

# The Social Foundations of Structural Power: Strategic Position, Worker Unity and External Alliances in the Making of the Chilean Dockworker Movement

*Katy Fox-Hodess, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom*  
*Camilo Santibáñez Rebolledo, Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Chile*

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the associational and societal foundations of structural power. A case study of the ten-year-long history of the Unión Portuaria de Chile is analysed with a focus on a critical juncture in 2012–2014. The Chilean dockworker case is an emblematic example of trade union movement revitalisation via strikes of strategically positioned workers. Yet ethnographic research with the organisation suggests that the role it has come to play in the country was only possible as a result of intensive long-term organising efforts to develop a high degree of internal unity at multiple scales, as well as sustained alliances with external actors. As a result, the authors argue that the most economic accounts of worker power and trade union movement revitalisation are analytically insufficient and would benefit from greater attention to associational and societal dimensions of power, even among the most strategically positioned workers.

## KEYWORDS

trade union revitalisation; structural power; associational power; strategic position; dockworkers

## Chilean Dockworkers at the Forefront of Trade Union Revitalisation

In October 2019, the most important social revolt in Chile since the return to democracy exploded onto the scene. Initiated by Santiago high school students in response to an increase in the cost of public transportation, the demands and geographical coverage of the revolt spread rapidly, the result of the country's profound inequalities and institutional failings for all but the wealthy (Sehnbruch and Donoso, 2020). At the beginning, the country's restrictive labour legislation meant that worker participation was spontaneous and not led by the unions. Soon, however, Chilean dockworkers took the initiative, stopping work in nearly all of the country's ports and proposing a general strike. The Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), Chile's primary trade union confederation, had until that point declined to call for wider strike action in support of the social demands, but soon joined in as a result of the moral pressure exerted through the dockworkers' strike (*La Tercera*, 2019). This led to the formation of a Strike Committee composed of the most important trade unions in the country. Through the Strike Committee, an agreement was reached that the strategic objective of the mobilisation should be the reform of the country's constitution, inherited from the dictatorship, in addition to a range of specific demands.

The leading role played by the dockworkers on the Chilean left since 2019 was made possible as a result of a successful series of national mobilisations carried out by the union in 2012–2014.

These mobilisations established the first stable precedent<sup>1</sup> for de facto sectoral-level collective bargaining in the country since the 1970s, before the Pinochet dictatorship. That they did so through a national organisation lacking legal recognition, which had nevertheless carried out successful weeks-long strikes of the country's ports in two consecutive years, only made it all the more extraordinary.

Following their victory in 2014, as a result of coalitions formed during the strikes and the ascendance of the first right-wing government in the country since the end of the dictatorship, the Chilean dockworkers became heavily involved in a number of key political campaigns led by the left. These included movements to renationalise the pensions system, re-fund health and education, support workers in the education sector, and reform the system of labour law through direct action. The dockworkers' participation in these movements was facilitated by the membership of many leaders and activists in the Izquierda Libertaria, a small but nationally organised left-wing political party.

The Chilean dockworker case demonstrates the potential for the revitalisation of the trade union movement through leveraging the power of workers located in strategic "chokepoints" for global capitalism, as Silver (2003), Womack (2009, 2020), Moody (2017) and others have suggested. Yet, a close examination of the dockworkers' success suggests the limits of the most economic version of the "strategic position" trade union movement revitalisation thesis, which posits that industrial action at the point of production in strategic sectors by itself is sufficient.

Instead, the Chilean dockworkers' ability to make use of their structural power has been heavily conditioned by their ability to develop associational and societal power. First, dockworkers built a high degree of internal unity at multiple scales through long-term intensive organising efforts, establishing their associational power. This was necessary because earlier efforts to build strength in the sector had failed as dockworkers undermined one another's struggles by continuing to work cargo during disputes, preventing them from effectively leveraging their supposed structural power. Second, in contrast to earlier failed efforts, dockworkers have relied to a surprising degree on societal power, formed through sustained alliances with external trade union and social movement allies to carry forward their work. In large part this has been the result of the extremely anti-union posture of employers, regularly backed up by repressive measures on the part of the state. Crucially, though perhaps counter-intuitively, the reiterative tendency towards heavy-handed state intervention in the sector results directly from dockworkers' strategic position in the economy and the potential for wide-ranging economic disruption that this implies. In other words, dockworkers paradoxically are vulnerable to repressive measures *because of, rather than in spite of*, their structural power. By forming alliances with external actors, the dockworkers have succeeded in developing a strong counter-hegemonic position, obligating the state to intervene in ways more favourable to labour.

In this article, each of these conditions for success is considered in turn. The next section provides a review of the literature on trade union revitalisation from the perspective of Global Labour Studies and Chilean labour scholars, followed by an overview of the research design, and a presentation and discussion of findings. In the conclusion, the implications of these findings for the understanding of worker power and trade union strategy more generally are considered.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, subcontracted miners at CODELCO, the state-owned copper company, succeeded in forcing the government to negotiate with them directly at the national level. Though this agreement covered a far larger number of workers than in the ports, the agreement only covered subcontracted workers in a single company. The port agreement, by contrast, was sectoral, in that it covered all workers in all companies in the country's ports. Furthermore, the miners, unlike the dockworkers, were unable to compel their employer to respect the agreement over the long term.

## Worker Power and Trade Union Movement Revitalisation

### *Perspectives from the global labour literature*

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the possibility of trade union revitalisation through so-called “strategic” sectors of industry (Moody, 2017; Womack, 2020). Workers in logistics are often cited as the contemporary strategic workers par excellence as a result of their nodal position in the global circulation of commodities (Moody, 2017: 38). Scholars writing in the strategic power tradition ground their arguments in a highly economistic understanding of worker power. For example, Silver (2003) emphasises high sunk capital investments, the degree of complexity and integration of the labour process, and the contribution of an industry to domestic economic growth as key factors shaping worker power. In a similar vein, Womack (2009) emphasises the role of the technical relations of production – rather than the social relations of production – in structuring worker power. That is to say, workers occupy a strategic position if they are able to stop the production of many others, whether within the same plant or in the economy as a whole.

