Labor and Global Commodities: Introduction

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Conventionally defined, "global commodities" refer to raw materials and basic foodstuffs—sugar, bananas, cotton, coal, bauxite—that are extracted or grown in one area of the world and sold on the world market for industrial or consumer use elsewhere. Labor historians focusing on the point of extraction/production or tracking the production and circulation of specific global commodities have gained insight into the development of global capitalism, in particular relations between colonized and colonizer, developing countries and advanced industrial countries. From Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1986) to Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: The Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (1998) scholars and general readers alike have found in studies of a single commodity a productive method for understanding social relations in the making of the modern world.

In this issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* (ILWCH) we take the concept of global commodities but give it a more capacious meaning, allowing us to consider some of the ways that commodity production in the global south has broadened to include both basic commodities and finished products for export to the global north. The line between "raw" and "finished" has always been somewhat fuzzy (refined sugar, textiles). But the range of global commodities has grown phenomenally since the mid- and late-twentieth century and is associated with changes in the structure of capital, supply chains, trade policy, and labor relations. The articles in this issue address all of these issues, from the late nineteenth century to our own time, and from American, European, Asian, and African vantage points. We also include articles that pay attention to the environmental effects of commodity production, a question not commonly addressed by labor historians.

The first essay, "The Return of Merchant Capitalism" by Nelson Lichtenstein, offers an analysis of contemporary retailers like Wal-Mart that have come to occupy a commanding position in the global economy, exploiting cheap labor in the developing world to manufacture goods for mass consumption worldwide. Lichtenstein argues that, notwithstanding branding, these goods are essentially interchangeable (sneakers, toys, cell phones) and thus may be considered basic commodities. He provocatively argues that today's retail giants have critical similarities to the banking and merchant houses of Amsterdam and London of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the traders, shippers, and bankers of the antebellum United States. These

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similarities include the power of merchant capital over manufacturing enterprises and state regulators and the exploitation of debased and sweated labor. Lichtenstein shows how old merchant-capital regimes can be instructive in understanding the dynamics of contemporary neoliberal globalization, in particular the ways in which companies like Wal-Mart have been a bulwark of free trade practices and conservative politics. These include using subcontractors (jobbers) to run sweatshops in China and other developing nations as well as weakening state regulation of business, trade, and domestic social-welfare policies.

The next two articles concern United States foreign-trade policy with regard to sugar and consumer knock-offs, respectively. In "The Political Culture of Sugar Tariffs: Immigration, Race, and Empire, 1898–1930," April Merleaux analyzes early-twentieth-century American debates over the sugar tariff in the context of the United States' newly acquired status as a colonial power. Notably, the annexation of Hawaii and territorial acquisitions from the Spanish-American War (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines) all brought extensive sugar-cane production into the ambit of American sovereignty and into competition with US continental sugar-beet growers. The range of sovereign arrangements, from protectorate to unincorporated territory to incorporated territory, complicated tariff policy. Moreover, Merleaux argues that the tariff issue was infused with the racial and immigration politics immanent of empire. Concepts of "foreign competition" and "domestic labor" assumed new meanings and implications when sugar planters from Hawaii to Cuba were Americans and domestic sugar growers relied on Filipinos and other non-white migrant workers.

The next article by Augustine Sedgewick examines American foreign trade policy during the New Deal. In "'The Spice of the Department Store': The Consumers' Republic, Imported Knock-offs from Latin America, and the Invention of International Development, 1936–1941," Sedgewick argues that the domestic and foreign-trade dimensions of the New Deal, conventionally studied and understood as discrete, were in fact linked and synergistic. During the 1930s the United States promoted in Latin America both the revitalization of basic commodity production (tin, rubber, coffee) as well as finished products for mass consumption in the United States (leather purses and shoes, handkerchiefs and tablecloths, pottery, wooden salad bowls and glassware). Sedgewick connects the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 to the nascent program for international development, arguing that the emergence of the United States as a "consumers' republic" and a neoimperialist power were part of a single process, produced by an integrated complex of New Deal domestic and foreign policies that began a shift in the international division of labor.

Elisabetta Bini's "Selling Gasoline with a Smile: Gas Station Attendants between the United States, Italy, and the Third World, 1945–1970" moves down the commodity chain to explore the work of and new workers involved in marketing new commodities, in this case gasoline. Focusing on the first decades of mass motorization in Italy, Bini examines how two oil companies,

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Esso (Standard Oil) and the Italian firm Agip competed not only to sell gasoline and related products to new motorists but also to make gas stations into modern consumer venues. Doing so required transforming family-run gas pumps into full service stations that were links in a corporate hierarchy and making gas station attendants performers of rationalized and standardized services. Bini traces how these ideas about male service work and consumption were borrowed from the United States but, in the case of Agip, harnessed to serve the mission of Italian economic development and Italian relations with the Third World. Like Sedgewick, Bini's study shows how the analysis of commodities illuminates complex strategies of development that sought to expand consumption and restructure racial and national hierarchies of workers.

The following two essays take up environmental issues associated with commodity production and raise important questions about the possibilities for cooperation between environmental activism on the one hand and the labor movement on the other. Environmental dangers to workers are at the heart of Gabrielle Hecht's study, "The Work of Invisibility: Radiation Hazards and Occupational Health in South African Uranium Production." Uranium mining was a key Cold War industry in which South Africa played a central role; its workforce was racially stratified, with blacks doing the most environmentally dangerous mine work. Hecht argues that protecting workers' health in uranium mining and processing entailed much more than establishing acceptable dosimetric regimes and enforcing adherence to them. Before that could be contemplated—and before workers could recognize and protest against excessive radiation exposure—the dangers of uranium mining had to be acknowledged. As she shows, the boundary between the nuclear and the nonnuclear was contested and shifting within South Africa as well as across the global uranium industry. What she calls the "nuclearity" of uranium mining was systematically denied for decades by the South African government, the mining industry, and apartheid science. It was assumed that uranium became dangerous only as it was processed and thus the danger from radiation existed only for white, mid-level technicians. To be sure, mine shafts were sampled, but in cursory and biased ways that gravely underestimated the dangers to black miners. Even when minimal safeguards were introduced, record keeping of migrant mine workers was inadequate to trace miners' lifelong exposure. While the visibility of nuclearity and the regulation of uranium mines have improved substantially since the mid-1990s, the long-term consequences of denying the dangers of uranium mining persist, as does the difficulty black miners face in proving and getting compensation for the health problems they have suffered.

Amanda Ciafone's "If *Thanda Matlab* means *Coca-Cola*, then 'Cool Drink Means Toilet Cleaner": Environmentalism of the Dispossessed in Liberalizing India," discovers protest about commodities that do not involve commodity producers, but rather those living around and suffering from commodity production. Ciafone examines the responses to the return of Coca-Cola to India as that country liberalized its economy in the mid-1990s. While Coke gained

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popularity in India's growing middle class, rural populations in areas around Coca-Cola bottling plants had a quite different reaction. Ciafone's study of Mehdigang in the state of Uttar Pradesh traces the emergence of widespread local protest against Coca-Cola's exploitation and pollution of the ground water—which Ciafone considers a resource of the commons critical to farming and domestic use—in order to produce not only Coke but also bottled water. Local activists linked up with protests against the economic and, above all, environmental effects of Coca-Cola bottling elsewhere in India and protests against the company's antiunion and environmental policies in other countries. Ciafone illuminates a novel aspect of global commodities—the local production of globally-branded products in the developing world for local consumption as well as the emergence of global networks of solidarity to support local protests.

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