

THE WORKING CLASS: IS IT DEAD?

by John Bellamy Foster

Longshoremens: Community and Resistance on the Brooklyn Waterfront, by William DiFazio. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985. 208 pp., \$24.95.

Among those who are convinced of the need for radical social change in the advanced capitalist countries as the world nears the year 2000 there are two broad streams of thought. One of these adheres to the traditional left view that the working class is (almost by definition) the only social force capable of carrying out a genuine socialist transformation within the center of the capitalist system. Although not denying the fact that workers in the developed countries are far from revolutionary at present, those who adhere to this perspective tend to emphasize the continuing radical significance of class struggles on the job, and would find themselves in general agreement with David Montgomery's stance that

when I thought about the question of socialism, and heard people asking whether the working class was an agent for social change, I found it very hard to even relate to the question. If the working class isn't going to change its own life and make a new world, why bother? To change one boss for another is not something I'm going to go out and put myself on the line for.¹

It goes without saying that such an assessment is quite consistent with a recognition of the fact that revolutionary class struggle in the periphery is the main variable in the twentieth-century equation, and the chief reason that Marxism remains a major force in the world today.

The other broad stream of thought includes all of those on the left who have become so disillusioned with the Western working class,

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and who frequently remain so indifferent to third world struggles, that they have sought various ways of declassing the socialist project. Thus André Gorz, author of *Farewell to the Working Class*, has argued that the future as history will be determined by a "non-class of non-workers" that is freeing itself from the productivist logic of capitalism and fighting a battle for the liberation of time. Other radicals, influenced by the post-structuralist current in Europe, have consciously sought to "decenter" the class subject within social analysis.²

At first glance, William DiFazio's new study of longshoremen would seem to belong unambiguously to the first of these two streams of thought. Indeed, despite the impression conveyed by its title, DiFazio's book is clearly intended to be much more (and much less) than a study of dockworkers as such.³ Instead it represents an attempt to answer the question "The Working Class: Is It Dead?"—the heading of the opening chapter—by examining the lives of thirty-five Brooklyn longshoremen who receive a guaranteed annual income of more than \$31,000 and yet work only a few days a year. "These longshoremen," writes DiFazio, "are in an unusual situation. They remain wage-labor, but not only do they no longer produce surplus value . . . they no longer work" (p.5). By researching the peculiar position of these longshoremen, in whose lives the traditional relations between work and community have been reversed, he seeks to challenge the now commonplace assumption among social scientists that the working class is no longer actively involved in resisting the capitalist order. "They resist," he states, "but in their own way" (p.2).

As a backdrop to his own study, DiFazio therefore begins by distancing himself from the views of such diverse thinkers as Daniel Bell, Louis Althusser, Harry Braverman, and Jurgen Habermas, each of whom are said to have contributed to the displacement of the working class within modern sociological analysis. The mistake attributed to a liberal, "post-industrial society" theorist like Bell is that class struggle is reduced to "the contractual fights between union and management;" whereas the essence of working-class opposition, DiFazio tells us, is to be found not in "formal resistance" (or "accommodation") within the prevailing configuration of industrial relations, but in the "informal resistance" that lies beyond the "contested terrain" of the labor contract. By focusing exclusively on the former, it is all too easy to arrive at the erroneous conclusion (à la Bell) that the working class is no longer an active agent in social transformation.

Theoretical weaknesses of this kind are not confined to the liberal tradition, however, but are also to be found within Marxist thought. Left theorists, DiFazio contends, have “written off the working class as a source of societal transformation” in three ways (p. 12). The first is represented by Althusser’s structuralism, which displaces the historical subject, and thus the working class individual, as the material force generating radical social change. “In place of Althusser’s ‘law of overdetermination,’” DiFazio states, “I argue for the insufficiency of structure and the insufficiency of organization” (p. 15).