Silver’s (2003) framework develops two key concepts for understanding worker power, first introduced by Erik Olin Wright (2000). First is structural power, which accrues to workers simply by virtue of their position in the economic system, the state of labour markets and the nature of the labour process. Second is associational power, the power workers possess through their collective organisation in trade unions and political parties. Silver’s operationalisation of these concepts suggests that these two fonts of power are not created equally, with structural power clearly taking precedence and associational power coming into play primarily as a means of bolstering workers when their structural power is weak.

Womack (2020) likewise characterises associational power as a “derivative power” or mere consequence of structural power, which might matter at the margins or in particular situations but whose impact on struggles is far less determinative. Presumably, then, a high degree of structural power ought to lead more or less spontaneously to effective action.

Dockworkers are presumed to have a high degree of structural power because of their ability to disrupt the flow of global commerce. Yet, while the theory described above suggests that they should therefore effectively *exercise* a high degree of power wherever they are found, the reality is far more complex. International research on dockworkers in Europe and Latin America (Fox-Hodess, 2017, 2019) indicates that the ability of dockworkers to utilise the power available to them through their “strategic position” is in fact significantly conditioned by national socio-political contexts, particularly the willingness of states to repress trade unionists, compromised sovereignty, the character of port ownership (public or private), and aspects of labour law governing trade union organisation and industrial action. At the same time, historical research on dockworkers (Hamark, 2013; Santibáñez, 2016, 2019; Cole, 2018) indicates that dockworkers are only able to exert power at the point of production when they have succeeded in controlling the labour supply. In other words, it is far from clear that dockworkers’ position in the economic system alone can provide a definitive account of their ability to effectively contest the imperatives of capital.

At the same time, scholars writing in the Power Resources Approach (PRA) tradition (such as Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018) have attempted to systematise the growing number of power resources identified in the literature, moving beyond an economistic emphasis on structural power to consider other dimensions. While critics of the PRA have cautioned against its compartmentalised and non-relational approach to power (Gallas, 2018) as well as its problematic and unexamined political assumptions (Nowak, 2018), the PRA’s typological definitions provide useful analytical frameworks. Of particular relevance to this article is the PRA’s discussion of

associational power and societal power.

Brookes (2018) argues that the definition of associational power provided by Wright (2000) and discussed above is imprecise because power implies power over someone or something but that person or thing is not specified. Brookes (2018: 256) therefore helpfully defines associational power as “the ability of union leaders, shop stewards, labour activists or rank-and-file union members to compel the other members of their organisation to do something they otherwise would not do – in this case, to behave as a collective actor”. Associational power may then be “a precondition for magnifying the impact of the other power resources or, in some instances, a necessary condition for even exercising those power types in the first place” (Brookes, 2018: 256). Societal power, conversely, is defined as “the latitudes for action arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations.... The exercise of societal power is essentially a question of the ability to ... generalise the political project of the trade unions ... so that society as a whole adopts it as its own” (Schmalz et al., 2018: 122). Societal power may then be used to compensate for a low degree of structural or associational power (Britwum, 2018).

### ***Perspectives from the Chilean literature***

Within the Chilean labour literature, there has been renewed interest in revitalisation of the trade union movement since 2007–2008, which saw an uptick in strike activity (Observatorio de Huelgas Laborales, 2017). Notably, this followed a period since the end of the 1990s that scholars characterise as a “crisis of trade unionism”. The crisis stemmed from the anti-union policies of the Pinochet dictatorship (Winn, 2004; Álvarez, 2017), and the subsequent defeat of trade unions in key sectors, as well as the increase in unemployment stemming from the shuttering or privatisation of key industries and the Asian economic crisis. The result was a drop in trade union membership and industrial action, as well as a drop in the number of political mobilisations called by the CUT (Ponce, 2018).

The most important reference point in the Chilean scholarly literature following the 2007–2008 conjuncture was a book published by a group of historians and sociologists in 2009, suggestively titled *The Rebirth of the Worker Strike in Chile* (Aravena and Núñez, 2009), which focused on the surprising emergence of strikes in the previous years by subcontracted workers in the copper, forestry and salmon industries. The success of the worker struggles detailed in the edited volume, however, was not understood through the lens of “strategic position”. Nevertheless, the book was published soon after John Womack’s (2009) celebrated book on worker power, which was widely read by Chilean labour scholars (Aguilar, 2009), and which contributed an understanding of the recent conflicts in terms of the disruptive capacity that these groups of workers possess as a result of the strategic position they occupy in the national economy (Aguilar, 2010; CIPSTRA, 2013a, 2013b). On the other hand, empirical research on the Chilean dockworkers (Santibáñez and Gaudichaud, 2017) has identified associational factors as key to their success. This includes workers’ subjective understanding of the sources of their power, such as their strong occupational tradition, the importance of maintaining trade union unity and the ability to stay one step ahead of the bosses.

Taken together, critical perspectives within both the global labour literature and the Chilean labour literature suggest that the strongly economic orientation of dominant theories of worker power in strategic industries do not tell the full story. Instead, they imply that, as Brookes (2018: 256) suggests, dimensions of worker power that might be considered associational (or societal) are in fact necessary preconditions for the exercise of structural power. That is to say, without the political space to manoeuvre within society – improved through the formation of external alliances – and without the ability to effectively unite in struggle, the supposed power of dockworkers at the

point of production is nowhere to be found. In this article, an iconic contemporary instance of effective dockworker power and strategy is examined over a ten-year period in terms of the extent to which effectiveness relied on strategic position, external alliances and their own internal organisational abilities. While the empirics speak directly to the Chilean experience, the findings have wide-ranging implications for the theorisation of worker power more generally.

