

A Century of Struggle on the New Orleans Docks



DOCKWORKERS trying to get work during the Great Depression.

Starting from the conditions on the New Orleans docks today, the author traces the history of the longshoremen's struggle focusing on the national question and the role of Black/white unity. The author is a resident of New Orleans and an activist in the people's struggles there.

In early August, longshore gangs walked off two New Orleans ships in a wildcat strike that lasted two hours. The reason—a white Harbor Policeman had arrested a Black longshoreman for “disturbing the peace by talking loud” when ordered to move his car off the wharf. He was protesting that there was no other place to park and that foremen and supervisors were not told to move *their* cars. The gangs didn't start work again until the man was released and returned to the ship.

Such incidents are fairly common on the New Orleans waterfront. Although New Orleans is the second largest port in the U.S. and third largest in the world, working conditions for longshoremen are worse there than in almost any other port in the country, large or small, including other ports in the deep South.

No port in the country has good longshore conditions. Longshore work is hard and dirty. The eight or twelve men “in the hole” may stow or discharge several hundred tons of sacks, drums full of industrial chemicals, boxes, bales of cotton, or rubber in one day, taking the cargo off pallet boards and stacking it in ship holds or sending it out to the wharf. New developments allow cargo to be stowed in containers and barges at non-longshore pay in factories or non-union ports “upriver” and loaded directly onto the ships, cutting hundreds of jobs for longshoremen. Because the companies are in a big rush to get the work done quickly and increase their profits, there is always a danger of cargo falling onto the backs of the longshoremen working below. Injuries and deaths from falling, drowning, etc., are commonplace.

CONDITIONS ON THE DOCKS

Near the riverfront in New Orleans, it is common to see longshoremen changing clothes in the street, their cars jammed and squeezed in any space available. There are no locker rooms, no showers, no bathrooms fit for human use, and no parking lots.

Often longshoremen must submit to searches by the FBI, U.S. Customs, and Harbor Police (a police force maintained by the Port Commissioners or Dock Board, the agency which regulates the port and is composed of representatives of big business). While longshoremen are arrested and thrown off the river for stealing a shirt, the police are always absent when truckloads of cargo and bargeloads of grain are stolen by racketeers and freight companies.

Each day New Orleans longshoremen go to the “hiring center” to see if they have a job. They have to compete with each other for jobs in the shape-up, a hiring system that goes back over 100 years. Some other ports have a guaranteed weekly income—but not New Orleans. Some other ports have a rotation hiring system that guarantees fair distribution of work—but

not New Orleans. In other ports, all longshoremen are in one union local—New Orleans is the only port left that still has Jim Crow segregated unions.

Why is it that longshoremen in the world's third largest port work under such bad conditions? Why is it that conditions here are even worse than in ports on the West Coast or in the North?

IN THE HEART OF THE SLAVE SYSTEM

New Orleans is one of the largest cities in the Black Belt. Although it now handles commerce from the whole country, it became an important port during the first half of the nineteenth century, handling the commerce of the deep South—the heart of the slave system. In those days, ships arrived bearing slaves as cargo and left carrying the products of slavery—mainly sugar and cotton—to industrial centers in New England and Europe. The riches of New Orleans came from slave labor.

Although the commerce of the port was totally dependent on slavery, slaves were very rarely used for longshore work. Longshoremen were “free” wage earners, proletarians. Most of them were white. There was a reason for this—longshore work was so dangerous that it was unprofitable to use slaves. It cost \$500 or \$1000 to replace a slave killed on the job, but to replace a wage worker, all they had to do was hire another one. Many white immigrants and poor white farmers forced off their land by the big slave-owners thus became longshoremen.

Like workers all over the world, the longshoremen soon realized that the only way to better their conditions was to organize and fight. In 1849, the screwmen—skilled dockworkers who could fit the maximum amount of cotton into a ship hold—formed the Independent Screwman's Benevolent Association. This was one of the first unions ever formed in New Orleans and the deep South. During the 1850s they led a series of strikes with other groups of longshoremen joining in. By the time of the Civil War, most white dockworkers had formed unions, along craft lines.

The Civil War broke the power of the slaveholders. Thousands of freed slaves came to New Orleans. Many got jobs on the docks. Although they were excluded from the white unions, they formed unions of their own.

The newly freed slaves brought into the labor movement a long history of resistance and struggle against oppression. Joining with the Black people who had been freed before the Civil War, they marched, demonstrated, and fought for equal rights and treatment on the job.

The real nature of the Reconstruction government has been covered up so much by bourgeois historians that not many people know what it was really about. The government was set up to suppress the old slaveholding Southern ruling class and to restructure society. Reconstruction, a time of

fierce class struggle, benefited the great majority of people, white and Black—the freed slaves, small farmers and workers made big economic and political gains during this time.

