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**Working for American Rights:
Black, White, and Mexican American Dockworkers in Texas
During the Great Depression**

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**Working for American Rights:
Black, White, and Mexican-American Dockworkers in Texas
During the Great Depression**

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In the 1930s, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) in Texas, a union with black and white members organized into segregated locals, expanded to include Mexican American dockworkers. Though the racially segregated structure of the union reflected the Jim Crow norms of Texas society, and many white members of the union strongly endorsed the concept of white supremacy, the ILA also challenged segregation by acknowledging a common identity for its members across race lines.

For all ILA members, the union was first and foremost an organization to defend their rights as worker-citizens. To them, citizenship was a compact; in exchange for loyalty to the country and doing their duty on the job, they were guaranteed protections that would allow them to fulfill their role as breadwinners by earning a decent wage. But

different interpretations of worker-citizenship created conflict among dockworkers. While all ILA men and their wives shared the goal of defending their rights as workers, not all workers had the same rights to defend. The most profound differences in workers' understandings of the labor movement developed because Mexican Americans and African Americans sought to secure many of the rights of citizenship that white longshoremen took for granted. They saw the union as an appropriate vehicle through which to eliminate this incongruity by expanding their access to rights off the docks and actively used their segregated locals to those ends.

Along with different interpretations of the union's purpose, blacks, whites, and Mexican Americans also had different experiences of their class position. For white longshoremen, the experience of class was an isolated one in which they were alienated from whites of other classes. Mexican Americans and African Americans, on the other hand, regularly engaged in cross-class alliances and found positions of respect within their racially defined communities.

Though the tension between devotion to white supremacy and multiracial unionism was never resolved, the ILA endured because all members shared a belief in the importance of the labor movement and the ability of unions to improve their lives.

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Introduction

Drifting Back to Slavery

At the International Longshoremen's Association's (ILA) annual convention in 1939, Freeman Everett and Reverend Jones, both from black Houston Local 872, spoke in favor of a resolution for the union to adopt an official Funeral Service. Much of the Funeral Service focused on the importance of the labor movement or "organized brotherhood," which was "the strongest tie on which we may depend to maintain a freeman's standard of living and to keep our civilization from drifting back to slavery."¹

Jones was the official chaplain for Local 872 and had a large role in composing the service. Everett was not only President of that local, the oldest local of the union in Texas, but had also emerged as a leader in the black community of Houston. In the past two years he had joined the executive board of the local branch of the National

¹ Proceedings of the 29th Annual Convention of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the International Longshoremen's Association, 1939, T331.88 In8, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 102.

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had made several speeches to large crowds about the importance of unionism, and had also led the membership drive of the Young Men's Christian Association. At this convention, Everett and Jones spoke before a crowd of representatives from most of the segregated locals of the Gulf South. The document they presented served both a ceremonial and a pedagogical purpose. When read at graveside it memorialized deceased union members. When used in its abbreviated form it educated incoming union members in the values and purposes of the ILA, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The assembled representatives voted to adopt the "Funeral Service for Local Unions," endorsing its interpretation of the importance of the labor movement. After this point all incoming members, whether black, white, or Mexican American, would be educated with words written by African American leaders of the union.

According to the Funeral Service, the recently departed would earn his eternal reward for protecting the "Rights of Man," which are "the right to organize for our own protection and the liberty of the press and free speech. These rights are stated in the American Constitution."² The authors also credited unions with making "the normal life the proper standard of living and ... [placing] that standard within the reach of the working man and his family."³ The service ends with the prayer: "Make Thou the Labor Movement Thy means to this Thine end and purpose for our troubled world and lives."⁴

² Ibid., 103.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 105.

The language of the Funeral Service is representative of the way that longshoremen of the ILA spoke about themselves and their union. They emphasized the importance of brotherhood in their speeches. They spoke openly and often about Christianity and Christian values. Most importantly, they saw themselves as men fighting for their constitutionally guaranteed rights, which included access to the “normal standard of living.” Longshoremen often described themselves as family men, and the duty to provide for their families, to fulfill their role as breadwinners, drove many of their wage demands throughout the thirties. As was standard for all AFL unions in the thirties, the ILA limited its membership to American citizens. In so doing, they created a community of members who shared a common identity that potentially obscured their differences. The ILA in Texas in the 1930s was a multiracial union composed of black, white and Mexican American members organized into segregated locals, but all were citizens concerned with protecting their rights and providing for their families. These seemingly common goals could have united them had their understanding of these goals been the same.

The words of the Funeral Service indicate that the union was more than a pragmatic association to fight for wages. For some it became a fictive kin network, and for most it served as a way to protect citizenship rights. Avowals of brotherhood and demands for civil rights were more than convention rhetoric or public relations; they motivated the actions of ILA members. But a close reading of the actions of ILA members, taken in conjunction with their words, reveals a great divide within the organization. All members attributed a greater purpose to the union, but not the same

greater purpose. Race shaped this divide – not simply in that white racism separated people, though it did, but on a deeper level: Men in the three racial groups lived in segregated worlds and experienced American citizenship differently. Their distinct experiences shaped separate conceptualizations of the labor movement.⁵ This dissertation explores the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that longshoremen assigned to the labor movement. It focuses on their divergent experiences and understandings of citizenship, masculinity, and class.

The ILA became an interracial organization in Texas in the 1910s when white Local 1273 joined the black Local 872 and the two created a system to maintain their segregated locals but share all work evenly. My dissertation examines the union and its race relations twenty years later when the initial excitement of forming an interracial union had long since vanished. While other authors have addressed the reasons why blacks and whites chose to work together, this study examines the shape and limitations of interracial cooperation after many years of struggling to work together. The Depression made work more scarce and amplified tensions between the races, particularly over the equitable distribution of work. At the same time, blacks and whites who had two decades of experience working side-by-side faced a new situation in the mid-1930s when they decided to incorporate a large number of Mexican Americans.

⁵ In part, this dissertation seeks to respond to Eric Arnesen's question, "What's on Black Workers' Minds?" In his article of this title, Arnesen challenges labor historians to look at the labor movement from the point of view of African Americans who have too often been portrayed as passive victims subject to the racism of their coworkers or work competitors. In this work I examine the union and the labor movement from the point of view of all the members of the union. Many studies of interracial unionism seek to explain why white workers chose to ally themselves with non-whites. This dissertation addresses that issue, but further explores to what purposes non-whites put their union, investigating their motives and perspectives as well. Eric Arnesen, "What's On Black Workers' Minds? African American Labor and the Union Tradition in the Gulf Coast" *Gulf Coast Historical Review*, Fall, 1994, 5-18.

In the port cities of Texas, “southern” beliefs about black inferiority met “southwestern” beliefs about the foreignness of Mexican Americans.⁶ In the ILA these different systems co-existed awkwardly. The bi-racial system of locals was developed to maintain division between black and white workers. As Mexican Americans were incorporated into the union their position was unclear. More white than black, they were organized into locals that were assigned the designation “white.” However, they were not allowed into locals that worked higher paying jobs because both black and white longshoremen saw them as “foreign.” Within this complicated mesh of racial beliefs, African Americans were able to assert their superiority over Mexican Americans within the union, if not outside of it.

Segregated locals both challenged and supported Jim Crow.⁷ White ILA members were products of Jim Crow and, as such, saw racial segregation as both natural and less likely to make their organization suspect in their local communities. Still, even a

⁶ The geographic area under study also falls into the region that Neil Foley described as a borderlands between west and south, where two different systems of racial ideas come together. See Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-16.

⁷ There is a growing historiography on the importance and meaning of interracial unionism. Daniel Letwin has described how segregated locals were shaped by Jim Crow and unionists chose to organize in this bi-racial form in order to be less offensive to Jim Crow norms. *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Michael Honey has conversely argued that even bi-racial organizations were “profoundly unsettling” to Jim Crow standards in *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Bruce Nelson’s recently published *Divided We Stand* challenges the long-cherished assumption that CIO interracial cooperation transcended the racism of the time period. He finds that white workers quickly worked to re-establish their supremacy within the interracial organizations. *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also “Symposium on Daniel Letwin: The Challenge of Interracial Unionism,” *Labor History*, February 2000, 63-90.

I argue here that both Honey and Letwin are correct. Bi-racial unionism was both a response to and a challenge to Jim Crow. However, the segregation of the ILA locals did not create a mirror of Jim Crow segregation. Segregated locals created a union with power dynamics different than those of Jim Crow society and thereby challenged it. Black and Mexican American longshoremen also used their locals as sites of activism to challenge the racial inferiority they face both inside and outside of the union.

biracial union “profoundly unsettled the segregation system” by acknowledging that whites, blacks and Mexican Americans had common cause for joining together and cooperating. It acknowledged a common identity among these men and women. In addition, segregated locals created a system in which white members did not have the total control that they wanted of the union. Over time, the number of African American locals grew and so did their representation on union committees and its executive board. Still, no group had total control over the union. White workers endorsed Jim Crow segregation, but it did not deliver the uncontested power they desired.⁸ Instead, union segregation distributed both work and power, enabling black workers to exert control over their lives and forcing white workers to compromise.

For all ILA members, the union was first and foremost an organization to defend their rights as worker-citizens. To them, citizenship was a compact: In exchange for loyalty to the country (expressed through their anti-communism) and doing their duty on the job, they were guaranteed protections that would allow them to fulfill their role as

⁸ Alex Lichtenstein contends that non-whites may have preferred segregated locals over interracial locals because this guaranteed them control over those locals, the ability to elect their own leaders and make their own decisions. This is certainly true of the men of the ILA. For example, the President of the district was white throughout the thirties, despite the fact that the union was majority black. Segregated locals did give black and Mexican American ILA members more control. This dissertation argues that they did not want this control merely to make work-related decisions, but for what they could do off the docks without white approval or permission. Alex Lichtenstein, “Exploring the Local World of Interracialism,” in “Symposium on Daniel Letwin: The Challenge of Interracial Unionism,” *Labor History* February 2000, 63-67.

breadwinners by earning a decent wage.⁹ The Funeral Service authors determined that a “normal standard of living,” which allowed a man to provide for his family, was a basic right of American citizens. They also cited the right to organize for their own protection, which they wrongly attributed to the Constitution, as a basic right of citizenship. Their interpretation of these rights was inspired by the programs of the New Deal. The ILA, along with a significant portion of the American working class, embraced the new rights, real and inferred, that New Deal programs granted them.¹⁰

With this definition of citizenship, ILA men embraced a particular understanding of manliness. The union members portrayed themselves as a community of breadwinners; most of them, though not all, were married, family men, pursuing homeownership. This manliness certainly had private meaning to the men who saw themselves in this light, but it also served the public purpose of justifying their wage demands. However, this emphasis on manhood also required their wives to play dependent roles. Wives of longshoremen organized themselves in the 1930s into Ladies

⁹ Clare Sheridan refers to this interpretation of citizenship as economic citizenship. She argues that there has long been a connection between citizenship and earning; for a considerable time only those with a certain earning capacity were seen to deserve citizenship. In her study, she argues that workers in 1920s Texas “embraced the idea that citizens are *owed* an opportunity to make a living wage by virtue of their citizenship.” The men of the ILA would share this view. “Contested Citizenship: National Identity and the Mexican Immigration Debates of the 1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* Spring 2002, 19.

