



This is a repository copy of *No magic bullet: technically strategic power alone is not enough*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/206130/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

Fox-Hodess, C. (2023) No magic bullet: technically strategic power alone is not enough. In: Womack Jr, J., Olney, P. and Perusek, G., (eds.) Labor Power and Strategy. PM Press . ISBN 9781629639741

© 2023 John Womack Jr., Peter Olney, and Glenn Perušek. This is an author-produced version of a book chapter subsequently published in Labor Power and Strategy. Uploaded with permission from the copyright holder.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

**No Magic Bullet:
Technically Strategic Power Alone Is Not Enough**

Katy Fox-Hodess

Building on the work of mid-century American industrial relations scholar and practitioner John T. Dunlop, John Womack argues that strategic positions may be strategic because of the economic, technical, social, cultural or political role of workers in those positions. However, among these possibilities, Womack is clear that he is primarily concerned with ‘technically strategic positions’, whether within a given workplace, industry or the economy as a whole. Pointing out that ‘In Russia in 1917 the Bolsheviks didn’t spend effort on organizing shoe-shiners or barbers or bakers or street peddlers or rag pickers’, Womack argues that it is only by focusing on technically strategic positions that workers can ‘get real leverage over production, the leverage to make their struggle effective. You don’t get this leverage just by feelings. You get it by holding the power to cut off the capitalist’s revenue. And without that material power your struggle won’t get you very far for very long.’

In this regard, Womack’s conceptualization of technically strategic positions bears striking similarities to the concept of ‘structural power’ developed by Beverly Silver in her 2003 book *Forces of Labor: Workers Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Examples of workers in technically strategic positions (or, in Silver’s formulation, with a high degree of structural power) include workers in heavy manufacturing (i.e., the auto industry) and logistics (i.e.,

transportation and the ports). Within each sector, certain workers, like tool and die makers and crane operators, are more technically strategic than others.

Whether by sector or job role, the power of technically strategic workers derives from their ability to create disruptive ripples that make waves far beyond their immediate workplace or industry.

Womack's notion of technical relations at work derives from a framework which understands workplaces, industries and the economy as a whole as webs or networks connected by links which create vulnerabilities that make certain locations far more likely than others to be used as breaking points. As Womack puts it, 'in almost every industry . . . there's no single, complete technology at work . . . It's always several technologies composed, put together. And wherever you put one thing together with another, there's a seam or a zipper or a hub or a joint or a node or a link, the more technologies together, the more links, the places where it's not integral . . . and where the parts go together . . . there can be a bottleneck, a choke point.'

Womack is therefore insistent that worker organizers attend to the specifics of the technical vulnerabilities in a given workplace or industry. By careful empirical analysis, Womack argues that these vulnerabilities can be defined objectively in terms of workers' ability to build leverage over capital. The suggestion for the labor movement, then, is to concentrate organizing efforts in the spaces (and times) that will have the greatest impact in terms of disrupting production. Womack's suggestion that these questions can be answered objectively and definitively and that, in doing so, we can maximize our efforts, is a compelling one and certainly merits greater consideration by organizers.

On the other hand, Womack is less persuasive on the question of the forms of power available to workers non-technical strategic positions and the significance of non-technical forms of power more generally. Earlier in the interview, he is disparaging of sociologist Erik Olin Wright's (2000) concept of 'associational power', which refers to forms of power that accrue to workers as a result of their collective organization in trade unions, works councils and the like. For Womack, associational power at this point in the interview is solely a 'derivative power' – 'a consequence of strategic power'.

Yet, though I began my research on global dockworker trade unionism with a similar perspective to Womack, I've come to the opposite conclusion: strategic power (or structural power) is deeply rooted in associational power.¹ To take a simple illustration of this principle: despite the tremendous strategic potential that dockworkers possess as a result of the technical division of labor in ports and the absolutely central role of ports in global commerce, it turns out that dockworkers do not have powerful unions everywhere around the world. Trade unionism in ports tends to be weak in countries where trade unionism is generally weaker as a result of socio-political conditions, That is to say, the lack of associational power available to these workers precludes the possibility of them exercising strategic power effectively, or in many cases, at all. For example, in Colombia, dockworkers historically had a powerful national union. But their union was destroyed overnight when the country's ports were privatized in the

¹ For an empirically grounded case study illustrating this argument, please see Fox-Hodess, Katy and Camilo Santibañez Rebolledo. 2020. "[The Social Foundations of Structural Power: Strategic Position, Worker Unity and External Alliances in the Making of the Chilean Dockworkers Movement](#)". *Global Labour Journal* 11(3): 222-238. This article is available through open access at the *Global Labour Journal* website.

