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# Workers of the world and workers of a single industry: Communist strike policy on the waterfront, Le Havre 1920-1970

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John Barzman, Jean-Pierre Castelain. Workers of the world and workers of a single industry: Communist strike policy on the waterfront, Le Havre 1920-1970. Marti Marín Corbera,; Xavier Domènech Sampere; Ricard Martínez i Muntada. III International Conference Strikes and Social Conflicts: Combined historical approaches to conflict. Proceedings, Barcelona, CEFID-UAB, 2016, 978-84-608-7860-5. halshs-02291917

**HAL Id: halshs-02291917**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02291917v1>**

Submitted on 28 Sep 2022

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**Strikes**  
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**conflicts**  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION

## *III Conference Strikes & Social Conflicts.*

*Combined approaches to conflict*

*Barcelona, June 16 - 19 2015.*

**WORKERS OF THE WORLD AND WORKERS OF A SINGLE INDUSTRY:  
COMMUNIST STRIKE POLICY ON THE WATERFRONT,  
LE HAVRE 1920-1970**

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In March 1950, the French Communist Party (PCF) urged Marseilles dockers to strike to protest the handling of weapons for the Indochina war and NATO.<sup>1</sup> French labor historian Michel Pigenet comments that the action showed the highest degree of confusion between party and trade union objectives and practices and led to a weakening of the *Confédération générale du travail's* (CGT) *Fédération des Ports et Docks*.<sup>2</sup> The incident is part of a long and tortuous history of Communist work in the trade unions. The purpose of this paper is to examine different facets of this policy through five strike episodes concerning dock workers in Le Havre between 1920 and 1970 (1922, 1928, 1936, 1945-46 and 1968).

Let us first situate France roughly in the spectrum of Communist parties and their trade-union influence in the world. When the United Socialist Party changed its name to Communist Party at the Tours Congress in 1920, Communists were very influential in the CGT, the historic and organic labor federation where they and their revolutionary syndicalist allies faced a reformist leadership not quite sure that it still had a majority. In France, trade-union influence is customarily measured not by dues-paying membership but by electoral results in “social elections” (trade union delegate, social

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the French term « dockers » (derived from the English « dock ») rather than the more common English « dockworkers » or US “longshoremen”.

<sup>2</sup> In « Les voies et les facteurs de l'unité organique : les syndicats des Ports et Docks dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle » [Colloque ihs-cgt.fr 2007 Montreuil], Michel Pigenet (CHS XXe siècle) writes : “La confusion est flagrante entre 1949 et 1952, lorsque le PCF pousse les militants des Ports et Docks à des actions « concrètes » avant-gardistes contre la guerre d'Indochine et l'OTAN (22). »... « Partout, la Fédération sort affaiblie d'un combat dont les dockers réalisent bientôt qu'ils ont été les seuls à le mener directement sur leur lieu de travail. »

security, labor courts) and the ability to mobilize in strikes or demonstrations.<sup>3</sup> After some losses in the 1920s, the PCF-supported unions became dominant around 1935 for sixty years or more, followed loosely by 40% to 60% of wage earners, with a peak between 1944 and 1976. In some industries, the PCF-influenced unions were the chief negotiators in collective bargaining for decades. This was the case in the cargo handling sector after 1936 in several French ports, but not in Le Havre.

In the port of Le Havre, the dockers' union was led between 1920 and 1970 by teams which identified with a particular brand of revolutionary syndicalism that began as militant anarcho-syndicalism in the early years and had become non-political trade unionism by the 1970s. Over the years, this union leadership entertained varying relations with the local Communist Party and national *Fédération des Ports et Docks*, influenced by the PCF (thanks to its support in other ports like Marseilles). A case study of Le Havre during five major strikes enables us to consider PCF trade union policy both in the national framework where it was often dominant, and in an exceptional local configuration where it acted as a minority in a strong union dominated by non-Communists.