¹⁰ T. H. Marshall has outlined how the meaning of citizenship in a liberal state evolves or rather builds over time, largely through the acts of government and how they are interpreted over time. According to Marshall, the rights of citizens began as civil rights, expanded to include political rights and in the 20th century have expanded to include a set of basic social rights, including rights to a certain status and standard of living. In the United States, the New Deal established social rights through programs like Social Security. I argue that longshoremen were caught between fighting for political rights and social rights with white longshoremen particularly feeling entitled to the right to a standard of living enjoyed by middle class whites. Black and Mexican American dock workers had the strange experience of being part of a union which was experiencing an expansion of rights under the New Deal but simultaneously belonging to racial communities with constricted rights. For a greater explication of Marshall’s theory as well as other theories about the meanings of citizenship, see *The Citizenship Debates: A Reader*, ed. by Shafir Gershon, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

Auxiliaries that supported the ILA locals during strikes and also engaged in activities to build up the Texas labor movement. These proactive and driven women publicly embraced their gendered dependency to further the goals of the ILA. However, women sometimes had different interpretations of appropriate manliness than their husbands, whose understanding of respectable manliness included acts of violence.¹¹

Violence also provided an arena in which dockworkers experienced moments of true interracial solidarity. Violence usually took place when their ability to fulfill their role as breadwinners was threatened. When scabs took their jobs, color lines temporarily lost their force, as union men attacked those who threatened their livelihood. Under these conditions, white and non-white ILA men together attacked scabs of multiple races. The strikes analyzed in Chapter Two provide an opportunity to explore the way that violence, both received and given, changed racial dynamics, temporarily uniting men through shared experiences of abuse and transgressions of the law.

On the other hand, when peace reigned on the docks, different interpretations of the meaning of worker-citizenship created conflict among dockworkers. Both white and black longshoremen acted on their perceptions of privilege. The actions of white longshoremen reveal that they saw themselves as having a superior claim on the rights of citizenship, especially the right to a “normal standard of living.” White workers acted to secure an advantage within the union and saw their non-white brothers as competitors for control over job contracts, often leading to conflict within the union. White workers

¹¹ In my gender analysis I am in part inspired by the work of Melinda Chateauvert, who posited that the discourse of masculinity used by sleeping car porters required that their wives meet certain expectations of dependent behavior. See Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

endorsed the racial status quo and in their interactions with non-white union members tried to enforce the rules of the larger society. Products of the Jim Crow South, white longshoremen interpreted worker-citizenship according to their beliefs in racial superiority. This allegedly unifying identity was easily fractured by white privilege. Chapter One describes this conflict in detail, focusing on debates over division of work between blacks and whites and highlights the difference in power dynamics between the union and Jim Crow society. This alteration of “normal” power relations angered white longshoremen who expected the union to maintain white privilege.¹²

White and black longshoremen shared a sense of privilege over Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans had to argue with their own union “brothers” to have access to work that was rightfully theirs. Both blacks and whites in the union limited Mexican American members to the lowest paying work. White and black ILA members did not extend equal access to the benefits of the union to Mexican Americans because Mexican Americans were not as “American” as they were. According to the dominant racial thinking of Texas, Mexican Americans did not meet a basic definition of citizenship: simple *belonging*.¹³ Therefore, they were least deserving of the rights of citizenship. Mexican Americans may well have had their own prejudicial interpretations

¹² This chapter also explores the relationship between Mexican Americans and African Americans in the union, not just the relationship each group had with whites. The dearth of studies on the interactions between different non-white groups, whether they be cooperative or competitive, is problematic. Most studies assume that these groups form their identity and activism strategies solely in relation to whites, but this study makes clear that African Americans had clear ideas about Mexican Americans that they used to justify their superior claims to rights.

¹³ Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s excellent study examines the connection between labor and citizenship and how gender is central to the construction of citizenship. *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 54.

of who best met the requirements to benefit from worker-citizenship, but due to their small numbers and brief history in the union, they lacked the power to act on them.

While all ILA men and women shared the goal of *defending* their rights as workers, not all workers had the same rights to defend. The most profound differences in workers' understanding of the labor movement developed because Mexican Americans and African Americans sought to *secure* many of the rights of citizenship that white longshoremen took for granted.¹⁴ Though the men and women of the ILA embraced a somewhat common understanding of their position as worker citizens and their dependents, ILA men experienced citizenship differently by race. Black and Mexican American ILA members found themselves in a somewhat unusual position: As members of the union they benefited from the expansion of rights for workers and made use of the National Labor Relations Board. But New Deal programs did not address citizenship inequalities like electoral restrictions or segregation of public facilities. Because of their involvement with an AFL-affiliated union, they saw their citizenship rights and

¹⁴ In general the 1930s are recognized as a time when the labor movement grew because the federal government granted important protections for workers. These protections aided the growth of industrial unionism which in turn allowed people of color, who usually did not qualify for membership in craft unions, to join the labor movement in larger numbers. But the labor movement is still understood as largely a white phenomenon. Here I argue that people of color who joined the labor movement did so on their own terms. They changed unions by bringing their own interpretations of what union should and could do. Additionally, their experience of the New Deal was different than that of white workers who felt validated; people of color also felt validated as workers but not as citizens in other ways. These experiences were not compartmentalized. Even Lizabeth Cohen's fine study of unions in Chicago, which is sensitive to distinct life experience of workers of color, attributes to all workers a common vision of the union under the changes made possible by the New Deal. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

protections in work-related areas expand, even as their civil and political rights remained limited.¹⁵ They saw the union as an appropriate vehicle through which to eliminate this incongruity by expanding their access to rights in these other areas. They took the union's rhetoric to heart, which the white membership believed fully applied only to them, and made it their own.

The Funeral Service's words "drifting back to slavery" hint at the expansive meanings the union had for its African American members; the union was a part of a larger freedom struggle. African Americans believed that the purpose of the union was to fight for their access to the "Rights of Man." But for them, the union had to tackle inequality on a greater scale. They saw the labor movement as part of a larger effort to keep the black community from "drifting back into slavery." They used their segregated locals to move toward the fulfillment of the promise of emancipation.

Mexican Americans had a similarly broad understanding of the union's purpose. They also used the ILA to resist discrimination. Like African Americans, they saw the labor movement as inextricably connected to their pursuit of equal citizenship rights in Jim Crow Texas. They used the political connections of the ILA for the benefit of their

¹⁵ Gary Gerstle argues that the New Deal did not fundamentally alter the nature of citizenship away from a racialized nationalism which granted full inclusion in the polity for all white Americans. He points to the fact that Mexican Americans and African Americans benefited much less from the New Deal because they generally worked in un-organized, agricultural jobs which were excluded from labor protections and Social Security benefits. See Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 162.

Suzanne Mettler demonstrated that the way in which New Deal programs were implemented reinforced a position of privilege for white men who much more than women or non-whites received benefits directly from the federal government. Women and people of color often faced discriminatory treatment at the hands of state run programs. She argues that this created a two-tier citizenship in which white men were national citizens and people of color and women were citizens of state and local governments. See Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

racially defined community. Unlike African Americans, Mexican Americans also looked to membership in the AFL as a means to emphasize their American identity and counter the racialization that marked them as foreign and therefore undeserving of those rights.

Acting on their interpretations of the labor movement took blacks and Mexican Americans off the docks and into their communities.¹⁶ Chapter Three demonstrates that both African Americans and Mexican Americans felt a responsibility to improve their racially defined communities. United with other people in their racially defined communities through common experiences of discrimination and common problems originating in segregation and racism, they used their segregated locals to build up their respective communities and address social problems. They acted as civic leaders as well as labor movement boosters.¹⁷

Their role as community leaders demanded that they address disparities in citizenship rights for their larger communities as well. Chapter Four explores the overtly political activism of ILA members. Blacks and Mexican Americans used the union's name, political connections, and the membership of their locals to strive for equal citizenship. Among other activities, African Americans joined nation-wide electoral

¹⁶ The men of the ILA were motivated not just by how they could use the union in their work-related negotiations, but also by how they could use their union off the docks. Their identity as workers and union members was tied into their place in the larger community and the activities in which they participated, as well as their relationships with their wives and families. If one only looked at what the union did on the docks, one would see only a small fraction of the union's activities. But the community based activities of the union reveal the full meanings of "rights," "brotherhood," and "citizenship," important motivational goals and identities, to the men and woman affiliated with the ILA. Nancy McLean challenged labor historians to look beyond the workplace in "Race-ing Class, Historicizing Categories," in "Symposium on Daniel Letwin: The Challenge of Interracial Unionism," *Labor History*, February 2000, 73-77.

¹⁷ Emilio Zamora finds a tradition of concern for the community among Mexican and Mexican American workers in Texas, stretching from mutual aid societies into early labor unions. See Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993).

struggles while Mexican Americans desegregated economic opportunities for other workers in their communities.

