

Introduction

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This book brings together the works of scholars who situate oil workers and the social, political, economic, spatial, and cultural dimensions of labor relations at the center of their analysis. The contributions are cross-disciplinary, and based on historical archival investigation, or anthropological and sociological field research. While the role of oil workers and class and labor relations in the global oil industry was a major focus of scholarly attention during much of the twentieth century,¹ the period since the 1980s has witnessed a marked decline of interest in the topic, to the extent that at present the analysis of the vital role of labor in all aspects of the global oil complex is either overlooked, or dismissed as of little significance. The contributors to this volume aim to reopen this

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important but neglected dimension of the social history of oil, by shedding light on the historical and contemporary experiences of people working in a wide range of jobs to produce oil and its byproducts in a number of major petroleum-producing regions that include Latin America, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Europe, the United States, and Africa.

When the editors began to conceptualize this volume, they quickly realized how little attention was being paid to the role of labor relations in the global oil complex, despite the fact that oil and its byproducts underpin the entire global political economy. Our invitation to a number of established scholars in various disciplines to contribute to this volume soon revealed the extent to which the topic had fallen out of favor. This collection aims to help reignite interest in the analysis of the various dimensions of labor in the global oil industry by adopting a number of different approaches.

First, the essays offer a multi-scalar approach to their subject matter, by intersecting various geographic scales of analysis—local, regional, national, and transnational. The contributions address the study of a wide range of those working in the global oil industry, including women, migrant laborers, and expatriates who move constantly between various sites, as well as the political and strategic impact that institutions and political actors have had on labor dynamics at local production sites. The historical contexts of shifting international geopolitics and the variegated logics of national governments, and national and multinational oil companies have affected local labor relations differently. At the same time, changes in labor relations at the local level have had important consequences on oil policies internationally. As this collection shows, the story of oil politics in several producing regions went hand in hand with that of labor policies in countries such as the United States. As oil workers organized collective forms of resistance, firms moved abroad and established their presence in areas with less stringent labor regulations, using a range of management tactics aimed at undermining labor activism. With the new wave of nationalization of oil in many countries in the 1970s, it became more difficult for the major international oil companies to move around as freely as they had from the 1920s onwards.

As a result, the oil industries of advanced economies had to become more aggressively competitive in search of access to reserves and market shares. They had to focus more rigorously on balance sheets, paying dividends, and control costs, while accelerating the introduction of new technologies. These technical advances both facilitated extraction from more

geographically challenging but less politically restricting fields, and allowed the reduction of labor costs and the creation of more flexible labor markets. New technologies and work organizations had led to the employment of fewer workers and hiring of more temporary employees who were often not unionized, but came with more specialized skills and a greater willingness to move around between the work sites. The more flexible and mobile workforce tended to be less embedded in local societies, and less organized and steeped in the history of trade unions and collective bargaining and strikes. Today the oil industry is characterized by a prevalence of contractors and contingent labor. Workers often work for several companies at a time, they are more precarious and vulnerable, and usually find themselves in unsafe working conditions, as was clear in the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Second, our contributors show that while there are significant similarities in the historical and specific experiences of those working in oil, there can be no universal history of labor in oil. While the category of “oil worker” comprised—and still comprises—a bewildering variety of skills, expertise, and tasks that has formed a highly intricate industrial and technical division of labor, encompassing pilots, deep sea divers, roustabouts, drillers, machinists, caterers, drivers, etc.; there have also been major differences in working for different employers. Employers in the oil business range from international oil companies to national oil companies, service companies, smaller independent producers, and a wide range of subcontractors that perform various technical tasks and provide vital services. They have been historically subject to various local and international constraints, and their relationship with workers and employees has been dependent on highly sensitive and shifting political and legal dynamics.

Third, this volume does not limit “labor” to manual or blue-collar labor, nor do contributors focus exclusively on work experiences within the sphere of production (oil fields, offshore platforms, refineries, along pipelines, etc.), or on relations with employees. It is assumed that the social lives of those working in various domains of oil production are not limited to their working time, but include their everyday experiences of leisure and reproductive activities (housing and domestic life, family dynamics, urban experiences, modes of consumption, etc.). Furthermore, it does not confine the politics of labor to its moments of confrontation with employers (strikes, labor negotiations) and political militancy. Relations of power permeate social relations, and even the absence of formal collective modes of labor organizing and activism are a state of political being that requires

analysis and explanation. Thus, the relative (and momentary?) decline of collective organization and representation are as integral to the analysis of labor relations in oil, as are the moments of spectacular militancy and successful bargaining with employers or confrontation with national governments.

