

van der Linden, Marcel: *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2008. ISBN: 978-90-04-16683-7; 469 S.

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The sub-title of this sprawling but ultimately rewarding book – „essays toward a global labor history“ – might well have italicized the word toward. In fact, there is not much „history“ here, at least in the conventional forms of exposition of research or even synthetic narrative. Rather, the distinguished author, who has long served as director of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, relies on a wealth of selective examples to lay out a rich set of frameworks for the undertaking of transnational, comparative, and/or global labor analyses – that means plans for future historical inquiries. Indeed, if Marcel van der Linden were Immanuel Kant, he might have called the book „Prolegomena to any Future Global Labor History.“ (tho’ I note that this reviewer is credited in the acknowledgments with coming up with the book’s actual title!)

The book’s sixteen chapters range widely in topic and time period. To be sure, despite the author’s off-hand observation that „emphasis“ in „the study of Global Labor History“ is usually delimited by developments „that emerged with the expansion of the world market from the fourteenth century, (p. 7)“ we are generally talking about the late 18th to the 20th century here. Still, he covers a huge canvas. Beginning with what he calls „conceptualizations,“ van der Linden’s early chapters re-examine deep assumptions about work and the „working class“ long buried in Marxist, neo-Marxist and anti-Marxist scholarship. Often beginning with old categories, he tries to open them up by way of both argument and example. Thus, to confound the classic view that the proletarian „only disposes of his (or her) own labor power,“ the author points to numerous examples of „intermediate forms between wage labor and self-employment.“ The latter include the 18th century Mexican silver „pickmen“ who, in addition to wages, divided up an extra sum among porters and

timber-men who helped them, late-19th century American factory workers who owned their own tools, and early 20th-century Chinese rickshaw pullers who daily rented their conveyances. In addition to moving from the more conceptually restricted category of the ‘working class’ to the more open-ended terminology of ‘subalterns,’ van der Linden re-visits milestone debates (especially among economists and other social scientists) on the boundaries and logic of „free“ and „slave“ labor. If at times his effort (borrowed from econometrics) to resort to algorithms as explanations – as in calculating the „stability of the slave population“ (p. 73) – is likely to raise eyebrows among historians, he no doubt offers an informed account of once-energizing, inter-disciplinary academic discussions.

The mid-section of the work offers an abundant catalogue of description of the major institutions and strategies historically embraced by the organized labor movement. In turn, van der Linden assays the distinctive logic of mutual insurance, consumer cooperatives, producer cooperatives, strikes, consumer protest, unions, and labor internationalism. Throughout these chapters the author’s figures, tables, and charts – specifying the „typologies“ of action or „varieties“ of institutional expression – regularly punctuate the narrative in the same way one might expect basic market functions to be explained in an economic textbook or physical processes to be illustrated in an introduction to cell biology. With a characteristic tendency towards itemization, for example, the author declares that „three outcomes“ were „possible“ in the case of mutual insurance societies: firstly, mutual insurance societies managed to stay abreast of competitors; secondly, societies preferred to retain their sociability function, effectively reducing them to small friendly societies that no longer focused on social security; and thirdly, societies neither withstood competitors and grew in size, nor retained their sociability function, and were therefore eventually wound up (p. 130). With similar dispatch, we learn of the differences between rolling strikes, boycott strikes, go-slow strikes, and general strikes – and then three variations of workplace action where the workers „stay put“ (p. 185).

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The deployment of the author's extraordinary, multi-lingual acquaintance with a vast literature is at once breath-taking and frustrating. Van der Linden is likely one of the very few students of the field who, in a discussion of producer cooperatives can nimbly jump from Philadelphia cordwainers in 1806 to Huddersfield (England) textile workers in 1834 to Parisian piano builders in 1849 to women's producer coops in the British building sector of the 1970s. Such jumps across time and space, however, raise as many questions as they answer. Specifically, the highly articulated categories raised here tend to ignore larger distinctions among nation-states and their political cultures. Emphasizing phenotypes across time, we also lose a sense of chronology, periodization, and historical turning points.

This latter weakness, fortunately, is overcome in the book's final chapters. Chapter 12, for example, offers a simplified but still quite useful „five stages of development“ of „proletarian internationalism,“ beginning with an era of intellectual manifestos leading up to the formation of Marx and Engels' Communist Party I 1848. Van der Linden's second stage focuses on the rise of „sub-national“ or „intra-occupational“ worker organizations in the aftermath of Europe's 1848 revolutions. The third stage (1870s-1890s) sees the rise of powerful national union confederations from Great Britain in 1868 and the U.S. in 1886 to Sweden and Belgium in 1898. Beginning in the 1890s these single-state based federations offer tangible response to the transnational reach of the capitalist market and labor process by founding international trade secretariats (or ITSs), beginning with the typographers in 1898 and continuing, trade by trade, to the painters in 1911. In addition to the single-occupation focus of international work, this fourth stage is noteworthy for the formation of the International Federation of Trade Unions in 1913 (a unity interrupted by two world wars and a Cold War split reflected in the establishment of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in 1949. Since the 1960s, van der Linden convincingly argues, the ITSs have begun to play a qualitatively new role on the world trade union scene. No longer a mere contact point

between national sovereignties but increasingly a center of initiative including organizing drives in select third-world countries, the ITSs-cum-global unions have entered a „transitional phase“ that may herald a new era of „transnational internationalism.“

As a tripwire to further work of a transnational nature, van der Linden also points to two previous intellectual movements, relatively neglected in recent years, that may still offer rewards for labor historians. The first such impulse derives from Immanuel Wallerstein's „world-system“ school scholarship of the late 1970s and 1980s. Stressing the reach of the world market over classically-Marxist definitions of capitalistic production, Wallerstein's approach carries the advantage of both geographic and sectoral breadth, usefully drawing us towards the blurry and interdependent intersection of „free,“ „coerced,“ and „mixed“ systems of labor control. Likewise, suggests van der Linden, the „entanglement approach“ of Germany's „Bielefeld School“ of social history, 1970s-1990s, offers a theoretical goad to a more nuance and generated view of transnational economic development. By breaking down conventional divisions of „market“ vs. „subsistence“-oriented labor power (demonstrating, for example, how dependent wage and professional workers are on unpaid household or reproductive labor), the Bielefelders' work should help future labor history scholars see workers whole. Much the same verdict and appreciation can be offered to the author of this volume.

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