

D. De Vries, "On Relevance and Limits: Discussion of William J. Mello, *New York Longshoremen: Class and Power on the Docks* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010)." In: *International Journal of Maritime History*, 23, 1, 2011. pp. 303-308.

A similar problem is Mello's treatment of the rank-and-file and their leaders. Other than the dropping of a few names, we are at a loss to identify who these people were and what they were thinking when challenging the forces arrayed against them. The voices of the leaders and members are missing. It is interesting to note that Mello provides a photograph of the rank-and-file leadership [117] yet very little is heard from them during their epic struggles. As a labour historian this criticism has a special edge. From the footnotes it is clear that Mello interviewed some of these leaders, yet he fails to use their memories to fill out the picture. Instead we are merely left with statements from the *Dockers News*, while the personal details of the leadership is left out. Who were these leaders? What propelled them personally to take on the ILA, the New York Shipping Association (NYSA), and the federal government? Were they communists or socialists? What made them stand up and fight? In my study of the rank-and-file leaders it was clear that Communist Party affiliation or the encouragement of labour priests played a pivotal role in energizing New York longshoremen to challenge for control on the waterfront. Yet here one gets the impression that these men are merely bit players in the larger conflict of structural forces beyond their control. In fact, these men were not defeated – indeed, in many of the wildcat strikes they managed to triumph by forcing the ILA to re-negotiate better deals for their members. And just as Mello suggests, they continue to instill in the leadership at least the notion that they cannot be ignored. If, as Mello points out, the story of the dockworkers and their plight is representative of other workers in other industries, then surely the point is that workers are not constrained by structural forces beyond their control. Instead, workers continue to challenge unfair treatment and are more than willing to suffer the consequences from both employer and state exploitation.

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William Mello's *New York Longshoremen: Class and Power on the Docks* aptly demonstrates the relevance of labour historiography after years of crisis. The book

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looks at workers' power when its political and organizational weaknesses are globally felt. And it focuses on the variety of forms of power expressed and practised by dockworkers when changes in shipment technology, port management and employment-arrangements on the docks persistently demand from workers to recruit new capacities to represent themselves and employ new tactics to gain power. Hardly anything in labour history seems to be more universal than that. Even more enlightening is the extent to which Mello's excellent analysis of the experiences of the longshoremen in post-World War II New York is relevant to various ports around the world, to dockworkers in different historical periods and to their adaptation to various phases in ports' technological transformations. As a student of port towns' societies and dockworkers in as distant and as different in size and political culture as Palestine and Israel, I could well see the relevance of the issues Mello raises in his book. Ports are not only connected, and make a fruitful case for historical comparisons and globally shared narratives, but they also occasion a classical duality – by and large the subject of Mello's book – between workers' capacity to expand the frontiers of their influence and control, and the political and structural limits of their power.²

Mello's book is first and foremost about the New York longshoremen's gains against many constraining factors and delimiting authorities. It is a story of the power "from below" of ethnically diverse groups of workers to ameliorate their working conditions, to advance their status at the port hierarchies *vis-à-vis* the New York bureaucrats and shipping companies, and to solidify the image of their collective power so as to further secure material gains. The latter were expressed in the growing presence of organization in the dock labour process, in expanding independent action and spaces of control, in gaining economic demands and in advancing reform on the docks. Often based on unorganized power, violence and wildcat strike action that expressed frustration with the gang-ridden and hierarchical unions, these achievements were part of a larger trajectory of turning older, immigrant-ethnic resources of power into intense class action.

At the same time, Mello's discussion is also about the distance of these gains from a larger, structural or systemic transformation of power relations at the New York docks. The distance is exemplified primarily in the nature of the reform at the docks, but more succinctly in the steady power and the growing legitimization of that power of the various groups and social agents that constituted the élites in New York politics and in the business world that impacted the ecology of the dock work place. The incapacity of the longshoremen to expand their power beyond their otherwise very significant material gains and to translate their achievements into a more structural change turns the book from a social history

²Goodrich Carter, *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics* (New York, 1920); Frederick Cooper, "Dockworkers and Labour History," in Sam Davies, et al. (eds.), *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Labour History, 1790-1970* (Aldershot, 2000), 523-541; Lex Heerma van Voss, "'Nothing to Lose but a Harsh and Miserable Life Here on Earth': Dock Work as a Global Occupation, 1790-1970," in Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History. A State of the Art* (Bern, 2006), 591-621.