In this collection, relations of power are not treated only in terms of class dynamics, but concern the handling of culturally imposed differentiations of gender, race, and ethnicity as well. The difficult experiences of migrant workers, the alienating and rootless conditions facing expatriate experts clustered in isolated enclaves, the double discriminations facing women working in various sectors of the oil complex, and the manipulation by employers of the tensions among workers and employees of different skin color or national and ethnic background, have been an integral dimension of the work experience in the oil complex, and continue to be so. The essays aim to engage the variegated social histories and lived experiences of labor in the global oil industry from these diverse and intertwined perspectives.

Last, this book attempts to situate its topic—the role and experiences of those working to produce petroleum and its byproducts—within the wider global, social, and political history of the long twentieth century. The histories of labor in oil cannot be envisaged in isolation from wider shifts and changes—cultural, political, economic, spatial, technical, social, and environmental—taking place worldwide. Oil underlies the contemporary civilization of global industrial and consumer capitalism, and the histories and experiences of those working to produce this commodity are embedded within the larger histories that include the transformations of international capitalism and finance, of colonialism, decolonization and nationalism, of global geopolitical conflicts, the Cold War, post-communism, and the rise and decline of the welfare state and the modes of regulation associated with it. In brief, the histories of labor in oil are embedded within the wider global histories of labor and the working classes.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The essays in this book are organized around a series of interrelated themes, and divided into three sections:

The first part, *The Political Life of Labor*, examines relations of power within the workforce, or between the workforce and employers, and the political institutions of the state. This theme embraces the organization of

various forms of collective representation, such as trade unions and associations, as well as the involvement of the oil sector and workers and employees in larger political changes.

Part two, *The Productive Life of Labor*, investigates labor relations in oilfields, refineries, petrochemical complexes, shipping ports, pipeline building companies, etc. The essays analyze the dynamics of various forms of skills, practical knowledge and expertise and their implications for the professional lives of those working within the oil complex.

Part three, *The Urban and Social Life of Labor*, addresses the reproduction of labor outside the workplace. The essays examine the dynamics of life in company towns and urban and other communities, gender relations, cultural dynamics and tensions, and the everyday frictions and negotiations between those working in various sectors of the oil complex and the larger local, national and transnational societies.

In the introductory chapter of the volume, Kaveh Ehsani draws attention to the recent decline of scholarly interest in labor studies among those who investigate the impact of oil on society. He argues that this important and disturbing development is not so much a reflection of the actual insignificance of labor in oil, as it is an indication of discursive and tactical shifts within the industry, and in the framing of its internal labor relations. What is of greater concern is the lack of interest or attention in the topic from critical scholars whose investigations of the impact of oil on society and nature has been increasing considerably in recent decades. Ehsani puts forward some provisional explanations regarding this trend, and frames this book as a fresh attempt to remedy this oversight.

The first section, on “The Political Life of Labor,” addresses a variety of cases in which oil workers challenged and redefined national and international oil politics. In his essay, Stefano Tijerina investigates the early history of oil production in Colombia. By analyzing the incursions of American oil companies there during the 1920s and 1930s, the author relates his specific case study to the transformation of the global oil industry in the interwar period and after, characterized by US’ imperial expansion in Latin America, and by increased forms of labor activism and resistance. Through a study of the efforts carried out by oil workers against foreign multinationals, Tijerina’s essay argues that the Columbian government and Tropical Oil Company were effective in using violence against Colombian citizens to protect American oil interests, thus undermining the relationship between the state and civil society.

Focusing on a major political event of the twentieth century, Peyman Jafari highlights the significant role the oil workers had in the Iranian

Revolution of 1977–1979. His essay opens with an examination of the social and political transformations of the 1970s that prepared the ground for the popular upheaval against the monarchy. These included a drastic increase in oil production and revenues that threw the economy into disarray and stirred popular discontent. In the oil sector, these changes brought about significant political and institutional transformation in management structures, as well as in employees' living and working conditions. The author provides a detailed analysis of the ways in which oil workers engaged in the general strike, which brought them to the forefront of the labor movement and of anti-regime activism.

