

Book Review

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Chan, Jenny, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai. 2020. *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. 275 pp. \$19.95. ISBN: 9781642591248.

Williams, Matthew S. 2020. *Strategizing against Sweatshops: The Global Economy, Student Activism, and Worker Empowerment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 292 pp. \$34.95. ISBN: 9781439918227.

Reviewed by: Chris Tilly, *University of California Los Angeles, CA, USA*

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These two books on global labor call resoundingly for solidaristic internationalism—what Falk (1997) calls “globalization-from-below.” Specifically, they advocate *labor* internationalism via supporting the rights of far-flung workers at the opposite end of supply chains from the Northern consumers who presumably will make up the main readership of these books (and this review). Such appeals to empower sweatshop workers have a long history: in the United States, the National Consumer League and the Women’s Trade Union League encouraged consumers to look for the union label and, in the case of the WTUL, provided material support to striking garment workers, beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century (Juravich 2019). I would argue this approach occupies an intermediate level of difficulty between two other forms of labor internationalism. The easiest (though by no means easy) approach around which to mobilize is forming common cause with other workers employed by the same multinational, as analyzed by Kay (2011), McCallum (2013), and Riisgard (2005). By far the most difficult form of global labor solidarity to build is support for the large majorities of workers in other countries who produce goods and services for their domestic markets, employed by domestic firms (including many who are self-employed). I will return to the varieties of labor internationalism at the end of this review.

Dying for an iPhone and *Strategizing against Sweatshops* (henceforth *Dying and Strategizing*) each studies a particular supply chain and a particular set of social and economic actors. Chan and her co-authors spotlight iPhones and other Apple products assembled largely at Chinese plants, examining the actions of corporate management and the lives of workers. Williams scrutinizes college- and

university-licensed apparel, stitched together by workers in Latin America and East and Southeast Asia—but his attention centers neither on the workers nor the companies that employ them, but on the activists of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and their strategic interaction with their institutions' administrators and with the global brands like Nike that sit atop the supply chain.

This difference in focus generates very different tones in the two books. For me, the difference was signaled in my own early experiences with each of the supply chains and the movements to support their workers. My first major exposure to USAS came at a conference on Global Labor at the University of Chicago in 2001, where I was bowled over by encountering a large, thriving nationwide student movement devoted to empowering sweatshop workers. In contrast, when I visited Students and Scholars for Corporate Responsibility, the leading organization mobilizing support for workers in Apple's supply chain, in Hong Kong in 2012, I was struck to discover a small, sparsely furnished office in a nondescript, run-down office building with no sign outside the building—the better to avoid unwanted attention from the Chinese authorities. (Full disclosure: my host at SACOM was Jenny Chan, who was then a staffer.) The contrast reflects distinct organizing contexts: the relatively open environments on most U.S. campuses vs. the tightening repression in China that as of 2012 was already constricting political space in Hong Kong. Correspondingly, Chan, Selden, and Pun's book is mainly a chronicle of oppression, whereas Williams's is an account of remarkably successful organizing.

Dying is a masterful work of muckraking, one that catalogues in painful detail the suffering of Chinese workers in Apple's supply chain, above all in the plants of the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn (the world's largest manufacturer), while consistently humanizing those workers and their aspirations. The volume details the plants' merciless work schedules (twelve-hour days with only two days off per month at peak times), inadequate pay, dangerous conditions, and iron-fisted discipline. It depicts how the Chinese government (national, provincial, and local) and Party-controlled trade unions collude with Foxconn's efforts to squeeze maximum production from its workforce, and how Apple's social responsibility program consists of largely empty rhetoric. The authors analyze how millions of rural-to-urban migrants and student "interns" drafted into sweatshop labor with no educational value make up vulnerable labor supplies—a particularly stunning passage recounts Henan Province's 2010 military-style mobilization to recruit 20,000 interns in two months for Foxconn, with individual targets set for each of 23 cities and counties within the province. Though their main brief is China, Chan and co-authors also briefly describe Foxconn's expansion elsewhere, including Eastern European countries, India, Mexico, and even a plant in Wisconsin.