Our purpose here is to highlight the main features of Communist policy on strikes based on a review of existing literature on dockers, trade unions and the Communist Party. For the primary sources, the reader may turn to works by scholars such as Michel Pigenet, Jean-Pierre Castelain and myself.<sup>4</sup>

In the first strike considered here, there was little specifically Communist policy. A long metalworkers strike led to a citywide general strike in summer 1922, in which the dockers' union participated actively. The PCF already existed for over a year but generally followed the local revolutionary syndicalist leadership.<sup>5</sup> The Fourth Congress

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Stéphane Sirot, *Le syndicalisme, la politique et la grève. France et Europe : XIX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Nancy : Arbre bleu éditions, 2011, 360 p.

<sup>4</sup> See John Barzman and Michel Pigenet, « Le miel et le fiel, ou le difficile cheminement des dockers vers l'unité », in Eric Wauters (ed.), *Actes du colloque « Les Ports normands : un modèle ? »*, Mont-Saint-Aignan : PURH, 1999 ; Michel Pigenet, « Le statut des dockers de 1947 », *Cahiers de l'Institut Régional du Travail*, 2000, pp.241-259 ; Jean-Pierre Castelain, *Manières de vivre, manières de boire: alcool et sociabilité sur le port*, Paris : Imago, 1989. Many primary sources are drawn from John Barzman « Les dockers du Havre, de la brouette au portique (XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles) », where they are cited in detail (HDR Paris I, 2000, publication expected in 2015). John Barzman, “Conflits et négociations au Havre avant et après les grandes réformes portuaires”, *l'Espace Politique, Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique*, Vol. 16, No. 2012-1, contains many additional references on the subject.

<sup>5</sup> The interaction between the strike in Le Havre and the French and Russian Communist leaders is discussed in John Barzman, *Dockers, métallos, ménagères: mouvements sociaux et cultures militantes au Havre 1913-1923*, Rouen: PURH, 1997, pp. 341-346.

of the Communist International debated the event in great detail.<sup>6</sup> According to French political scientist Bertrand Badie, this discussion was the beginning of a theorization of the use of strikes by the international communist movement, drawing on the revolutionary syndicalist tradition.<sup>7</sup> Around 1910, Pierre Monatte, editor of the revolutionary syndicalist review *La Vie Ouvrière*, had begun to theorize the need for conscious trade unionists to form, inside the majority unions, nuclei of more lucid activists who studied their industry and could take into account the national political scene.<sup>8</sup> Faced with the creation of the Industrial Workers of the World in the United States, he had favored the strategy of “boring from within” the American Federation of Labor.

But the Communist strike strategy also included a view inherited from the revolutionary social-democratic tradition that could occasionally consider strikes as political tools. In several countries, social-democratic parties called for mass strikes to advance the struggle for universal suffrage. In the same vein, the Basel Congress of the Second International in 1912 used the threat of a simultaneous general strike to ward off the danger of war. Conversely, political support for the war effort between 1914 and 1918, generally meant abstaining from strikes. It is clear that according to this approach, the desirability of strikes should be judged not only from the standpoint of the workers in one industry, but from that of the “general interest” of all workers.<sup>9</sup> What exactly was meant by the general interest of all workers remained to be clarified: did it apply to one country or the whole world? Did it mean the defense of the Soviet Union? Who decided in each conjuncture what this interest was?

In any event, after the 1922 Comintern discussion, Communists in France and more generally in advanced capitalist countries with stable labor movements, were supposed to follow certain guidelines in their trade union and strike activity. As was the case for revolutionary syndicalists, Communists believed strikes should serve not only for immediate gains in one industry, but in a broader context, as practice for self-

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<sup>6</sup> See John Riddell (ed.), *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, Brill, 2011, pp. 277, 581, 970 et sq., 1126.

<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Badie, *Stratégie de la grève - Pour une approche fonctionnaliste du Parti communiste français*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques, 1976, pp. 30-36.

