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The Ever Given, part of the Evergreen fleet, in the Suez Canal.

Global Solidarity on the Docks

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In March 2021, the massive container ship Ever Given, part of the Evergreen fleet, carrying eighteen thousand containers, ran aground, blocking the Suez Canal for six days.[1] The ship's cargo, valued at $1 billion,[2] included everything from apparel to electronics to furniture and agricultural commodities. Yet, the losses extended far beyond the ship's cargo itself, holding up the $9 billion worth of commodities—or roughly 12 percent of global trade—that crosses the Suez Canal every day and creating bottlenecks, backlogs, and shortages in ports and their adjacent supply chains around the world.[3]

Images of one of the largest container ships in the world blocking one of the most trafficked waterways on the planet made international headlines, making visible the vulnerability of an economic system built on just-in-time global supply chains. Although the blockage itself was primarily a result of environmental factors, it suggested the potentially transformative power of workers in the industry stemming from strategic disruptions in key nodes—or distribution locations—of logistics networks.

In fact, a number of labor scholars and activists have begun to identify the global logistics industry as a likely sector for trade union movement revitalization.[4] The logistics industry, which employs nearly six million workers in the United States,[5] encompasses all of the sectors of the economy engaged in the storage and movement of commodities along supply chains, from road, air, rail, and docks to warehousing and distribution centers. The structural power of logistics workers derives from the organization of just-in-time production, through which firms attempt to gain comparative advantage by minimizing the amount of time that inventory sits in storage. This has created increased vulnerabilities along global supply chains as disruptions in key nodes trigger backlogs, sending ripples outward.

The structural power of logistics workers derives from the organization of just-in-time production . . .

As sociologist Beverly Silver has argued, an examination of the historical record suggests that the ability of any group of workers to facilitate broader trade union movement revitalization through their organizing efforts requires structural power, the power that workers possess as a result of their scarce skills or their role in the labor process or economic system.[6] Workers have the kind of structural power with the potential to facilitate the development of militant trade union movements more broadly when, by taking industrial action, they are able to disrupt production far beyond their own workplace as a result of the central role they play in the economy as a whole.

In the United States, dockworkers from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) have periodically exercised this role, using their strategic bargaining power after the 1934 San Francisco general strike to organize inland warehouse workers. This power has also been in evidence when ILWU members have stopped work in support of a wide array of political causes over the years, from their refusal to ship arms to fascist countries in the

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1930s and to Vietnam in the 1970s to stoppages in solidarity with racial justice movements from the United States to South Africa to Palestine, to name just a few of the better known examples. Recent cargo pile-ups as a result of Covid-19 at the Port of Los Angeles-Long Beach—the largest in the United States, handling approximately 40 percent of the country's container traffic—only serve to underline how crucial these nodes of the global logistics industry are.[7] While the ILWU has come under attack in recent years by employers and the courts,[8] it remains a bastion of trade union power, along with its East Coast counterpart the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), which has successfully negotiated to prevent port automation.[9] Nevertheless, labor standards, employment numbers, and union density across the logistics industry vary considerably. Dockworkers, despite their small numbers in the tens of thousands, have nearly 100 percent union density in the United States and some of the highest labor standards of any blue-collar workers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, millions of workers labor in warehouses and distribution centers in the United States, with union density in the single digits and notoriously poor working conditions.

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Given the outsized role of online retailers like Amazon in the global economy and their heavy reliance on smooth circulation, disruptions in key distribution centers should, in theory, provide these workers with substantial structural power. Yet, as recent organizing campaigns at Amazon distribution centers have highlighted, workers in this sector of the logistics industry face substantial barriers to improving their working conditions.[10] These barriers include anti-union legislation; union-busting and divide-and-conquer strategies of employers; high turnover rates, subcontracting, and other precarious employment arrangements; and creeping automation and employer surveillance.

. . . [O]rganizing the logistics industry could . . . be the key to unlocking organizing gains for the retail workers who labor at the end point of these supply chains . . .

Former ILWU organizing director Peter Olney has argued that greater attention to organizing the logistics industry could therefore be the key to unlocking organizing gains for the retail workers who labor at the end point of these supply chains,[11] as well as workers in warehousing, if workers with the greatest power in key nodes of these supply chains are willing to leverage that power to support the organizing efforts of workers at other locations.

