

In Search of Worker Strategy

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"Wherever things connect, that's where they're materially weakest....

It's hard to tear fabric woven whole, like Christ's cloak, all of one piece; it's much easier to tear it where there's a seam," argues John Womack Jr. in *Labor Power and Strategy*. And so it is in the processes of the production of goods and services from the raw materials to the final product. As Womack puts it more specifically, "And wherever you put things together, 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 is not integral" (26). It is at these many points that workers have unique power to halt, delay, and/or disrupt production, profits and accumulation.

This is the theme of *Labor Power and Strategy* edited by labor veterans Peter Olney and Glenn Perušek. This short but idea-packed book is composed of a long interview with John Womack Jr. conducted by Olney, former organizing director of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), along with critical but "comradely" responses by ten other labor activists and academics. Womack is a Harvard professor and an expert on the Mexican revolution. It was this that led him to study the structure of Mexican industry in the state of Veracruz, where he found the key points of disruption that to him helped explain the behavior of Mexican industrial workers during the revolution. He would also draw on the works of such divergent scholars as industrial relations expert John Dunlop and Italian sociologist Luca Perrone.

While *Labor Power and Strategy* is not the first book to take up the matter of choke points particularly in relation to logistics,¹ what makes this volume both unique and important is precisely the focus on these points of disruption that characterize virtually any type of extended production process from factories to warehouses, hospitals, hotels, packing plants, or supermarkets. As Glenn Perušek points out in the introduction, most discussions of organizing have focused on the "political-social aspects of organizing" (10). Among these, mapping the workplace, building morale through activities, making house visits, and accruing votes for an NLRB election. Womack calls for a deeper look at the sources of workers' power within the production process as a whole.

This power of position in production includes not only what goes on in any given workplace but in the connections between production sites all the way to the final sale or for that matter between different firms—the hubs, nodes, links, the roads and rails and ports we often summarize as logistics. As Womack reminds us:

Through this new round of capitalist expansion, “globalization,” going back to the 1970s, most big companies (little companies too) have been into subcontracting, “downsizing,” “outsourcing,” vertical integration. But that only increases the importance of logistics, the industrially and technically strategic transportation and communication necessary for all these transactions (45).

This means that “any product that moves now, anybody who moves, goes through more connections in chains and networks than a generation ago” (46). Thus, transportation and communication “are in the direct grind of production so that in manufacturing the supply chain is now not only the first link in the productive process or the last link, delivery, but also a series of intermediate and intermittent links in the chain, the steps between the fixed stations of transformation” (35). This applies to services as well, all of which depend not only on the delivery of materials but on sequential or simultaneous steps in provision of almost any service. In other words, the points of vulnerability to worker action have multiplied and are by now nearly universal. At the same time, capital and its systems of production and movement seldom stay the same. Even here, however, Womack insists: “But I want to emphasize here that when the company makes a change in the means or organization (inevitably both), it actually opens a window for workers to get into it...can imbed themselves into it...so that they soon know better than the company’s engineers how the whole system functions.” (38).

All of this brings to mind Eric Olin Wright’s and Beverly Silver’s concepts of “strategic workers” or power that flows mostly from the workers’ skills and “associational” power based on organization and solidarity. Womack acknowledges this, but unlike most earlier attributions of worker power to particular skills or market power, including Harry Braverman’s epic analysis, he insists:

In all due respect for Braverman, I argue not about skills but about positions, and I think any modern production is inevitably a combination of technologies, old and new, a combination of divisions of labor. Workers can break that combination, to their benefit (146).

This distinction between the strategic power of skills and that of position is key because as one of his “mentors,” John T. Dunlop, argues, from the very skills that give some workers strong bargaining power “a pure craft union may result.”² The workers who have power by virtue of position may or may not be skilled, but it is the position that matters. And this position is part of an interconnected process so that solidarity and inclusion also matter. Skills are not central. Womack gives the example of the (supposedly) low-skilled janitors in a high-rise office building: “...without janitors and maintenance workers a big office building is very quickly an impossible place for office workers to do their jobs” (56).