<sup>8</sup> See Colette Chambelland, *Pierre Monatte: une autre voix syndicaliste*, Paris : Editions de l'Atelier, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> A brief but stimulating discussion of the impact of the use of the concepts of « general interest » and « common good » in the trade union movement was published recently: René Mouriaux, “En débat: ‘Intérêt général’, un miroir aux alouettes”, *Cahiers de l’Institut CGT d’histoire sociale*, n° 132, décembre 2013, pp. 19-21.

management and confrontation with the capitalist class. Communists should prepare for such tests of strength a long time in advance, with care, by gathering information on the industry where they worked, testing the popularity of certain demands, proposals for the organization of the strike, building solidarity actions in neighborhoods, other industries and nationwide, and drawing political lessons about the state of the class struggle from each strike, whether an advance or a defeat. According to Bertrand Badie, this apprenticeship gave the PCF a real ability to become part of strike movements, an ability which was then used to stimulate, channel or hold back open conflict according to party policy.<sup>10</sup>

The injunction to prepare strikes could have little effect in countries where Communist Parties were confined to intellectual circles or hounded out of cities by repression. But in countries with relatively democratic regimes such as France, it is undeniable that Communist Parties improved their ramifications and influence in the trade union movement. Nevertheless, it seems to us that Bertrand Badie exaggerates their ability to control strikes. In some cases, strikes could break out or continue despite Communist reticence, in others, strikes might stop or fail despite Communist attempts to prolong them.

The next four dockers' strikes discussed here tend to illustrate the complex interplay of many political factors in Communist relations to strikes.

In the dockers' strike of 1928 in Le Havre, Communists only influenced a small minority of the participants, mainly in the coal-handling sector, which they had brought into the PCF-dominated national confederation, the CGTU.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority of the close to seven thousand dockers followed a revolutionary syndicalist leadership around Jean Le Gall and belonged to a local confederation (the *Union des syndicats autonomes*) situated between the PCF-dominated CGTU and the reformist-led CGT. At the time of the strike, the Communists were on a confrontationist course with the local revolutionary syndicalist union leadership, which they denounced as reformist. Unions had been very weak since 1922.

The union leadership decided to launch a full-scale strike on May 14, 1928, after employers tried to use the sliding scale of wages and a slight drop in everyday food prices to lower wages. The strike was well-organized and massive, and ended with an

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<sup>10</sup> See Bertrand Badie, *Stratégie de la grève...*, 1976, pp. 30-36.

<sup>11</sup> CGTU = *Confédération générale du travail unitaire*, founded in 1922 as a result of expulsions and walk-outs from the CGT. It included Communist Party followers and some independent forces.

agreement which the union leadership described as a great advance.<sup>12</sup> Following a not uncommon tactic of signing a settlement which gave small wage increases but recognized the union, the strike leader, Jean Le Gall accepted the contract. To the contrary, the Communists denounced the contract as insufficient.<sup>13</sup> But in reality the agreement proved to be a decisive turning point. After 1928, dockers refused to work with non-union laborers and, between 1928 and 1935, strengthened the union presence and obtained many concessions on wages and working conditions.

When the national unification of trade unions (CGT, CGTU and Autonomes) took place in 1935 in the framework of the Popular Front, the Communists were forced to recognize the revolutionary syndicalist leadership around Le Gall not only as the leader of the local unified dockers' union of Le Havre, but also of the Le Havre labor federation (*Union des syndicats du Havre*) and the national dockers' federation (*Fédération des Ports et Docks*). This is the context for our next case study, the non-strike of the Havrais dockers during the nationwide general strike of June 1936

As is well-known, the Popular Front coalition won a majority in the legislative elections of May 1936, and rank-and-file workers, faced with hesitations by the new government led by Léon Blum, launched a general strike, the most massive yet in French history, distinguished by the widespread use of the sit-down tactic in factories (*occupations d'usine*). The dockers union in Le Havre abstained from participating in this national general strike, stating that dockers had already won the demands advanced by other corporations, namely union recognition, wage increases, and a shortening of the work day (more substantial in fact, than the national forty-hour week).<sup>14</sup> The union did help workers in other industries to occupy their factories. Moreover, once general advances were won by all workers through new labor legislation, the dockers' union engaged in late 1936 and in 1937, in several strikes to win further advances. During

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<sup>12</sup> The union confirmed its recognition by the employers' organization and set the normal size of teams in *Convention du 18 juillet 1928 (additif à la convention du 30 janvier 1925)*. « La grève du port. Ses conséquences. Ses résultats. Admirable cohésion ouvrière », *Vérités*, 24e année, n° 5, mai 1928 ; « Texte complet de la Convention entre l'Union des employeurs de main-d'oeuvre du port et de la ville du Havre et le Syndicat général autonome des ouvriers du port, commis auxiliaires et similaires du Havre, passée le 18 juillet 1928 », *Vérités*, 24e année, n° 8, août 1928.

