

Fink, Leon: *Sweatshops at Sea. Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3450-3; 278 S.

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„Sweatshops at Sea“ is a well-researched and written history of the US and UK seafaring labour. Quality histories of seafaring labour are rare; Leon Fink's book therefore fills an important gap. Fink has read widely and displays a solid understanding of the dynamics affecting the industry and the workers in it, including the importance of global labour mobility, wage competition, and international politics. He sets his detailed national histories in international context, as this is essential for understanding the operation of national labour politics in this industry. For example, Fink gives detailed histories of the seafaring labour standards debates at the International Labour Organization from the 1920s onward, and of the International Transport Workers' Federation's campaign against Flags of Convenience.

Fink begins with a description of the conflict over impressment of American seafarers which lead up to the War of 1812 (or, from a European perspective, to US involvement in the Napoleonic Wars). Wages were higher on American ships than on British ones, so UK sailors were often tempted to find their way on to American ships. The UK navy therefore took to stopping US shipping, to search for UK deserters. Aside from the affront to US sovereignty, it appears that the British were not too careful about which American seafarers they impressed into UK naval service, and whether those seafarers really were, in fact, deserters from British ships. Fink focuses on how the enmity caused by this issue helped draw the United States to war. He makes the case that despite the righteous indignation over the insult caused by impressment, little consideration was actually given to the situation of those seamen; the war was over sovereignty and national honour rather than defending the welfare of seamen.

Fink shows how the history of seafaring

labour in the 19th century, on both sides of the Atlantic, was defined by a struggle for emancipation. Seamen at the time worked in a semi-bonded legal status, involving military-like discipline and a strict hierarchy of ship-board regulation. Officers could inflict cruel physical punishment to keep discipline. Laws prevented seafarers from quitting at will, labeling this desertion in an almost military sense. Fink describes how many of the initial struggles of seafarers had to do with winning the right to quit in any port, and with putting an end to physical punishment. In short, seafarers sought to be treated as full, emancipated human beings.

Particularly in the United States the similarity to the struggle against slavery which was occurring at about the same time was not lost on contemporary observers. As with slaves, for seamen the justification for their harsh treatment lay in their allegedly unruly temperament; seamen were seen as a race apart. Particularly when discussing perceptions of the seafaring profession, Fink relies heavily on literary accounts: the writings of Herman Melville, William Leggett, and James Fennimore Cooper for example helped frame contemporary understandings of conditions for seafarers. In the context of reformist political debates in the late 19th century UK, the right to quit became an industrial safety issue, because a seafarer who had signed on to an unseaworthy vessel could be prevented from leaving it.

Fink shows how, from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century just after the Second World War, seamen's struggles were defined by the drive to unionize, and to improve wages and conditions on ships. Improvements were always gained with an eye toward lower-wage competition from other countries. In the case of the UK, this often meant seafarers from Imperial possession. From its initial founding in 1919, seafaring unions regarded the ILO as an important venue for setting standards, because of the international nature of the industry, and because of its potential to limit inter-union wage competition. Fink also details how, in the United States, the International Seamen's Union pushed Congress for the Seamen's Act of 1915, which gave foreign seamen certain

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rights when in US ports, and was designed with the intention of being leveraged in order to increase seafaring wages generally. While the ISU pursued a unilateral nationalist solution, UK unions built contacts with European unions via the International Transport Workers' Federation, which helped to coordinate strikes and stop employers' using replacement workers.

Since the Second World War, the main dynamic has been the growth of Flags of Convenience. Shipowners responded to the growth of strong unions in the United States and United Kingdom by moving to flags with weak regulatory regimes. The good wages and conditions which national unions bargained in the post war years applied to a rapidly shrinking number of seafarers, and the world fleet began to be manned mainly by seafarers from developing countries. This was opposed by developed world unions, who organized a campaign to stop Flags of Convenience via the International Transport Workers' Federation. Fink describes the development and workings of this campaign, which ultimately became the basis for a global labour rights system for seafarers.

For anyone interested in a comprehensive, readable history of seafaring labour, *Sweatshops at Sea* is the book you want. It covers the main issues needed to understand the topic, it is well researched, and is an engaging read. Given that maritime shipping is a truly global industry, the focus on US and UK maritime labour constrains the analysis somewhat, but this weakness is also a strength, as it would be impossible to write detailed history of the whole world in this level of detail. Related to this, Fink's research is, however, limited to English language sources. He therefore ignores, for example, Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten's very substantial history of the International Transport Workers' Federation, which is written in German. Perhaps more seriously, given his focus, Fink glosses over the split in the US maritime labour movement from the 1930s into the 1950s caused by the influence of the Communist in the National Maritime Union, and the efforts of anti-Communists to purge them from positions of importance. This is puzzling since this issue is considered in some detail in Gerald Horne's

book *Red Seas*, and it would have been quite an easy gap to fill, simply by citing Horne's work. Nonetheless, this is an excellent book and a good entry point to the topic for anyone with an interest in maritime labour history.

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