

Book Review

John Womack Jr., Edited by Peter Olney and Glenn Perušek (2023)
Labor Power and Strategy. Oakland: PM Press.
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Reviewed by
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Labor Power and Strategy, by J. Womack Jr., discusses the concept of strategic position and its relevance to think about class struggle today. It is a militant book, not only for the authors with past or present activists' and union leaders' roles but also for the reflections the book offers in terms of working class organisation within the context of capitalist exploitation. In the words of Glenn Perušek: "This is a book about power – workers' power in the objective processes of production and distribution." (p. 5).

John Womack Jr. is an historian and emeritus professor at Harvard University, whose main research has focused on the Mexican revolution, the rebellion in Chiapas, and the concept of strategic position and labor power.

The book has a dynamic structure, beginning with an extensive interview of John Womack Jr. conducted by Peter Olney, followed by ten critical comments from union organisers and activists. Finally, Womack reflects on those comments, covering different issues again.

Olney's interview recovers Womack's (2008) analysis of strategic position, to think about the present of the labour movement: What are the strategic sectors for organising the workers' movement today? How important are struggles in social reproduction sectors, such as teaching and healthcare?

During the interview, they discuss the concept of strategic position, its link with the concepts of structural power and associative power, and the importance of "chokepoints" in interrupting production and supply chains. They also address the impact of technological change on the composition of the working class and its forms of organisation.

Womack's interest in the concept of strategic position began from his research on the history of Mexican workers. Unlike culturalist perspectives, he was interested in studying the technical relationships of workers at the workplace. Rereading J. Dunlop (1958), he adopts the concept of strategic position to analyse labour power.

Womack considers that workers located in industrial and technical strategic positions can deploy an offensive struggle against capital (p.17), not only sectoral in scope, but also for the working class as a whole. At this point, he insists on the importance of material power, to disrupt capitalist accumulation. The author highlights that the growing interconnections in capitalist production and distribution implies, at the same time, a greater vulnerability of capital (p. 26).

One of the most interesting and controversial points of the interview is Womack's analysis of

associative power (Wright, 2000) as derived from positional power or structural power. Whilst Womack acknowledges the importance of associational power to build solidarity, he stresses the need for material power:

...without material power in action, real force, all you get is association in action, movements, which in their heyday may be inspiring, but continually, always fade. Only with material power—not with it only, but only with it, on its strength—can you force change and keep it. (p. 32)

Nevertheless, I consider some key questions arise over this point: Through what processes does the working class become aware of its strategic position and “make use” of it? Are not political and subjective factors necessary to make use of a given technical or economic strategic position?

Indeed, from her research on dockworkers, Katy Fox-Hodess came to a conclusion opposite to Womack’s: that strategic power (or structural power) is rooted in associative power (p. 84). Jack Metzgar also highlights the importance of solidarity and associative power in both strategic and non-strategic sectors to sustain a struggle.

Another important subject of the interview is about social reproduction sectors. Reflecting on the West Virginia Teachers’ Strike, Womack emphasises the *socially* strategic power of social reproduction sectors as teachers and health-care workers (pp. 55-56).

It is Jane Mc Alevey who introduces an interesting critique of this point, asking whether the disruptive character of mass strikes in the education and health sectors would not express the *material* (and not only *social*) power of these workers.

Recovering the controversy, Womack distinguishes economic power – “... all the relations in production and finance...” (p. 146) – from material power – “...the physical relations at the means of production.” (pp. 146-147) – and highlights the importance of the scale of conflicts. The economic workers’ power in social reproduction sectors is high at the national or regional level, but schools and health centres are distributed throughout the territory, so “If these workers move small, they win small. If they move big, they may win really big, economically, against capital, for themselves and their class” (p. 147).

What is the material power of these workers? Womack recognises a direct effect, when they stop working for capital and do so for the working class, and an indirect one, as health and education are the precondition of production, restoration and reproduction of labor power.

Womack recovers Perrone’s (1983) concept of disruptive power, which weighs the direct and indirect effects of a strike according to the economic sector where it takes place and the impact on other sectors. That is why he highlights the strategic nature of distribution points in the supply chains of large companies such as Walmart and Amazon, with a much more effective impact than trying to develop an organisational campaign in a particular warehouse or a group of warehouses (p. 44).

Womack remarks: “It seems to me strategic campaigns, much more than they do now, should concentrate on these questions of transportation, storage, physical composition, i.e., putting things together, assemblage, and communication” (p. 46).

Womack also focuses on the importance of creating research centers *of* and *for* the working class, in order to identify those weak points in the functioning of the capitalist economy, whose paralysis or obstruction can have a disruptive effect on the system.

Dan Di Maggio rescues the importance that Womack gives to the strike as an exclusive weapon of the working class. He highlights the need to organise strategic workers and encourage them to use their power for the whole class and not only for sectoral purposes. The alternative, he warns, is to continue on the path of seeking the revitalisation of the workers’ movement outside

the workers' movement.

Other leaders and activists question whether the technical and economically strategic position is a sufficient element in the building of workers' power and discuss what may be the sectors capable of leading the struggle against capitalism today.

Bill Fletcher raises the importance of considering gender and race not only as identity issues, but also as concrete forms assumed by capitalist oppression. He proposes the organisation of the oppressed (without prioritising strategic sectors), and a social justice unionism, moving away from Womack' classist perspective.

Joel Ochoa, for his part, points out that workers in strategic positions are only a part of the class, and recovers examples of unions that established alliances with "non-strategic" sectors as key to (re)organising the whole class.

Carey Dall highlights the importance of internal organisation and union strategy, pointing out as obstacles the lack or little presence of left-wing union leaders in strategic sectors and rescuing, instead, the organisational experiences of teachers and health workers. Rand Wilson also highlights the role of workers and grassroots activists as protagonists of workers' struggles, beyond their strategic character (pp. 105-106). It is they who know the weak points in the production and distribution system.

Melissa Shetler emphasises the importance of union democracy and a participatory pedagogy to strength unionisation. Gene Bruskin, for his part, reconstructs the importance of chokepoints in the Smithfield campaign, but remarks the importance of the claim for decent working conditions as the impulse for workers' organising.

The building of labour power it is a central debate in the present of the labour movement. I believe strategic position is more of a possibility than a determining condition (Marticorena and D'Urso, 2021). Empirical research in different economic sectors shows that strategic position is not enough for building labour power, but associational power seems to be the precondition for any labour strategy. In this sense, a combative or classist union strategy is necessary to develop and build worker's power against the capitalist offensive (Marticorena and D'Urso, 2022). Far from social movement or social justice strategies, Womack gives us theoretical keys to reflect on the importance of material power and recover the strike as the specific weapon of the working class.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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