<sup>13</sup> The main Communist dockers in the 1930s were Jules Le Troadec and Roger Le Marec. My analysis is based on *L'Unitaire*, *Vérités*, « Souvenirs de Roger Le Marec » (manuscript at the Archives municipales du Havre), and national police reports (AN F7 13.874) with some information from Marie-Paule Dhaille-Hervieu, « Communistes au Havre, communistes du Havre, société, culture et politique 1930-1983 », thèse Histoire sld A. Prost, Paris I, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> « Deux mois d'action ouvrière », signed « L » (probably Jean Le Gall), *Vérités*, 32e année, n° 5, juillet 1936.

1936 and 1937 Communists in the dockers' union in Le Havre did not object to the tactic of the non-Communist union leadership. They concentrated their attention on organizing solidarity with Republican Spain through their own channels. In other industries in France where the unified unions were led by non-Communist forces, Communists sometimes tried to press for more action and won support on that basis. We have not found evidence of such Communist pressure for more militant action in the Le Havre cargo-handling industry in 1936-37. The Communist Party accepted the non-Communist leadership's tactics. Two explanations come to mind: the first is that the non-Communist union leadership conducted the trade-union struggle quite effectively and left little room for Communist criticism of its tactics, the second is that Communists took into account the "general interest of workers of the world" to unite in a broad anti-fascist front and avoided embarrassing their non-Communist allies, even if the latter were reputedly "anarchist" provided the latter did not challenge their national and international plan.

We skip the complicated events leading to the French declaration of war in September 1939 and the German occupation of Le Havre from June 1940 to September 1944, to focus next on the immediate postwar period. In many countries, the accumulated discontent of the economic depression of the late 1930s and war-time sacrifices, even when self-imposed in the name of antifascism, finally erupted in a labor upsurge expressed in expansion of union membership and activism, strikes and demonstrations: this was the case in the United States, Britain, Sweden for example. In France, however, the same discontent did not lead to a strike wave; the Communist Party discouraged strikes until the onset of the Cold War (spring 1947), in the name of continuing the struggle against Nazi Germany, then of reconstructing France and facilitating the adoption of certain reforms by the coalition government in which the PCF had several ministers.

Le Havre was heavily bombed then liberated by British and US forces in early September 1944. Thereafter, under the supervision of US military engineers and French civil servants, the port served as a major supply point for the Allied troops progressing against Germany until its surrender on May 8, 1945. During that time, the city was governed by a provisional commission including the Communist Party.<sup>15</sup> Once the traffic had become relatively steady, dockers began to demand their traditional right of

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<sup>15</sup> Marie-Paule Dhaille-Hervieu, *Communistes au Havre, histoire sociale, culturelle et politique (1930-1983)*, Mont-Saint-Aignan : PURH, 2009, pp. 163-208.



taking home materials that had fallen on the ground as well as overtime pay for night and Sunday shifts.<sup>16</sup> Despite food rationing, fuel shortages, substandard emergency housing and price inflation, these tensions did not lead to frequent strikes.<sup>17</sup> The single work stoppage that appears in the records took place on the afternoon of May 8, after the news of victory had arrived and US authorities suspended a number of dockers charged with theft. To protest the unwarranted searches and punishment, five thousand dockers did not return to work and demonstrated massively the next day behind their traditional non-Communist leaders. The sub-prefect promised to rectify the problem. This took place after the first round of the municipal elections on April 29 and before the second round on May 13.