Helge Ryggvik's essay brings the reader to a different context, by investigating the turbulent and shifting politics of labor within the Norwegian oil industry. Norway's management of its oil sector is generally held as an exception to the prevailing notion that the abundance of oil resources leads to political corruption and poor economic performance. Ryggvik provides a more nuanced and less rosy picture, showing that labor relations in the Norwegian oil sector went through several phases that also had a significant impact on wider national relations of power. Initially, Norway's nascent oil sector was subject to the harsh labor regimes imposed by international oil companies whose expertise and investments were necessary to get the country's oil production up and running. However, Norway's wartime and postwar experiences of labor activism, and the establishment of a welfare state and a tripartite accord between corporations, the state, and labor unions, had created a space for Norwegian oil workers to press ahead with successful collective bargaining despite the government's reticence. As the industry became consolidated and the state more directly involved in managing the country's oil resources, this arrangement has weakened and Norwegian oil workers have been increasingly subjected to confrontational policies by a state that prioritizes commercial interests above inclusive social policies.

Andrew Lawrence's essay on the role played by Nigerian oil trade unionists in influencing national politics is a welcome departure from the prevailing trend in the literature that almost exclusively emphasizes the violence, corruption, and conflicts surrounding oil extraction from the country's Niger Delta. While acknowledging the disturbing consequences and the widely recognized negative aspects of Nigeria's oil industry, Lawrence points out that oil workers' trade unions have played a significant political role in shaping Nigerian politics during key moments of national crises.

Gabriela Valdivia and Marcela Benavides, in their essay on the recent history of the labor movement in Ecuador's oil industry, compare and contrast two periods in organized labor's reaction to the government's neoliberalization policy. While by the turn of the century, Ecuadorian oil workers forced the state to retreat from its intended scheme of privatizing the oil industry; in 2015, oil workers were absent when the large anti-neoliberal demonstrators poured into the street of Quito. Through multiple in-depth interviews with former workers of the Ecuador oil industry, the authors trace the roots of this more recent absence of labor politics within the oil sector. The authors highlight the consequences of grinding coercive policies against organized oil workers as one of the reasons behind their declining political presence and agency.

The second section of the book, "The Productive Life of Oil," explores a range of labor experiences within the workplace. Touraj Atabaki's essay examines some of the global shifts that took place in the oil industry on the eve of the First World War, leading to the rise of petroleum as a strategic commodity of vital importance. His essay focuses on transnational labor relations within the emerging Iranian oil industry, and its acute need and dependence on importing skilled and semiskilled labor to work in oilfields and refinery. Atabaki examines the complex relations between the nominally private Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and the various arms of the sprawling British Empire, especially the colonial Government of India. His essay highlights the life and time of Indian migrant workers in the Iranian oil industry prior to the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951.

In their essays, Tyler Priest and Betsy Beasley relate the history of oil in the US South to the wider history of post-Second World War American corporate capitalism and labor relations. By focusing on the refining industry in the US Gulf Coast, Priest challenges the idea that after the war oil workers experienced a period of decline in their ability to organize, and highlights the continued forms of activism carried out from the 1930s to the 1970s. He argues that the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU) and its successor, the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) union, were able to obtain important concessions, until management started using a tool that was difficult to contrast: the contracting out of jobs and the introduction of other forms of manpower reductions, made possible by advances in technology.

Beasley's essay covers a similar territory, albeit more locally focused on the ways in which oilfield service companies challenged Houston's labor movement in the decades following the Second World War. Hers is not

only a local case study, but has larger implications for the history of postwar American imperialism and for an understanding of the ways in which the US used oil to establish its global power. As labor activism increased in postwar Houston, oilfield services' executives outsourced oil refineries abroad, or to subcontractors, and introduced various forms of automation. These undermined workers' ability to strike and redefine labor relations on the floor, by transforming blue-collar workers into a non-politicized white-collar workforce. At the same time, they promoted a new ideology of American imperialism that imagined the US as a manager of integrated global production rather than as a producer or exporter in its own right.

Both Priest's and Beasley's essays remind the reader that in the US, as elsewhere, oil companies have often used race to divide oil workers and undermine labor movements. In Gulf Coast refineries, despite the fact that workplaces remained segregated and were characterized by racial tensions, trade unions were able to introduce forms of racial equality that were not present in other industries in the American South. In the case of the oilfield services companies examined by Beasley, the effort to undermine blue-collar workers went hand in hand with management's opposition to African American and Latino oil workers, and civil rights gains.

