 31.

⁷Herb Mills, "The San Francisco Waterfront," in Andrew Zimbalist, ed., *Case Studies on the Labor Process* (New York 1979), 145.

is drawn by Mills and others. I argue that the highly routine character of the container operation does not mean that the skills exercised by the workers are insignificant — skill simply takes another form.” (121) Finlay emphasizes the game-like context in which these skills are exercised, and the informal workplace bargaining that takes place at an extracontractual level. Nevertheless, he makes no attempt to draw a direct comparison (as Mills did in his analysis) between the old skills of longshoremen operating conventional shipboard winches and stowing cargo, with the new skills of container crane operation and lashing. In fact, Finlay who clearly spent a great deal of time with both the “elite” element of the longshore work force (container crane operators) and the longshore “underclass” (the non-union casuals working banana cargoes) seems to have no real insight into the daily routine of what remains the core of the labour force who participate in neither of these two forms of activity. Furthermore, he appears to have disregarded the fierce struggles that longshoremen fought in the 1970s and 80s in ports throughout the US and Canada to prevent an extreme stratification of the workforce as a result of the creation of a privileged group of container crane operators. In port after port large numbers of longshoremen have taken the position that the crane operators cannot be assumed to have extraordinary skills simply because they are operating more expensive machinery. Reflecting this overall view, the ILWU has insisted on tying the opportunity for certification as a crane operator as much as possible to seniority within the industry — thereby subtly undermining management’s own rationale for creating an internal labour market within the longshore work force.

Not only does Finlay downplay what has undoubtedly been the dominant understanding among longshoremen in this respect, but he clearly does not perceive certain trends in the industry. At its most extreme, these are reflected in the organization of dockwork in Montreal: there the hiring hall has been abolished, dispatch is now determined directly by a computer controlled by management, and gang size has been reduced to no more longshoremen than is absolutely necessary for a given job.⁸ It is the existence of this tendency within the industry that most strongly supports the Braverman-Mills interpretation of the direction of the labour process on the waterfront. Indeed, the latter interpretation suggests that there is a continuity to class struggle during the two ages of waterfront labour represented by the 1930s and 80s, despite the dramatic overshadowing of labour by the container crane that has taken place in our time.

⁸See John Bellamy Foster, “On the Waterfront: Longshoring in Canada,” in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Montreal 1986), 281-308.

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