Origins of the Concept of “Positional Power”

Dunlop was a well-known mainstream academic and practitioner in industrial relations. No radical, he seems an unlikely source of workers’ strategic ability to disrupt production. As Womack points out, however, Dunlop saw first-hand the disruptive power of wildcat strikes as an administrator for the National War Labor Board during World War Two. His job, of course, was to minimize such actions, not to encourage them. By the end of the war Dunlop saw the growth of unions in part as a reflection of this disruptive power. In 1949, he wrote “Successful organization has required that workmen occupy a *strategic* position in the technological and market structures.” While this might involve skilled workers, he went on to argue, “The term strategic, however, is not identical with skill. It means sheer bargaining power by virtue of location and position in the productive process.”³ This insight was repeated briefly in his major 1958 work, *Industrial Relations Systems*, but essentially buried in his “systems” analysis with its triad of managers, workers, and government and its emphasis on the creation of rules to govern collective bargaining. The “Commentary” he added to

the 1993 edition didn't even mention strategic position.⁴ It disappeared as part of mainstream and even much of left industrial relations thinking.

According to Womack, his other major influence was the Italian sociologist Luca Perrone, who argued "that a measure of the 'disruptive potential' of workers derived from their position within the hierarchy of the system of economic interdependencies is the most appropriate way of tapping structural power."⁵ As Perrone died at an early age in 1980, this and a subsequent work were edited by Erik Olin Wright. The thrust of these two articles, however, was not on positional power within the production process or even in logistics, but on the impact of strikes in strategic industries on other industries. To quantify this Perrone used the Italian Central Bureau of Statistics' (Leontief) "input-output" tables. The results were not what he had expected as they showed some impact on wages, but little on the propensity to strike. This was, perhaps, because the potential power of those workers meant the mere threat of a strike was enough to produce higher wages.⁶ This level of analysis never became part of either mainstream or left industrial relations analysis. It was, however, one source of the concept and term "positional power."

The intellectually curious Womack did not cease his investigation of strategic or positional power in academic sources. In what he characterized as a "polemic" meant "to provoke a debate" on sources of worker power in the fields of labor history and the debates over organizing strategy, he drew on a vast amount of the history of organized labor and the political left. This 257-page work, written in 2006 and as yet unpublished in English, is indeed provocative and too long to summarize here. What is perhaps most important for this discussion is that it brought into one comparative study some of the earlier efforts at strategic thinking and practice by radical union activists: notably the works of William Z. Foster in the 1919 steel strike, Farrell Dobbs and Vincent Dunne in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strike, and some of the main strategically-minded organizers of the 1936-37 General Motors' Flint, Michigan sit-down strike.⁷ I say some because in the case of the GM sit-down Womack's unfortunate reliance almost solely on accounts focusing on the central place of Communist Party activists in the strike missed the role of other radicals. This is particularly the case of Socialist Party members Roy Reuther, Genora Johnson, and Kermit Johnson. As even CPer Bob Travis acknowledged, it was Kermit Johnson who devised the strategy for occupying the Chevy 4 engine plant that tipped the balance of power to victory in 1937.⁸ Still, Womack's "polemic" is a breathtaking as well as controversial and otherwise impressively well-documented history of strategic thinking and the lack of it in academia and the workers' movement of the last century or more.