of workers in a workplace into a political history that enlightens the larger processes these workers experienced. Moreover, the discrepancy between piecemeal, incremental and often short-lived achievements, and the capacity to translate them into a wider tipping of the balance of power to the side of the longshoremen, tells a lot to the students of other ports on the various meanings of what labour politics is, and what constituted its social bases and resources. In this sense Mello's employment of these relations and their contextualization in the political history of power in this vibrant workplace location provokes questions that make the book relevant to a wider audience interested in labour history and in the history of industrial relations in port cities in particular. I will focus my comment on two such questions – one relating to perception and image, and the other to the global context. I shall do so from the perspective of the two main ports in Israel – the one in Haifa which was established in 1933 by the British ruler in Mandate Palestine, and the other the port of Ashdod which began its operation by the government of Israel in 1965.³ These ports too tell a lot on how the forms of workers' power changed over time, and what were – in striking affinity to the terms Mello draws for New York – the limits of that power.

One of the aspects that makes the distance between workers' material gains and weakness to effect a structural change a widespread phenomenon is the dimension of awareness and perception that emerges in Mello's reference to the longshoreman culture of resistance and to the cultural aspects of class action. Was it only what the dockworkers achieved, and what they could not have achieved that mattered, or was it, no less, their understanding of that discrepancy that also played a formative role in accepting and even maintaining the discrepancy? And if so, was that awareness and perception a precondition to the incapacity to enforce a wider power-change? Or were they merely accompanying features of the subculture of resistance, a demonstration of the longshoremen's adaptation to their realization of the limits of their power, or perhaps an outcome of that discrepancy?

Haifa's port was built by the British Mandate government of Palestine and, since the beginning of its operation in late 1933, most of the dockworkers were employed by contractors, themselves operating for the port authority, shipping companies, and import-export agents. As intermediaries between the government and the economic élites and the workers they practically shaped the port's industrial relations system. In recruiting day workers, they were deeply aware that the fundamental weakness of the casual dockworkers and of the temporary groupings they organized originated in the permanent presence of replacement workers on the docks (arriving from both Haifa and the countryside),

³See David De Vries, "The Construction of the Image of Dock Labour," in Sam Davies *et al.*, *Dock Workers*, 680-708; and David De Vries, "Harboring Promise and Resentment: The British Presence in the Ports of Mandate Palestine," in Carmel Vassallo and Michela D'Angelo (eds.), *Anglo-Saxons in the Mediterranean. Commerce, Politics and Ideas – XVII-XX Centuries* (Malta, 2007), 193-217.

who persistently patrolled the physical boundaries of the port. But the contractors also realized that the workers could counter this hovering threat of the replacement workers by falling back again and again on their social networks – in the port itself and in the city of Haifa at large – that served in constructing the labour groupings in the first place. Because of the character of 1920s-1940s Haifa society – an Arab-Palestinian majority (Moslem and Christian) with a growing population of Jewish immigrants – these networks could only operate along ethnic, national and religious lines, often mixing one set of ties with another. On these depended the capacity of the workers to organize, embark on improvement struggles and transform the power structure and hierarchy in the port of Haifa.⁴

In the case of the Ashdod port three decades later, the cultural dimension was both a reflection of power hierarchies and a formative factor in reproducing these hierarchies. Built by the State of Israel, managed by state-paid administrators, and housing the activities of state-backed private companies, the Ashdod port in the 1960s and 1970s employed only Jewish workers. The absence of Arab dockworkers meant the absence of national tensions between Jews and Arabs and consequently the absence of the highly merited participation of the dockworkers in the national-driven segmentation of the dock labour market. This allowed the operation of the port along capitalist principles and the negative stigmatization of militant workers and workers committees at the docks. Often the stigmatization marked the many Sephardic Jews working at the port as unruly and a danger to management and society in general.⁵

For the management of the Ashdod port, the perception and consciousness of power was not based only on the capacity to fire dockworkers. It was also based on the understanding and conviction that the workers would not turn to unrestrained militancy – not only for fear of losing their place on the docks, but in particular for harming their legitimacy as trusted workers to be seen as loyal to the economic targets of the port and an active part in the latter's competitive strategies. This search for legitimacy in the workplace was a cultural construct no less than a material lever, and it fed on the cultural dimensions of the ethnic tensions and conflicts that beset Israeli society in the 1950s and 1960s, and on the sources of solidarity within the group. The social terminology turned a significant part of the power structure on the docks and the Orientalist derogation could be used to reproduce the political hierarchy at the port. Clearly it was beyond the

⁴David De Vries, "Nationalism and the Making of Dock Labour in British-Ruled Palestine," in Sam Davies *et al.*, *Dock Workers*, 231-249; Shai Srugo, "From the Port of Thessaloniki to the Port of Haifa: The Immigration of the Salonica Port Workers in the Inter-war Period" (Unpublished MA thesis, Haifa University, 2003, in Hebrew), 72-74.

