

BOOK REVIEW

Ralph Callebert. *On Durban's Docks: Zulu Workers, Rural Households, Global Labor*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2017. xvi + 235 pp. Maps. £80.00/\$99.00 Cloth. ISBN: 9781580469074.

Durban is the main harbor in South Africa, and as such it reflects the city's social and economic life, having also historically occupied a strategic position in facilitating trade and empire. Ralph Callebert's book *On Durban's Docks* focuses on the working and living condition of Durban dock workers and the livelihood strategies of their rural households between 1910 and 1958. During that time, dock workers constituted the largest demographic concentration in the city and were pivotal for the smooth operation of the harbor. Their salaries, however, were unpredictable because the dock workers were hired by the day rather than on a continuing contract, and therefore they occupy a central position in labor history.

Callebert argues that the "Unilinear transaction from rural migrant workers to a modern and stable urban working class, which both Marxists and liberals expected to happen, did not take place in South Africa" (8). Instead, the dock workers retained a very strong rural orientation both socially and economically and lived their lives largely in isolation from the urban world. By investing their wages to build homesteads in their villages, which were outside Durban, they relied on rural economies, such as pastoralism, agriculture, and small trade to support their livelihoods. This was largely an outcome of apartheid-era influx control. Common experiences of oppression, brutal working conditions, and uncertain work opportunities faced by the dock workers fostered solidarity among them. These factors led to the establishment of the first Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU).

Callebert's book grows out of his extensive archival research and interviews conducted by him in isiZulu and isiXhosa during his own field work in 2009 among former dock workers who worked in Durban between 1939 and 1959 and with the women in their households. The text is organized into six chapters, each representing a distinct yet complementary view of the Durban dock workers. The first chapter explores the dock workers' labors within the history of Africa and the active role of these workers within the labor market and in Durban politics. African labor history to a very great extent focuses on working-class consciousness; it presents the dock

workers as strike-prone working-class radicals. Callebert argues that there is an idiosyncratic mix of informal entrepreneurship along with working class action.

The title of the second chapter, “One head of cattle named Salt, another named Beans,” is very interesting, and in many ways it is the descriptive core of this book, as it discusses the livelihood strategies of these workers and their households. The economic activities of the dock workers were not fixed, and they did not determine their identity. According to Callebert, two distinct strategies emerged among dock workers who were interviewed: while some of them maximized their earnings by working over shifts and by minimizing their expenditures in the city in order to send home as much money as possible, others took a more commercial entrepreneurial path, many of which activities constitute what is known as informal economy. Callebert also presents a compelling argument that these small-scale commercial activities should not be viewed as disconnected from the employment on the docks, which many eminent scholars fail to capture. This presents the conclusion that dock workers’ livelihoods were often more complex, and we cannot look at either these commercial activities or their wage labor employment in isolation from their broader livelihood strategies.

The next chapter focuses on the working and living condition of dock workers in the city, exploring the links between formal wage labor and informal entrepreneurialism by presenting the experiences of the dock workers who were interviewed during his field research. Callebert found out that mostly all dock workers attached great importance to land and invested a large part of their wages in livestock, especially cattle. For the dock workers, cattle were more than a commodity, as owning them allowed the workers to marry by using them as bride wealth, building their *umuzi*, and enabling them to claim a top position in the patriarchal rural hierarchy. The final two chapters of this small book, which focus on the common practices of pilferage and bribery on the dock and how these practices became a mainstay for the livelihood of dock workers, were previously published in scholarly journals. The author points out that these practices were part of the dock workers’ conscious strategy to combine dock labor with a small business.

Callebert highlights that even though global labor history has achieved much by moving beyond national histories, still more work remains to be done. The greatest strength of this book lies in the oral testimonies of seventy-seven dock workers and extensive archival research drawn from the author’s own fieldwork, which presents the vivid life experiences of migrant dock labors and their families. Therefore, Callebert’s book is an important contribution to the study of the relationship between labor market, wages, and migration. Labor historians and policymakers alike, as well as students of South African history, should pay attention to this book.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Barchiesi, Franco. 2008. "Wage Labor, Precarious Employment, and Social Inclusion in the Making of South Africa's Postapartheid Transition." *African Studies Review* 51 (2): 119–42. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0083.
- Freund, Bill. 1984. "Labor and Labor History in Africa: A Review of the Literature." *African Studies Review* 27 (2): 1–58. doi:10.2307/524115.