A second way in which the working class is supposedly “removed from the struggle for the transformation of advanced capitalism” is identified with Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Noting Braverman’s emphasis on managerial imperatives stemming from the logic of capitalist accumulation, DiFazio claims that such a perspective ignores the larger field of the cultural contradictions of capitalism in which informal resistance is largely enacted. Consequently, “Braverman’s degraded workers seem static, passive and too overwhelmed by the dominant class to ever be an agency of change.” Indeed, Braverman himself is (strangely) said to have fallen “back on a Marxist structuralism that assumes that external structures and external forces will make a passive working class turn active” (p. 17). (It should be mentioned, in contrast to the rather misleading impression that DiFazio offers here, that Braverman himself had defended his study in this respect—as some MR readers will undoubtedly recall—not by resorting to Marxist structuralism, but by emphasizing the overall similarity in tone between his own book and Engels’ *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*.)⁴

The third and final way in which working class struggles have been displaced within Marxian theory is represented by the work of Habermas. By defining communication rather than production as the central realm of class struggle, Habermas, in DiFazio’s words, suggests that “the worker is incapable of independent autonomous action. . . . Only individuals separated from material production are capable of self-reflection and . . . undistorted communication” (pp. 21–22).

Thus DiFazio avows that

I am particularly critical of all three forms of the left’s notion of change. . . . It is my contention that there will be no big bang revolution but that there is a continuous revolutionary process, and that this . . . can be viewed only through an analysis of the everyday lives of working people. . . . As a result of this analysis, I get a . . . picture of continuous resistance at the

informal levels of human interaction, that is, outside of the formal organizational structures but always aimed at them. (p. 23)

All of this sets the stage for DiFazio's "theoretical ethnography" of longshoremen on the Guarantee of Annual Income (GAI), through which he hopes to demonstrate the usefulness of an approach that focuses on the dialectic of formal and informal resistance. However, he leaves his readers somewhat in the dark about the longer history of class struggle on the waterfront, and since a correct assessment of his book requires a certain degree of knowledge in this area, it is necessary to recount some of the main developments.

From the beginning of its history the longshore industry has been characterized by intense labor conflict. Much of this of course stemmed from the position of waterfront workers as casual labor. Demand for workers fluctuates widely from day to day, and is relatively unpredictable. Consequently, hiring occurs on a daily basis. It is this situation that led to the forms of extreme exploitation associated with the shape up (hiring off the wharves) that characterized the industry in its early days. And it was through their struggles against the shape up that longshoremen gradually gained a considerable amount of control in relation to both the workforce and the production process. When the smoke cleared after "Bloody Thursday" during the 1934 general strike in San Francisco, for example, it became clear that the West Coast longshoremen—then part of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), but soon to reorganize themselves into the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU)—had won not only substantial control over work relations through gang size and sling load stipulations, etc., but that they had also succeeded in taking over the actual hiring process, through the establishment of a union-controlled hiring hall.⁵ The New York area was not "decasualized" to this extent until 1954, twenty years after the Pacific Coast, under the direction of the government acting on recommendations of the New York State Crime Commission. As a result, the hiring hall was state controlled rather than union directed. Still longshoremen on the East and Gulf Coasts, who were organized within the ILA, like those in the West Coast ILWU, obtained a degree of control over work relations that most unions in other industries envied. Most important, longshoremen managed to maintain some of the benefits of casual labor without suffering its worst defects. Hence, unlike workers in general, longshoremen remained free *not* to work on any given day without losing their overall job status.

Such a situation, though stabilizing work relations on the waterfront for a time, was far from ideal for capital, and the last five decades have been dominated by the counterattack by management, whose object has been to extend the decasualization process still further by eliminating the gang structure and the hiring hall by creating a "standard industrial work force." Management's main weapon in this battle has been the technological revolution in cargo handling that began in the late 1950s. The most important innovation was the container, a rectangular steel box that could hold around twenty-five tons of freight, making it unnecessary for longshoremen to individually handle cargo on the old piecemeal, "break-bulk" basis. Seeing the writing on the wall while the technological revolution was only in its infancy, the ILWU crafted the famous Mechanization and Modernization Agreement in 1961, which was designed to eliminate obstructions to productivity growth, in return for employment/income guarantees. A somewhat similar deal was negotiated for the East and Gulf Coasts by the ILA in 1964, enabling management to move containerized cargo through the ports, in exchange for a Guarantee of Annual Income for a portion of the longshore workforce (those occupying senior positions). Today a workforce of 12,000 men in the New York–New Jersey area moves more cargo than was handled by the work force of 48,000 men in 1950—even though several thousand of the former, thanks to the GAI, scarcely ever have to work at all (p. 31).

