Thinking Labor Rights through the Coolie Question

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In 2014 the conservative Australian Institute of Public Affairs called for the abolition of the minimum wage—at the time AU$16.87, the highest in the industrial world and twice that of the United States.[1] The Australian minimum, enacted in Victoria in 1896, was the first in the world. Other nations copied it, and the International Labor Organization inscribed it as an international convention in 1928. Responding to calls for its abolition, University of Melbourne historian Marilyn Lake reminded Australians that the minimum wage was a "symbol of Australian values." Envisioned as a "living wage, sufficient to meet the variety of needs of a person living in a civilized community … [it] recognized workers as human beings and equal citizens," she wrote.[2]

Why did Australia lead the world with its minimum wage? Lake takes a world-history approach to answer this question. Australians in the late nineteenth century were keenly aware of global labor trends, she argues, in particular the spread of contract, indenture, and sweated factory labor in the era of slave emancipation. Their perspective was unusually "global" because the Australian colonies were not, as conventionally understood, isolated outposts of Britain. Rather, Australia was proximate to mass Asian labor emigrations and was itself the "site of dynamic encounters between the subjects of the British and Chinese empires."[3] In Victoria, a politics of labor "protection" connected concerns with domestic sweating, Chinese immigrant workers, and competition from foreign manufactures. Although the Chinese in Melbourne were not indentured—in some cases they formed their own labor unions—whites targeted them as "coolies" to explain the perceived threat of cheap Chinese labor. Labor protection, which included a state-sanctioned minimum wage, embodied the "fantasy" of a "White Man's World" and the first federal "White Australia" policy (1901), which excluded all Asians from immigration.[4]

Inspired by these issues, Marilyn Lake and Sophie Loy-Wilson coconvened an international conference at the University of Sydney in September 2015 called "Thinking Labor Rights through the Coolie Question." The conference aimed to provide historical context for the growing anxieties over globalization and labor migration that are found around the world today. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of people residing outside their country of birth was in 2015 the highest ever recorded and stood at 244 million (up from 232 million in 2013).[5] Local communities have responded

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 91, Spring 2017, pp. 5–7
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doi:10.1017/S0147547916000399

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547916000399 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to these shifts with alarming levels of xenophobia and concern about labor rights.

The symposium sought to explore the juxtaposition of labor rights with xenophobia by examining responses to Asian indentured labor, what was known in parlance of the day as "the coolie question," in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The coolie trade extended from the early 1840s—it was one consequence of the ending of slavery in the British Empire in 1834—to the 1920s. During this period approximately 1.3 million Indians, 750,000 Chinese, and some 60,000 south Pacific Islanders went under long-term indentures to work on plantations in Peru, the Caribbean, Mauritius, Natal, Fiji, and northern Australia.[6] The system that developed was widely condemned as coercive, exploitative and often as being akin to slavery. At the same time, whites in the United States and the British settler colonies racialized all Asian emigrants regardless of legal status, occupation, and location as coolies. The coolie question underwrote the Asian exclusion laws passed in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The articles in this special issue are based on select papers from the Sydney conference. They address both the historical experience of Asian indentured labor and the racial discourses that arose from these projects, bringing together two historiographic streams that are not often connected. The articles range across the Caribbean, Africa, and Australia, but they are not meant to be representative of the vast phenomenon that was the coolie trade. Rather, we hope this special issue will offer some new insights into the coolie question, insights made possible through comparison across and within empires (British, French, and U.S.), across ethnic groups (Indian, Chinese, African American, Euro-Americans), and across a long durée. One theme that arises from these comparisons concerns the persistence of labor resistance across regions, groups, and time, which challenges conventional beliefs that coolies were docile or so cruelly oppressed as to have little ability to resist. At another level they reveal the "impossible demand for postslavery societies, for everything to be the same yet characterized by free instead of enslaved labor."[7] A second theme concerns the coolie question as a global discourse, in which Euro-American planters and employers from the U.S. South, the Caribbean, Australia, and Africa actively exchanged both philosophical and practical views. Finally, two articles consider the coolie question from the vantage of labor rights in the present. Taken together, these articles indicate that it is impossible to understand the migrant experience with categories that fail to capture the complexities of race and power within the emerging industrial capitalist system of the nineteenth century. These same conceptual difficulties are found in our own time, when abusive labor relations continue despite celebrated regulatory mechanisms designed to protect workers.

We realize that some readers may consider our use of the term "coolie" problematic because of its long pejorative connotation. The word coolie probably derived from the Tamil word *kuli*, meaning wages or hire. It evolved into a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547916000399 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pidgin word in nineteenth-century East Asian port cities like Macao and Guangzhou (Canton), first to refer to a menial or household worker and later as a specific reference to long-distance indentured workers. Asians did not call themselves coolies; the Hindi word for an indentured worker is *girmitya* (based on the word for contract). Chinese often called those who were kidnapped or otherwise coerced into long-distance indentures *zhuzai* (piglets) and called the coolie trade *mai zhuzai*, or selling piglets. When uttered by plantation overseers and in colonial discourse, coolie was a racial slur that associated Asian workers with slave-like stereotypes (docile, servile, lacking volition and individual personality). But Indian and Chinese indentured workers also sometimes called themselves coolies when they interacted with Europeans, using it as a simple referent in pidgin without negative self-identification. Increasingly, in our own time, Indian and Chinese writers have reclaimed "coolie" as an identity bearing pride and not shame in the origins of indenture; some have proposed "Coolitude," akin to Negritude, as a kind of diasporic identity.[8] While recognizing increasing embrace of the "C word," we are mindful that in the colonial context "coolie" obscured as much about Asian labor as it revealed. Thus we use "coolie" mainly in political and discursive contexts and "indentured laborer" to refer to actual people.

NOTES

1. http://www.wsj.com/articles/australia-debates-whether-its-minimum-wage-is-too-high-1422210360(accessed January 12, 2017). In 2016 the Australian minimum increased to AU $17.70 (US$13.25).

2. Marilyn Lake, "Minimum Wage is More than a Safety Net, it's a Symbol of Australian Values,'" *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 10, 2014.

3. Marilyn Lake, "Challenging the 'Slave-Driving Employers:' Understanding Victoria's 1896 Minimum Wage through a World-History Approach," *Australian Historical Studies* 45 (2014): 94–95.

4. Ibid.

5. http://www.iom.int/news/iom-releases-global-migration-trends-2015-factsheet (accessed January 12, 2017).

6. Adam McKeown, "Global Migrations," *Journal of World History* (2004). For purposes of the symposium and this special issue, we do not include regional short-term contract labor, such as Indian migrant labor in the South Asian subcontinent and southeast Asia (27 million) and Chinese migrant labor in southeast Asia and Manchuria (50 million).

7. Zach Sell, "Asian Indentured Labor in the Age of African American Emancipation," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 91 (2017): page #.

8. Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman, The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago, 2014), xix–xxi.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547916000399 Published online by Cambridge University Press