While this kind of strategic thinking has been all too marginal on the labor left in the last few decades, there have been some more recent pioneers. Olney, who co-edited and conducted the interview in this volume, is one of them. In the late 1990s he put forward a William Z. Foster-style multi-union plan, known as the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LA-MAP), for organizing the long string of factories along LA's Alameda Corridor. While he actually lined up a number of unions to launch the project, they all eventually bailed out on the basis of short-sighted "cost-benefit" analysis. More recently, he also tried to get his own union, the ILWU, to reprise its historic, if short-lived "march inland" to organize the growing warehouse industry in Southern California's Inland Empire. This too failed to get union approval due to cost and bureaucratic caution.⁹

Another under-recognized strategic thinker was the late Jerry Tucker. He is perhaps best known as leader of the New Directions reform movement in the United Auto Workers (UAW) from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s. While he was still a UAW district director in 1981, Tucker developed an "in-plant" or "inside" strategy that drew precisely on positional power. As Tucker put it, "We began focusing, looking for key departments," often using the workers' inherent knowledge of the weak points in the production process. He first implemented it with success at the Moog auto

parts plant in St. Louis. He went on to employ the inside strategy at LTV, Bell Helicopter, and elsewhere in the early to mid-1980s.¹⁰ In the mid-1990s, Tucker again applied the inside strategy during the long struggle at Staley in Decatur, Illinois, but this time the company countered with a lockout.¹¹ In his *In These Times* obituary of Tucker, David Moberg noted that Tucker also called this strategy “running the plant backwards.” Significantly, as he wrote, it was a strategy “for workers as a group.”¹² That brings us to another closely related aspect of positional power: the centrality of the “primary” or “informal work group” in the exercise of power.

In the article in which Dunlop spelled out the potential of positional power to disrupt that he had seen during his time as an administrator with the War Labor Board, he also observed, “No working community is ever completely unorganized. Any group of human beings associated together for any length of time develops a community in which there are recognized standards of conduct and admitted leaders....”¹³ These are the natural or organic leaders spotted and developed by effective organizers. This also described the primary or informal work group which had been the focus of the 1920s study of work at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant conducted by management theorist Elton Mayo. For Mayo and Dunlop, the primary work group was a problem for administrators and managers. For union activist Stan Weir, it was an opportunity to expand workers’ power.

Stan Weir was a socialist who had worked during the war as a merchant sailor and after as an auto worker, teamster, and dockworker. In these jobs he saw the work group in action and sought to draw out its radical potential. Drawing from his experience as a merchant sailor, in 1973 he wrote:

But I later came to see that the informal social groups that developed on a ship at sea are in the main created by the formal and official division of labor which operates the ship; that is the informal and formal work groups are identical so that the social and technological powers of the seaman are merged, thus revealing to them the importance of their role and enlarging the consciousness of their strength.¹⁴

From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s Weir was a mentor to many of us who joined what became the International Socialists and planned to “industrialize”; that is, take jobs in one of several industries we saw as strategic such as auto, steel, trucking, and telecommunications. In “U.S.A.—The Labor Revolt,” published in 1967 and directed at the new generation of radicals, he wrote of the rank-and-file rebellion of the 1960s, by then “plainly visible.”

In thousands of industrial establishments across the nation, workers have developed informal underground unions. The basic units of organization are groups composed of several workers each of whose members work in the same plant-area and are thus able to communicate with one another and form a social entity. Led by natural on-the-job leaders, they conduct daily guerrilla skirmishes with their employers and often against their official union leaders.¹⁵

Then, as now, production processes and work saw changes. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was automation and the introduction of new machinery by a more aggressive generation of managers that threatened established working conditions. As Weir pointed out, “During the transition period the employers use their authority to introduce new work rules that will further increase the pace of work.” But just as Womack sees such periods of change as an opportunity, so “For the most part,” Weir wrote, “the revolts involved workers’ counter-attempts to introduce rules that will slow or maintain the old pace of work.”¹⁶ Clearly, bringing together a method of analysis that includes both positional power and the functioning of informal work groups in today’s evolving conditions would enrich our understanding of workers potential power and of the tasks involved in rebuilding, expanding, and reforming organized labor in the U.S.

Is That All There Is? What About...?

