

Waterfront Revolts: New York and London Dockworkers, 1946–61. *By Colin J. Davis.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003. x + 246 pp. Photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-252-02878-3.

Reviewed by Kenneth Lunn

Comparative studies in labor history can produce uneven results. *Waterfront Revolts* demonstrates the potential strength and value of this type of study. Colin J. Davis explores the apparent similarities in the experiences of waterfront labor forces in the major ports of New York and London during the period following the Second World War, particularly the critical role played by the rank-and-file movements in both locations.

The increasing demands of dockworkers in the two cities stemmed from their desire to challenge the weaknesses of traditional union representation and to gain control over the work process. In the case of the New York dockers, the gangster-influenced system of selective employment and the limited opportunities available to them were the basis of their consistent challenges to the established union hierarchy. Their discontent manifested itself in “unofficial” strikes and the growth of organizational structures outside the formal labor movement, as many workers tried to create better employment conditions for themselves in the face of employer intransigence. With what Davis describes as a new-found sense of militancy, sometimes aided by outside agencies such as state government bodies, sympathetic lawyers and “labor priests,” the New York longshoremen confronted the limits on their right to work and on their ability to determine conditions of employment.

In a similar spirit, London dockers demonstrated broad dissatisfaction with aspects of their work situation. Like their American counterparts, they were hostile to the existing union hierarchy, and they made the new National Dock Labour Board a target of their challenge. This organization, set up by the postwar Labour government to eliminate the worst excesses of casual employment, was quickly attacked by the rank and file. The alleged connivance of union officials in what the workers viewed as a harsh disciplinary code enacted by the Board quickly became the focus of a struggle for control of work and

for worker representation. Allegations of communist influence in this challenge to union legitimacy were made by prominent figures, such as Arthur Deakin of the Transport and General Workers' Union and several Labour politicians, as well as by the media. One particular event, the "expulsion" strike of 1950, also prompted police action against seven leading figures of the grassroots movement, who were charged with conspiracy to incite dockworkers to strike. The subsequent trial, which acquitted them of this serious charge, produced further evidence of the gulf between the official union movement, the government, and the dockworkers who were challenging the status quo. In considering the role of the Communist Party, Davis concludes that its achievements owed more to the efforts of individual Party members in dealing with their concerns about immediate employment issues than to any institutional or ideological grand strategy by the Party as such.

Davis's detailed approach to the forces shaping rank-and-file unity works well in both situations. He takes into account traditional union workings, the role of government, both local and national, and the contribution of employers to the escalation of conflict. Although the balance of forces may have differed, dockworkers in both ports gained a new sense of confidence in their right to have more control over their work situations.

One significant difference between the two sides of the Atlantic emerged in the question of race. Although the Irish identity of many London dockers led to some conflicts (and the later 1960s show a complex set of responses to broader issues of race within British society), the matter took on more significance in New York. Davis explores the differences between the various ethnic groups working on the New York waterfront, particularly in the chapter entitled "The Fault Line of Race." Clearly, African American and Hispanic workers occupied the lower rungs of the hierarchy, but the boundaries were not simply the result of blatant discrimination by white workers and unions. Employers, too, sought to exploit the fault lines of race. Different strategies were adopted to combat discrimination: there were attempts to form biracial union locals, and the black unions occasionally staged confrontations to gain more equal status. Some workers adopted more conventional strategies, including demands for payoffs. Davis never simplifies the racialized dimensions of the longshoremen's situation during these years.

There can be no doubt as to Davis's sympathies. He emphasizes that it was the workers' solidarity that gave them "the power and courage to take on forces determined to control them. That in some cases the men prevailed says much about their common values of dignity and their commitment to struggle" (p. 240). His study focuses almost exclusively on work and its constituent politics, with institutional structures, official and unofficial, its key paradigm. In this sense, the book represents labor history in its classical form. Davis barely touches on issues of class culture outside its political milieu, such as patterns of residence or gender dimensions, nor does he take on other aspects of wider social history. He devotes little space to alternative voices outside the rank-and-file movements, and we are thus left with some doubts about the overall significance of the challenges to union and employer control in both cities. However, in exploring the nature and content of the immediate postwar revolts against the limits on dockworkers in London and New York, Davis has written an enlightening study of their politics and the impact of their struggle.

Kenneth Lunn is reader in social history at the University of Portsmouth, U.K. He has written extensively on the history of race relations in Britain, on work and labor relations in British naval dockyards and, more recently, on aspects of national identity and heritage in British society. He is a former editor of Labour History Review.