Among logistics workers, perhaps no single group possesses greater structural power than dockworkers, thanks to the central role they play in global trade, so understanding their ability to organize across work sites and the strategies they employ provides a basis for understanding the possibilities of logistics and supply chain organizing more broadly. An example of a "best case scenario" for global logistics worker organizing is the International Dockworkers Council (IDC), an independent global union organization of workplace-level dockworker union activists that I have researched for the past decade.

The IDC's experience not only helps us imagine the transformative impact that a better organized logistics sector could have for the labor movement as a whole—it also points to concrete strategies to help bring that into being. While organizing must be guided by the specificities of each sector of the logistics industry, the IDC case suggests some general principles for effective strategizing and intraorganizational practices by worker activists. None of these lessons on their own will provide the "magic bullet" needed to crack open the most

difficult to organize sectors and workplaces in the logistics industry, but they may provide helpful signposts pointing organizers in the right direction.

History and Structure of the IDC

Although the IDC was officially founded in 2000, dockworker union activists already had decades of experience of cross-border solidarity and coordination during labor disputes, particularly in Europe. Many of the unions active in the IDC's creation, including the ILWU, had been excluded from the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), the mainstream global union federation in the transportation sector, as a consequence of their left-wing politics during the Cold War. A shared perception that the ITF had failed to adequately respond to iconic dockworker disputes at the Port of Liverpool in the 1990s and the Port of Charleston in 2000 as a result of the organization's bureaucratic structure finally shifted the balance in favor of founding an independent global dockworker organization open not just to national unions but to locals and even individual dockworkers.[12]

The International Dockworkers Council . . . has been an experiment in participatory democracy and independent, non-bureaucratic global unionism . . .

The IDC from its inception, then, has been an experiment in participatory democracy and independent, non-bureaucratic global unionism, with decision-making through annual assemblies open to all members and de facto international stewards' councils at the regional level. The General Coordinator is an unpaid part-time officer who remains embedded in his local union, and well into its second decade, the organization only employed a single staff member.

Over the course of the organization's twenty-year history, the IDC has expanded significantly from a primarily European dockworker organization to one with truly global reach, particularly in Latin America and West Africa. A comparison of some of the key disputes affiliates have faced in recent years, as well as the broader organizational lessons, is therefore helpful in illuminating the potential of organizing in the global logistics sector.

Lessons from Labor Disputes at IDC Affiliates

An examination of major labor disputes facing five of the IDC's affiliates has yielded key takeaways relevant for logistics worker organizing more generally. First, disputes were resolved successfully when workers combined strategic industrial action with support from community and trade union allies. Second, even the best organizers struggled to reach successful outcomes when the broader political environment was stacked against them, pointing to the need to address issues beyond the workplace. Of these five disputes, three involved affiliates in Europe (the United Kingdom, Portugal and Greece) and two involved affiliates in Latin America (Chile and Colombia). Two of the disputes had successful outcomes for the unions (Portugal and Chile); one of the disputes was partially successful (the United Kingdom); and two of the disputes had unsuccessful outcomes (Greece and Colombia).[13]

In Chile and Portugal, dockworker union activists pulled off major successes that benefited not only the workers directly involved in the disputes but also the trade union movements in their countries more broadly. In Chile, dockworkers held weeks-long national strikes in 2013 and 2014 as part of an offensive to reverse the decades-long decline in labor standards on the docks brought about by the Pinochet dictatorship–era reform of labor law, which had atomized the country's trade union movement. In Portugal, dockworkers struck repeatedly in 2013-2014 as part of a defensive campaign to prevent the breaking of the union-controlled hiring pools at the port, a provision demanded by the European Union as part of Portugal's bailout from its sovereign debt crisis.

In both cases, dockworkers won through a strategy of effective industrial action, international solidarity, and community/political support. By understanding both when and where

they had the most structural power—that is to say, when and where withholding their labor would have the greatest impact on key decision-makers in each dispute—they set the stage for a successful confrontation.

Their industrial leverage was bolstered by external support from the IDC and other allies in the trade union movement and domestic social movements. As the disputes dragged on, the IDC threatened to boycott the unloading of ships arriving from the ports, which proved to be a major tipping point in the conflicts.

Ultimately, the Portuguese dockworkers retained their union-controlled hiring pools and the Chilean dockworkers negotiated a national agreement with the help of the government—the first time the Chilean state had facilitated national-level sectoral collective bargaining since before the Pinochet dictatorship.