By now the reader is probably thinking: Wait a minute, as important as all this is, there is much more to unions and workers' power as a class than that in the workplace or even along the supply chain. This is where the ten "comradely" responses to the Womack interview in *Labor Power and Strategy* come in. Not surprisingly, several responders raise some of the broader questions that almost naturally come to mind. Labor historian Jack Metzgar, for example, takes Womack to task for what he sees as Womack's "dismissal of "associational" power as secondary..." and his underestimation of the importance of solidarity as a source of change (95). For one thing, more often than not, even the exercise of positional power requires cooperation beyond the immediate group, as Tucker's "running the plant backwards" demonstrates.

Additionally, while "positional power" does not imply the problem of craft exclusion often associated with skilled workers, there is a potential downside. As Nelson Lichtenstein points out, this sort of power can also have a negative effect. Looking at the many wildcat strikes that broke out after the UAW won recognition at GM in 1937, he writes, "They proved immediately advantageous to workers who were strategically located in the production process, but they could destroy solidarity among the larger group, especially when a strike in one department produced a layoff in another."¹⁷ Similarly, Olney points to the potential problem of "self-satisfied sectionalism" among workers with strategic power (39). The antidote to this, of course, is building the organization and solidarity across the production process.

Katy Fox-Hodess, who has extensively researched the power of dockworkers in Latin America, warns there is "no Magic Bullet" inherent in their strategic position. As she argues "associational power" is not automatic and often depends on the state of organized labor as a whole in a country. She writes,

Trade unionism in ports tends to be weak in countries where trade unionism is generally weaker as a result of sociopolitical 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 (84).

As she points out, there is an additional problem for those workers like dockers whose positional power impacts the broader economy. "Because technically strategic workers have the power to send disruptive ripples far beyond their immediate workplaces," Fox-Hodess writes, "they find themselves in conflict with both capital and the capitalist state again and again" and "the more strategic the industry, the more likely it is that the capitalist state will intervene" (85-87). That was the experience of ILWU members in 2002 when George W. Bush invoked the Taft-Hartley Act to halt their actions. More recently, one has only to think of the Biden administration's intervention to deny the nation's railroad workers the right to strike as most of the U.S. labor movement stood by in silence to see the truth of this proposition. The need for broader labor and community solidarity actions to counter the state can be decisive.

Bill Fletcher Jr. adds the importance of the struggles of oppressed groups. This is not simply a moral question. Fletcher points to the changes in the workforce, some due to new technology, that particularly impact workers of color and women. The result, he argues, is not higher productivity, which has collapsed in many areas in the last decade or more, but "an increase in low-skilled, low-paid employment at one end, and higher-skilled, higher-paid employment on the other end. Though for fewer workers" (71). Fletcher further makes a point that is too often ignored. He writes, "Race and gender are not identity questions. They speak to a specific set of contradictions and forms of oppression that are central to actually existing capitalism" (74).

Fletcher's interrelated insights on race and oppression into the nature of work and its distribution are highly relevant to the matter of who has positional power today. While workers of color have long composed a disproportionate part of the lower-paid workforce in healthcare, accommodations,

food, and other services sometimes seen as less strategic, their proportions in such key industries as manufacturing, transportation, and warehousing, where stagnant wages and poor conditions have reigned for years, have risen significantly in the last two decades. While the proportion of women has changed less in some areas, they now compose 35 percent of the warehouse workforce and continue to dominate in the increasingly strategic area of healthcare, as well as in education where the teacher rebellion has shown a high degree of “political” strategic power.¹⁸ The intersection of race, gender, and positions of power in these and other industries must be part of our understanding of working-class power.

Why Positional Power Matters Today

The near disappearance of the use of positional power in most daily union practice as well as in the industrial relations literature was, I believe, primarily a result of the rise of business unionism which became dominant in the industrial unions that set the bargaining patterns during and after World War Two. This was manifested as leaders surrendered the workplace to capital through “management’s rights” and “no strike” clauses in the contract. Shop stewards were transformed from worker leaders to shop floor lawyers. The job of the shop steward was no longer to lead on-the-spot actions, perhaps at strategic points, when necessary to redress grievances in a timely fashion like the “quickie” strikes of the 1930s and early 1940s. Rather, stewards were to interpret and enforce the contract through the official grievance machinery—a multi-step legal process in which strikes are forbidden by most union contracts. Furthermore, the issues considered legitimate were limited by what the contract spelled out as well as by the “management’s rights” clause.

