

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 7: SAN FRANCISCO DOCKWORKERS: WINNING THE UNION-CONTROLLED HIRING HALL

Author: Peter Cole, Professor of History, Western Illinois University

KEY READING:

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In the US West Coast port of San Francisco, like in ports around the world before containerization, dockers suffered from very dangerous work conditions, low pay, and long hours. In addition, the hiring system weakened and divided dockworkers - who, in the United States are called longshoremen - by playing them off each other. Against such enormous challenges, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) organized successfully to win a union-controlled hiring hall with democratically elected 'dispatchers', who were union members.

Traditionally in San Francisco, hiring was done on a strictly "casual" basis, meaning temporary and with no guarantee of any further work beyond that specific job. Those in charge of the hiring process, known as the "shape-up", or simply the 'shape', often picked friends, people similar to them (same race, ethnicity, religion, etc.), and those willing to "kickback" some of their wages, i.e. pay a bribe. In San Francisco, two to three times every day, in designated locations near the waterfront, thousands of men crowded hiring bosses, desperate for work. In the words of one San Francisco longshoreman: "We have been hired off the streets like a bunch of sheep, standing there from 6 o'clock in the morning, in all kinds of weather; at the moment of 8 o'clock, we were herded along the street by the police...more or less like a slave market."



Not surprisingly, workers wanted control over hiring - often called decasualization. The “Big Strike” of 1934 that rocked the US Pacific Coast originated among longshoremen and spread to other maritime workers, crippling the entire region’s economy. Common demands included wages, hours and, union recognition. After weeks of brutal repression, the San Francisco Police killed two men—one a striking longshoreman, the other belonging to a different maritime union. Now called “Bloody Thursday,” the ILWU still commemorates it annually with memorial events and it remains a legal holiday for its members, written into its master agreement with the port employers. The killings ignited the historic four-day San Francisco General Strike involving more than 100,000 workers who struck in solidarity with maritime workers. Ultimately, the Big Strike lasted nearly twelve weeks, only ending after the federal government intervened. Federal arbitration took several more months, with the workers ultimately winning many of their demands. A few years later, in 1937, most Pacific Coast ports, including SF, split away from the East Coast dominated and more conservative International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) to form the ILWU.

West Coast longshoremen won unprecedented gains including—perhaps most importantly—a hiring hall, ostensibly jointly managed with port employers but largely controlled by the union. Other gains included: recognition of the union (in 1934, the ILA and, from 1937 onwards, the ILWU) as the workers’ bargaining agent; a 6-hour day and 30-hour week; major raises for hourly wage and time and a half for overtime (since shifts, ultimately, remained 8-hours, that meant all workers were paid overtime for the final quarter of each shift); a coast-wide contract with the same wages, hours, and general conditions in every port; employment preference for union members; and job assignments on a rotating basis through hiring halls operated by each local. Each year the rank-and-file in every local elected “dispatchers” who assigned work to union members in good standing when they presented themselves at hiring halls several times a day. In their first agreement after the Big Strike, San Francisco and other West Coast longshoremen won—in no small measure due to a sympathetic government—many of their demands. President Franklin Roosevelt and the US Congress, both more pro-worker than any before them (and perhaps since), facilitated these gains. though increasingly militant workers also pushed them to act. In 1933 the National Industrial Recovery Act established first-ever legal protections for



unions and collective bargaining, and workers around the nation, already engaged in a massive wave of activism, quickly pressed employers to recognize their unions and bargain with them. In the case of the West Coast longshoremen, after almost three months on strike, employers and workers agreed to accept the rulings of the newly created National Longshore Board (NLB), a federal body populated with presidential appointees. In late 1934, this board ruled in favour of worker demands including recognition of their union, reduction in hours, and major wage hikes. The NLB ruling also created a hiring hall jointly maintained by the union and employers though, crucially, the union chose the job dispatchers. These events also demonstrate the importance of the state to labour relations.

A sacred principle upon which the union's hiring hall operated involved equalization of work, meaning the union member with the fewest number of hours worked (in that quarter) was dispatched first. This "low man out" system was quite radical and gives a clear sense of how the ILWU implemented, in a practical way, its ideological commitment to equality. In the words of later Local 10 leader and historian Herb Mills, "The hiring hall was indeed 'the union.' It was the institution whereby the reality of community could be fashioned and maintained by men who had agreed to structure and divide their work on a fair and equal basis and who, through great strife and conflict, had won the right to do so." Given these ideals, it should come as little surprise that a number of ILWU members belonged to and/or were influenced by two distinct socialist traditions, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies).