On the Brooklyn waterfront itself there are as many as 1,200 longshoremen who receive an income of \$31,200 per year without the obligation to work except on rare occasions. The thirty-five men with high seniority who DiFazio studied all labored on the waterfront together for thirty or forty years but are now able to receive a full day's wage without working. "Because of stipulations within the contract," he tells us

they must badge-in at the 60th Street hiring hall in Brooklyn and be available for work on every workday. But an advantage of their seniority is that they can have first or last choice for an available job in their category. Although they must work if there are not enough men with less seniority for the available jobs, this rarely occurs. . . . These men meet each day at "Joe's" a luncheonette two blocks away from the hiring hall. They drink coffee and munch on buttered rolls, read the *Daily News*, and talk sports and politics until the windows open at the hiring hall at 7:00 A.M. when they can badge-in. They continue socializing until the shape-up is finished at 8:50 to 9:00. Then they badge-out and leave with the rest of the day to be disposed of as they see fit." (p. 26)

Why do these men choose not to work when they could earn more

money by doing so? (A very few senior longshoremen in New York area are said to have earned as much as \$70,000 in a single year by taking advantage of their preferred status to work overtime on a semi-regular basis.) How are their relations to work and community restructured? In what ways do they continue to resist the system (if at all)? It is with questions like these in his mind that DiFazio (himself the son and grandson of dockworkers) interviewed the small group of longshoremen that formed the basis of his study, sitting and talking with them while they ate in the luncheonette or while they waited to badge-out in the hiring hall.

The first thing that he discovered is that in refusing to work these longshoremen were partly protesting the dissolution of their traditional work relations, especially the declining importance of the gang structure, which had formed the central element in the longshoreman's work activity. These men, DiFazio explains,

are not resisting work in general. They do resist work that is no longer meaningful in terms of a community of workers. . . . If the community could be reconstituted, as Sally (one of the men on the GAI) says, "They'd go back to work tomorrow." Since the community of work is not likely to be reconstituted, because of the shipping companies' commitment to capital-intensive technologies, workers create community elsewhere. . . . Thus these longshoremen have attempted to recreate class community in the hiring hall and their nonwork time (p. 65).

Although consciousness of both the growing degradation of work on the waterfront and of a history of exploitation have induced most senior longshoremen to collect the GAI while carefully avoiding work, they still share a sense of community within the hiring hall at the "fringe of the workplace" environment. DiFazio provides a detailed description of the conversations in which the longshoremen are engaged during the two hours each day that they are required to wait in the hiring hall. Sports talk, news talk, and television talk, as well as joking, are examined for indications of community and an autonomous culture of working-class resistance. The anecdotal evidence that he accumulates seems to suggest that the representatives of the working class here depicted are not simply the apathetic and authoritarian individuals that the hegemonic ideology makes them out to be. Instead, they use much of the time at their disposal to discuss political and social events, carefully combing the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Times* to confirm their suspicions that corruption is rife among the powers that be. Some of the statements

recorded indicate a sensitivity to issues of racism, and even a willingness to defend the student antiwar protesters of the 1960s vis-à-vis the authorities.

The drastic transformation in the lives of these longshoremen is most evident in the much larger amount of time that they have away from the workplace. How do they utilize this new-won time? A thinker like Christopher Lasch, author of *The Culture of Narcissism*, DiFazio conjectures, would be extremely suspicious of such a development, believing that it could only lead to an extension of the isolation and self-absorption that plague contemporary U.S. society. On the other hand, Stanley Aronowitz (who wrote the introduction for DiFazio's book) claims in *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* that there are two kinds of narcissism, one that feeds into the commodity culture and one which is critical of that culture. DiFazio believes that his own study of the "lived-through" experience of Brooklyn longshoremen backs up the latter view. These longshoremen utilize their additional time in ways which go against the hegemonic culture, resulting in the emergence of stronger family and neighborhood units and the rejection of competitive, productivist norms.