Leavening the harshness of the narrative somewhat, and adding to the sociological interest of the text, are the voices of dozens of current and former Foxconn workers. Most of the accounts follow a similar arc from naivete to misery, disappointment, and anger, but personal details make each story distinctive. *Dying's* authors do describe worker resistance, from mass suicides and *threatened* mass

suicides, to a riot at Foxconn's Taiyuan plant in 2012, to a fascinating first-person account of a slowdown-and-sabotage campaign by the highly organized night shift at a Foxconn plant assembling Amazon Kindles (the authors depart occasionally from their focus on Apple). Unfortunately, the histories of resistance all end the same way, with protest absorbed by a combination of cooptation of a few and repression of the many, as well described by Lee and Zhang (2013). The resourceful night shift at the Kindle plant was soon dispersed across shifts and plants at the production complex, neutering their power. Interestingly, protest has followed Apple's supply chain as it has migrated around the world (as predicted by Silver [2003])—while I was reading *Dying*, Indian workers employed by Wistron, a Foxconn-like Apple subcontractor, trashed their plant's offices. Equally interesting, Wistron promptly apologized for late and less-than-promised wage payments, and Apple placed Wistron on probation pending corrective actions—a contrast with the response to the 2012 riot at Foxconn Taiyuan, which was put down by riot police and followed by bland Apple assurances that Foxconn treats workers well (and that consumers need not fear interruptions in deliveries of the iPhone 5 produced at the plant).

Dying is a trade press book aimed at reaching and outraging a broad audience. Accordingly, readers will not find contributions to sociological theory, but rather a comprehensive, thoroughly researched portrait of the Satanic mills behind our iPhones and MacBook Airs, and the workers toiling in them. Chan and co-authors end their book by, among other things, optimistically invoking the example of United Students against Sweatshops, suggesting how international consumer pressure could be brought to bear on Apple.

Strategizing picks up where *Dying* leaves off, with the USAS movement. The volume is also more theoretically ambitious. Williams notes that several books already analyze United Students Against Sweatshops and how it exercised leverage over apparel brands through a version of Keck and Sikkink's (1998) well-known boomerang strategy (a strategy Chan and coauthors hope can also be directed at Apple). Though he re-tells that basic tale, Williams centers his narrative on the *evolution* of USAS's strategy from 1997-2007, elaborating a model of social movement learning and innovation as a dialectic between ideology and experience in the face of challenges, and proposing a synthesis between the proponents and critics of the concept of political opportunity structure (integrating counter-actors in addition to social movement actors, and specifying culture and discourse as critical terrains of struggle).

Williams's starting point is to explain what I saw at the University of Chicago twenty years ago, noting that campuses are small, self-contained communities with relatively open political environments and administrations concerned with maintaining their own legitimacy—all elements that give student activists exceptional leverage. But it took a special organization to exploit this opportunity. The scattered group of campus anti-sweatshop activists who self-organized starting in the mid-1990s began to achieve more strategic, organizational, and ideological coherence through mentorship by staff at the UNITE textile and apparel union. UNITE won

over students to what Williams calls a “worker empowerment ideology”, emphasizing facilitating the power of apparel workers through independent unions, rather than a more paternalistic outlook centering Northern consumers.

Williams then follows USAS’s strategy development through three cycles of innovation. From the start, USAS’s core approach involved escalating pressure on administrators guided by a pro-worker ideology. The brands challenged this initial strategy by establishing a labor rights certifying body, the Fair Labor Association, which USAS concluded was whitewashing problems rather than accurately documenting labor practices. The student organization’s first innovation was to establish the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an alternative monitoring and certifying institution with no ties to the corporate brands, and governance shared among USAS, independent advocates and scholars, and university administrators. But the WRC’s success raised a new challenge: WRC scrutiny pressed apparel manufacturers to allow workers the right to unionize, but when workers actually formed a union and won higher wages, the brands simply switched to a lower cost contractor, returning to square one. So USAS innovated again, creating the Designated Supplier Program (DSP), in which schools would require brands from the outset to do business with companies certified by the WRC as respecting worker rights. However, USAS was unable to convince many higher education institutions to enroll in the DSP. Stymied, they shifted gears and applied the DSP model to state and local governments, institutionalizing it in the Sweat-Free Purchasing Consortium. In analyzing each innovative stride, Williams convincingly exercises his conceptualizations of the strategic innovation process and of the political opportunity structure.

As Williams documents and Chan and co-authors would surely agree, a labor internationalist worldview is difficult to promulgate, and labor internationalists have limited leverage points to support faraway workers. USAS’s successes are greatly to the credit of the student activists and their union and advocacy organization allies, but those successes are narrow in scope. University-licensed apparel is a small slice of the garment sector, let alone of supply chains more generally, and USAS’s strategies have much less traction in more repressive environments—like the Chinese manufacturing sector described in *Dying*.

And as I suggested at the beginning of this review, supply-chain-based applications of labor internationalism are not the most difficult case. That hardest case would be the billions of workers with no direct link to workers or consumers in the United States. Marx was optimistic that as workers worldwide were drawn into a global commodity economy, they would recognize their common interests—but so far, that outcome has been exceptional.

Overall, then, labor internationalism is no easy charge. But research like *Dying* and *Strategizing* will help us find ways to navigate it—both for the supply chain case, and more broadly. *Dying*’s analysis of political economy and *Strategizing*’s analysis of, well, strategy point to both the challenges and the opportunities for an internationalist approach to labor.

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