The bulk of these chapters are set in the port city of Houston. In 1925, the completion of the Houston Ship Channel greatly expanded the shipping capacity of the port of Houston, which gradually eclipsed Galveston as the main port of Texas. As such, it had the state's largest concentration of longshoremen. The city also had the largest black population of any Texas city and a significant Mexican American community.¹⁸

Black and Mexican American members knew that the problems of industrial capitalism could not be separated from the racism and discrimination they faced off the docks. The labor movement and their freedom struggles bled together. It has long been a truism that the American Federation of Labor discriminated against non-white workers and championed white supremacy. If one looked at the words and actions of the white members of the ILA one would find that pattern maintained. Yet modest numbers of African Americans and Mexican Americans have long been part of AFL unions, despite its well-earned reputation for discrimination. The actions of the non-white members of

¹⁸Only a handful of studies have been done on the Mexican American and African American communities in Houston during this era. See Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999) and Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: the Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) for studies of black Houston activists during the 1930s. Julia Kirk Blackwelder's study of beauty colleges in Houston adds important information about the Houston black community, especially opportunities for women. *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training during Segregation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003). Arnoldo de Leon's work remains the most thorough examination of the Mexican American community in Houston. *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston* (Houston: Mexican American Studies Program, University of Houston, 1989). Thomas Krenneck's biography of community leader Felix Tijerina also gives insight into the growing middle class in Houston during the 1930s. *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur and Civil Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001). For analysis of black working class activism, see Ernest Obadele Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2000).

the Texas ILA reveal a vastly different AFL. Black and Mexican American members of the ILA did not see themselves as intruders or guests in a white union. They made the union their own and used it to anti-racist ends. They put the name and reputation of the AFL and ILA to their own uses, affiliating these organizations with both the NAACP and LULAC. They used their segregated locals for ends that would have made AFL union leaders squirm, no less their union brothers who valued white supremacy.¹⁹

Along with different interpretations of the union's purpose, blacks, whites, and Mexican Americans also had different experiences of their class position. Again, Mexican Americans and African Americans had more in common with each other than either did with their white union brothers. For white longshoremen, the experience of class was an isolated one in which they were alienated from whites of other classes. Mexican Americans and African Americans, on the other hand, regularly engaged in cross-class alliances and found positions of respect within their racially defined communities.

¹⁹ There is a growing body of literature on the connection between civil rights activity and labor unions. Michael Honey broke ground with his work which argued that labor unions formed an important foundation for the civil rights movement. He found that the ILA in Memphis was a training ground for black activists to learn skills which transferred to the civil rights movement in *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*. Eric Arnesen explores the fight of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters for working rights and civil rights. *Brotherhood of Another Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality*. Robert Rodgers Korstad examines how southern tobacco workers organized to take advantage of the opportunities of the New Deal and World War II. They saw that this required enfranchisement of southern blacks, thus connecting labor and political rights. *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Though it is difficult to define precisely what comprises a working class identity; all ILA members demonstrated a concern with and affinity for working class issues. They recognized that, despite their many differences, they occupied a similar position vis-à-vis their employers.²⁰ For black and white longshoremen, their positions on the job were nearly identical. They made the same wages and faced equally the lack of opportunities to advance into supervisory positions. White longshoremen could perhaps aspire to better jobs outside the industry, but those options were limited, at least temporarily, by the Great Depression. Mexican Americans had fewer opportunities than their white and black brothers who discriminated against them and generally refused to share their higher paying longshore jobs with them. Still, they all recognized a common identity as workers, which was demonstrated in the effort that all three groups dedicated to furthering the labor movement, supporting the development of other labor unions, and recruiting new members in the ILA.

Although these men shared a common class position in that they held similar positions of power in relation to their employers, they did not experience the same status in their racially defined communities. Outside of the union, white workers enjoyed rights that their union brothers were denied. They could vote in any election, serve on juries, send their children to better schools, seek treatment in good hospitals, and gain admittance to any movie theater, restaurant, or hotel. However, though white workers clearly enjoyed more of the “Rights of Man” than their colleagues, the middle class white

²⁰ I say similar positions because white workers had occasional advantages. For example, employers treated white longshoremen more respectfully in regular meetings than they did non-whites. Their common race may have brought white longshoremen some advantages but overall the power dynamics were similar.

community did not hold them in high regard. White longshoremen had a reputation for drunkenness and violence and were viewed with disdain by many members of the larger white community in their Texas ports.²¹ White workers did not associate with upper and middle class whites. They interacted with other working class people and earned their respect, but were isolated from other classes. Their strikes received little widespread support.

Mexican Americans and African Americans, whose access to citizenship rights varied but did not equal those of their white union counterparts, enjoyed respect and prestige in their respective communities.²² Though they did not make more money than white members, and in the case of Mexican Americans made considerably less, they were respected as community leaders in a way that eluded white longshoremen. They became integral members of race-based communities that were united by problems that crossed class lines. They enjoyed interactions with other classes, social standing, and community influence. The relative positions of each group within their racially defined community stretch our understanding of the boundaries of class.

Many scholars of African American and Mexican American history see a sharp division between the middle class and the working class, especially in regard to labor issues. Conventional wisdom argues that the middle class generally advocated

²¹ Ruth Allen, *Wage Earners Meet the Depression*, University of Texas Bulletin no. 3545, Bureau of Social Science Research, 59.

²² Mario Barrera argued that middle class Chicanos were not middle class in the same way as Anglos. Rather they are integrated into the middle class as a subordinate segment based on race. Additionally, they are simultaneously part of a larger Chicano internal colony. They share with other members of the internal colony certain attributes, such as language, culture, and experiences of discrimination. Inspired somewhat by Barrera, I argue here that working class Mexican Americans and African Americans were not working class in the same way as their white counterparts. They are part of cross-class, racially defined communities. See Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 100-103, 212-218.

accommodation and more conservative activity.²³ However, the black men and women affiliated with the union bridged the gap between the working class and middle class members of the black community. ILA men worked closely with the NAACP, were leaders in their churches and other civic organizations. Mexican Americans worked with LULAC and with other organizations to sponsor community-wide cultural celebrations. Through these interactions, Mexican American and African American longshoremen gained the support of middle-class members of their community. They were integrated into their larger communities, while the white workers' experience was more insular.

These divergent experiences and meanings had consequences for the ILA, as Chapter Five demonstrates. Not all members of the white locals were content with the craft unionism approach of the AFL and some white workers advocated changes within the union. But these rank and file dissidents failed to convince most black and Mexican American ILA members that change would improve the union. These self-titled Progressives could not see the union from their non-white brothers' points of view and therefore could not articulate an argument for change in a way that would appeal to their concerns. Outside organizations like the CIO also attempted and failed to win the support of black Texas longshoremen.

The words that ILA members used to describe their goals and identities as citizens also contributed to the invisibility of their different interpretations. All longshoremen

²³ See, for example, Brian Kelly, "Beyond the Talent Tenth: Black Elites, Black Workers, and the Limits of Accommodation in Industrial Birmingham, 1900-1921," *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950*, eds. Charles M Payne and Adam Green (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 276-301.

invoked the same set of symbols and words, the language of Americanism. This language was flexible and ambiguous enough to encompass the different racial groups and their divergent goals.²⁴ However, this language had limitations as well; it confined ILA members to an acceptable, “American” range of ideas. In the red scare environment of 1930s Texas, debates about the union’s future played out in a language of Americanism, and union leaders succeeded in portraying most alternative organizing strategies as suspect and un-American.

Devotion to white supremacy and to multiracial unionism never co-existed peacefully. Though at times, one or the other ideal dominated, the underlying tension between these two contradictory ideas was never resolved. But despite these powerful contradictions, the multiracial unionism of the Texas ILA was not transitory; it began in the 1919s and has endured because all members shared a belief in the importance of the labor movement and the ability of unions to improve their lives. Additionally, all members benefited at least to some degree from union membership. Pragmatically, they recognized that, with few skills, they could not successfully bargain with their employers without large numbers affiliated with the union. Given the composition of the workforce

²⁴ In *Working Class Americanism*, Gary Gerstle has ably described how the ambiguity of the language of Americanism could encompass divergent movements. Gerstle defines Americanism as a “political language ... [used] to articulate ... political beliefs and press [for] political demands.” The Funeral Service demonstrates many of the traits of Americanist language that Gerstle outlines: It invoked the democratic ideals of America by referencing “rights” and “freedom.” It called upon Americans to recognize traditional values like Christianity. Gerstle argues that the emphasis on Americanization programs in the 1920s created such a preoccupation with “being American” that Americanism became the dominant political language of the 1930s. The ILA used this language to make their demands. Gary Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 8.

on the docks, a multiracial union made the most sense. But the system of segregated locals also endured, as explored in the Epilogue, in large part because it allowed for ILA members to act out their different interpretations of the union. The men and women of each racial group made the union their own.

Chapter One

The Limits of Brotherhood

May 8, 1939

Representatives from most of the 118 locals of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the International Longshoremen's Association gathered in Corpus Christi for their annual convention. As usual, the program began with a series of speeches welcoming the members and their families and praising the spirit of brotherhood that is the basis for any union. This year the ILA members of the SA&GCD convention were honored to be joined by the International President himself, Joseph Ryan. In his spoken remarks, Ryan emphasized the patriotism of the membership, celebrating their loyalty to their country and the relationship that they as worker citizens had with the government that had, through the New Deal, finally recognized their rights to an American standard of living.

The mood of the convention should have been celebratory; not only had the union survived years of Depression, it had grown in numbers and strength. The assembled men and women were greeted with solemn speeches by District President M.J. "Mickey"

Dwyer and Vice-President D.H. “Doc” Hamilton. Both speakers praised the accomplishments of the past eight years. Wages had increased, hours had decreased, the number of locals had grown dramatically and the union had won back control of New Orleans, a success which would increase wages in all Texas ports.¹

However, neither man could ignore the obvious tensions within their own ranks. Their words of congratulations were tempered with disappointment and concern. Hamilton and Dwyer openly discussed the struggles for power and control of work that divided the black, white, and Mexican American men of the union. As Dwyer pointedly put it, the union needed to “be able to give some time to building up our organization, instead of spending most of it trying to settle disputes between Locals.”² As the problems of the Great Depression waned, the open conflict among union members intensified. Though Dwyer and Hamilton wanted to focus union efforts on strengthening the organization, specifically by fighting against the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ incursions into their territory, in-fighting required that they put valuable time and energy into managing their own membership.