In the mid-1930s, the ILWU successfully pushed for the creation of hiring halls in every port it controlled on the West Coast. While workers received no guarantee of minimum hours, the new process ensured that hiring took place without discrimination. Further, and atypical of most decasualization schemes, the ILWU equalized work opportunities (not earnings). The union did not mandate that workers had to report for duty, say, five days a week. Instead, they retained that part of the earlier, casual regime in which an individual decided when he reported for work. The union-controlled hiring hall replaced the anti-worker shape-up, promoting equal treatment among ILWU members, and went further by implementing an egalitarian "low man out" hiring system. The hiring hall was built upon a democratic foundation in which members voted for



dispatchers in annual elections held in each local. With the ability to select their dispatchers, fellow unionists all, the hiring process had been revolutionized as longshoremen no longer had to bribe hiring bosses or appeal to their prejudices. The union's success was acknowledged even by their bosses as T. G. Plant, leader of the Waterfront Employers Association, said at his organization's annual meeting in 1940: "joint control of the hiring hall and hiring policies has been converted into 100 percent union control. The union likewise controls work distribution." Plant referred to the hiring system that Lou Goldblatt, long-time ILWU leader and one of its many leftists, more fully explained: "The whole principle of equalization of work opportunities is what it amounts to. We don't have equalization of earnings under the contract; we have equalization of work opportunity, the basic idea being that under the system of rotary dispatch a man took his job as his turn came along." Also called "low man out," the member with the fewest hours worked in that quarter of the year gained the first chance at a job when reporting for dispatch at the union hall. This system ensured equal treatment and, the ILWU hoped, inculcated egalitarian ideals.

Crucially, factors like ethnicity, race, and religion no longer influenced the selection process, of particular import to African Americans, who had suffered greatly from previous racist practices. By contrast, in New York City and other non-ILWU ports Black union members were forced to shape for work as "extras," rather than as part of gangs, and were segregated into all-Black locals.

The hiring hall also provided a place for members to meet, see friends, catch up on the news of the day, and learn from one another. Cleophas Williams, a long-time Local 10 member, described it as the union's "nerve centre" for "that's where you told your stories." A Black man then in his late 80s reflecting on arriving on the waterfront in the early 1940s, Williams claimed he did not understand, at first, the nature of the occupation he stumbled into: "I learned early that I was cut off from this kind of interaction, living in [rural, racially segregated] Arkansas. I didn't live in a port city."

Perhaps no one has thought longer and more deeply about the hiring hall than Local 10 leader and trained sociologist Herb Mills, who believed the union's egalitarian principles and policies emerged out of the nature of traditional (i.e. pre-containerized) longshore work. Mills joined



Local 10 in 1963 and, a few years later, received permission for a hiatus from the docks to complete his dissertation at the University of California, Irvine, graduating in 1967. Fully registered in Local 10 the following year, he worked another twenty-five, served in multiple elected positions in Local 10, and never stopped writing and talking about longshore work and his union until his death in 2018. Mills contended: “The community which had been fashioned by and amongst the San Francisco longshoremen by the late 1930s was uniquely democratic and diverse, unified and stable, militant, impetuous, and audacious, progressive, and embattled because of an unusual unity that had come to exist between the daily occupational experience of its members and their organizational and political experience.”

In short, the work itself and the union determined the politics of the longshoremen which, in turn, shaped the union they built. “The history of this community from the late 1930s forward”, Mills continued, “simply cannot be understood except in the light of the concrete occupational experience of its members.” Mills was thinking about praxis, how the nature of the work shaped the ideology of the ILWU with the hiring hall and “low man out” system serving as concrete representations of the union’s ideals. In a 2011 interview, Mills concluded, “The hiring hall is the cornerstone of fraternity and unity because it shares the work,” while the dispatch system enshrined “equalizing opportunity to work and, therefore, some say equalizing income but also equalizing opportunity.” To Mills, the introduction of containers irreparably changed the work, weakened longshore culture and, thus, irreparably harmed the ILWU.

Before containerization but also, to some extent, after it was introduced, the ILWU preserved attractive aspects of casual work, most importantly that union members need not report on any particular day. Eric Hoffer, the famous “longshoreman philosopher” who wrote multiple books and countless syndicated newspaper columns while working on the San Francisco waterfront, repeatedly commented that he chose to work a few days followed by taking some off in order to write; sometimes, when focused upon a particular idea or on deadline, he did not report for a week or more. For those longshoremen not best-selling authors, Goldblatt added: “Conditions included working when you pleased. If you wanted a day off, you took a day off. If you didn’t feel like working that morning, so you didn’t turn [up]. The next day you’d plug in; the low man out system, you’d take your turn if you worked. We had guys who for years never worked the



week when the horses were running; they'd work Friday night, Saturday and Sunday—figured they made themselves a pay check with three days at overtime. Come Monday, they were down at the racetrack. Their way of living, that's all, and the waterfront meant that to them; other guys would work all the time.”