## **Research Design**

### ***Background and case selection***

The Unión Portuaria de Chile is an exceptional case both within the Chilean trade union movement and within the world of global dockworker union activism. In Chile, the Unión Portuaria has come to be seen as a model of non-bureaucratic and assembly-based trade unionism capable of breaking the Pinochetista economic paradigm that has prevailed in post-dictatorship Chile through exercising power in a key strategic sector of the economy. However, the role that the dockworkers have come to play was far from certain and depended on their success in the 2012–2014 national strikes which reshaped the playing field for labour–capital conflicts in the sector. In other words, a role that has come to be seen as inevitable would, in fact, have been predicted by almost no one prior to this critical juncture.

Until the coup d'état which installed the 1973–1990 military dictatorship, the Chilean trade union movement was characterised by its militancy, radicalism and strongly class-based identity, as well as by the movement's close ties with left-wing parties (Álvarez, 2017; Ponce, 2018). The Pinochet dictatorship radically reshaped the balance of class forces in Chile through brutal repression and intentional dismantling of worker power and organisations. Even more enduring, however, were neo-liberal reforms which institutionalised a new system of labour relations characterised by the weakening of workers' collective bargaining power (Winn, 2004). The new system allowed employers to replace striking workers, restricted collective bargaining to the enterprise level, and promoted parallel unionism and the deregulation of the labour market. In addition, the shift away from Import Substitution Industrialisation, which had created a strong and heavily unionised industrial working class, to a strategy of exporting primary commodities, had a profoundly damaging effect on workers and the trade union movement beginning in the 1980s and lasting into the post-dictatorship period (Gárate, 2012; French-Davies, 2018). Union density never recovered its pre-dictatorship levels, holding steady at 12–13 per cent of the workforce between 1997 and 2008. Strike activity generally followed a similar pattern during the same period, while collective bargaining covered only 8 per cent of the workforce. The 2007–2008 strike wave was followed by a significant increase in strike activity from 2010–2015, primarily in the form of “extra-legal” strikes (Observatorio de Huelgas Laborales, 2017; Pérez, Medel and Velásquez, 2017). Nevertheless, 65 per cent of the unions formed in 2014 had disappeared by 2016, and half of those remaining had forty or fewer workers, while 80 per cent of companies in the country had never been unionised (Doniez, 2019).

Although some subcontracted export industry workers, such as copper miners, had begun to mobilise soon after the return to democracy, the real growth of organising only began ten years later, with dockworkers' strikes between 1999 and 2003 and the strikes of forestry workers, copper workers and fishery workers between 2007 and 2008 noted above (Aravena and Núñez, 2009). All of these conflicts received a great deal of public attention, given their centrality to the country's economy, their militancy and police repression (Aravena, 2017). For all these reasons, although workers in other sectors such as health and education had tended to be more permanently

mobilised (Ponce, 2018), this grouping of conflicts in primary export sectors has widely been considered the central axis of Chilean trade union movement revitalisation, both by researchers and in public discourse.

At the same time, among dockworker union activists internationally, the Chilean case is seen as a model of what is possible when militant industrial action at the point of production is backed up by cross-border solidarity. Affiliates of the *Unión Portuaria* today are members of the International Dockworkers Council (IDC), an independent global union organisation formed in 2000 (Fox-Hodess, 2020). The Chilean dockworkers' disputes in 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 came in the midst of a period of rapid expansion for the IDC in Latin America. This provided an opportunity for the organisation to demonstrate its value to both the Chilean dockworkers, at a time when only a small number of local branches in the country were affiliated to the IDC, and to dockworkers across Latin America more generally. The IDC's support, via a threatened international blockade of cargo, played a significant role in breaking the impasse in bargaining, and the Chilean dockworkers' struggle overall has come to be viewed as a major victory and reference point for the global movement, most especially within Latin America.

### **Methodology**

The authors carried out multi-method qualitative research between 2010 and 2020, including interviews, participant observation, and analysis of union archival documents and relevant news items. Fieldwork was carried out in eleven ports – Arica, Iquique, Mejillones, Antofagasta and Huasco in Northern Chile; San Antonio and Valparaíso in Central Chile; and Talcahuano, San Vicente, Coronel and Puerto Montt in Southern Chile – as well as in Santiago, the inland capital city. Fox-Hodess, a labour sociologist, conducted in-country interview-based research in early 2015 and 2019 with dockworker unionists active in the Chilean port cities of Talcahuano (6), Valparaíso (5), San Antonio (2), Mejillones (1), Antofagasta (1) and Iquique (6). In addition, she attended meetings of the International Dockworkers Council with Chilean dockworker union leaders in Tenerife (Spain) in 2014, Miami (United States) in 2016, London (England) in 2018, and Lisbon (Portugal) in 2019. Additional interviews conducted with IDC-affiliated dockworker union activists from Argentina (1), Uruguay (1), France (2) and Spain (3) in 2014 and 2015 contributed further to the analysis of the role of international solidarity in the Chilean disputes.

Santibáñez Rebolledo, a labour historian, carried out participant observation with the *Unión Portuaria* over the past decade, participating in national congresses (5), strikes (10) and national union meetings (10). He has also conducted historical research on the twentieth-century history of the Chilean dockworkers using trade union archives and local press reports. In addition, he has long-standing linkages with the union as a socially engaged scholar, contributing to the preparation of working papers and Trade Union Schools analysing the recent conflicts, as well as delivering technical documents to support the union in its tripartite negotiations with the employers and government.