The coalition in which the PCF stood lost the municipal elections of May 13, in part because of discontent with the provisional city government's lack of attention to the emergency needs of the working population. The PCF and its allies argued that such sacrifices were necessitated by the struggle against fascism. Despite its eviction from the Le Havre City government, the PCF remained interested in participating in national coalition governments and therefore in appearing as a factor of social peace. Thus, when Havrais dockers decided on a ban on working on Sundays in May 1946, the PCF reported on the movement with some distance, preferring to glorify the dockers' participation in the battle to keep France politically and economically independent and rebuild the port of Le Havre, despite the maneuvers of Vichy-supporters and the big corporations.<sup>18</sup>

To summarize the 1945-1946 strike situation, one can say that the rank-and-file dockers returned massively to the union and expressed discontent with certain work regulations and the general price inflation, but resorted to stoppages on very rare occasions. The non-Communist, formerly anarcho-syndicalist union leadership around Jean Le Gall, seems to have preferred negotiations to strike action, except on one brief occasion when it was able to embarrass the city government in which Communists participated in May 1945, and another, later in May 1946, possibly to show its independence from the national government in which Communists participated. We

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Aubéry, *Les Américains au Havre*, Paris : Bibliothèque française, 1948, pp. 87-88.

<sup>17</sup> ADSM 10 M 401. Travail. M. Botet, inspecteur du travail à Ministre du travail, 15 janvier 1945.

<sup>18</sup> On June 7, 1946, the local PCF newspaper, *L'Avenir du Havre*, wrote : « En dépit des manoeuvres des saboteurs vichyssois et des trusts, les dockers ont mené à bien cette lutte de titan qui a permis à notre pays de conserver son indépendance politique et économique. A cette gigantesque bataille nos dockers havrais ont brillamment participé ; ils ont ainsi contribué particulièrement à la renaissance de la France et de notre grand port.<sup>18</sup> » (quoted in Patrick Pasquier, « Les dockers du Havre 1928-1947 », *Mémoire d'histoire*, Rouen, 1973).

know from examination of internal union records that a major part of this non-Communist leadership had conciliated the Vichy government and had to account for their behavior once Le Havre was liberated. Moreover, during the Vichy regime, it had begun negotiations on a new dock labor scheme that was made into law, with many labor-friendly additions, on September 6, 1947, so that, after Liberation, it focused its efforts on the promotion of this future law rather than strike action. In other words, it avoided a sustained head-on confrontation with the PCF in the name of serving the needs of the rank-and-file and defending trade union independence against government pressure, except on May 9, 1945, when it could score an easy point against the city government in which the PCF participated.

During the same period, as we have seen the Havrais Communists tended to discourage labor conflicts in the port in the name of reconstructing the French economy. They were able to make a deal with the non-Communist dockers' leadership for a division of spheres of influence in the labor movement: the Communists abandoned the local Havrais dockers' union to the non-Communist leadership in exchange for the latter's neutrality in political matters and acceptance of Communist leadership in other local unions and the national dockworkers' federation. It is estimated that the non-Communists had the support of approximately seven thousand dockers and the Communists, five hundred.<sup>19</sup> The Communists decided to organize their supporters into cells, with a more political outlook, under the leadership of Albert Duquesnoy, and to include dockers among the eligible candidates of their slate in later municipal elections.<sup>20</sup> Here, the Communist definition of the general interest of the workers, defined as reestablishing French independence, overrode the desire to gain influence among dockers as the best defender of their professional interests against their employers.

Let us move forward some twenty-two years. Havrais dockers struck again during the May-June 1968 general strike in France. In the preceding two years, the national government led by De Gaulle was losing ground in the face of a rise of worker and youth discontent. Trade unions, including the national dockers' union, were putting forward bolder demands. In Le Havre, the city government was led by the Communist

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Aubéry, « Les dockers du port du Havre : de l'isolement et de la misère à l'organisation professionnelle », *La révolution prolétarienne*, 20<sup>e</sup> année, février 1951, numéro 348.