Who had control over the union, especially regarding proper apportioning of work, was the central issue of debate at the convention in 1939, and it broke down clearly along racial lines. The simple process of seating the delegates and reviewing the rules on

¹ New Orleans had been unorganized for much of the 1930s and wages had been quite low there. Shipping companies used the low wages of New Orleans to argue that wages in Texas should also be low. If wages became too high in Houston, Galveston or other Texas ports, shipping companies claimed that they would re-route their shipments through New Orleans to save money. Taking back control of New Orleans allowed the ILA to negotiate for common wages throughout the region and thereby eliminate that threat.

² Proceedings from the 29th Annual Convention of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the International Longshoremen’s Association, 1939, T331.88 In8, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 20.

the opening day of the convention revealed much about the limits of brotherhood. The reading of the rules of the convention sparked controversy. Rule 17 stated that no member could speak favorably of the CIO.³ Additionally, the delegates seriously considered removing a Houston delegate, a known CIO sympathizer. No Mexican American delegates took their seats; financial difficulties prevented the Mexican American locals from attending. In their stead, the Houston compressmen sent an incendiary letter of complaint about mistreatment by their black and white union brothers. African American delegates likely slightly outnumbered white delegates, much to the chagrin of many white longshoremen. Black and white delegates and their respective wives sat separately, blacks on the left side of the aisle and whites on the right.⁴ However, more than an aisle separated black and white longshoremen at this convention; both desired control over more work and blamed the other for their financial problems. White longshoremen wanted white privilege to extend into the union; they wanted the greater share of work for themselves and were frustrated that the large black membership prevented this. Blacks wanted to solidify a more equitable distribution of work and defend against white encroachment on their share of the work. Mexican Americans sought fair treatment at the hands of their union brothers. These internal divisions belied the brotherhood the union proclaimed.

³ Proceedings from the 29th Annual Convention of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the International Longshoremen's Association, 1939, T331.88 In8, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 16.

⁴ Gilbert Mers describes this segregated seating system for joint meetings between locals 1225 and 1224 in Corpus Christi in Gilbert Mers, *Working the Waterfront: the Ups and Downs of a Rebel Longshoremen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 32.

Dwyer and Hamilton's leadership of the District represented the union ideal: a partnership of black and white men working towards common goals, placing loyalty to the ILA and AFL above the divisions of race, while still respecting society's rules of segregation. Dwyer belonged to an all-white Galveston local. Hamilton led his all-black Galveston local. In addition to being Vice-President of the Gulf Coast District, he held the position of Sixth Vice-President of the International. Hamilton's impressive leadership positions could certainly be interpreted as a political statement against Jim Crow. But Hamilton and Dwyer's relationship was indicative of the more complex relationship between the ILA and standards of segregation. The interracial cooperation represented by these men defied Texas norms, but also had its limits.

The interracial nature of the ILA required that whites work with and publicly offer respect for their African American and Mexican American co-workers. For example, when Hamilton passed away later that summer, decorum (and perhaps sincere respect and sadness) required that Dwyer attend and speak at his funeral. Dwyer praised Hamilton's contribution to the labor community. Dwyer crossed out of his white world, entered the very black space of Hamilton's funeral, and publicly lauded his colleague's accomplishments. Interracial cooperation pushed all ILA members into one another's worlds at times. White workers had to respect the authority of leaders like Hamilton who had the power of the ILA structure behind them. When committees met, they were composed of members from all locals and were therefore interracial.

Despite their obvious awareness of the racial boundaries that structured their lives, neither Hamilton nor Dwyer spoke openly in public about race. Dwyer had alluded

to the problem of racism in the sanitized language of the union where racism was simply seen as an aspect of disputes over sharing work. Hamilton did not address the race issue directly in his remarks. Hamilton held the highest position achieved by a black man in the ILA and he certainly had not attained it by raising the issue of white racism. He “stated that he is proud of the fact that he was one of the first negroes to take the stand for the A. F. of L. in this district.”⁵ The four thousand African Americans who attended Hamilton’s funeral considered him a community leader. He certainly did not gain their respect by ignoring the racial problems that blacks faced. However, Hamilton tried to keep peace within the union by avoiding direct talk about race. With the exception of praising their interracial cooperation, avoidance was the ILA party-line , even though more than a few ILA brothers would violate this union standard while venting their anger over unfair job distribution within the union.

Though union convention rhetoric portrayed the ILA men as brothers united by common values, this unity was threatened by tensions over sharing work. White and black workers remained dedicated to segregated locals despite the fact that this structure worked against an equal and reliable distribution of work. While the union sought to protect the ILA’s work from intrusion by non-union workers and succeeded in expanding their control of work, each local also had the responsibility to provide work for its members. Segregated locals put whites, blacks and Mexican Americans at odds with one another in their struggle to secure ample work for their own members. Because their locals were segregated and their members believed that whites, blacks and Mexican

⁵ Proceedings, 1939, 8.

Americans had different claims on work, they came to be competitors for work rather than brothers in defending work. When their mutual enemies (the ship owners and stevedores) were at bay, these internal tensions became dominant. The members could not be united when they embraced the idea of difference and the legitimacy of segregation.

In *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, Michael Honey argued that segregation worked to the advantage of most white workers, but in the case of the Texas longshoremen, it actually created a strange alteration of “normal” power dynamics. Because black longshoremen numerically dominated the longshore trade, they had more locals and greater numbers in those locals. When whites asserted their desire for more of the work, they confronted this demographic reality. Segregation should have secured the most and best work for them. In the form it took in the union, segregation meant they had to share power and, in their eyes, too great a share of their work with their black co-workers.

The place of Mexican Americans vis-à-vis whites and blacks within the union also differed from the “normal.” Within the union Mexican Americans occupied the lowest position in the hierarchy whereas outside the union Mexican Americans had a superior legal standing and more electoral access than African Americans. For example, the Democratic Party did not exclude all Mexican Americans from voting in the all-white primary as it did African Americans. Yet within the union, blacks had a much greater

voice than Mexican Americans in determining union affairs.⁶ Mexican American ILA men had the least say in union matters and their concerns were often ignored. The jobs they performed were the least prestigious and least remunerative.

Despite these problems and the example of interracial CIO locals, few men considered integration a reasonable solution to their problems. Black and white longshoremen even rejected the idea of working in the same holds in segregated gangs, though this had been the system in the 1910s.⁷ The words and actions of longshoremen of the time make it clear that white longshoremen, for the most part, viewed themselves as superior to their non-white colleagues and wished to assert their proprietary claim on a more than proportional share of the work. They felt a sense of entitlement that overrode the claims of their “brothers.” At the 1939 convention, members spoke about protecting their “sacred right” to work. All ILA men desired to fulfill their roles as breadwinners and viewed the ILA as the best means to that end. They felt the support of the

⁶ Bruce Nelson examines the relative positions of Mexican American and black longshoremen in Los Angeles, CA in the 1930s. His findings are quite different than my own. White longshoremen in LA found Mexican Americans less threatening than blacks and welcomed them in greater numbers in segregated longshoring locals. Mexican Americans in LA outnumbered blacks 3 to 1, but whites overwhelmingly dominated. This reinforces the importance of demographics both to the security of white workers and to the ability of non-whites to move into better positions. Bruce Nelson, “The ‘Lords of the Docks’ Reconsidered: Race Relations Among West Coast Longshoremen, 1933-1961,” in *Waterfront Workers: New Perspective on Race and Class*, ed. by Calvin Winslow. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 179.

⁷ Two different explanations have emerged for this change which took place in 1918. According to Bill Follett, a white longshoreman, “there was a whole lot of pressure applied off the waterfront by the powers that be in Houston ... business people, politicians.” Bill Follett, interview by George Green, 29 August 1985, transcript, Oral History Collection, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections. According to C. H. Chambers, a black Houston longshoreman interviewed in 1936, the split happened because of “fights and trouble in the hatches.” In other words, white and black workers fighting amongst themselves, not outside pressure. Notes from Interview with C H Chambers, 1 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. In chapters three and four I will discuss the community activism and civil rights activities in which these segregated locals were involved – which may partly explain why integration didn’t seem to serve their purposes. Also, in fostering integration, the union could have faced resistance from the larger community and would certainly have faced accusations of communist influence.

government in this endeavor through New Deal programs and rhetoric. However, they could not agree among themselves who had a greater claim on the right to work with dignity, for wages ample enough to support their families.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the ways that the New Deal shaped ILA members' definitions of citizenship. Then, after a brief history of the union and a description of longshore work, it turns to the central issue of the chapter: internal divisions with the ILA; looking first at disputes between black and white longshoremen over control of work and then at the efforts of Mexican Americans to push black and white ILA members into treating them fairly and with respect.

The New Deal Years

When Dwyer and Hamilton secured their positions as President and Vice-President, the ILA in Texas was nearly non-existent. The proceedings of their annual convention in 1931 demonstrated the weakness of the union. Only four ports paid dues that year – Houston, Galveston, Texas City and Corpus Christi. Only 24 locals remained in the union in the entire district. Worst of all, Dwyer and Hamilton had to explain to the assembled representatives the rate cut that they had accepted in the contract negotiated after their failed strike earlier that year. Hourly wages were reduced from 80 cents an hour to 65 cents an hour. The new contract also reduced the amount paid per bale in

cotton work, which was paid by piece rather than by hour.⁸ They could only explain that under current conditions, this was the “best that could be obtained.”⁹ These rates remained in effect until 1934, after which the union experienced an extended period of growth in numbers and consequent growth in influence.

Hamilton, Dwyer and other ILA officials credited the union’s post-1934 growth and the subsequent increase in wages to two factors: interracial cooperation and the New Deal. After the National Industrial Recovery Act passed in 1933, the ILA began an energetic organizing campaign with Hamilton at the helm. By 1934 the number of locals in the district had increased from 24 to 53.¹⁰ At the 1934 convention, a resolution for more professional organizers, written by rank and file members, attributes the growth directly to the NIRA, “Whereas, since the National Industrial Recovery Act became a law ...we have been successful in gaining a great victory in the above named ports.”¹¹ Their great victory included an agreement with the Master Stevedores Association for one wage scale covering all Texas ports and Lake Charles, LA. The agreement reduced the work week from 48 hours to 44 hours and raised wages as much as 23 percent in some ports.¹² This change represented a dramatic recovery from the previous years, and union growth

⁸ Bill Follett., interview by George Green, 14 August 1987, transcript, Oral History Collection, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, 2.

⁹ Proceedings of the 21st Annual Convention, 1931, 27.