### **Associational Preconditions of Structural Power: Unity of the Workforce**

Theories of structural power (Silver, 2003) and strategic position (Womack, 2009) suggest that dockworkers' position in the economic system and the technical relations of production in the industry should predict effective industrial action in the sector. Yet, research into the ten-year history of the *Unión Portuaria de Chile* tells a far more complex story in which the associational dimension of worker power – that is, the ability to behave as a disciplined “collective actor”

(Brookes, 2018: 256) – is a contingently available precondition for the effective exercise of power at the point of production.

The highly atomised system of industrial relations put in place during the dictatorship and carried forward into the present – which mandates collective bargaining at the enterprise (rather than sectoral) level, parallel unionism, and the separation of collective agreements for permanent and casual workers (Julián, 2020) – has posed significant challenges to activists seeking to build the kind of unity necessary to behave as a collective actor. Chilean dockworkers have responded over time by building from the bottom up, gradually increasing their unity and capacity to make and implement strategic decisions at the point of production and, as discussed in the following section, in society at large.

### ***Unity at the local level***

Following the return to democracy in the early 1990s, multiple local-level trade unions competed with one another for members among each employer in every port, and problems of corruption and paternalism among union officials were endemic. The result was low levels of trust, cohesion and organisational commitment among the membership. These factors constrained dockworkers' ability to act as an effective "collective actor" to improve their working conditions, as union leaders signed sweetheart deals with management and competed for work across the sector, fostering a race to the bottom.

As Sergio Parra, a union leader from the Port of Talcahuano-San Vicente put it:

In the old days ... there were lots of unions, just like there were lots of companies as well. Each company had its group of people, tiny unions, without greater weight in bargaining (Interview, S. Parra, San Vicente-Talcahuano, 2015).

In addition, there were strong divides across the sector between permanent and casual workers and in some ports, like Iquique, between workers in the public and private terminals of the port. Corruption and paternalism created further problems. As Joan Parra, a leader from the FETRAPI union federation in the northern Port of Iquique, put it:

The work that there was, was managed by a group of leaders ... that controlled ... the hiring system. And they chose who participated by pointing a finger, according to their participation, according to their cooperation, and many times, according to the money that was given ... in order to be able to work (Interview, J. Parra, Iquique, 2015).

José Agurto, from San Vicente-Talcahuano, highlighted another facet of corruption:

This is a world of temptation, the dockworker world, above all for the leaders ... it's never lacking the boss that says to you, 'Don't worry, I'll help you' and afterwards, at the bargaining table, he says to you, 'Ah, remember that I helped you' (Interview, J. Agurto, San Vicente-Talcahuano, 2015).

Dockworkers worked to address these issues over time by electing new union leadership and holding them accountable. They also sought to unite dockworkers on permanent and casual contracts who, by law, are organised into separate unions. The fact that workers in both categories earn similar salaries, as well as the strength of the casual worker unions thanks to their control of the hiring hall, created a firm basis for cooperation. Nevertheless, cooperation was not a foregone conclusion, and depended on the initiative and creativity of union activists who got around

restrictive legal provisions by forming de facto trade union organisations uniting both groups of workers through the regional UPCh structures.

### ***Unity at the regional level***

Regional unity was a clear strategic necessity because of the ease with which employers can divert cargo to nearby ports during disputes, or hold down wages and working conditions over the long term by forcing nearby port workforces to compete with one another. The first region to unite successfully was the southern Biobío region where there was a particular necessity for unity given the fact that there are several competing ports within close proximity to one another. As José Agurto put it:

We took the risk to speak with the ports of Lirquén and Coronel and we said to them, why don't we make a single regional pay scale ... there were big differences in pay between Lirquén, San Vicente and Coronel ... We had a regional work stoppage that lasted five days and the solutions were given immediately, so we saw that it was the best that we could have done (Interview, J. Agurto, San Vicente-Talcahuano, 2015).

In the subsequent negotiations in 2005, bargaining occurred not only at the regional level in the Biobío, rather than at the local level, but with the political authority of the region, rather than the port employers, setting an important precedent.

In the north, ports are spaced apart at a greater distance, yet the need for regional coordination remains in order to prevent shipping companies from diverting cargo to other ports during labour disputes, undercutting dockworkers' structural power. Alejandro Lilis, a leader from the Port of Antofagasta, explained:

At some moment in collective bargaining, the ships from Antofagasta went towards Iquique and the next year the same thing was happening; the ones from Iquique were going to Antofagasta, and they were worked. After, a conversation began about not doing this anymore... We made the linkages, the ties, and today we don't have problems (Interview, A. Lilis, Antofagasta, 2015).

For the same reason, the crushing of the union in Mejillones after the 2014 strike, described below, posed a significant problem for the other unions in the north. As Nelson Francino from the Port of Iquique put it:

Now with Mejillones, Iquique has to really think about if it stops work. In some way, our hands are tied because Mejillones doesn't stop work (Interview, N. Francino, Iquique, 2015).

On the other hand, recent success in early 2019 to reform the notoriously employer-friendly Sindicato No. 1 in the Port of Valparaíso has yielded positive results for the Unión Portuaria in the central region of the country. This has opened the possibility for stronger cooperation between dockworkers in the country's two largest container ports, Valparaíso and San Antonio, whose workforces have long been used to undermine one other during disputes (Interview, M. Montecinos, Valparaíso, 2019).

### ***Unity at the national level***

While the need for unity at the local and regional level primarily stems from the improved capacity to engage in effective industrial action, the need for unity at the national level stems as well from a



very different set of issues related to the role of the state in constituting labour–capital relations. In forming the Unión Portuaria de Chile (UPCh), Chilean dockworker leaders understood that bringing about sector-wide change would require sector-wide mobilisation at the national level. The strategy was straightforward: employers would do everything possible to resist worker demands, so the dockworkers would need to threaten the conditions of accumulation of capital *in general* in order to compel the state to resolve disputes in their favour. Doing so would require carefully coordinated strikes that not only affected capital in the shipping industry but capital in key export industries (such as agriculture and mining, the latter of which is partially state-owned), as well as the import of retail goods.