<sup>20</sup> John Barzman, « Dockers à l'Hôtel de Ville : délégués syndicaux ou conseillers municipaux ? Le Havre 1944-1956 », in Michel Pigenet (sld), « Le syndicalisme docker depuis 1945 », *Cahiers du GRHIS*, n° 7, 1997.

Party. The movement first gained momentum in the one-day general strike of May 13 against repression of the student demonstrations. A few days later, a number of industries decided to continue or resume the strike, leading to a vast social movement and the largest general strike in French history. In Le Havre as elsewhere, the movement began among students and cultural workers and spread to automobile, shipbuilding and electrical workers around May 16, and a bit later to most other sectors. Dockers participated in a massive and disciplined show of strength. In each industry, the PCF-led CGT tried to channel the multi-faceted unfocused desire for change into winning a slightly augmented version of the last set of demands put forward by the trade unions. In the dockers' union, the non-Communist leadership followed a similar approach. The Communists therefore participated in the strike of dockers and offered municipal facilities for meetings and rallies. Once a good compromise had been obtained on the various trade-union demands, they recommended an end to the strike. Differentiations occurred in some industries over the possibility of winning more than offered in their first proposal, or over the importance of prolonging the strikes, or some form of protest, until an initial political alternative to the Gaullist regime had been found. No such differentiation emerged in Le Havre or among dockers in any visible form. As a result, in this dockers' strike, the Communists were undistinguishable from the non-Communist leadership, both joining in the movement not too early, not too late, neither more militant nor more cautious, accepting the bounds set by the CGT national leadership.

The non-Communist dockers' leadership, guided at this time by Lucien Nolent, prided itself on having led a strike that gained new advances for the workers of the port transport industry, and having displayed solidarity with the rest of the working class. Quite naturally, the PCF had a more political and global explanation for its behavior in May and June 1968; it gave more attention to answering what it called its ultra-left critics. It argued that it had taken into account the general relationship of forces in France and had prevented a confrontation that was doomed to defeat, thus preserving the general interest of working people in France. The PCF and its leading union activists may have also tried to take into account the general interest of the workers from an

international point of view, involving the defense of French independence from the United States in the Cold War framework.<sup>21</sup>

Our review of Communist policy in five dockers' strikes in Le Havre shows that the immediate interests of the workers involved in the strike was not the only guiding principle of the party. In 1922, Communists participated without much specific strategy of their own, but nevertheless with a desire to win followers. In 1928, they criticized rather ineffectively the strike led by an anarcho-syndicalist leadership. In the three latter cases, 1936, 1945-46 and 1968, they accompanied the strike strategy of their non-Communist allies at the head of the dockers' union, but with political justifications which brought into play their own interpretation of the larger scene: the need to preserve a broad antifascist unity in 1936, to reconstruct the French economy in 1945-46, and to avoid uncontrolled militancy that might lead to a bloodbath and the end of the independent Gaullist foreign policy in 1968. The revamping of Communist Party work in the unions following the 1922 Comintern discussion may have enabled the party to influence strikes in France in general, as stated by Bertrand Badie, but, if so, the Le Havre dockers' union was an exception, perhaps due to the PCF's ineffective criticism in the formative strike of 1928, and its unpopular moderation when the established leadership was again in a weak position in 1945.

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<sup>21</sup> See for example this report on discussions between Pompidou and Séguy during the Grenelle negotiations : « Pompidou tried to convince Séguy that France would be weakened economically if the CGT's demands were met and this would profit the international, pro-Atlantic enemies of General De Gaulle's foreign policy." George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France: From Popular Front to Eurocommunism*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1982, p. 199.

Barzman Castelain Barcelona citation

John Barzman, Jean-Pierre Castelain. Workers of the world and workers of a single industry: Communist strike policy on the waterfront, Le Havre 1920-1970. Marti Marín Corbera,; Xavier Domènech Sampere; Ricard Martínez i Muntada. *III International Conference Strikes and Social Conflicts: Combined historical approaches to conflict. Proceedings, Barcelona*, [CEFID-UAB](#), 2016, 978-84-608-7860-5. ([halshs-02291917](#))