Effective stewards, of course, did (and do) their best to stretch or go beyond what is “allowed,” using collective means wherever possible as several handbooks on workplace grievance tactics attest. More often than not, however, the immediate sources of power for stewards and workers are by-passed by standard grievance processing. When legal strikes do occur, typically as the old contract expires, they tend to close the entire facility so that sources of power in the “seams” *within* or *between* workplaces are obscured. Weir’s attempt to reintroduce the primary work group as a focus of union action and Tucker’s to “run the plant backwards” were pushing against a strong current.¹⁹ And so, I suspect, will be Womack’s observations on the power of position.

It is hard to imagine the revival and growth of organized labor in the U.S. without the organization of Amazon. And it is hard to imagine that without a focus on workgroups, positional power, and direct action. Perhaps not surprisingly, I first ran across the concept and term of “positional power” in two articles analyzing Amazon’s tech-driven labor processes by New York University researcher Nantina Vgontzas.²⁰ Vgontzas’s argument, however, was that Amazon’s artificial intelligence-driven technology basically negated the workers’ potential positional power. Despite her perfectly good advice on how workers could deal with this collectively, my own research led me to believe that there were “seams,” “nodes,” and points of connection between the elements of automation where workers could disrupt the rapid flow of products at the heart of the Amazon business model no matter what the artificial intelligence (AI) instructed.

I have written about this elsewhere, but basically all the points of the movement of goods between the automated conveyor belts, heavy package lifters, and roving robots inside the facilities and the trucks and vans that move things between them depend on the direct labor of human beings.²¹ These include truck drivers, loaders, and unloaders; stowers; pickers; packers, labelers, trouble shooters (there are lots of tech glitches); and others who number in the thousands in Amazon’s largest fulfillment centers. Some are directed, as Vgontzas correctly observes, by AI, but often cannot “make rate” as “required,” indicating that even the slickest AI combined with surveillance can’t force the movement of humans or goods by itself.²² Moving goods still requires basic machinery and workers—and workers can fail or disobey. The same is true in the smaller, but strategically key

sortation centers where among other points of connection “robotic platforms deliver rolling carts to workers for loading onto trucks.”²³

I count 20 strikes at U.S. Amazon facilities in 2022.²⁴ They are all minority strikes of short duration, much like the “quickie” wildcats of 1937 and during the war that Lichtenstein wrote about. I don’t know how much disruption they caused, but many of them won small gains of one sort or another in short order, indicating some impact. In the UK, the general union GMB is currently organizing a major Amazon fulfilment center in Coventry through a series of minority strikes each of which has brought in more members. The union estimates an eight-day strike at the target facility alone costs Amazon £2 million.²⁵ Clearly, we need to know more about the precise impact of worker action in the dense network of cash flow-producing motion at Amazon, which is increasingly becoming the model of capitalist transformation.

If Amazon is to be unionized, the strike and other direct actions on the job—like running the sortation center backwards—will be key to building the power needed to bring Amazon to heel. As *Labor Notes* staffer Dan DiMaggio notes in his response, although in the wake of the spectacular teachers strikes of 2018-2019—which Womack acknowledges—there have been more works on strike strategy and organizing, “any serious revival of the strike will require workers and their organizations to grapple with the questions that Womack raises in this discussion and in his book on strategic position and working-class power” (78-79). For young radicals taking jobs in today’s key sectors and “old hands” alike, *Labor Power and Strategy* is a good place to start “grappling” with these important questions.