Prior to the formation of the Unión Portuaria, Chilean dockworkers had learned important lessons from the failed experiment of the Coordinadora de Trabajadores Marítimo-Portuarios (1999–2004) which had emerged in response to the concessioning of Chile’s ports, organising their fight port by port. The UPCh, founded in 2012, began instead by pressing a *national* demand for the state to refund a tax that dockworkers had been wrongly charged for years. Through illegal strikes involving dozens of ports, they won. Additional early success on the payment of lifetime pensions, which are inheritable and equivalent to twice the minimum wage, as well as the establishment of joint committees on health and safety in the stevedoring firms, demonstrated to the workers that their strength resided in disciplined collective action, and established practices for future mobilisations.

The UPCh incorporated key organisational features of the Unión Portuaria del Biobío (UPBB). This included a structure of direct democracy and a lack of bureaucratisation, depending upon unpaid spokespeople elected on a yearly basis from among base-level leaders, rather than an executive board (Interview, J. Agurto, San Vicente-Talcahuano, 2015). Declining to form a legally recognised union organisation has allowed the UPCh to find ways to creatively skirt around restrictive provisions of the law. Frequent contact among spokespeople from the zones, as well as in-person meetings, have enabled the organisation to flourish. In addition, the UPCh, like the UPBB, has from its inception played an important role in wider mobilisations in support of broad working-class demands.

At the same time, however, the dockworkers learned difficult lessons about the importance of unity as a precondition for effectively exercising structural power. In December 2013, a group of workers from the Port of Mejillones tried to force a local port employer to engage in collective bargaining to reach an agreement covering both casual and permanent workers. The company refused and the workers began a strike without the support of the rest of the local trade unions in the port. The state brought in a massive show of police force to ensure the smooth flow of goods through this critical chokepoint. Despite receiving the support of the national Unión Portuaria, without local level unity they were unable to prevent the port from continuing to operate and the local demand failed.

At the national level, however, the dispute widened and came to focus on a demand put forward in a second strike, initiated two days later in San Antonio, the largest port in the country. This demand was national: backpay for the lunch breaks that they had not been allowed for years. In contrast to Mejillones, local-level unity at San Antonio ensured that the port was unable to continue to operate normally, despite a large show of force by the police. When the state conceded to the demand on backpay after a month of national strike action, the Unión Portuaria decided to end the strike and accept the agreement. As a result, Mejillones was essentially left in the lurch and the national union lost this strategic northern port.

San Antonio’s strategic position as the primary supplier to the capital city, Santiago, located inland in the same region, in addition to its role as an exporter of perishable goods that make up a

significant proportion of the country's export revenue, enabled it to play a critically important role in the strike. Timing the strike during the southern hemisphere fresh fruit and vegetable harvest put significant pressure on government to intervene via pressure from employers' associations in the agricultural export sector. As a leader from San Antonio put it:

When this thing ... was going to be resolved is exclusively when 5 000 pigs are going to die ... a million chickens are going to die, the clinics don't have medicines, the guys don't have spare parts, the fruit was fucked, the truck drivers weren't moving [cargo] ... the business owners ... said to the government, fix this thing (Interview, San Antonio, 2015).

However, a purely economic reading would be insufficient to understand why, one year later, the UPCh found itself in a weakened position as a result of the loss of Mejillones, as explained above. In addition, in the course of a few months following the strike, the employers succeeded in breaking the federation that had united the local San Antonio unions by offering permanent contracts to a large number of casual workers, taking away the power of the union-controlled hiring hall and expelling a union leader from the port. The state declined to get involved, suggesting that it was an issue for the workers to resolve among themselves.

In other words, the state's role in structuring worker power in the disputes proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, dockworkers' associational power, and the use of structural power that it enabled, succeeded in compelling the state to resolve the dispute in the workers' favour. But the state's role in constituting a highly unequal balance of class forces remains as ever contradictory, evidenced by the use of repressive measures and unfriendly provisions in the law to undermine associational power – and with it, the possibility of effectively exercising structural power – in key ports in the future.

### ***Unity at the global level***

At the time of the national strikes in 2012–2013 and 2013–2014, only a small number of local unions in the north were affiliated to the International Dockworkers Council.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the IDC played an important role in ending the dispute in the dockworkers' favour in 2014 by threatening an international blockade of Chilean cargo at a key moment in the dispute, increasing pressure on the state to settle the dispute. Dockworkers from competitor “yellow unions” COTRAPORCHI and COMACH had continued to work the cargo in the small number of ports that were not affiliated to the Unión Portuaria – and in some cases, had served as strike-breakers in Unión Portuaria affiliated ports. The threat of a blockade, therefore, was to some extent able to redress the undercutting of the UPCh's structural power that the lack of total unity at the national level had enabled.

In addition to the economic leverage this provided in negotiations, the threat of an international blockade by a European-based organisation – which garnered national headlines in a context in which the Chilean unions had struggled to attract the attention of the media – was one more factor putting pressure on the Chilean government from a public relations perspective (see next section). An activist from Iquique argued that the Chilean state, which “sells abroad an image of being super stable”, is particularly sensitive to negative perceptions internationally so “when it

---

<sup>2</sup> Currently, local unions from nine of the twenty-four ports with affiliation to the Unión Portuaria are affiliated to the IDC. These nine ports are: Antofagasta, Caldera, Chañaral, Huasco, Iquique, Lirquen, San Antonio, San Vicente, Ventanas.

is seen from abroad that in Chile, no, things are not all right, there is a concern on the part of the state. In fact, it was resolved by that government” (Interview, Iquique, 2015).