Although a few men take a second job, and therefore accommodate themselves to the system, the vast majority use their time in other ways, still preferring not to work in an alienated society. One such way, adopted by a fraction of the men, is the sporting life. These men use their time at the races or the card table. Even here, however, DiFazio argues (although one has difficulty taking him seriously), interpersonal relations are transformed, since low stakes become institutionalized within the group, so that the activities are geared as much to community as competition. But most of the longshoremen on the GAI that he studied have little use for gambling and use their time as family and community activists. Thus he documents in considerable detail how individual longshoremen have restructured their roles in their families, taking on more and more of the household chores (although still probably not sharing an equal burden with their wives in this respect) and becoming increasingly aware of what is happening in their children's and grandchildren's lives. Some are also shown to be active in community affairs, and DiFazio illustrates this with examples of their involvement in the neighborhood, as well as participation in larger organizations such as the union, the American Legion, and the Republican Party. It is in this fashion, DiFazio suggests, that these longshoremen in their non-work lives demon-

strate the predominance of informal resistance to the logic of capitalist development and culture.

Narcissism? Gambling? The New York *Daily News*? The American Legion? The Republican Party? At this point, if not before, the attentive reader is inclined to rub his or her eyes in disbelief. If this is informal *resistance*, what would mere *coping* look like? Indeed, whatever importance one may attach to the newly emerging political, familial, and "communal" relations among longshoremen (and other workers), DiFazio's own argument only adds further support to the view that they are definitely not sufficient at this point (or in the foreseeable future) to carry almost the entire brunt of social transformation. And yet this is the role that they must play in his analysis, since throughout his study he equates the formal resistance of the working class with mere "accommodation." In fact, the displacement of working-class struggles from the terrain of the labor process itself is clearly indicated in his description of the "new working-class movement":

(1) It is a movement against alienated work and for the liberation of time. (2) Since work has been trivialized by computer-mediated production and the worker increasingly removed from the labor process, struggle must be made at the periphery. (3) It is a struggle that is made through the mobilization of desire against the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. (4) It is made at the level of the everyday life of ordinary working people through the reproduction of informal community. (pp. 138-39)

In short, DiFazio denies the possibility of genuine social advancement through the formal organization and formal resistance of the working class, giving his vote instead to Robert Michels' view that, "Who says organization, says oligarchy" (p. 139). But his own attempt to find signs of resistance within the informal lives of longshoremen on the GAI is mainly noteworthy for its dreamlike character—as if the expected results were clung to even after the incoming evidence proved them to be without foundation.

This dilemma that DiFazio faces at the end of his book is a natural consequence of the fact that he has actually conceded too much to post-industrial society theorists like Bell and Gorz, and to all of those located within that (second) broad stream of radical thought on historical agency in advanced capitalism that has chosen to deny any radical significance to the continuing class struggles of the working class on the job (and on the waterfront). In this respect, DiFazio made the mistake of writing off Braverman's contribution far too quickly. For it might be argued that the most important recent

works on class struggle with respect to longshoring itself have been produced by theorists aligned with Braverman.⁶ Such studies treat the conflict on the waterfront as an ongoing battle for job control. It is clear, for example, that the New York–New Jersey area is now threatened by the kind of total decasualization that has already been implemented in the port of Montreal, where the hiring hall has been abolished, dispatch is now determined directly by a computer controlled by management, and gang size has been reduced to no more men than is absolutely necessary for a given job (which compares with minimum gang sizes of six in Vancouver and eighteen in New York). DiFazio seems to have little understanding of (or even interest in) these continuing and potentially explosive class struggles. Ironically, the longshoremen that he studied are distinguished precisely by the fact that they have chosen not to work, so that they gave him little basis for ascertaining the real interconnections between formal and informal resistance. (One might even ask what particular value there is in studying longshoremen at all in this way, rather than simply looking at the informal resistance of the unemployed, where the results are likely to be much more dramatic?) The weaknesses of such a methodology are especially evident in his discussion of the 1977 strike, where virtually nothing of significance is said in a whole chapter about the conflict on the waterfront itself, but only about the eight week cancellation of GAI income that resulted.

Thus the reader encounters a book about members of the working class that is strangely one-sided, in that it never gets closer to the point of production than the “community at the fringe of the workplace.” To be sure, rather than “decentering” the working class, as numerous theorists have done, DiFazio merely seeks to decenter work itself. But the end result is much the same.

More realism and more hope is to be found in the words of Louis Goldblatt, International Secretary-Treasurer for the ILWU from 1943 to 1977, writing in the pages of *MR* only five years ago: “Of one thing we can be certain. There will be no fundamental movement for change in this country, change that is long overdue, without the power of labor as the main motor force.”⁷