Notes

1. For example, Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Immanuel Ness, *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), *passim*; Kim Moody, *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 59-69; Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 76. This ground breaking work on logistics is more concerned with security than the choke points *per se*, but is essential reading for understanding contemporary logistics.
2. John T. Dunlop, “The Development of Labor Organization: A Theoretical Framework,” in Richard A. Lester and Joseph Shister (eds.) *Insights into Labor Issues* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 180.
3. Dunlop, “The Development of Labor Organization,” 179.
4. John T. Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1958 and 1993), 1-41, 75-76, 82.
5. Erik Olin Wright and Luca Perrone, “Positional Power and the Propensity to Strike,” *Politics & Society* 12(2) (1983), 233; Luca Perrone, Erik Olin Wright, and Larry T. Griffin, “Positional Power, Strikes, and Wages,” *American Sociological Review*, June 1984.
6. Wright and Perrone, “Positional Power, and the Propensity to Strike,” 237-254; Wright, Perrone, and Griffin, “Positional Power, Strikes, and Wages,” 415-420.
7. John Womack Jr., “Working Power Over Production: Labor History, Industrial Work, Economics, and Strategic Position,” unpublished in English, Cambridge, MA June 2, 2006.
8. For a more rounded account of this crucial strike see: Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors*

Strike of 1936-1937 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 173-222; Sol Dollinger and Genora Johnson Dollinger, *Not Automatic: Women and the Left in the Forging of the Auto Workers' Union* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 123-160.

9. Peter Olney, "On the Arithmetic of Decline and Some Proposals for Renewal" *New Labor Forum* No. 10 (Spring/Summer 2002), 7-18; Peter Olney, "Beyond the Waterfront: Maintaining and Expanding Worker Power in the Maritime Supply Chain," in Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, *Choke Points*, 243-258.

10. Dan La Botz (ed.), *A Troublemakers Handbook* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 1991), 117-126.

11. Steven K. Ashby and C. J. Hawking, *Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 47-57.

12. David Moberg, "Jerry Tucker: A Life on the Front Lines for Workers," *In These Times*, October 28, 2012.

13. Dunlop, "The Development of Labor Organization," 177.

14. Stan Weir, *Singlejack Solidarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 241.

15. Stanley Weir, "U.S.A. - The Labor Revolt" (Boston: New England Free Press, 1967, reprinted from the *International Socialist Review*, 1967), 467. The first version of this was actually a mimeographed pamphlet published by the Berkey Independent Socialist Club in 1966. However, it did not include these introductory remarks.

16. Weir, "U.S.A. - The Labor Revolt," 476.

17. Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War Two* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15.

18. BLS, Household Data, Annual Average, "Employed persons by detailed industry, sex, race, and Hispanic Origin," 2022, Table 18.

19. The AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department did actually produce a pamphlet on "The Inside Game" drawing on Tucker's insights. Although a few other groups of workers adopted Tucker's approach. it is fair to say that the AFL-CIO-IUD pamphlet was about as widely used by affiliated unions as the IWW's 1915 translation of Emile Pouget's *Sabotage*.

20. Nantina Vgontzas, "Amazon after Bessemer," *Boston Review*, April 21, 2021; Nantina Vgontzas, "A New Industrial Working Class? Challenges in Disrupting Amazon's Fulfillment Process in Germany," in Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese, *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 116-128.

21. Kim Moody, "The Changing Contours of the Movement of Capital in Turnover Time," *Spectre*, forthcoming.

22. Jason Struna and Ellen Reese, Automation and the Surveillance-Driven Warehouse in Inland Southern California," in Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, *The Cost of Free Shipping*, 85-101; Christoph Roser, "The Inner Workings of Amazon Fulfillment Centers," Parts 1-6, *All About Lean.com*, October 22, 2019.

23. Todd Bishop, "Inside an Amazon robotic sortation center: How automation is changing the

'middle mile,'" *Geek Wire*, May 23, 2022.

24. Seventeen from the Cornell ILR Labor Action Tracker, plus three more from various news sources.

25. Heather Stewart, "Amazon staff announces six days of strikes in row over pay," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2023, 27; Press Office, "Amazon strike to cost company more than £2 million," *GMB Union*, March 1, 2023.