¹⁰ Proceedings of the 24th Annual Convention, 1934, 20.

¹¹ Proceedings of the 24th Annual Convention, 1934, 64-65.

¹² Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention, 1935, 10.

continued throughout the 1930s. By 1939, 118 locals belonged to the SA&GCD.¹³ Membership increased from 5,000 to 19,000 between 1934 and 1939.¹⁴

The ILA members' embrace of the New Deal was evident in the way that longshoremen spoke about President Roosevelt. Interviews with ILA members in 1936 reveal a universal support for his re-election.¹⁵ During a campaign visit to Houston in 1936, "All ILA Locals greeted President Roosevelt with a large banner, many flags, cheers and a well known competent band composed of members of Local 872."

Although their overall support was clear, ILA members were not completely uncritical of the New Deal. They criticized the decisions of the National Labor Relations Board at times, and they suffered from the reductions in cotton production mandated by New Deal programs. But they also identified strongly with the New Deal. When Dwyer was called to Washington in 1934 to testify about regulating the shipping industry, the knowledge and authority of ILA men were being recognized and respected by the federal government. NLRB decisions in the ILA's favor made real the government protection for workers about which FDR eloquently spoke.

Longshoremen embraced the language of Americanism, making Roosevelt's rhetoric their own by articulating a connection between union and country. Speaking to a crowd during their 1935 strike, one ILA member said that all he and his brothers wanted were "the rights of every worker that we thought were guaranteed to him under the

¹³ Proceedings of the 29th Annual Convention, 1939, 23.

¹⁴ Untitled newspaper clipping from *People's Press*, 28 July 1939, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 2, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁵ All longshoremen who were questioned about their feelings about the election expressed support for FDR's re-election. Black and white longshoremen follow the expected pattern of joining the "New Deal coalition" of voters.

constitution of the United States.”¹⁶ When International President Joseph Ryan addressed the ILA in 1939, this connection had become firmly entrenched in the minds of ILA members. His words resonated with the membership, “It is very easy to be an American patriot ... because when you are true to your organization you will be true to your country.”¹⁷

The words and actions of ILA men indicate that they, like so many other working men, saw themselves as worker citizens. Through their labor, ILA men believed they had earned certain rights: the right to a decent wage to provide for their families, freedom from employer harassment, and government protection. Nelson Lichtenstein argues that through the New Deal and the rhetoric of the Roosevelt administration, “An ‘American’ standard of living was becoming a right of citizenship.” In addition, Lizabeth Cohen has convincingly argued that one of the most significant accomplishments of the New Deal was the “attitudinal changes it produced in a generation of working class Americans who now looked to Washington to deliver the American dream.”¹⁸ Black, white and Mexican American ILA men all participated in this new relationship between workers and government and adopted this new vision of citizenship, but did so separately and with different and often conflicting interpretations of their rights.

¹⁶ “Dock Strikers Air Case at Mass Meeting,” *Houston Post*, 18 October 1935, 2.

¹⁷ Proceedings of the 29th Annual Convention, 1939, 10.

¹⁸ For Nelson Lichtenstein’s argument on the incorporation of “standard of living” into the meaning of citizenship during the New Deal, see Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 25-29. For the Cohen quote, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 289.

Roots of a Segregated Structure

From its inception, the ILA in Texas employed a system of segregation. In 1913, John Bell Williams, an African American longshoreman, moved from New Orleans, where he had been an ILA member, to Houston and founded Local 872. Black workers had dominated the longshore industry in the Gulf South since before the Civil War. However, Williams and his new colleagues realized that it would be difficult and impractical to exclude white Houston dockworkers. So Local 1273, the first all-white Texas ILA local formed shortly thereafter. The two locals agreed to divide the work for which they were contracted equally and worked on the same ships. They alternated which local worked fore and which aft. Hypothetically this system accommodated the dual realities of black numerical dominance in the industry and white supremacy in Texas society.

Put simply, longshoremen loaded and unloaded ships. Although inexperienced longshoremen could be a safety hazard, the work was more closely related to unskilled work than most other AFL craft unions.¹⁹ As a result, shippers and stevedores viewed longshoremen as replaceable.²⁰ This perception seriously weakened their bargaining power. Union power had to come through control of numbers rather than those with particular skills, making it impossible to be racially exclusive. James Maroney, in “The

¹⁹ James Maroney, “The International Longshoremen’s Association During the Progressive Era,” *Southern Studies*, Summer 1977, 225.

²⁰ Calvin Winslow, “Introduction,” *Waterfront Workers: New Perspectives on Race and Class*, ed. by Calvin Winslow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 2.

The term *stevedores*, at this time, referred to individuals or companies who were hired by shipping lines to manage the movement of cargo. They, in turn, hired longshoremen to do the labor. In the 19th century, the term had been used interchangeably with *longshoreman*.

International Longshoremen's Association During the Progressive Era," discusses early motives for biracial unionism in the Gulf, including employers' attempts to use race to divide longshoremen. He concludes that whites only accepted blacks out of economic necessity. Logically, blacks would have had similar motives for unionizing with whites in a predominately black occupation. While Eric Arnesen contends that there was nothing in the work of longshoring to encourage interracial cooperation, its very unskilled nature, combined with the particular demographics of the Gulf Coast, made biracial (separate locals), if not interracial, cooperation a necessity.²¹

Two types of longshore locals are important for understanding the division of work in Texas ports. The highest paid men worked in deep-sea locals: They worked ships that made international or long haul trips. The next highest paid worked coastwise ships, ships that traveled short distances. In some ports, such as Galveston, the same men actually comprised both the deep-sea and coastwise locals.²² In larger ports such as Houston, they had a distinct membership. In every port, union protocol demanded one black and one white of each local to split work evenly. These distinctions sometimes overrode loyalties on the basis of race. For example, in 1934 Houston's two coastwise locals asserted control of a small amount of deep-sea work. The black and white deep-sea locals united to fight this incursion into their category of work and succeeded; the District Executive Board decided in their favor, rejecting the application of the black and

²¹ Eric Arnesen, "Biracial Waterfront Unionism in the Age of Segregation," *Waterfront Workers: New Perspectives on Race and Class*, ed. by Calvin Winslow. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 22.

²² In Galveston, 307 and 1334 were both white locals and actually had the same membership. Locals 851 and 1220 were both black locals composed of the same men. "Relations between ILA Locals in Galveston," undated notes by Ruth Allen or assistant. Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2d306, folder 1, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

white coastwise locals. In this instance, locals of different races allied on both sides to try to expand, on the one hand, and defend, on the other, their right to work deep-sea vessels. In this situation the motivating division was category of worker, not race.²³

In 1934, D. H. Hamilton determined that the union would be stronger if they organized related industries on the docks as well. He succeeded in organizing cotton compressmen and warehousemen in multiple ports. Compressmen ran bales of cotton through compress machines that reduced the size of the bale by two-thirds. This allowed more cotton to be packed into the holds of ships. Warehousemen moved cargo either before or after longshoremen (un)loaded it on or off the ships, interacting with longshoremen of both races as they did so. The men who worked in these jobs were African American and Mexican American. Through this organizing effort, Mexican Americans joined the ILA in significant numbers. However, these positions paid significantly less than longshore positions (fifty cents an hour was a high wage for compressmen and warehousemen), and their locals had much less influence in union affairs than longshoremen. Union records reveal that they did not consistently participate in ILA meetings and activities. Delegate Hamilton reported to the Dock and Marine Council that he could not persuade the newly organized compress workers to attend the meetings, indicating either disinterest or discomfort on their part.²⁴ The indifference that longshoremen showed to their new compress and warehouse brothers led to some of the significant tension at the 1939 convention.

²³ Proceedings of the 24th Annual Convention, 1934, 50-60.

²⁴ Dock and Marine Council Minute Book, AR 269, box 1, folder 3, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, 75.

Longshoremen in the 1930s faced an array of problems that motivated them to join unions and cooperate across color lines. The unpredictability of longshore wages created the greatest concern among longshoremen. The hourly wage for longshoring was high for the time period (\$0.70 - \$0.80/hr), but the inconsistency of the work made it potentially unreliable as a means of support. In his study of the industry, Lester Rubin found that before the 1950s, few longshoremen “achieved more than a subsistence earnings level.”²⁵ Longshoring was seasonal work, related to the cotton crop; November through February was the heaviest season in Texas.²⁶ There was, of course, longshoring to be done the rest of the year, but not in a great enough volume to support an entire union of men. During the Great Depression, many men were forced to leave longshoring altogether and at one point, one local reported not having worked for six months.²⁷ Especially in the smaller ports, men struggled to support their families on a limited income. Many men worried about meeting their obligations as head of household under these circumstances. As one longshoremen expressed it: “We don't average more than \$10.00 a week, for 52 weeks a year. What can a man do with that kind of wages? How can he rear a family and put his kids through school, even the grades?”²⁸

Because of the physically demanding nature of their work, longshoremen were stereotyped as “huge of limb and tough of muscle.”²⁹ Yet in other ways they struggled to fulfill their manly roles: to provide for their families, to work with dignity. Union

²⁵ Lester Rubin, *The Negro in the Longshore Industry* (Philadelphia: the Wharton School, Industrial Research Unit, University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 40.

²⁶ Galveston Roll Book, AR268, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections.

²⁷ Proceedings of the 21st Annual Convention, 1931, 7.

²⁸ Notes of Conversations around the Screwmen's Hall, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Box 2e306, Folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 1.

²⁹ F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 83.

membership had the potential to ameliorate feelings of incompetence as the union addressed concrete problems. In many ways, the ILA's ideology was a gendered reaction to perceived threats to masculinity. Their ideal of brotherhood provided a sense of solidarity and strength. The union offered possibilities for men to obtain leadership possibilities within their locals, creating a feeling of importance. The rhetoric of the union reinforced the notion that as good moral, American citizens, union men were entitled to the rights of every "free man," including the right to earn a decent living.³⁰ By joining and working with the union they were being active, exercising their rights, and working to improve their conditions. The ILA imbued them with a sense of control in a time of crisis.³¹

The participation of women also bolstered the manliness of ILA men. Black and white ILA locals both had Ladies Auxiliaries. They were not mere social clubs. The women of the Ladies' Auxiliary participated extensively in union activities, attending meetings and conventions, proposing resolutions to the convention body, and working to influence the behavior of their husbands and fathers.³² They appealed to the convention delegates to encourage their wives and sisters at home to organize to "give strength to organized labor."³³ They listened to the same speakers as their husbands, believed in the

³⁰ In her work *Purchasing Power*, Dana Frank notes that "gender was embedded in the tactics, institutions, and political ideals through which working class people challenged their place in an unequal society." Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

³¹ David Roediger describes how unions supported ideas of manliness being reoriented to man as the "provider" of the family as opposed to the producer - a role which was no longer viable for most laboring men. See Roediger, "Gaining a Hearing Black-White Unity: Covington Hall and the Complexities of Race, Gender, and Class," *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London: Verso Press, 1994), 133.