The history that emerges from this collection does not deal only with capitalist countries or with global capitalism, but addresses the Soviet Union as well. Drawing on newly opened archives, Dunja Krempin's essay contributes to our understanding of life in the late Soviet period. By examining the Western Siberian oil and gas complex in the 1960s and the 1970s, the essay examines the forms of mobilization of workers in the late Soviet planned economy under Brezhnev. It relates the changes taking place in the 1970s to a longer history of modernization projects dating back to the interwar period, and to the employment of migrant communities in the early Soviet oil industry. Krempin does not deal only with the media campaigns carried out by the Soviet regime, but also with the working and living conditions of the oil workers who moved to Western Siberia. By doing so, she sheds light on some of the pitfalls of the Soviet planned economy that led to its demise a decade later.

The third section of this book, "The Urban and Social Life of Labor," examines the experiences of oil workers and local communities in and around company towns and enclaves, and highlights the importance gender has had in the history of labor in the oil industry. Elisabetta Bini in her essay examines the ways in which US oil companies transformed labor policies in Libya between the mid 1950s and the late 1970s. By analyzing the labor relations

introduced by American oil companies in oil camps and company towns, Bini argues that through expatriates US oil companies reproduced the gender, class and racial hierarchies that characterized other American camps across the world, based on racial and ethnic segregation, and on the elevation of white women to symbols and agents of America's corporate mission. Furthermore, she points out that after the establishment of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, gender played a crucial part in transforming labor relations in oil towns, as Libyans often considered American women as sexual objects.

Zachary Cuyler's essay focuses on another aspect of American labor policies in oil-producing countries, namely the role Lebanese workers had in operating the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, or Tapline, between the early 1950s and the early 1960s. It argues that, despite Tapline's effort to contain labor activism through forms of welfare capitalism, Lebanese workers organized trade unions and strikes that allowed them greater control over a crucial oil infrastructure and over their own work conditions. While workers adopted an anti-colonial nationalist discourse, Cuyler points out their demands were in many ways also shaped by the language and practice of Tapline's management.

The last two essays examine more contemporary issues, and adopt particularly original approaches to the study of their subject matter. Saulesh Yessenova highlights a little-known aspect of the history of the oil industry in Kazakhstan in the early twenty-first century, and examines the formation of the *munayshilar* (oil workers), a class formed in the local herding communities. Using an anthropological approach, she sheds light on the interactions—and conflicts—between the local traditions and the oil industry. Yessenova's essay shows the deep historical roots that lie behind what became one of the Soviet Union's largest oil fields, Tengiz, and points to the importance of examining the subjectivities that emerge around oil enclaves.

Finally, Diane Austin's contribution highlights the importance the category of gender has for the history of oil, an issue that has been long overlooked by scholars. By focusing on the US offshore oil and gas industry from the 1940s to the 1990s, Austin argues that men have greatly outnumbered women, despite the introduction of equal opportunity employment and civil rights laws from the 1970s onwards. By carrying out a range of interviews with women working in various sectors of offshore oil extraction in the Gulf of Mexico, the essay highlights the complexity and variety of women's experiences in the oil and gas industry, their background, and the challenges they face in juggling their working life with their family lives, and their expectations.

The collection of essays in this volume is largely derived from two international conferences, the first held in Amsterdam in June 2013 at the International Institute of Social History on the *Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Oil Industry*, and the second held at the University of Padua in October 2014 on *Labor Politics in the Oil Industry: New Historical Perspectives*.

The editors are very grateful to all contributors to this volume as well as to the other speakers and the audience present at the June 2013 and the October 2014 conferences. The 2013 conference was part of a larger project at the International Institute of Social History, on the *Hundred Years Social History of Oil in the Iranian Oil Industry*. We would like to thank the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO) for its generous support of the social history of oil grand project encompassing the June 2013 conference. We would also like to thank the Fund for Investment in Basic Research (FIRB) project *The Engines of Growth: for a Global History of the Conflict between Renewable, Fossil, and Fissile Energies (1972–1992)* of the Universities of Padua and Venice Ca' Foscari for their support in organizing the October 2014 conference.²

We hope the publication of this volume paves the way for others to explore and contribute to the analysis of the global social histories and experiences of labor in the oil industry.

NOTES

1. Peter Nore and Terisa Turner, eds., *Oil and Class Struggle* (New York: Zed Books, 1980) was probably one of the last major works dedicated to the comparative overview of the topic.
2. Fondo per gli Investimenti della Ricerca di Base (Fund for Investment in Basic Research, FIRB) project number RBF10JOTQ.