During Reconstruction the foundation was laid for what has been called the “golden age of New Orleans labor.” Starting right after the Civil War, the tendency in the labor movement and on the docks was towards greater and greater unity between Black and white workers. The dockworkers' unions, starting in 1886, began to strike together. By fighting together, they improved wages and working conditions so much that by the 1880s New Orleans had the highest wages and best working conditions of any port in the country.

Although in the beginning the bosses would use white workers to scab on Black strikes and vice versa, by the 1880s the New Orleans longshoremen had such a reputation for unity and militancy that the bosses couldn't even get scabs from as far away as St. Louis and Louisville.

CAPITALISTS CONSOLIDATE

But the 1870s was not just a time for the growth of the labor movement. The Northern capitalists had consolidated their victory over the slaveholding class. Although they didn't want the slaveholders running the country, they definitely didn't want the workers and poor farmers running the country, either.

In 1876, the Northern capitalists agreed to let the plantation owners re-establish their power fully in the South. The Reconstruction governments were no longer useful to the capitalists, so they were sabotaged and control of local government began to fall back into the hands of the former slaveholders. The planters began to smash the gains that had been made by the people. The former slaves and poor whites in the countryside were reenslaved, turned into sharecroppers. Their new schools, their new political freedoms were destroyed by the night-riding Ku Klux Klan terrorism. In cities such as New Orleans, they moved on the labor movement and the political rights of Black people.

The main weapon that the slaveholders used against the masses of people was white chauvinism. The system of segregated unions on the waterfront proved fertile ground for using racism to bust the unions. The police and employers had always used divisions between Black and white workers to smash strikes.

During periods of upsurge in the labor movement, this tactic did not work. The longshoremen stuck together. But in times of economic crisis, the number of jobs fell off. The newspapers, controlled by capitalists and former slaveowners, pointed to the Black workers and the masses of Black

people fleeing starvation and Ku Klux Klan terror in the countryside as the cause of the crisis. The shipowners tried to make deals with the white or Black longshoremen, promising them jobs if they would work for lower wages and under worse conditions.

In the "Panic of 1873," the first depression after the Civil War, fighting broke out between white and Black longshoremen. But the power of the people was still strong. The longshore unions were set back, but they continued to grow.

1880 saw almost a year of strikes led by Black longshoremen. Wages were raised from 30 to 40 cents an hour. Longshore unions, supported by a group of revolutionaries known as the Labor League, won a contract for the first time. Out of these struggles came the Cotton Men's Executive Council, a united front of longshore unions that had equal representation from each union.

During the 1880s, New Orleans became one of the strongest labor cities in the South. Black and white unions of the same crafts met in the same halls. Some unions integrated. Black and white workers marched in labor parades. When a Black longshoreman was murdered by police in a strike in September, 1880, 3000 Black and white workers attended his funeral in a Black church. Three Black and three white longshoremen were his pallbearers.

ATTACKS ON THE PEOPLE

As the century drew to a close, the people's rights and living standards were being attacked throughout the South. Black people, denied any possibility of assimilation into the U.S. as equals, continued to develop into an oppressed nation within the South. The position of Black people was used as a tool to gain huge profits for the big landowners and to attack the standard of living of poor whites. But in New Orleans, the unity of Black and white workers and the militancy of the Black people in defending their rights prevented this from happening as rapidly.

In 1892, the labor movement was strengthened by affiliation with the AFL. More union charters were issued in New Orleans in 1892 than in any other place except Indiana, Illinois and Ohio, and big strikes soon followed. The stevedores and ship owners tried to undermine the basis of Black and white unity, but failed. The longshoremen won, and the unions accused the companies of trying to divide them. The longshore strike was the forerunner to a wave of strikes that ended in the New Orleans general strike of 1892.

In the general strike, which was fought over the issue of the 9-hour day and the closed shop, employers tried to get the white unions to sell out and

abandon the Black unions. But they were unable to break the strike this way, and the workers won in three historic days. 1892 proved to be the high tide of the labor movement in New Orleans.

The next year brought another depression. Competition for jobs was fierce. The Black screwmen were expelled from the Cotton Men's Executive Council when they demanded that they be hired in proportion to their numbers. This caused the CMEC to fall apart, as the Black workers realized that it would no longer fight for them. With the planter class and capitalists firmly in control of the state machinery, the press, and the police, the stevedores and shipowners manipulated the situation. They agreed first to hire only whites, then only Blacks, meanwhile driving down wages. Open fighting broke out on the wharves as 200 armed white screwmen and off-duty police wearing masks invaded the wharves and threw Black workers into the river. Police standing around arrested no one. The racist mobs seized the wharves and refused to let Black people work.

Black screwmen issued a call for a Black united front of labor. At a meeting of 1500 Black people, a people's trial found the screwmen and police guilty of racism.