early 1990's. Three decades later, they continue to struggle for basic union recognition as dockworkers' strategic position does not exempt them from the extremely adverse conditions for trade unionism in general in the the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists.²

Womack is prepared to concede that associational power does matter, 'however derivative it is', in crisis situations when 'you've got to have many people for your struggle, your cause, morally, politically'. He suggests that 'if it comes as a total surprise . . . everybody else in the country is against it' and that new replacements, either 'civilian' or 'military' could be found for striking workers within the week. The problem, however, is that Womack's laser-like focus on the technical division of labor doesn't allow him to provide a comprehensive explanation of just why it is that broad-based support seems to matter quite a bit for strategically-positioned workers at certain moments. My research on dockworkers, however, suggests that broad-based social support for this highly (technically) strategic group of workers is critical to maintaining their ability to exercise technical strategic power in the first place. In Portugal, for example, dockworkers faced down an attempt to subject their union-controlled labor pools to non-union competition – one of the terms of the Portuguese state's bailout agreement following the sovereign debt crisis. While the dockworkers were able to effectively leverage their strategic position through targeted strike action – and the threat of a boycott of ships leaving Lisbon by dockworkers in

² 2019. "Worker Power, Trade Union Strategy, and International Connections: Dockworker Unionism in Colombia and Chile". *Latin American Politics and Society* 61(3): 29-54.

Spain – union leaders emphasized the importance of the large coalition they built with many non-strategic workers, including the unemployed, who helped to amplify the dockworkers’ message that their struggle was in the interests of Portuguese workers as a whole. Taken together, these forms of technically strategic pressure at the point of production and socio-political pressure through broad-based coalitions enabled a major victory in this phase of the Portuguese dockworkers’ struggle.³

The necessity of broad-based support is not incidental but instead intrinsic to their technically strategic position. Because technically strategic workers have the power to send disruptive ripples far beyond their immediate workplaces, they find themselves in conflict with both capital and the capitalist state again and again. The ripple effects of disruptions through industrial action tend to effect both multiple sectors of capital as well as other workers – the example of transportation strikes that shut down the evening commute or result in scarcities of basic commodities are an obvious example – creating a reiterative threat that ‘public opinion’ may turn against the highly strategic striking workers. In such cases, when public opinion turns, it is far easier for the state to move against workers in a repressive capacity. In other words, *the strongest position from a technically strategic perspective may simultaneously be the weakest position from a social or political perspective, with important consequences for labor strategy.*

³ Fox-Hodess, Katy. 2017. [\(Re-\)Locating the Local and National in the Global: Multi-Scalar Political Alignment in Transnational European Dockworker Union Campaigns](#). *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 55(3): 626-647.

As a result, deep-rooted alliances and shared understandings with less technically strategically positioned workers and other groups in society may serve as an effective buffer against overly repressive measures by the state as it weighs the possibility of a crisis of profitability, driven by strategically-positioned workers withholding their labor, against the possibility of a crisis of legitimacy if the state represses union action. In other words, creating and maintaining a buffer through building long-term, mutually beneficial links with workers who have a weaker degree of technically strategic power, but a high degree of social or political strategic power, ups the stakes of repressive state intervention, making it more likely for technically strategically positioned workers to succeed through industrial action. The crucial point here, *contra* Womack, is that technically strategically privileged workers require the social and political power of less technically strategically privileged workers (and other actors in civil society) just as much as the latter require the technical power of the former.

The power of these alliances was on full display in strikes in recent years by dockworkers in Chile, who have built surprisingly strong relationships with the student movement – for many years, the strongest social movement in the country. Student activists provided myriad forms of support to the dockworkers, including building linkages throughout the country and amplifying the dockworkers’ message, as in the case with the unemployed workers’ support for the Portuguese dockworkers. This proved especially important in countering negative coverage of the strike in the media and raising the stakes of further state repression after arrests and beatings on the picket lines. The dockworkers reciprocated with solidarity strikes for the students and the coalition has endured

over time as they have worked together to redress the enduring inequalities and democratic deficits in the country that have remained since the Pinochet dictatorship.

In sum, power flows in multiple directions across multiple dimensions (economic, social and political) in conflicts between capital and labor. The more strategic the industry, the more likely it is that the capitalist state will intervene. As a result, labor movement revitalization, in my view, will require understanding not only how to find and take advantage of vulnerabilities in the technical division of labor but how to find and take advantages of economic, social and political vulnerabilities within the capitalist totality. This will by necessity require a clear understanding of the forms of power each group of workers may offer and a clear understanding that success will come through *articulating and combining* powers across multiple dimensions, suggesting the need to re-think hierarchies that privilege the technical over the social and political.