## **Societal Preconditions of Structural Power: Alliances Outside the Workplace**

Societal power has also played a crucial role in increasing the impact of dockworkers’ structural power and in ensuring that its exercise is not undone by the state. Developing tactical alliances with other workers (from “productive” sectors of the economy and with dockworkers internationally) and political alliances with other social groupings (in particular, students and university professionals) played a critical role in magnifying dockworkers’ collective voice in a context in which they struggled to be heard. This increased the pressure on the state to resolve the dispute in their favour. Over the long term, these external alliances have coalesced into effective coalitions to defeat anti-union legislation (in 2015), to overturn the privatised pensions system instituted during the Pinochet era and, most recently (in the 2019–2020 wave of protests), to put forward a raft of social demands, coupled with the demand for constituent assemblies.

### ***Alliances with students***

Perhaps the most surprising facet of the Chilean dockworkers’ societal power has been their connection to university students in port cities across the country. Leaders from the Biobío region in the south, the Port of San Antonio in the centre, and the ports of Antofagasta and Iquique in the north all identified local university students as their most important source of external support. A leader from San Antonio explained that, in a context in which the dockworkers had struggled to be heard,

[the students] brought it to the public light and there we achieved press attention ... and also the students brought us communications from Spain, from France, from Germany (Interview, San Antonio, 2015).

Nelson Francino from the Port of Iquique concurred:

There wasn’t much support [from the rest of society], but what was felt strongly was the support of the student comrades, in every respect. They were also there in our headquarters, when it was necessary to go out and paint murals. They were there when it was necessary to take to the streets (Interview, N. Francino, Iquique, 2015).

The students supported the dockworkers’ struggle at the national level as well, and from the very beginning this support was mutual. At the national congress of the Unión Portuaria in 2013, university students from the CONFECH federation made a presentation asking the dockworkers for their support in the on-going student mobilisations that had reached their peak in Chile in 2011 (Interview, N. Francino, Iquique, 2015) – at that time, the most significant protest movement in the country since the return to democracy. The dockworkers subsequently carried out a work stoppage on 24 July 2013 in support of a national student strike. The students were ready to return the favour when the first national dockworker strike began at the end of the year:

The [student] federation contributed tickets so that some union leaders could travel. ... in some cases the same secretaries of the federation took notes [for us]. They were included in what were the debates within the Unión Portuaria. Here in Iquique we had the comrades, there were several, that were

always present, in every action, in all the mobilisations ... in fact there are still students who have gotten close to the ports and are working [there] (Interview, N. Francino, Iquique, 2015).

Facilitated in part through the participation of many union leaders in the Izquierda Libertaria political party, university-trained professionals (economists, historians, attorneys) played an important role as well by providing on-going advice, often in an unpaid capacity, on strategy and in educating the membership.

### ***Alliances and antagonism with other workers***

Building societal power, whether with trade unionists in other sectors or workers in the community at large, played an important role, both in increasing pressure on government (through the possibility of solidarity strikes) and mitigating the perception that the dockworkers' strike was damaging to workers in other sectors, which might otherwise have provided a pretext for more severe government repression. A leader from San Antonio shared:

The number of guys that were out of work in this country because of the fruit [not being shipped] was enormous ... (Interview, San Antonio, 2015).

As a result, a leader from Iquique suggested:

They 'criminalised' us in the media (Interview, San Antonio, 2015).

José Agurto argued that as a consequence:

When we make decisions, we make them responsibly. We don't go on strike for stupid things ... the whole citizenry would pile on us ... (Interview, J. Agurto, San Vicente-Talcahuano, 2015).

Support from other unionised groups of workers came from various quarters, particularly the mines and the fields. Copper miners in the north provided "moral support" to the dockworkers in Antofagasta (Interview, A. Lilis, Iquique, 2015), while copper miners at the massive El Teniente mine in the centre of the country held a work stoppage in solidarity (Interview, S. Vargas, San Antonio, 2015). Vargas suggested that the work stoppage at El Teniente had "hurried along the end of the strike" because when it happened ...

...the [government] minister Jobet calls me ... and he said to me 'you are an anti-patriot, the country is going to stop growing, the whole country is going to come for you because the economy was being tremendously harmed' and I saw the despair of the government to resolve the issue (Interview, S. Vargas, San Antonio, 2015).

Support from the leadership of the Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT), which represents many farmworkers in Chile, was particularly significant given the agricultural losses sustained as a result of the strike (Interview, union leader, San Vicente-Talcahuano, 2015):

[The union] was lending us their headquarters ... in Santiago so we could have meetings there when we were going out to the meetings with the government. ... he even gave us food, he directed the logistics in Santiago ... they contributed economic resources so that we could maintain ourselves because the government doesn't even give you a glass of water (Interview, S. Vargas, San Antonio, 2015)

Beyond organised groups of workers, the dockworkers sought support from the broader community in port cities. Nelson Francino, from Iquique, explained that they had built support through...

...popular radios that counter the information from the press ... information from hand to hand, doing activities. For example, here in Iquique we made a free clinic, in which the comrades that were leaving the university as doctors came and gave medical appointments... we made cultural activities ... to have a little music outdoors and take advantage of the platform that a stage gives to speak to the citizenry and say that the mobilisation was of a peaceful character and what we were wanting was a just demand for the workers. Those were the techniques to combat a little the bad propaganda that the press made against us constantly during the mobilisations (Interview, N. Francino, Iquique 2015).

