

INDUSTRIAL WORKER

OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

August/September 2009 #1718 Vol. 106 No. 7 \$1/ £1/ €1



Page 8 • Industrial Worker • August/September 2009

Book Review

Capitalism Is Transforming The African Working Class

Water, Mary-Alice and Martin Koppel
“Capitalism and the Transformation of Africa: Reports from Equatorial Guinea.”
Pathfinder Press, 2009. 150 pages, paperback, \$10.

By Heath Row

In 2005 and 2008, the authors and other reporters took two trips to Equatorial Guinea, a coastal country with a population of about 630,000—and one of the smallest in Africa. Since gaining independence in 1968 after 190 years of Spanish rule, the West African country experienced an 11-year dictatorship under Francisco Macias Nguema, human rights violations that inspired the exodus of more than one third of the country's citizens, and a coup led by the current president Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo. With the discovery of offshore oil reserves in the early 1990s and the arrival of American oil companies, the country is now the third largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the last two decades, Equatorial Guinea has experienced massive economic development, much of which has yet to translate to stable improvements in basic national infrastructure such as education, healthcare, electricity, and transportation.

“In the blink of an eye, historically speaking,” the authors write, “one of the most capital-intensive, technologically complex, and highly monopolized industries has been superimposed on a foundation of labor productivity that was the product of thousands of years of hunting, fishing, and subsistence agriculture.”

That collision—the introduction of globalization and the oil industry to a still largely pre-capitalist and -industrial society—makes for a fascinating opportunity for the mindful development and emergence of a working class, as well as workers rights. Yet this slim, readable, and insightful book indicates that in many ways, the opportunity is largely being lost.

In the chapter “Transformation of Production and Class Relations Highlights Realities Facing Millions in Africa,” originally published in the Sept. 8, 2008, edition of *The Militant*, Koppel indicates that the country has almost no manufacturing industry. Its food is imported from Cameroon, Spain, and other countries. Even the oil rig, construction, hotel, restaurant, and other workers are primarily brought in from other parts of Central and West Africa, as well as China, North Africa, Lebanon, and Iran. When you have to import the food, materials, and workers to support an economy that exports a country's wealth, in this case oil, what's left for the people who live in Equatorial Guinea?

Perhaps not even work. In the “Reporter's Notebook,” section at the end of the book, which I found most interesting, Waters suggests that there are very few Guineans working on the oil rigs and other infrastructural projects to support the oil industry. “Over and over you hear the comment that these businesses—and Equatorial Guinean ones too—don't hire Equatorial Guineans because Guineans don't like to work,” she writes. “Whenever we get the chance, we ask, ‘Why should they?’ ... There are individual alternatives to wage slavery and debt slavery, so why work?”

Indeed, while that could lead to an idyllic utopia, that can also make for some major disconnects between the country's populace and the working class. In one instance, a Cuban electrician remarked that maintaining the new electrical infrastructure is challenging because, while foreign companies came in to install underground cables, they didn't leave any plans or diagrams for their maintenance.

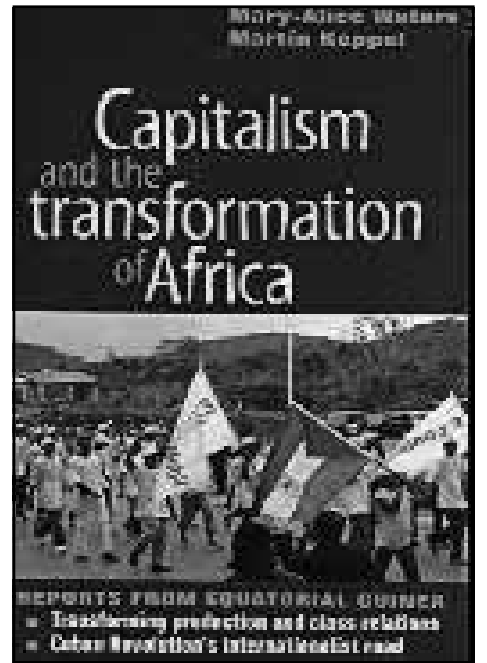
While the above two sections, which open and close the book, account for about 50 pages, the bulk of the text considers sectors in which Equatorial Guineans are taking more of an active stake, largely with the help of the Cuban international. In 2000, Cuba sent bri-

gades of medical workers to staff hospitals and public health centers in Equatorial Guinea. In 2006, the first class of doctors graduated from a medical school associated with the national university in Bata. Even though those graduates, as well as subsequent classes, are now staffing Equatorial Guinean healthcare facilities, they still need to persuade residents to seek medical care—and not the assistance of tribal healers, or curanderos, which can delay timely healthcare. Perhaps as importantly, if not more so, however, hardly anyone can afford such hospital care or stays. Many Equatorial Guineans live on less than \$1 or \$2 a day. A doctor's visit can cost \$225.

Part III, “Without Culture You Cannot Be Free” addresses the nascent culture industry, which is tightly tied to the educational system. The authors participated in the First Equatorial Guinea Book Fair in 2005, a groundbreaking event given that there are reportedly no printing presses or bookstores in the country. Educators at the National University of Equatorial Guinea hoped the event would help develop a culture of reading, as well as the documentation of Guinean literature and history. This section is composed primarily of transcripts of remarks given at the fair by Waters and Victor Dreke, then Cuban ambassador to Equatorial Guinea.

Even with those valid and valuable efforts and projects, the problem of the lack of an organized working class remains. “Working-class organization is illegal, as are strikes, yet there are initial signs of a proletariat being born!” Waters writes. It seems that it might be in Equatorial Guinea's interest to more strongly assert its citizens as employees of the global enterprises that are taking advantage of the offshore oil reserves. I also wonder whether some form of nationalized industry to support the country's growing economy and infrastructure might also be promising.

With increasing numbers of Equatorial Guineans becoming workers on



Graphic: africabookcentre.com

road and construction projects—many for the first time—and most of the skilled workers coming from other countries, there's also a sizable opportunity for organization and training to ensure that Equatorial Guinean workers don't miss out on the bounty being reaped by others—and that the country is left holding the keys to its own shop once the infrastructure is complete (or the oil is depleted).

Granted, it's still early days—non-oil industry in the country mostly includes a small bottling plant, a brewery (beer costs 50 cents, water \$3), and a cement factory—but those can be the most important days. The country still uses DDT to fumigate for malaria, for example. Safer methods “take a different level of labor productivity and social organization,” Waters says.

When should that labor productivity and social organization be established? Now. There's already a Rotary Club in the city of Malabo. If you can have a Rotary Club, you can have a union. Perhaps the introduction of the IWW would be a sensible next step.

Industrial Worker
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