HOWITZERS ON THE WHARVES

By 1895, when the state militia occupied the wharves with howitzers and gatling guns, the longshore unions were totally destroyed. Segregation and Jim Crow had become the basis of the legal system in the deep South. Black people could no longer vote. In 1896 and 1897 racist mobs swept through the Black communities burning and killing. The "golden age of New Orleans labor" had ended and the "Jim Crow" decade had arrived. The entire labor movement was in shambles; the AFL organization fell apart and was chased from the city.

The events of the 1890s consolidated the grip of the old slaveowning class on the South. Their power and the power of the Northern capitalists who financed them, was built on the ruins and wreckage of any rights that the masses of people of the South once had. It was especially built on the sweat and blood of the Black people, on the back of an oppressed Black nation in the Black Belt South. This change was part of a transition that the whole country was making.

The American bourgeoisie had become an imperialist bourgeoisie, a small group of monopolists that made billions—not just from exploiting the workers of its own country, but from enslaving and oppressing whole nations, both inside its own borders and overseas.

This change was also reflected inside the labor movement. With the superprofits extracted in the colonies, the imperialists bought off an influen-

tial section of the movement, creating a "labor aristocracy." The AFL had been in the forefront of the labor movement, but by 1900, under the control of the labor aristocracy, it had come to represent only the most narrow craft form of unions. The AFL leadership began to hold back and sabotage the struggles of the masses of unskilled and semiskilled workers in heavy industry. They especially sabotaged the struggles of the emerging Black proletariat and the whole working class in the South.

When the AFL was revived and regrouped in New Orleans around 1900, the economic crisis and the racist offensive by the ruling class had wiped out the high wages and good working conditions in the city. They had destroyed the unity of the working class. But the AFL did not come back to New Orleans with a plan to rebuild that unity and fight the capitalists; it came back with policies that were in total agreement with the racist Jim Crow system that had become entrenched in the South.

GOMPERS DEFENDS JIM CROW

Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, spoke to an assembly of Black trade unionists in New Orleans in 1900. He told them that Jim Crow was here to stay, and that if they wanted to be in the unions they would just have to accept second place. This sell-out of the masses of Black people and the great majority of the working class continues to this day. The AFL was willing to go along with the national oppression of Black people and the unorganized state of basic industry in return for being allowed to organize the highly skilled workers.

By 1900, the majority of longshoremen in New Orleans were Black. The dock unions united again to form the Dock and Cotton Council and in 1902 all dock unions affiliated with the International Longshoremen's Association, an AFL union. Although the ILA was one of the few AFL unions that admitted Black people, it kept to the old system of having segregated locals.

During World War I, a high density cotton press was invented which made the work of screwmen obsolete. By this time Black longshoremen outnumbered white longshoremen by four to one, yet the work was divided fifty-fifty.

A series of strikes from 1921 to 1923 by white screwmen to save their jobs at the expense of Black longshoremen left the unions with no power at all. Company after company ignored the contracts and hired non-union labor, starting with the United Fruit Co. (now United Brands). For almost fifteen years the ILA locals had no contract and most longshoremen didn't even belong. Between 1923 and 1933, the ILA unions battled each other, with the white union trying to get control of the Black union.

The Great Depression brought more wage-cuts and even worse condi-

tions. U.S. foreign trade collapsed, falling off 65%. Thousands of longshoremen were thrown out of work. The depression also brought a great upsurge in struggle against the capitalists. Great union drives shook every branch of industry. Many of these struggles were led by the Communist Party, which at that time was a revolutionary organization. Even the South, the stronghold of the non-union shop and the company town, saw waves of strikes. The Communist Party armed the working class with the knowledge that all workers must fight for the self-determination of the Black Belt nation in order to build true class unity. Lack of this firm foundation had allowed the ruling class to divide the workers time and time again with white chauvinism.

The rising strength of the working class movement forced the government to pass the National Labor Relations Act, accepting for the first time that workers have a right to organize unions. The New Orleans Steamship Association realized that they couldn't continue to ignore the struggle for unionization, and so, in 1933, they set up two company unions and signed contracts with them. The ILA, based on class collaboration and white chauvinism, went so far as to try to revoke the charters of the two ILA unions and charter the company unions.

MILITANCY ON THE WEST COAST

Meanwhile, on the West Coast, longshoremen were organizing. Oppressive conditions, high unemployment, low wages, and having to bribe foremen to get jobs, would no longer be tolerated. In 1934, all maritime trades, longshoremen, teamsters, and sailors started a wave of strikes that eventually became a coast-wide general strike. When the ILA leadership, led by Joe Ryan, tried to sell the strike out, the angry longshoremen threw the ILA off the West Coast. By 1937, they set up the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) and affiliated with the CIO.

The ILWU established a rotary hiring system controlled by the union. They outlawed all discrimination in the union and on the job. They won a six-hour day for eight hours pay. They threw the gangsters and racketeers out of the union.