⁵Leonard Mars, "Leadership and Power among Ashdod Port Workers," in Emanuel Marx (ed.), *A Composite Portrait of Israel* (London, 1980); Dror Osnat, "'Of Tailors and Shoemakers we built here a Port': Labour, Nationalism and Ethnicity among Ashdod Port Workers 1961-1967" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Ben Gurion University, 2004, in Hebrew).

power of the dockworkers and their unions to change – that is, until labour disputes and the fervent strike action that the port saw in the latter part of the 1970s died out. The Ashdod workers may have ameliorated their pay and working conditions, but could hardly translate these gains into a more significant impact on the managerial and hierarchies at the port and on the prevalent assumptions on the place of the workers in these hierarchies.⁶

This is related to the spatial horizons of Mello's discussion. Clearly the New York longshoremen were situated not just in a workplace connected to other ports (and their power structures), but also in a large system of shipping companies that depended on and were connected to larger factors and forces beyond the port of New York – in particular, in the context of the technological transformations in port technologies around the globe between the late 1940s and late 1970s. Were not the limits of the power of the longshoremen in New York related therefore to these forces and to the companies' wider economic and competitive considerations?

The cases of Haifa and Ashdod raise similar questions. In Haifa, imperial, colonial and war-related connections made the port a workplace where workers could gain materially and improve their access to key positions of power in work allocation because of the demand for workers and their functions during emergency periods. The governments who handled the ports advanced policies which tied matters intrinsic to the ports with wider political, demographic and commercial considerations. These contexts created a variety of opportunities for the dockworkers.

In the case of Mandate Haifa, day workers could well use the uncontrolled spaces created by fragmentary employment structure expressed by the multitude of contractors and recruitment groups. And more organized workers could play on the demand for their work when immigration dwindled, and the war invigorated the economic and military significance of the ports. In post-1948 Haifa and mid-1960s Ashdod, the ports were main sites expressing the intersection between export, state defence, absorption of immigration and economic state building – issues that were deeply anchored in both international relations and foreign trade. The intersection blurred the demarcation lines between political power, the military establishment, and economic élites, turning them into an unsurpassable power which limited the capacity of workers to extend short-term material gains. No wonder the derogative terminology of dockworker militancy was often oriented towards those who disturbed the vitally important economic activity of the port, or that current debates in Israel on limiting the right to strike

⁶For similar points see Frank Broeze, "Militancy and Pragmatism. An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870-1914," *International Review of Social History*, XXXVI (1991), 165-200; Yiğit Akin, "The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics in Early Republican Turkey: Language, Identity, and Experience," *International Review of Social History*, LIV (2009), 167-188.

in essential services are fed on these past resources.⁷ The capacity to survive the gap between workers' achievements and their limits and to sustain it, as Mello shows so forcefully in the case of New York, therefore has wider cultural and international meanings, albeit in different contexts. This seems to be significant in a period when global labour historiography places the specificity of local class action in a new light.

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When closely examining the rich tapestry that chronicles the somewhat complex and chequered history of the New York longshoremen, and their struggle for control over the waterfront environment which defined them as a distinctive occupational community, one could be forgiven for thinking that what emerges from William Mello's unfolding account of class and power on the docks from c.1945 reads more like a Hollywood fiction than historical fact. As Mello suggests, in the public imagination the waterfront had a close association with organized crime, and because of "numerous magazine exposés" and the release of the 1954 movie *On the Waterfront* starring Marlon Brando, the docklands gained "immense notoriety" by the 1950s. [71] Indeed, it would appear in the case of the New York waterfront that in the telling of this story it would seem that the truth is stranger than fiction. Nevertheless, as Colin Davis has shown in his earlier study of the New York waterfront, "the murderous image of the mobster and

⁷Dror Osnat, "The Workers of Ashdod Port: Primary Labour Market and Peripheral Zionism," in Zvi Zameret, Aviva Halamish and Esther Meir-Glizenstein (eds.), *The Development Towns* (Jerusalem, 2009, in Hebrew), 175-194; Peter Turnbull, "The War on Europe's Waterfront – Repertoires of Power in the Port Transport Industry," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, XLIV, No. 2 (2006), 305-26.

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