

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

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

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SCRIPT OF THE VIDEO LECTURE

In the US West Coast port of San Francisco before containerization, as in ports worldwide, dockers suffered from 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 “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,” often picked friends, people similar to them— the same race, ethnicity, religion, etc.— and those willing to “kickback” some of their wages, i.e. pay a bribe. Two to three times every day, in designated locations near the waterfront, thousands of men crowded around hiring bosses, desperate for work to “shape up.”

Not surprisingly, dockworkers wanted control over hiring— often called decasualization— and they won it thanks to their “Big Strike” of 1934. The strike originated among longshoremen and spread to other maritime workers, crippling the



entire US Pacific Coast's economy. After weeks of brutal repression, San Francisco Police killed two men, a striking longshoreman and a member of another maritime union. Now called "Bloody Thursday," the ILWU still commemorates it annually and it is a legal holiday according to its coastwide agreement. The killings ignited the historic four-day San Francisco General Strike involving more than 100,000 workers. The Big Strike lasted nearly twelve weeks, only ending after the federal government intervened. 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 San Francisco, split away from the East Coast dominated and more conservative International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) to form the ILWU.

In the Big Strike, West Coast longshoremen won unprecedented gains including—perhaps most importantly—a hiring hall in each port, jointly managed but largely controlled by the union. The union hiring hall distributed work to dockers employed by multiple port employers. Other gains included: union recognition; a 6-hour day and 30-hour week; major raises in hourly wages and overtime (since shifts, ultimately, remained 8-hours, that meant all workers were paid overtime for the final quarter of each shift); a coast-wide collective agreement with the same wages, hours, and general conditions in every port, and; preference of employment 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.

A sacred principle upon which the 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 gives a clear sense of how the ILWU implemented, in a practical way, its commitment to equality. In the words of later Local 10 leader 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.”

Many ILWU members belonged to or were influenced by two distinct socialist traditions, the Communist Party (CP) and anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies). Crucially, factors like ethnicity, race, and religion no longer influenced the selection process, of particular importance to African Americans, who greatly had suffered from earlier racist practices. 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 African American leader, described it as the union’s “nerve centre” for “that’s where you told your stories.”

The Local 10 leader and trained-sociologist Herb Mills believed that the union’s egalitarian principles and policies emerged out of the nature of pre-containerized longshore work. Mills wrote: “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 determined the politics of the longshoremen and the union they built: 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.

By contrast, US Atlantic and Gulf Coast ports—represented by the ILA—did not eliminate the shape-up 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, *On the Waterfront*, depicted the abuses of the shape-up in one of its classic scenes. As historian Colin Davis wrote, “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.” ILWU President Harry Bridges described 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.” As containerization exploded, worldwide in 1970s, union dockers struggled to adapt to this entirely new system – you can learn more about this in the key reading for this video lecture.

But on the US Pacific Coast by the mid-1950s, as a result of rank-and-file power and leadership savvy, San Francisco longshoremen became “lords of the docks.” The ILWI hiring hall to eliminate discrimination and promote the equalization of work provide inspiration to today’s struggles of casualised and precarious workers across the world.