While it might seem counterintuitive that workers capable of leveraging such significant structural power would need to call on non-structural forms of support as well, union leaders from both Chile and Portugal emphasized the role played by community allies in their victories in amplifying the impact of industrial action and increasing the likelihood that the government would intervene in ways favorable to organized labor. Dockworker unions in both countries have become iconic symbols for the trade union movement and the left more broadly of what is possible when workers organize, and they have played a leading role in social and political movements in their countries since that time.

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In the United Kingdom, on the contrary, dockworkers were not able to win an outright victory until they had built sufficient power on the shop floor, which unlike in the Chilean and Portuguese cases had lagged. In 2013, Dubai Port World, a global terminal operator, opened a new port on the Thames called London Gateway. At the time that it opened, it was the only non-unionized port in the country. Unite, the union that represents dockworkers in the United Kingdom, built a corporate campaign to put external pressure on key decision-makers in the company with the help of labor and community allies but neglected to build a worker-organizing base from within, making minimal progress in reaching an agreement.

Nevertheless, when the first ship left the port, the IDC stepped up once again with a threat to refuse to work the ship at other ports of call, resulting in an agreement allowing union organizers access to the workforce at the job site. However, because the union had not previously built up a base of shop-floor activists, the company successfully engaged in a union-avoidance campaign with its workforce, preventing Unite from winning sufficient support to push for union recognition. Over time, the union pivoted toward identifying effective worker organizers on the shop floor who could build support for the union, and they were eventually able to negotiate a collective agreement. The lesson, then, is an important one: international solidarity, and labor, and community support are vital forms of leverage in the logistics sector but cannot replace effective shop-floor organizing.

Finally, in Greece and Colombia, despite valiant organizing efforts, dockworker union activists simply were not able to overcome the constraints of their external political environments. In Greece, dockworkers faced the wholesale privatization of the country's ports, a condition imposed as part of the EU bailout agreement for the Greek sovereign debt crisis. At the largest port in the country, Piraeus, dockworkers engaged in multiple rounds of industrial action with strong support from labor, community, and political allies. Yet, the scale of the economic and political crisis in Greece was beyond the ability of any single sector of workers to address, and the port was ultimately privatized.

In a very different context, Colombian dockworkers at the country's largest port in Buenaventura have been struggling for basic union recognition at the ports since privatization in the 1990s destroyed their former national union overnight. However, the ongoing civil

conflict in the region, widespread targeting of union activists by paramilitary organizations, and lack of enforcement of labor law have combined to create an overwhelmingly difficult context for organizing, in the ports and beyond, despite support from a number of international organizations.

While the Greek and Colombian contexts are very different from what logistics workers are likely to face in the United States, the key lesson remains relevant: even for workers who occupy highly strategic positions within global capitalism, the broader political environment for organizing can undermine the ability to exercise power effectively. Strategy must take account both of the industrial leverage workers possess and of how that power operates within a broader framework shaped not just by the economy but also by the state.

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In the United States, one of the most significant contextual factors is the highly restrictive system of labor law compared to other wealthy Western democracies. Taft Hartley, for example, which enables the president to prevent strikes that threaten national security, has been invoked on our ports successfully only twice in the past fifty years, both times on the West Coast.[14] And an ILWU dispute in the Pacific Northwest in 2011 with a grain terminal operator led then President Obama to threaten to call in the Coast Guard to escort the ship.[15] More generally, the ILWU has fought battles again and again to effectively take solidarity action—also restricted by Taft Hartley—by invoking health and safety provisions to refuse to cross community picket-lines.[16] Railroad workers in the United States, on the contrary, have a highly restricted right to strike,[17] and the power of truck drivers has been severely eroded over time by the deregulation of the industry and concomitant rise of bogus self-employment.[18] At a broader level, the politicization of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) appointments[19] and right-to-work laws in the South, along with a range of other potential political factors, constrain the environment for logistics worker organizing across the board, particularly for those workers with less structural power. Any effective strategy for new organizing in the logistics industry will have to find ways to work with or around these constraints.

Lessons on Intraorganizational Practices from the IDC

In addition to providing lessons for the development of logistics worker-organizing strategy, the IDC's organizational model provides lessons on how to bring logistics workers together across disparate worksites—and even countries. My research showed that the success of the IDC's organizing model came from its practices of rank-and-file democracy, flexibility and honesty with regard to the differential ability of workers in disparate locations to take collective action, and a model of solidarity among autonomous local unions.