This suggests that while the dockworkers' strategic position in the economy provided them with a tremendous amount of potential structural power because of the wide-ranging economic impacts of port strikes, the fact that the economic impacts are so wide-ranging, impacting labour as well as capital, can simultaneously undermine their struggle from the perspective of building a hegemonic position in the eyes of the society. In other words, the strongest position from an economic perspective (strategic position) can simultaneously be the weakest position from a social or political perspective. In this regard, then, societal power provided a form of counter-hegemonic pressure on the state, as well as a buffer against state repression that, when coupled with the economic pressure of coordinated industrial action, proved decisive.

## **Conclusion: Reconceptualising Worker Power in a Global Economy**

Dockworkers have played a central role in the revitalisation of the Chilean trade union movement in recent years, thanks to their ability to successfully confront both private employers and the state. From 2012 to 2014, through disciplined and strategic collective action, based at different scales of organisation and unified around core demands, they achieved a stunning victory, establishing a precedent for sectoral-level collective bargaining for the first time since the Allende era. This outcome was by no means a foregone conclusion but instead depended entirely on the dockworkers' success in developing their associational and societal power. Without these, their structural power would have existed purely as a theoretical abstraction – a reality that seems to be as clear to employers and the state as it is to the trade unions in the sector. As a result, it might be said that it is the associational and societal sphere in which class conflict actually plays out.

The leading role that the dockworkers play in the current period of social protest in Chile, therefore, is no mere reflection of the place that these workers occupy in the export-driven economy but of conscious decisions to play a strategic role in broader political movements. Following the successful strikes of 2012–2014, despite their diminished capacity, the Unión Portuaria played a leading role in the national worker struggle in 2015 to reform the country's labour legislation, inherited from the dictatorship. In addition, the union maintained its participation in the mobilisations against the privatised pensions system and sustained its close relationship with other mobilised social actors, particularly students and teachers. In forming alliances with external actors, the dockworkers have been able to achieve a powerful counter-hegemonic position that strengthens their ability to compel the state to accede to their demands. That is to say, the involvement of the dockworkers in issues that tie them to the working class in general reinforces their own negotiating position at the point of production, which, in turn, allows them to fight for improved conditions beyond the point of production for the working class more

broadly. In the context of post-dictatorship Chile, this constitutes an important strategic innovation of great relevance to the working class and the left, whose progress has been impeded again and again by the legacy of the dictatorship.

Furthermore, the implications of this case serve to complicate overly economistic analyses of worker power, suggesting that researchers would do well to not assume the power of workers on the basis of strategic position alone but instead to consider the organisational preconditions that allow them to make use of their strategic position. While proponents of the strategic position revitalisation thesis ground their arguments in the materiality of production and circulation (Silver, 2003; Womack, 2009, 2020; Moody, 2017), the Chilean case demonstrates that greater potential power in the economic domain creates significant vulnerabilities for workers in the political and social domains which can only be countered by the exercise of strategic agency on the part of the workers involved. Far from “derivative powers” emerging as a consequence of structural power (Womack, 2020), associational and societal power are instead fundamental conditions of class organisation that make the effective exercise of structural power possible.

## REFERENCES

- Aguiar, S. (2009) *El concepto de posición estratégica. Reseña de un libro y avance de investigación*. Santiago: Estudios del Trabajo.
- Aguiar, S. (2010) *Elementos de la estructura de la clase trabajadora en el Chile actual*. Santiago: Estudios del Trabajo.
- Álvarez, R. (2017) Las políticas de la dictadura militar. Entre la institucionalización del neoliberalismo y la represión (1979–1989). In *Trabajadores y trabajadoras. Procesos y acción sindical en el neoliberalismo chileno, 1979–2017*, edited by J. Ponce et al. Valparaíso: Editorial América en Movimiento.
- Aravena, A. (2017) Rodrigo Cisternas: Semblanza de la lucha forestal-2007. In *Trabajadores y trabajadoras. Procesos y acción sindical en el neoliberalismo chileno, 1979–2017*, edited by J. Ponce et al. Valparaíso: Editorial América en Movimiento.
- Aravena, A. and D. Núñez (eds.) (2009) *El renacer de la huelga obrera en Chile. El movimiento sindical en la primera década del siglo XXI*. Santiago: ICAL.
- Britwum, A.O. (2018) Power Resources and Organising Informal Economy Workers. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 249–253.
- Brookes, M. (2018) Power Resources in Theory and Practice: Where to Go from Here. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 254–257.
- Centro de Investigación Político y Social del Trabajo (CIPSTRA) (2013a) *Sectores y posiciones estratégicas en la economía (I y II)*. <https://cipstra.cl/2013/sectores-y-posiciones-estrategicas-en-la-economia-i-material-teorico-y-de-aplicacion> and <https://cipstra.cl/2013/sectores-y-posiciones-estrategicas-en-la-economia-ii-material-cipstra> (accessed 21 September 2020).
- Centro de Investigación Político y Social del Trabajo (CIPSTRA) (2013b) *Movilizaciones minero-portuarias y consideraciones sobre el poder de las posiciones estratégicas*. <https://cipstra.cl/2013/movilizaciones-minero-portuarias-y-consideraciones-sobre-el-poder-de-las-posiciones-estrategicas> and <https://cipstra.cl/2013/movilizaciones-minero-portuarias-y-consideraciones-sobre-el-poder-de-las-posiciones-estrategicas> (accessed 21 September 2020).
- Cole, P. (2018) *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Doniez, V. (2019) ¿Contar sindicatos o sindicatos que cuentan?. *El Desconcierto*, 3 May 2019.
- Ffrench-Davies, R. (2018) *Reformas económicas en Chile, 1973–2017. Neoliberalismo, crecimiento con equidad e inclusión*. Madrid: Taurus. <http://repositorio.uchile.cl/handle/2250/149969> (accessed 21 September 2020).