³² Proceedings of the 26th Annual Convention, 1936, 82.

³³ Proceedings of the 27th Annual Convention, 1937, 53.

rights of their husbands as citizens and laborers and understood how the struggle affected them.

The activity of the Ladies' Auxiliary women did not threaten their husbands' authority; they organized around *his* labor. The work of "educating our women in Unionism"³⁴ engendered ILA women's faith in their husbands and their cause and served important pragmatic as well as "masculinity-boosting" purposes. Women and men could share the union cause. If a man could not provide for his family, they understood that he was fighting for that right. The Auxiliary recognized the proper role of men as breadwinners and worked with the union to change the external circumstances that prohibited their husbands and fathers from fulfilling that role through such activities as raising money to fund strikes and running buy union campaigns. Yet women and men did not always agree on how best to proceed and tensions arose as women strove for the authority to implement their plans.

While the work of their wives may have been a balm to both black and white men, the equal status of black and white workers on the job was not mutually embraced. Unlike other AFL unions, there was no skill division between longshoremen of different races within the ILA. The majority of black and white longshoremen did the same work, received the same wages, and experienced the same working conditions.³⁵ For blacks, this equality helped them to procure a position of prestige within the local black community. For many whites, this equality seemed degrading.

³⁴ Speech of E. M. Withers, ILA member, Proceedings, 1935, 34.

³⁵ Lester Rubin, *The Negro in the Longshore Industry*. (Philadelphia: The Wharton School, Industrial Research Unit, University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 33.

By the 1930s, black longshoremen had been unionized in Houston for 20 years. Certainly they encountered difficulties during the Depression. However, relative to other black laborers, longshoremen were in a privileged position both economically and socially. They also could take pride in working on an equal footing with their white co-workers and running their own locals. They had more independence than many other black working men as well. Their success enabled them to purchase their own union building, run a café and a loan office.³⁶ A white contemporary described black longshoremen as “the aristocracy of the southern black labor.”³⁷

This work-related prestige translated into community standing. The local black press lauded longshoremen for their successful organizing and held up the longshore locals as models of activism. Longshoremen received regular coverage in the papers. The *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, the leading black paper, covered their meetings and activities as well as those of their wives in the Ladies’ Auxiliary. Additionally, the paper covered the union in “human interest” stories, such as “I Visit the Longshoremen,” which portrayed them as hardworking, Christian gentlemen.

For whites, working on the same footing as black workers did not bring them prestige within the white community. Longshoremen in Texas (union and non-union combined) in the 1930s were predominately black - approximately 70 percent.³⁸ White longshoremen then were employed in what was viewed in the region as a black

³⁶ “I Visit the Longshoremen,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 6 April 1938, 1.

³⁷ Gilbert Mers, *Working the Waterfront: The Ups and Downs of a Rebel Longshoremen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 148.

³⁸ According to Rubin, TX longshoremen were 69.8% black in 1930 and 63.5% black in 1940. The West coast in 1940 was only 1.4% black, while the east coast was 18.8% black. Longshoremen in the South as a whole were 86.1% black.

occupation. In most studies of east coast and west coast longshoremen, the particular ethnic breakdown of the “white” longshoremen is discussed, often at length. In no study of the Gulf Coast longshoremen, nor in any of their minutes or oral histories, is any ethnic differentiation made among the white longshoremen. Their racial identity was defined in opposition to black and Mexican American longshoremen. Ethnic differentiation would have indicated divisions for which the labor situation did not allow.

In *The Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger suggests that Irish laborers were violently racist towards blacks because they feared a loss of their civil liberties due to association through similar labor.³⁹ White longshoremen were unable to exclude blacks from what was in the south a historically black occupation. However, in maintaining both separate locals and personal distance from blacks and Mexican Americans, whites attempted to bolster their whiteness. Gilbert Mers, a white Corpus Christi longshoreman and labor activist, noted in his autobiography that even in simple things, like helping a brother with a heavy load, whites were less likely to help their colored brothers than vice versa.⁴⁰ At work, white foremen supervised black longshoremen but blacks never supervised whites.⁴¹ Even at conventions, when the spirit of fraternity was at its highest, blacks and whites engaged in separate social activities.⁴²

Though occasionally individual white longshoremen came to see black workers as their equals, they could not gain the support of their white co-workers. Mers, who held

³⁹ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. (London: Verso Press, 1991), 150. Roediger contends that Irish Americans wanted to push Blacks out of occupations they shared so that they would not be associated with “nigger work” or assume the “degradation” of blacks by assuming their “avocation” as warned by Frederick Douglass.

⁴⁰ Mers, 27.

⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴² Proceedings of the 24th Annual Convention, 5, 70.

an office in his Corpus Christi local, related such an experience. He had developed a good working relationship with Fred Hall, his black counterpart. Hall asked Mers to accompany him and some other black ILA men to a meeting with their stevedoring company, Boyd-Campbell. The company had locked out some of their workers and Hall felt that Mers' presence would change the tenor of the meeting; shipping line representatives often condescended to the black members. Mers attended the meeting, and when the other members of his local discovered this, they berated him. In their eyes, he had "crossed the color line and demeaned them."⁴³ Aiding the black members with an issue that pertained only to them was regarded not as an example of union brotherhood but as a threat to their standing, their prestige as white men.

White workers also bemoaned their imperfect control of ILA affairs. The fifty-fifty split of work created an equal number of black and white locals in most ports. In practical terms, this meant that white workers could not push a unified white agenda. They also could not hold the best work for themselves, secure contracts that paid white workers a higher wage, or a greater portion of the work. This situation forced black and white workers to negotiate contracts together in joint, racially mixed committees. The District Executive Committee, which oversaw union affairs for the ILA in the SA&GCD, comprised both black and white men. In other words, while black longshoremen may not have run the union, the union could not be run without their consent. In addition, while the district President was always a white man, power was shared even at those high levels. Men like D. H. Hamilton had authority over both white and black ILA members.

⁴³ Mers, 68.

By creating a world apart within the union, African Americans defied Jim Crow norms, securing a sizable share of power from both Mexican Americans and whites.

This conflict reached a head in the late thirties. The growth of the union had not created opportunities for every member. Though the union expanded and secured greater control over contracts in Texas ports, many ILA members still were not guaranteed a consistent income. Compounding this continued uncertainty, the impression that the benefits of union growth unfairly went to blacks angered white longshoremen. Some of them felt compelled to articulate their frustrations at their black union brothers in annual conventions, in interviews and finally in front of the Houston City Council.

Hill-billy Whites and Niggers

White resentment of the position of black longshoremen fueled many of the debates about work. In 1939, this tension reached a peak among coastwise longshoremen in Houston. White longshoremen took their concerns outside the union to the Houston City Council a month before the 1939 convention. Dwyer certainly had this event and its attendant fallout in mind when he made his opening address: “It is essential that some definite program in respect to division of work between the Locals be established so that we may be able to go along peacefully about our work and be able to give some time to building up our organization, instead of spending most of it trying to settle disputes between Locals; trying to determine who the particular work belongs to.”⁴⁴ As Dwyer’s

⁴⁴ Proceedings of the 29th Annual Convention, 1939, 20.

statements indicate, these disputes consumed a great deal of time and energy that needed to be directed elsewhere.

The tension so prevalent in 1939 had been building during the Great Depression as scarce work for all brought out self-protection and competition. Throughout the 1930s, white and black longshoremen fought to control more of the high-paying job contracts. Whites focused on the numbers of African American longshoremen and the number of shipping lines with which they contracted. Employers intentionally tried to raise tensions on the docks by using black strikebreakers or working with independent black unions. Official ILA policy mandated that the union organize these scabs after a strike to eliminate a source of job competition and strengthen the union. As a result of this policy, and the historical dominance of longshore work by African Americans, the black locals grew rapidly in number, and some ports developed additional black locals without white counterparts. Under these circumstances, blacks often controlled more than half of the work in Texas ports because their numbers grew considerably beyond fifty percent of the labor force. To the biased white eye, blacks violated the all-important code of fifty-fifty division of work and stole work from deserving whites.

From the black point of view, this system hurt their ability to survive as well. For example, in Beaumont after the 1935 strike, Local 325 had to take in 42 new men. Local 325 then had to support those additional men, meaning that work had to be further divided. Because work was scarce in Beaumont, black union leaders also struggled to meet their members' needs. Black longshoremen resented the fact that whites were insensitive to these issues. The tension in the union, according to one black Beaumont

longshoreman W. G. Bell did not come from blacks taking too much work, but “ignorant hill-billy whites who poison the organization... [and] say that they have no use for those ‘niggers.’” Black longshoremen were quite aware that this “playing on the inferiority of the Negro and the superiority of the whites tends to split the labor ranks.”⁴⁵

In 1935, white workers attempted to eliminate these “extra” locals by forcing the new black locals to consolidate with the old. From their point of view, merging black locals would restore the balance and reinstate the fifty-fifty sharing of work. For example, in Galveston, members of white Local 307 wanted black Locals 851 and 329 to merge into one local and to split the Galveston workload evenly with Local 307.⁴⁶ This would have given whites a disproportionately great share of the work, one half of the work to one third of the workers. Black workers rejected this plan. In 1936, when interviewed about this issue, Nick Macela, the white business agent for Local 307,

⁴⁵ Bell’s comments are quite out of the ordinary. He is the only African American longshoremen who spoke about whites in an overtly negative way when interviewed by members of the UT economics department in the 1930s. Bell was an activist who, among other community activities, fought the all white primary with his own ill-fated legal challenge. Notes from interview with W. G. Bell, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 5, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. Other men, even when interviewed just months after hostile convention meetings, said that there were no race problems in the ILA. According to Mr. Nelson, “[a]ll along there has been harmony between the white and the colored locals.” Notes from interview with Mr. Nelson and Mr. Curtis, 1 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. And Mr. C H Chambers, said that “There is not color discrimination.” Notes from interview with C. H. Chambers, 1 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

These interviews, and all similarly cited throughout this dissertation, were conducted by research assistants to Professor Ruth Allen, a University of Texas economics professor. Her assistants were Ben Owens and Alan Scaff. However, the notes from interviews do not indicate who conducted which interviews.