Numerous longshoremen have described taking trips to California's Sierra Nevada Mountains or Alaska to camp and fish, often with children. ILWU members hardly were the only ones who valued such freedom. Historian Andrew Parnaby also writes of Vancouver dockers who preferred to retain “the ability to choose when and where to work.” No doubt, flexible scheduling is attractive to many workers, including those with families, but few workers— particularly manual labourers paid hourly wages— have the power to compel employers to operate such a system. The ILWU, however, proved strong enough to retain this aspect of causal work though employers resented it and, in the mid-1960s, effectively imposed a new system that allowed them to bypass the hiring hall – the foundation of union power – to employ workers on a regular basis and hence known as ‘steady men’.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the reconstituted Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), representing US West Coast shipping corporations in matters with the union, pivoted to a technological approach to undermine the ILWU. The PMA did so through the Modernization & Mechanization Agreements (M&M), in 1960 and 1966, world-historic albeit controversial contracts in which the ILWU agreed to accept containerization and changes to work rules.

The ILWU and PMA signed their first M&M in 1960, essentially ending traditional longshore practices. As the US Maritime Administration later declared, “Overall, the single most important aspect of the container revolution has been the changing of the maritime industry from a labour-intensive to a capital-intensive one.” Given the centrality of the United States to the world economy, the importance of San Francisco as West Coast's premier port (into the 1970s when Los Angeles-Long Beach supplanted it), and strength of the ILWU, M&M held international ramifications. For the first time in this industry—worldwide—a union and employers negotiated over automation which would increase global trade by orders of magnitude.

Although the 1st M&M was historic, containerization did not take off in the early 1960s. Instead, employers instituted major changes to work rules, labelled “modernization,” resulting in



decreasing numbers of workers in gangs, heavier loads, and dramatic increases in productivity. The ILWU and PMA negotiated the 2nd M&M, another five-year contract that commenced in 1966. The 2nd M&M echoed the first in that PMA members—benefiting from massive profits as a result of modernization—again traded more money (in wages and benefits) in exchange for more control and changes to work rules. Moreover, a provision new to the 2nd M&M came under increasing criticism, particularly in the Bay Area where the PMA pushed hardest to hire “steady men.” The 2nd M&M also saw the abandonment of a guaranteed wage, supposedly because there would be no decline in the work (though, in fact, soon there was).

In 1971, after eleven years of accepting Harry Bridges’ recommendations on containers, 96.4% of ILWU longshore workers, coastwide, voted to reject the third contract of the container era and unleashed the longest strike in US longshore history, across 1971-72. This strike reflected the anger that many dockworkers, especially younger ones, felt about containers and how employers used had them to regain power. Yet despite the impressive commitment of rank-and-filers, led by Local 10, the strike did not alter the terms of earlier M&M agreements. Instead, containerization continued, fewer dockers worked on the waterfront, more of them more beholden to employers, and—while well compensated—their union had been weakened, official statements to the contrary.

By contrast, while the ILWU eradicated the shape-up from its ports in the 1930s, Atlantic and Gulf Coast ports— part of the ILA— did not do so until the 1960s. Thus, years after World War II, ILA longshoremen loudly complained about the shape-up while the most famous Hollywood film about longshoremen, Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront*, depicted the abuses of the shape-up in one of its most classic scenes. Historian Colin Davis writes, “The murderous image of the mobster and union officials was based on a violent reality...longshoremen both obtained employment and worked in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.” Since most ordinary longshoreman hated the shape-up, another explanation for why a strong union, the ILA, did not replace this hiring process is needed. It is reasonable to presume, given the well-documented corruption of its leaders and lack of democracy, that the leadership benefited from the process, in order to control a potentially rebellious rank-and-file while enriching themselves by inflating the rolls of dues-paying members as workforces with open hiring systems are several times larger than



those with more controlled access. When it came to hiring, then, a stark contrast between the two unions existed. Bridges described his view on these differences during a 1955 Congressional hearing: “We readily admit that so long as the industry is decasualized the peaks and valleys of demand for longshoremen will present problems, but we are not prepared to return to the jungle of the New York waterfront and the west coast of pre-1934 in order to have a permanent surplus of men available at each dock gate. That way is the way of sharing starvation and with it comes the kickback, the payoff, the corruption and the racketeering. We will never return to this.”

From its inception the ILWU had sought to eliminate aspects of longshoring that workers detested (the shape) and retain those they liked (choosing when to report). The union had replaced the shape with a dispatch system that eliminated favouritism and racism. Over time, as more Blacks joined Local 10, their votes in the election of dispatchers provided a further check.

By the mid-1950s, as a result of rank-and-file power and leadership savvy, San Francisco longshoremen became “lords of the docks”: ILWU members, including in Local 10, had created a hiring hall to eliminate discrimination and promote the equalization of work while maintaining a rare level of freedom for workers to choose which days or nights to seek work. Further, they were proud of their craft, as Mills described, “The work which was performed by the San Francisco longshoremen in the ‘good old days’ [pre-containers] required initiative, ingenuity, a willingness to cooperatively innovate, and a wide range of skills and experience.”

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Suggested readings:

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