

Senior Editors' Note

The Senior Editors of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, along with many readers no doubt, have been preoccupied with the political events of 2016. Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump have trained a spotlight on the failures of globalization and xenophobic opposition to migration. This issue, *ILWCH 91*, gives us much food for thought as we process these developments and search for a way forward.

At the heart of *ILWCH 91* is a special issue entitled "Thinking Labor Rights through the Coolie Question," edited by Mae M. Ngai of Columbia University and Sophie Loy-Wilson of the University of Sydney. The six papers that comprise this issue are drawn from a conference organized by Loy-Wilson and Marilyn Lake at the University of Sydney in September 2015 which aimed to provide a "historical context for the growing anxieties over globalization and labor migration that are found around the world today." These papers show that the movement of Asian indentured labor, the "coolie question" in the language of the nineteenth century, linked labor rights with xenophobia from South Africa to the United States, Canada and Australia.

Readers should note that the editors and the authors of these papers are fully aware of the pejorative connotations of the word coolie. Plantation owners and overseers and colonial authorities used the term as a racial slur, although the laborers themselves used it as well to describe themselves in exchanges with Europeans. As Ngai and Loy-Wilson observe in their introduction to the issue, some contemporary writers are claiming the word as "bearing pride and not shame in the origins of indenture."

While the papers in the issue range from the Caribbean to Africa and Australia, they make no claims to be either comprehensive or representative of the coolie trade as a whole. "Rather," the editors write, "we hope this special issue will offer some new insights into the coolie question, insights made possible through comparison across and within empires (British, French, and U.S.), across ethnic groups (Indian, Chinese, African American, Euro-Americans), and across a longue durée."

Three large themes emerge from the six papers. First, despite being characterized as docile and subservient, coolies possessed remarkable powers of resistance. In her "'Unwanted Scraps' or 'An Alert, Resolute, Resentful People'?" Chinese Railroad Workers in French Congo", Julia Martínez traces the opposition by Chinese workers to French expectations of absolute obedience and uncomplaining hard labor. Seventy years earlier, and several thousand miles away, Chinese goldminers protested the seizure of their hard won gold by New South Wales' authorities, as Sophie Loy-Wilson recounts in her "Coolie Alibis: Seizing Gold from Chinese Miners in New South Wales." The report

that Loy-Wilson draws upon to reconstruct the story is itself a product of an inquiry sparked by the worker protests.

Second, the coolie question produced a global discourse with major political implications. Mae M. Ngai, in her “Trouble on the Rand: Chinese Mine Labor in South Africa and the Apogee of White Settlerism,” argues that the question of banning Chinese laborers reverberated throughout the Anglo-American world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It played a role in the British general election of 1906, which marked the triumph of white laborism behind a Liberal-Labour electoral pact and ensured that the settler colonies would be open only to whites. In “Asian Indentured Labor in the Age of African American Emancipation,” Zach Sell explores coolie questions across the British Empire during the era of the US Civil War. Sell shows that the coolie emerged as a figure who planters, factory owners and state officials imagined could replace the African-American slave and reduce the disruptions that accompanied emancipation.

Finally, two papers link the long history of the coolie question to contemporary concerns. Warwick Anderson, in his “Coolie Therapeutics: Labor, Race, and Medical Science in Tropical Australia,” traces the “biomedical framing” of labor in Australia from the nineteenth century to the present. Longstanding racialized tropes of fitness for labor, which justified highly exploitative conditions of work, can still be found in Australia today and Anderson argues for a single framework which unites racial thinking with histories of labor and medicine. Leon Fink, in his “The First Precariat?,” examines together the coolie question and the plight of low-wage workers in today’s global economy. Fink points to some striking differences between the coolies of yesterday and the precariat of today, the most significant being the extent of legal regulation which was much greater in the case of the coolie, but the compulsion to work, the racial segmentation, super-exploitation, and conditions of indebtedness which characterizes low-wage work today are eerily reminiscent of the coolie.

ILWCH 91 also contains two free-standing articles. Wendy Matsumura’s “More than the ‘Wife Corps’: Female Tenant Farmer Struggle in 1920s Japan” recounts the dramatic fight of rural women in 1920s Japan against both capital and male privilege. These women joined with their husbands, sons, and fathers to challenge the power of landlords but they were not mere appendages in a male-centered movement. Women formed autonomous organizations to fight for the issues of social reproduction that were critical to them, including daycare facilities and paid maternity leave, as well as issues of equality such as the right to vote and equal treatment under the law. These women also saw themselves as part of a global women’s movement and one of their demands was the celebration of International Women’s Day. Matsumura concludes that these women created important spaces in which to challenge the intersection between capitalism and patriarchy and to explore the interplay between theory and praxis.

In "The IWW in Turin: 'Militant history', workers' struggle, and the crisis of Fordism in 1970s Italy" Nicola Pizzolato explores why the International Workers of the World, or Wobblies, found a surprisingly receptive audience in the Italy of the 1970s. He argues that the autonomous groups of the period were sympathetic to the Wobblies because they too had "sought to deflect the labor movement from its protection of the existing prerogatives of a dwindling number of craft workers and to mobilize the mass of unskilled, immigrant workers with direct action, imaginative tactics and radical demands." In the paper Pizzolato builds upon the transnational turn in United States labor history, but takes it in some novel directions. While he recognizes that there were links between the US and Italy in the 1970s, much of the paper is devoted to a "diachronic transnational approach," which documents the profound impact in Italy of the Wobblies a half century after their heyday in the US.

The transnational turn in United States labor history is also the focus of a review essay by Justin F. Jackson on labor and the US Empire. Jackson's essay shows that the study of US imperialism is thriving and that a growing body of scholarship highlights the centrality of labor, whether maritime workers who sailed the ships that connected far-flung ports, military laborers who enforced US dictates, or migrants who worked on plantations in Hawai'i, Cuba, the Philippines or Puerto Rico. That the study of the United States in the world is integrating the history of workers is a welcome development, especially as it shows that the US empire "required the extraordinary efforts of ordinary Americans ... who not only suffered costs but sometimes also derived benefits and even pleasure." This is something historians must grapple with, both in the past and in the present.

Finally, with this issue we begin an occasional series of Reports from the Field on Labor in the University. We kick off this series with reports on contingent faculty unionization efforts at Barnard College, the graduate student union struggle at Columbia and Harvard, and the victorious dining workers strike at Harvard. Carlos Aramayo of UNITE HERE, the union that represented the dining workers, gives us a revealing look into the elaborate preparatory work that made that strike a success, the first open-ended strike in Harvard's 380-odd years. Lindsey Dayton and Rudi Batzell, doctoral candidates in history at Columbia and Harvard respectively, give us a finely-grained account of what went into those two fights for graduate student unions and why students need such an organization in the face of university administrations that are being driven by commercial principles. Finally, Georgette Fleischer reports on the difficult conditions for contingent faculty at even prestigious institutions such as Barnard and the hardball efforts by the administration to block unionization.

While a range of workers are covered in these reports, the editors admit that the focus is too skewed toward elite institutions in the Northeast United States. In our defense, the idea for these reports was hatched at our editorial board meeting in late October, which gave us very little time to commission them and we turned to the immediate connections we had. In future issues we

will broaden the remit of these reports and we urge readers to contact *ILWCH* if they would like to write one or draw our attention to an important struggle anywhere in the world.

ILWCH 91 promises to both spark our historical imaginations and help us understand our present predicament. We hope you agree.

Franco Barchiesi, Prasannan Parthasarathi, and Barbara Weinstein
Senior Editors