⁴⁶ Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention, 1935, 45.

explained the actions of black workers in this way: “A Nigger is a Nigger; when he gets something he doesn’t want to give it up.”⁴⁷

The most outspoken critics of black longshoremen in the mid-thirties were white workers whose financial struggles eroded their pride and sense of entitlement as white men. The outbursts of Tom Hency, a Galveston banana handler, and F.N. Hunter, an apparently incompetent Houston longshoreman, demonstrate how their perceptions of the availability of work were filtered by racism. Both of these men spoke out within the union against black “control” of work, and also broke ranks by speaking bluntly about their feelings to outsiders.

Hency resented working in the fruit handling trade, loading and unloading bananas. His Local , 1350, was the only local to be equally comprised of white and Mexican American men. Not coincidentally, the work paid about half of what longshoremen made. At the convention in 1936, Hency accused black longshoremen of limiting white workers’ opportunities. Because blacks had so many longshoring jobs, he was forced to work side by side with Mexicans in a low paying position.

Hency did not initiate this battle at the 1936 convention. According to news coverage, “Brother J. E. J. Rogers [a member of Houston white Local 1273] of Houston ... said that blacks have too much work, 85 percent of work in Galveston, 70 percent in Houston.” Rogers “spoke about twenty minutes in spite of many efforts...to rule him out

⁴⁷ Notes from interview with Nick Macela, Business Agent for 307, Galveston, 8 July 8 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

of order and set him down.”⁴⁸ Rogers angrily attacked black longshoremen for controlling work. Joe Brown, a black longshoreman, tried to contextualize the numbers of blacks in the longshore industry by explaining that racial prejudice limited the industries in which blacks could work:

the reason the colored membership is larger than the white membership is because the white men has [sic] other vocations to look forward to but the colored are limited and have to be satisfied.

Hencey replied that,

it was not for reasons that the white membership had other jobs that caused the white membership to dwindle but due to the small amount of work that was in possession of the white charter. He stated men that belonged to the white local in years past have to carry bananas on their back to try to make a living.

He caustically concluded that “he supposed the colored membership is satisfied.”⁴⁹

Brown and Hencey were not strangers who happened to encounter one another at the convention. They had served together on the District Executive Council for two years. They attended Executive Council conferences together, and with other council members would have set the goals for the district and developed solutions to district problems. Still, Hencey did not hesitate to direct his vitriol at Brown.

⁴⁸ “Highlights on Convention,” *Ship Channel*, 22 May 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 14, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 2-3. The *Ship Channel* was a weekly paper put out by a group of ILA members who advocated changes within the union and is discussed at length in chapter 5.

⁴⁹ Proceedings of the 26th Annual Convention, 1936, 54-55.

Brown argued that blacks were not intentionally taking work from whites but rather were forced into this occupation by a racist society. Longshoring was one of the few decent jobs open to black men. Their numbers in the industry came from their weak position in society. It was not an indication of superiority. Brown sought to bring the reality of employment discrimination into the discussion. The longshore industry was not only a haven for black workers, but one of very few job opportunities. Brown tried to make the point that, ironically, the number of blacks in longshoring was a result of the success of Jim Crow segregation, not its failure, as Hency seemed to indicate.

For Brown and other black delegates at the convention, Hency and Rogers' comments represented the worst of the union experience – the “hill billy whites ... that knew not Joseph.”⁵⁰ These men knew that black men had brought the union to Texas. It was more theirs than Hency's or Rogers.' These white delegates' ignorance and racism threatened to destroy the safe space of the ILA for them and the job safety and prestige that union membership and union jobs afforded.

From Hency and Rogers' point of view, the fact that they struggled to survive financially while black workers allegedly succeeded indicated a failure of the Jim Crow system. Hency's final comment that black workers must be “satisfied” betrays his animus. In his view, not only was he working in a demeaning position but he imagined that Brown was happy with this reversal of roles. He implied that black longshoremen wished to make whites suffer – that they did so intentionally and even gleefully.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Notes from interview with W. G. Bell.

⁵¹ The fact that Hency thought that black longshoremen would be “satisfied” or happy to be on top of whites, certainly indicates that he was aware, on some level, that black men might be dissatisfied with white supremacy – that black men would find it unfair that white men had access to all the better jobs

Hencey indicated that Brown and the members he represented had a social mandate to even out the work and establish the supremacy of whites within the union.

For Hencey, the union was a vehicle to protect and advance the interests of white labor. As he told an interviewer in 1936, “This [the fruit handling docks] is the only place left where the white man can work...If we let this union fall through our jobs will go to the Negroes.”⁵² Hencey and others like him found themselves in desperate situations. They earned much less than they had in the past, and certainly less than they felt they deserved.⁵³ They worked in jobs with little respect and in Hencey’s case, a job he deemed appropriate for Mexicans and therefore degrading for whites. For these men, blacks were easy scapegoats for a much more complicated problem and perhaps for their own inability to secure higher-paying, more secure work.

Racism also shaped how longshoremen developed their statistics. F. N. Hunter of Local 1273 calculated that white longshoremen only worked 25 percent of the work in Houston. “The Negroes get all the work on Morgan Line and the Southern Steamship Co., which use independent labor, and all the work the Luckenback and Swain and Hoyt Lines...”⁵⁴ Hunter combined all black workers together. Blacks, both ILA members and

and would have reason to want to exact some kind of revenge against whites. So, while he firmly believed in his own superior entitlement to work, he was also aware that black men did not really share that point of view, regardless of how men like D. H. Hamilton tried to maintain a diplomatic front within the union.

⁵² Notes from meeting of Local 1350, 17 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁵³ In 1936 men in local 1350 were making 50 cents an hour. They had at one point made 80 cents an hour but then had disassociated with the union – it seems most likely their organization had fallen apart in the early depression years. Wages had then fallen to a low of 30 cents an hour until the men re-organized into ILA 1350. Notes from interview with L M Balderach and Tom Hency [sic], 15 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁵⁴ Notes from interview with F. N. Hunter, 4 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 1.

unorganized or independently organized workers, controlled 75 percent of the work. His hostility to his black union brothers grew partly out of circumstances completely beyond their control, work being done by other men who happen to also be black. Like Tom Hency, Hunter's anger grew out of his own failure. According to a contemporary, Hunter failed as a longshoreman: "Hunter's heart was in the right place, but he didn't have the brains to go with it.... He was such a sorry longshoreman that they wouldn't hire him hardly."⁵⁵ Yet rather than blame his own failing, Hunter placed the blame on the unfair distribution of work. He believed that he had a right, as a white citizen, to a larger share of the work pie. Influenced by the New Deal rhetoric, Hunter said "that he thinks the government would do something about it as a matter of constitutional rights if they knew how the situation was."⁵⁶ And to some extent, he was right. Though the New Dealers who inspired this statement did not intervene in this issue, local government, in the form of the Houston City Council, did.

One month before the 1939 convention, two longshoremen appeared before the Houston City Council. J. W. Constant, business agent for black Local 1409, and R.J. Landgrebe, President of white Local 1273, worked together on a regular basis, meeting to discuss contract negotiations and common difficulties with employers. In fact, they could not operate independently of one another; they were required to agree on important topics like appropriate wages and hours. Locals 1273 and 1409 shared the coastwise longshore work for the port of Houston. But on the day they appeared in front of the City Council,

⁵⁵ Bill Follett, interview by George Green, 29 August 1985, transcript, Oral History Collection, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, 74.

⁵⁶ Notes from interview with F. N. Hunter.

Landgrebe and Constant were at odds, as were their entire locals. On this day, despite Constant's arguments, the City Council passed a resolution urging "Agents of Shipowners and stevedores.... to give white men at least half of the longshoremen work at the Port of Houston and let the remainder go the Negro longshoremen." According to the *Houston Chronicle*, "The council took this action at the request of white longshoremen, who complained that Negroes now have 75 percent of the work and are getting an increasingly larger percentage from year to year."⁵⁷ Constant certainly brought to the City Council's attention the fact that white longshoremen comprised significantly less than fifty percent of workers. White longshoremen later denied approaching the City Council about this issue and claimed that the council itself had initiated the resolution. Regardless of who initiated the resolution, white longshoremen supported it, at least by their participation in the process. Landgrebe "appeared at City Hall in interest of the resolution."⁵⁸ When Landgrebe, who walked with a limp due to a bullet taken in the 1934 strike, stood in council chambers and supported the resolution, he violated the trust among union locals, abandoned union procedure, and exposed the union's internal problems to the public and the shipping companies.

Like Hunter and Hency, Landgrebe believed that white workers had a superior claim on work. Unlike Hunter and Hency, Landgrebe was not a failure but a successful longshoreman and elected representative of his local. By asserting their right to this disproportionate share of the work, white workers claimed the right to a higher standard

⁵⁷ Untitled newspaper clipping from the *Houston Chronicle*, 25 April 1939, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 2, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

of living than black workers. A true fifty-fifty division of labor would have resulted in each white worker having a greater income than each black worker. Further, his actions said that since this was an issue of whites being denied their rights by blacks, it was not simply a matter for the union, but for community authorities. The City Council intervened to protect the rights of white workers. In so doing, they attempted to restore the “normal” social order that was missing within the union. They also could demonstrate to the public the ongoing need for Jim Crow segregation: Blacks threatened whites’ livelihood. Longshoremen had unionized with blacks and now needed the protection, the intervention, of an authority that could protect their interests as white men.