Unlike the mainstream global union federations, which tend to rely heavily on paid professional staff and to be directed "from above" by the leadership of national union affiliates, the IDC's success has depended on its bottom-up, participatory democratic organizing model, embedded in the needs and capacities of workers at the shop-floor level.[20]

Decisions are made collectively by activists and are arrived at by consensus. IDC activists are, with few exceptions, working dockworkers, rather than full-time union reps, allowing them to maintain a close connection to the rank-and-file of the affiliated unions. This connection to the rank-and-file helps to ensure that decisions made by the IDC will be carried out collectively through local actions.

One of the key organizational challenges the IDC has faced—relevant to logistics worker organizing more generally—is how to work together effectively while recognizing the differential ability of workers to exercise power across disparate social, political, and economic contexts. IDC activists emphasized the importance of open, honest discussions of this issue

and a willingness on the part of each affiliate to do the most that they can do while accepting that what they can do will differ. While some Western European and Latin American unions, for example, can call twenty-four-hour work stoppages at short notice with relative ease, workers in other parts of the world face considerably greater obstacles to withholding their labor, so they may contribute instead with informal job actions (i.e., slowdowns) or protests outside the workplace.

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In addition to negotiating these power differentials among affiliates, the IDC has developed practices to address resource differentials. To support the development of activist networks in Latin America and Africa among poorly resourced unions, dockworker unions from North America and Europe pay higher affiliation fees. Yet, crucially, this transfer of resources to the Global South does not imply a transfer of decision-making to the Global North. In other words, the Latin American and African networks maintain their own autonomous organizing structures and are led by rank-and-file union activists from their regions who collectively define and carry out priorities established by their affiliates with financial support from the Global North.

The IDC has important lessons to impart as well regarding organizing strategy in the logistics industry. The key insight is that power comes from the ability to disrupt the flow of goods across a network, so building connections across worksites is crucial. For example, although the Colombian dockworkers have made limited progress, pressure by Danish dockworkers on the Danish employer Maersk to respect workers' rights at the Port of Buenaventura in Colombia helped the dockworkers there to reach an agreement with their employer in 2016, though enforcing it has proved a more difficult struggle.[21] In general, when dealing with employers in the Global South, threats from trade unions in major trading partners like the United States are particularly significant. For example, eleven dockworkers under house arrest and facing possible prison sentences during a major labor dispute in Paraguay were ultimately released after a delegation of dockworker union leaders from the United States, France and Spain took steps to pressure the Paraguayan state—a particularly effective action as dockworkers downriver in Uruguay had already taken action to boycott ships from Asunción.

In the global shipping industry, transshipment ports—which focus on moving container cargo from one ship to another rather than importing and exporting—are especially crucial in the network. In both the Portuguese and U.K. disputes discussed above, the decision by dockworkers at the major Spanish transshipment port of Algeciras at the Strait of Gibraltar to refuse to work ships coming from the ports of Lisbon and London Gateway was the major turning point in the disputes.

Conversely, the inability to effectively address "holes" of support at critical locations in a logistics network can significantly undermine worker action. For example, although the IDC has affiliated most of the major ports in Europe, including Barcelona, Valencia, Marseilles-Fos, Le Havre, and Antwerp, other key ports, such as Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Hamburg and Bremerhaven in Germany—all among the largest in the region—are unaffiliated, creating incentives for shipping companies to simply divert vessels to these ports when IDC affiliates are in dispute.

What Are Next Steps?

The potential for tremendous power stemming from strategic disruptions by workers in key nodes in the logistics industry is clear. What is needed now is a better understanding of how to develop and harness it for trade union movement revitalization more generally. This will require workers in the strongest positions within logistics networks—such as dockworkers—to consider how they can leverage their

structural power to support organizing among workers in weaker positions—such as warehouse workers.

In the United States, perhaps the most obvious target for support is worker organizing in Amazon distribution centers around the country, such as the campaign in Bessemer, Alabama. Amazon, the second largest employer in the country,[22] depends on the smooth circulation of goods through its supply chains for its business model—from last-mile delivery drivers and in-house warehouse workers to dock, road, and rail workers a bit further down the line. Amazon's increasing reliance on oversees sellers, particularly from China,[23] and its expansion into third party logistics operations in road, air, and sea transport[24] have created strong incentives for workers in the ports and other well-organized logistics centers to enter the fray. As the IDC case suggests, doing so would not be a case of altruism but instead a way of ensuring their own position long-term by addressing "holes" of worker power within the broader logistics network in which they are situated and ensuring that Amazon's notoriously poor working conditions do not bleed over into other sectors of the logistics industry.

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