These events shook the ILA to its roots. By this time, New Orleans had become what it is today, the worst port in the country for longshoremen. Shippers around the country refused to raise wages, pointing to New Orleans' low wages and bad conditions as an excuse. A Gulf Coast strike in 1935 was broken by diverting cargo through New Orleans. Finally the ILA threatened an East Coast and Gulf general strike, causing Roosevelt's secretary of labor to intervene. For the first time in twelve years, the ILA won a contract in New Orleans.

True to its scab history, however, the ILA's first major move was to charter the two company unions. These two scab unions were converted into ILA 1418 and 1419 by a stroke of the pen.

In 1937, the new ILWU set out to organize the Gulf. They got a contract with Morgan Lines. The ILWU began to organize the longshoremen, opposing discrimination and company unionism. They took up the fight against the old shape-up hiring system.

The ILWU campaign attracted wide support from both Black and white longshoremen, who saw a chance to have a fighting democratic union for the first time. They rapidly signed enough workers to qualify for an NLRB election.

SHIPOWNERS RUN SCARED

The shipowners and businessmen got worried. They had not had to contend with a united longshore work force for over 40 years. The government, press, shipowners, and the ILA leadership all united against what they saw was a common threat—a militant organized group of longshoremen demanding better conditions.

In 1934, the Louisiana legislature called the ILWU "communistic" and said that "organization of Blacks" was a threat to white supremacy. Soon afterwards, the New Orleans Police Dept. destroyed the ILWU headquarters and arrested its organizers. Just before the NLRB elections, the New Orleans Steamship Association gave a big raise to the ILA.

In spite of all this, the NLRB still had to rig the elections to defeat the ILWU, restricting voting so much that most longshoremen did not qualify to vote.

Soon after this, the most militant longshoremen were blacklisted and driven from the river. The Communist Party, after abandoning its revolutionary line on the national question, could no longer provide leadership to unite the longshoremen and lead the struggle on the docks. The development of revisionism in the Communist Party under the Browder leadership caused the party to retreat entirely from communist work, on the docks, throughout the South, and nationwide. The ILA leaders consolidated their grip on the waterfront and have held it ever since.

Today neither the ILA nor the ILWU is serving the real needs of the rank and file longshoremen. As the present economic crisis deepens, the unions need to fight to make the bosses pay for the crisis. Instead, the longshore unions are sacrificing the interests of the workers to preserve the position of their bureaucracy.

This has made the ILA one of the most corrupt unions in the country. Union funds are "lost" by one bureaucrat after another; the rights of the longshoremen are sold out under the table; and violence and blacklisting

are used openly against militants.

The capitalists would like nothing better than to see a depression with no protest or action on the part of the working class. They are counting on their old stand-bys—sell-out unions and their racist policies—to serve them again. They are hoping to use the port of New Orleans as an example again to slash wages and throw longshoremen out on the streets.

Shipping to the port of New Orleans is off 12% this year, yet not a word was heard from the union leadership except "you knew when you came out here the work gets bad sometimes." While the rank and file has been demanding that unemployed longshoremen have their dues payments suspended, the last ILA convention passed rules to expel members when they fall 80 days behind on their dues.

At a time when unity of the longshoremen is crucial, the leadership of the two New Orleans locals are the most outspoken opponents of doing away with the Jim Crow union system. While the harbor police form their own SWAT squad for the wharves to deal with the rank and file upsurge, and the steamship lines violate the contracts left and right, the union leadership busies itself attacking the rank and file.

SEGREGATED LOCALS — OBSTACLES TO THE STRUGGLE

The longshoremen of New Orleans have never taken such attacks lying down. In the past 40 years, there has been wave after wave of struggle, especially in Local 1419, the Black union. But the struggle against the companies and against sell-out bureaucrats can never be successful if it is carried out by only one local at a time. The whole history of the port shows that the system of segregated locals is the single biggest obstacle to the longshoremen's struggle. The vicious oppression of Black people on the job and in their communities is one of the main props of the ILA leadership and the capitalist system itself, and longshoremen must fight against it to retake control of the unions and struggle against the companies. New Orleans' location in the Black Belt makes it doubly important to understand the history of the port and how the national oppression of Black people is responsible for the fact that New Orleans has the worst port conditions in the country.

The struggle against the steamship companies and the sell-out unions is intensifying all across the country. Longshoremen in many ports have formed rank and file caucuses. In New Orleans, the ILA Brotherhood Caucus has demanded an end to the segregated locals and the formation of one militant democratic union local that fights for all the longshoremen.

Before it's over, the present crisis will bring worse hardships for longshoremen than ever before. The struggle against the bureaucrats and their racist policies is becoming more and more a question of survival! Unity and class struggle are the weapons that longshoremen need for victory!