

Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, eds., *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 256 p. ISBN 9780745337258

At the beginning of 2019, I attended a strike of airport security workers at the airport in Frankfurt, Germany, Europe's fourth busiest. The predominantly migrant workforce celebrated its strike by playing a techno version of the Italian partisan anthem "Bella Ciao." Employers had provoked the strike by trying to play different groups of security workers off against one another by creating chains of subcontractors and employing them in different firms. Security workers are not usually conceived of as being critical to capital accumulation and circulation, and yet their strike not only resulted in all out-going flights being cancelled and incoming planes being diverted, it also affected air travel elsewhere. It was with this experience in mind that I read and analysed Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness's co-edited volume *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain* (2018).

Ness's academic contribution to the understanding of migrant labour and worker organizing is unparalleled. His books, edited volumes, and Pluto Press's Wildcat Series are acclaimed amongst those studying changes in capitalism, the working class, and new forms of resistance. Building on this work, *Choke Points* provides a unique contribution to the debate on the changes of contemporary capitalism in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a moment which has become synonymous with the rise of Amazon and Alibaba. This volume's publication corresponds to a renewed interest in the politics of labour and logistics, and in the question of whether logistics workers are going to be central to revitalising the labour movement.

In fact, labour scholar Kim Moody has argued that logistics work is central to a new form of capital accumulation, one in which racialised groups of workers have been cut off from other job and career prospects, and that this typified a new form of capital accumulation. On the other hand, Jane McAlevey argues that public services, in particular teachers and hospital workers, are more likely to renew the labour movement given their proximity to communities and the relational nature of their occupations.

Unfortunately, this book does not take up the labour renewal debate. However, it argues that tactical mobilisation at capital's strategic choke points has worked in the past and will do so again in the future, thus implicitly agreeing with Moody's propositions. The book advances this argument in four parts. The first part focuses on labour power and solidarity across the world's choke points; the second deals with logistics workers

resisting exploitation; the third deals with neoliberalism and the transformation of ports, and the final section deals with organizing strategies across global supply chains.

For the editors of this volume, global value chains epitomise the contested nature of capitalist social relations. The editors accomplish this by proposing a “lengthened GCC approach” that analytically distinguishes between upstream and downstream in the value chain. In this approach, upstream implies all the raw materials, agricultural goods, and unfinished products that usually come from the Global South. Downstream implies the transport of finished products which are ready to be sold on the consumer market. The differentiation can thus reveal labour’s power at different points within the value chain. Based on this distinction, they can discern that labour relations upstream are characterised by workers being self-employed, in informal employment, or on temporary and precarious contracts. Downstream in the global commodity chain in Western Europe, companies buy peace with structurally and institutionally strong unions. Thus, this book makes a valuable theoretical contribution to the current understanding of global value chains.

By making the workers’ struggle central to all of its chapters, this book is a welcome antidote to the countless management books published on supply chain management. The book’s insistence on global logistics workers becoming “unmanageable” does not, however, imply a lack of academic rigour.

It is significant that, despite adopting this critical attitude towards the business studies approach, the edited volume continuously refers to this strand of literature and seeks to unveil the changing nature of the business environment and its implications for labour. The second chapter, for example, deals with how mergers and acquisitions in the shipping sector have led to business logic permeating all economic activities in the maritime sector. Ultimately, this consolidation of capital contributes to the declining cost of international transport and the ability to handle ever larger ships and greater quantities of commodities. Consequently, this pits different ports against one another in a race to remain competitive. This is exemplified in the fourth chapter, which deals with how China’s ports and logistics industry continues to operate at lower cost, despite significant investment in new technologies.

The book’s central focus nonetheless remains the resistance to these neoliberal changes that occurs under even the most repressive regimes, such as in China where logistics workers have engaged in numerous strikes in the Yangtse River Delta and Pearl River Delta. Instead of repressing these strikes, Bai Ruixue and Au Loong Yu demonstrate how the government made concessions to workers’ economic demands, since the formal institutions in China dedicated to industrial relations can no longer adequately regulate and solve conflicting interests.

Peter Cole, editor of the volume *Wobblies of the World* (also published in Ness’s Wildcat Series), contributes to this volume with a chapter further elaborating on his previous work, which hails dockers, port workers, and seafarers as diffusers of internationalism and militant worker action. At the time of writing this review, Italian unions had re-

fused to unload a Saudi ship carrying weaponry for their war effort in Yemen. As Cole shows, such international solidarity has a long tradition. His chapter investigates how Durban-based dockworkers' Pan-Africanism and anarcho-syndicalism helped them to view themselves as part of an international community of maritime workers associated with Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Their actions included downing tools on the eve of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. More recently, Durban-based dockers boycotted loading Chinese arms cargo in solidarity with their Zimbabwean sisters and brothers.

The case study of blue-collar warehouse workers and the campaigns of the Warehouse Workers United/Warehouse Workers Resource Center in inland Southern California deserve special mention here. The authors disclose how employers' concerted use of temporary agency workers – which make up 40 per cent of the total workforce – undermines logistics workers' bargaining power. Meanwhile, Amazon provides some of the best employment conditions and wages in that particular logistics cluster to attract and retain workers in this highly transient sector. Through coalition-building and community-led collective actions amongst racialised groups of workers, these campaign groups have been able to flag labour violations and improve health and safety standards.

The workers analysed in these pages are either workers in transit (truck drivers, tanker drivers, seafarers) or workers who are central to the circulation of capital (warehouse workers, dock workers, and so on). It would have been particularly interesting to draw out the ways in which their resistance differs or manifests itself due to their positional power vis-à-vis capital and mobility.

Several contributions contained in this volume allude to Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright's power resource approach without going into greater detail about it. These case studies would have benefited immensely from doing so, as nearly all chapters except the first two remain descriptive and lack analytical depth. Wright distinguishes between associational power, institutional power, and positional power. Associational power is broadly defined as workers' organisational capacity to mobilise and organise. While many accounts treat associational and institutional power as distinct, Wright argues that workers' institutional power (that is, collective bargaining, political representation) are products from past uses of associational power. This is important insofar it helps us to view different repertoires and tactics as part of a continuum. Lastly, workers' positional power is due to their location in the production process or process of capital circulation, or in the labour market. Taking up these insights would allow future researchers to gain deeper knowledge of how resistance and co-operation with capital manifests itself up- and downstream in the global supply chain.

Another issue which remains underexplored in these pages is that of automation and digitalisation. The book could have benefited from a lengthier discussion of how automation and new technologies in the logistics sector have created jobs polarisation – in both the upskilling and deskilling of groups of workers – as well as allowing for more and more tasks to be conducted by robots. At the same time, blue-collar workers have been replaced with engineers and white-collar workers sitting miles away from the

actual port. Thus, the possibilities to create a class consciousness through the labour process moves further into the distance. Unfortunately, this volume does not contain a discussion that brings the different chapters' insights on automation together. The result is a confused view of how the logistics industry is being transformed by new digital technologies and automation. The two tendencies of moving to just-in-time logistics and robotics on the one hand and cheap racialised labour in the Global North and South are not explained.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the authors' focus on "choke points" opens up new possibilities for labour activists and labour scholars to converge around the current paradigm that logistics has become the edifice of capital accumulation and a primary site of resistance in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a research agenda requires, however, a deeper discussion on how the labour movement's renewal is envisaged.

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