- Fox-Hodess, K. (2017) (Re-)Locating the Local and National in the Global: Multi-Scalar Political Alignment in Transnational European Dockworker Union Campaigns. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 55(3): 626–647.
- Fox-Hodess, K. (2019) Worker Power, Trade Union Strategy, and International Connections: Dockworker Unionism in Colombia and Chile. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 61(3): 29–54.
- Fox-Hodess, K. (2020) Building Labour Internationalism “from Below”: Lessons from the International Dockworkers Council’s European Working Group. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(1): 91–108.
- Gallas, A. (2018) Class Power and Union Capacities: A Research Note on the Power Resources Approach. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(3): 348–352.
- Gárate, M. (2012) *La revolución capitalista en Chile (1973–2003)*. Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado.
- Hamark, J. (2013) Strikingly Indifferent: The Myth of Militancy on the Docks prior to World War II. *Labour History*, 54(3): 271–285. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0023656X.2013.804271> (accessed 21 September 2020)
- Julián, D. (2020) Transformación y bifurcación de las trayectorias sindicales en Chile. La “reforma laboral” y el escenario sindical (2014–2016). *Izquierdas*, 49: 1696–1714.
- La Tercera (2019) Puertos se movilizan y CUT llama a paro nacional para miércoles y jueves. *La Tercera*, 22 October 2019.
- Moody, K. (2017) *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Nowak, J. (2018) The Spectre of Social Democracy: A Symptomatic Reading of the Power Resources Approach. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(3): 353–360.
- Observatorio de Huelgas Laborales (2017) *Informe Huelgas Laborales en Chile 2016*. Santiago: Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social y Facultad de Economía y Negocios de la Universidad Alberto Hurtado.
- Pérez, D., R. Medel and D. Velásquez (2017) Radiografía de las huelgas laborales en el Chile del neoliberalismo democrático (1990–2015): Masividad del conflicto por fuera de la ley en un sindicalismo desbalanceado. In *Trabajadores y trabajadoras. Procesos y acción sindical en el neoliberalismo chileno, 1979–2017*, edited by J. Ponce et al. Valparaíso: Editorial América en Movimiento.
- Ponce, J. (2018) Movimiento sindical en transición. Conflictividad y cultura política sindical en la postdictadura chilena (1990–2010). In *Transiciones. Perspectivas historiográficas sobre la postdictadura chilena, 1988–2018* edited by J. Ponce et al. Valparaíso: Editorial América en Movimiento.
- Santibáñez, C. (2016) Posiciones estratégicas y fuerza obrera: Apuntes en torno a un ciclo huelguístico de los estibadores del salitre (Chile 1916–1923). *Izquierdas*, 30: 188–214.
- Santibáñez, C. (2019) Comunidades obreras portuarias y propensión a la huelga: Iquique, 1923. *Avances del Cesor*, XVI(21): 161–174.
- Santibáñez, C. and F. Gaudichaud (2017) Los obreros portuarios chilenos y la idea de “posición estratégica” en la postdictadura chilena (2003–2014). In *Trabajadores y trabajadoras. Procesos y acción sindical en el neoliberalismo chileno, 1979–2017*, edited by J. Ponce et al. Valparaíso: Editorial América en Movimiento.
- Schmalz, S., C. Ludwig and E. Webster (2018) The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 113–134.
- Sehnbruch, K. and S. Donoso (2020) Social Protests in Chile: Inequalities and Other Inconvenient Truths about Latin America’s Poster Child. *Global Labour Journal*, 11(1): 52–58.
- Silver, B. (2003) *Forces of Labor: Workers Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winn, P. (2004) *Victims of the Chilean Miracle: Workers and Neoliberalism in the Pinochet Era, 1973–2002*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Womack, J. (2009) *Posición estratégica y fuerza obrera: Hacia una nueva historia de los movimientos obreros*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Womack, J. (2020) *The Foundry Interviews with John Womack, Jr.: Strategic Workers and Organizing*, edited by P. Olney and G. Perusek. Forthcoming.
- Wright, E.O. (2000) Working-class Power, Capitalist-class Interests, and Class Compromise. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(4): 957–1002.

### Interviews

Name	Port	Year of Interview
José Agurto	San Vicente-Talcahuano	2015
Nelson Francino	Iquique	2015
Alejandro Lilis	Antofagasta	2015
Marco Montecinos	Valparaíso	2019
Joan Parra	Iquique	2015
Sergio Parra	San Vicente-Talcahuano	2015
Sergio Vargas	San Antonio	2015
Unnamed Participant	Iquique	2015
Unnamed Participant	San Antonio	2015
Unnamed Participant	San Vicente-Talcahuano	2015

### FUNDING

Research for this article was funded in part by an International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council (United States) and the Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo de Chile, Beca Folio 21172011.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Kirsty Newsome, Pablo Gaston, Manuel Rosaldo, the *Global Labour Journal* editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

KATY FOX-HODESS is a lecturer in Work, Employment and Organisations at the University of Sheffield and a research fellow at the Centre for Decent Work and the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute. Her research examines local and national labour disputes and trade union internationalism among port workers in Europe and the Americas, theorising effective organisational practices, strategies and worker power in a global economy. [Email: [katy.fox-hodess@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:katy.fox-hodess@sheffield.ac.uk)]

CAMILO SANTIBÁÑEZ REBOLLEDO is a lecturer and doctoral fellow in the Department of History at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile and a member of the Research Group on Iberoamerican Port Communities. He has written several articles on the history of Chilean maritime and port



workers. The most recent is “De las tabernas a los sistemas rotativos de contratación: obreros, capataces y alcohol en las faenas portuarias (Chile 1914–1923)” *Estudios Atacameños* (forthcoming). [Email: [sntibaez@gmail.com](mailto:sntibaez@gmail.com)]