

Nodes of resistance

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*A review of Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, **Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disturbing the Global Supply Chain** (Pluto, 2018), £18.99*

It is a truism that, in the era of economic globalisation, capital needs to circulate without disruption. The complex network of logistics and transportation companies not only connects every corner of the globe, but also constitutes an important, growing industry in its own right. Even though the logistics sector and its workers remain relatively obscure for customers, supply chain management has become increasingly important at universities and vocational schools. Students, following the principles of neoliberal dogma, are taught how to squeeze the supply chain further using the logic of the flexible just-in-time system. According to this approach, workers are regarded only as a cost to be minimised; any disruption caused by their action should be avoided.

However, logistics workers are strategically positioned within supply chains where they control the “choke points” of global capitalism. The existence of the biggest multinational corporations, such as Amazon, Walmart or Maersk, depends on millions of dockers, warehouse workers and drivers. *Choke Points*, published by Pluto Press in its “wildcat” series, looks at the neglected labour aspect of the supply chain; it investigates the global network of workers disturbing these critical transport nodes. The book is co-edited by two academics, Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, based in the United States. But it includes contributions from more than 20 authors from the Global South and the North. And, what is a novelty, labour activists, union organisers and students across many countries are among its authors. For example, the chapter on workers’ struggle in Amazon’s warehouses is collectively contributed by “Amazon Workers and Supporters”. This diversity of contributors makes for a refreshing perspective on the business-dominated study of logistics. While there are many recently published studies of workers in emerging economies, primarily in manufacturing (Bangladesh’s garment industry or China’s electronics sector among others), *Choke Points* focuses on countries and industries that have not previously been in the media and academic spotlight. Stories of truckers in Palestine, Indonesia and Turkey, dockers in South Africa, Greece and Chile, warehouse workers in Italy and California are brought to our attention through the rich variety of case studies.

The book opens with an important theoretical standpoint. The first chapter, by Elizabeth Sowers, Paul Ciccantell and David Smith, deconstructs the concept of global commodity chains (GCCs), the inter-firm linkages and power relations between different actors in the global economy. The authors use a “lengthened” GCCs approach, analysing the

commodity chain by taking into account not just production, transport and consumption of goods but also aspects not usually considered such as raw material extraction and waste disposal. Placing the resistance of labour at the centre of their analysis, they argue that workers and social movements can exploit “choke points” anywhere along the commodity chain in order to resist the power of capital and states (p20). Particularly, they assert that logistics workers, despite being geographically separated, can disrupt the capitalist system not only at their own workplace, but also in the upstream and downstream direction of the commodity chain (p22).

The main, empirical part of the book covers the key labour struggles in the global logistics industry. Every chapter provides a useful account of industrial relations in its case study country as well as working conditions. Justifiably, Amazon attracts much attention here and there are similar cases from Poland and Southern California. The corporation recently expanded its business activity, not only through e-commerce, but through building hundreds of distribution centres serving its flagship fast home deliveries. In these warehouses, workers are exposed to extreme “trackability” through ubiquitous monitoring and surveillance. Moreover, in 2017 Amazon Poland employed a company to check whether workers were physically at home during sick leave (pp98-99). The shattering rhythm of work is also enforced by a company policy of “breaking records” of orders processed in each warehouse. Considering this Taylorist regime, the company’s employee motto “Work Hard, Make History” sounds both sarcastic and horrifying.

Additionally, *Choke Points* examines the harsh reality of working conditions for drivers, especially in the Global South. The chapter on fuel terminal workers in Indonesia describes the appalling health and safety standards. The distribution of fuel is organised according to the just-in-time system. Drivers spend over 12 hours a day on the road, making three round trips on average. The disastrous consequences of “outsourcing” are evident. Employment is contracted to agencies and workers are left without any benefits such as medical insurance, paid holidays or sick leave. The company does not take any responsibility when accidents occur and drivers are even required to maintain their own trucks (pp204-205).

The main aim of *Choke Points* is to demonstrate that logistics workers do not give in to this oppression without resistance. For example, the chapter titled “Worker Militancy and Strikes in China’s Docks” is very inspiring. It analyses a series of successful strike actions in the Pearl River Delta area including the 2013 Hong Kong dockworkers’ strike, which ran for 40 days. This strike received a lot of solidarity from students and activist groups in Hong Kong (p74). As the authors of this chapter argue, logistics workers in China occupy a strategic position, not only for China but for the world.

The book shows the close connections formed between fragmented logistics workers. There is fantastic evidence of cross-border cooperation of Amazon workers in Poland, Germany and France. When Amazon workers in Germany went on strike in 2015, the management shifted orders to a neighbouring warehouse in Poland. Polish workers responded with a spontaneous slowdown, which disturbed the warehouse operation (p100). The book lists many other such examples of solidarity and cooperation, for example in the section on Italian domestic and migrant logistics workers (pp236-239).

Choke Points links the global political economy and industrial relations in a novel way. It offers an alternative approach to the study of supply chain management and, more importantly, it brings experience of workers’ resistance and outlines organising strategies in logistics and distribution sectors across the world. *Choke Points* gathers many different themes, but readers should easily find a common thread. Every page of the book highlights the importance of workers’ potential to use their power at the point of production. In the 1930s, American dockers opposed Nazism and fascism by refusing to

unload German and Italian goods. In the 1960s Australian and American maritime workers successfully blocked South African cargo. As authors of this volume remind us: strategic mobilisation at the “choke points” of the global economy worked in the past and can work in the future.

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