The following month the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District met in Corpus Christi. Tensions ran high as black Local 1409 brought charges against white Local 1273. Beyond the affront to them personally and the clear violation of union procedure, they particularly cited the public humiliation that this act brought upon the whole union. They saw that this public demonstration of discord weakened their position vis-à-vis ship owners and stevedores.⁵⁹ Locals 1409 and 1273 also presented contrasting resolutions at the convention, one to split work fifty-fifty and the other, supported by multiple black locals, calling for distributing work between the locals in proportion to their numbers. Ultimately, 1409 agreed to share more of their work with 1273.⁶⁰ Beyond the scrutiny

⁵⁹ Proceedings, 1939, 53.

⁶⁰ Resolution 32, proposed by longshoremen from a variety of black locals, proposed dividing work in proportion to size of locals. The committee on resolutions voted to send this resolution to the international convention. Essentially they refused to deal with this controversial proposal. The resolution became irrelevant when the Committee on Resolutions endorsed Resolution 33, which proposed shifting work around to create a fifty-fifty division. The committee endorsed this Resolution because behind the scenes negotiations between 1409 and 1273 had already been concluded and 1409 had agreed to sacrifice some of their work. Proceedings, 1939, 87-89, 97.

given to their actions, 1273 faced no official sanction for what many black members viewed as unacceptable behavior. Their strategy of seeking reinforcement from community leaders worked - especially since the City Council reinforced their position with a telegram sent to the convention, a telegram in which they assumed responsibility for initiating the original resolution. The telegram, signed by Houston's mayor and city commissioners, claimed that the resolution was "not suggested by white longshoremen associations."⁶¹ It further stated that, "It was then and is now the belief of the City Council of the City of Houston that work should be divided in this manner."⁶² Essentially they presented the issue of white workers' lack of work as a community problem that had come to their attention, the unstated accusation being that the union had failed to respond to this egregious problem and should do so. The City Council therefore put subtle pressure on the ILA to decide in the white longshoremen's favor or be at odds with the Council.

This exchange revealed the ways in which white longshoremen took advantage of their whiteness for political and economic gain. The Council did not always take their side; if this had been a dispute between white longshoremen and white ship owners, the Council would have acted differently. However in this instance, despite their class position, their whiteness entitled them to the support of the larger community as represented by the Council, an organization that supported their claim to privilege. Blacks and Mexican Americans could not access this outside power structure to resolve their problems with the union. Blacks could compensate, to a great degree, with their

⁶¹ Proceedings, 1939, 70.

⁶² Proceedings, 1939, 70 – 71.

strength in numbers in the union. Mexican Americans relied on their own tenacity and a tactical combination of discourse and attention to union regulations.

The Latin American Letter

F. J. Morin and Angel Hernandez, President and Secretary of Local 1581, did not attend the convention in Corpus Christi in May, 1939. If they had, the convention would certainly have witnessed yet another contentious series of resolutions. As it was, they relied on a lengthy letter to convey the complaints of the men of their local. They wanted access to more work. They too felt they were denied work that was rightly theirs, and that their union brothers denied them this work on the basis of race.

Morin and Hernandez's letter, though focused on a particular complaint, also referred to years of unequal and indifferent treatment from others in the union. Because white and black longshoremen were committed to maintaining their positions of power within the union, the experience of Mexican Americans was difficult from their initial entrance into the organization. Houston locals unequivocally excluded Mexican Americans from longshoring.⁶³ There are records of a few Mexican American men longshoring in Galveston and Corpus Christi. From an analysis of the Galveston white Local 307's roll books, it seems that during the most difficult years of the Great Depression, those members with Spanish surnames were least active in work, although as

⁶³ Gilbert Mers, interview by George Green, 15 June 1985, transcript, Oral History Collection, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, 51.

conditions improved their activity matched that of the white members.⁶⁴ How these men came to be accepted into ILA ranks is unknown, but as a rule, it seems clear that Mexican Americans were expected to keep themselves in the lesser, longshoring-related occupations of warehousing and cotton compressing. Even as late as the 1940s, Bill Follett “got the hell beat out of him” by his local brothers for hiring Mexican Americans during a labor shortage.⁶⁵ White and black longshoremen maintained a hierarchy of prestige by excluding Mexican Americans from these jobs. This may have been partly designed to limit job competition - but longshoremen were also interested in preserving the prestige of this work for themselves. Black longshoremen were highly respected members of their communities. They worked on an equal footing with and earned the same pay as whites. They also turned their locals into close-knit communities and sites for community action. They did not want to risk their standing within the union or change their communities by including Mexican Americans. Whites, who felt degraded by their association with the blacks, did not want to be further degraded by having to work in gangs with Mexican Americans.

Even in the course of their work in these lower paid positions, Mexican Americans suffered because of the indifference or outright hostility of their supposed union brethren. The first local of Mexican American compressmen in Houston was Local 1309. Though initially they had success in getting wage increases, they also faced serious discrimination from their employers. Some workers were blacklisted and most

⁶⁴ Roll Book, AR 268, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections.

⁶⁵ Mers interview, 51. According to Mers, Mexican Americans did not regularly work in longshoring jobs until the 1960s.

employers refused to recognize the union. Recognition of 1309 was on the agenda for the 1935 strike, but when this long strike finally ended, this goal was put off.⁶⁶ Without the support of the rest of the union, 1309 was unable to successfully fight the illegal actions of their employers and dissolved after only a few years. Two years later, under the direction of Morin, another local, 1581, formed and took its place. This local also faced difficult circumstances both within and without the ILA.

The prejudicial treatment that the men of Local 1581 faced in the union derived from widespread beliefs, shared by many white and black longshoremen, about the inferior and “foreign” nature of Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans in Texas suffered a double discrimination: not only were they viewed as non-white, but they were negatively associated with Mexican immigrants. As a result of high unemployment during the Great Depression, the 1930s in Texas saw a heightened anti-immigrant sentiment. Mexican immigrants were seen as a threat to American jobs and because of shared ethnicity, Mexican Americans were perceived similarly. Because of this association Mexican Americans were seen as “outside of American civilization.”⁶⁷ Members of LULAC bemoaned this inaccurate perception in the *LULAC News*: “Cheap propaganda, and unrestrained fanatics, have worked with relentless persistency to create an atmosphere tendering [sic] to brand us as ‘Mexicans,’ the word being shorn of its real meaning and used in the sense of degradation.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ James Reese, “Gunfire Along the Shore: A History of the 1935 Strike,” Draft in Gilbert Mers Collection., box 1, folder 8, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

⁶⁷ Victor Clark, as quoted by Neil Foley in *The White Scourge*, 40.

⁶⁸ Ruben Lozano, “LULAC Subsidiaries,” *LULAC News*, October 1932, 1.

During the 1930s, Mexicans were deported and otherwise coerced into leaving the U. S. in large numbers. Many of those who “returned” to Mexico were U. S. citizens.⁶⁹ This could only have legitimized the idea that Mexican Americans were not really Americans.⁷⁰ In addition to questions about their nationality, Mexican Americans also faced discrimination and segregation. As David Montejano argues, 1920-1940 was a period during which segregation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans set in more solidly in Texas. Arnolde de Leon describes how this process took place in the city of Houston. Most of the men who worked on the docks lived in the area of town known as Magnolia Park, a predominately Mexican area. They faced prejudice from both the white and black communities in Houston with whom they competed for jobs.⁷¹ Longshoremen in particular viewed Mexican Americans as a potential threat to their jobs, particularly if they remained beyond the control of the union.

In 1935 a white Corpus Christi longshoreman named Oscar Wilds expressed concerns regarding Mexican American ILA members. Some of the Mexican Americans affiliated with the organization had withdrawn from the union. According to President Dwyer, they left the union because of the prejudice they faced from their co-workers.

⁶⁹ Camille Guerin-Gonzales describes how government officials targeted people long settled in the United States, many of whom had older American citizen children. See Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 77-96. For more on repatriation and its context, see Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

⁷⁰ Ian Haney-López posits that US immigration laws create a US that is ideologically a white country in *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 117.

⁷¹ For histories of the Mexican and Mexican American communities in Texas during this time period, see Arnolde de Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston* (Houston: Mexican American Studies Program, University of Houston, 1989), David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836 to 1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), and Neil Foley, *The White Scourge*.

Wilds' concern was emblematic of white attitudes towards Mexican Americans in general. He was "afraid that these men would be troublesome in case of a strike."⁷² In fact, these men were unlikely to become strikebreakers and sought to get an AFL charter of their own as a separate organization. Dwyer stated that "he knew this group had been discriminated against," intimating that this is why they had left the ILA.⁷³

Wilds' fear that un-affiliated Mexican Americans would be "troublesome" was not uncommon. Many longshoremen feared that Mexican American workers would become strikebreakers in case of a strike. Many men likely remembered or had heard stories about the importation of Mexican workers by ship owners in the great strike of 1920. The strike of 1920 proved devastating and had engendered a great deal of animosity towards Mexican workers on the part of longshoremen. Wilds' concern indicates that longshoremen still viewed Mexican Americans as potential strikebreakers years later.

Despite the racism that they faced within the union, Mexican Americans also derived real benefits from joining the AFL/ILA. Compressmen faced reductions in work both because of the New Deal reductions in cotton production and also because of changes in the industry. An article in the *Negro Labor News* stated that "The compress situation at the ports will affect greatly the Negro and Mexican labor."⁷⁴ Compressmen were expecting fifty percent less work in 1938 than they had in 1937 because more cotton owners were compressing their cotton where it was grown instead of at the ports. This

⁷² Proceedings, 1935, 39.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Houston Compress Laborers Are Facing Crisis" *Negro Labor News*, 3 September 1938, 1.

allowed cotton companies to avoid paying wages mandated by various New Deal programs because they did not apply to compressing at the site of production, only on the docks.⁷⁵ Compressmen realized that unionizing provided a way of controlling access to increasingly limited work. This strategy did eventually work for the compressmen; the predominately Mexican American Local 1581 and its sister black local secured a favorable contract with employers in 1941.

Perhaps more importantly, membership in the AFL worked to emphasize their American identity in several ways. The AFL only permitted citizens to join. It also publicly decried radicalism, which had, especially since the Red Scare of 1919, been associated with foreignness, in favor of a conservative, bread and butter approach. Finally, the AFL supported the deportation of Mexican immigrants in the early years of the Depression. While many Mexican Americans who joined the AFL likely disapproved of the deportations, acceptance into an organization that had endorsed these extreme programs made a clear statement that they did not fall into the category of deportables. They were not stealing American jobs, they were Americans. By this time, as Gary Gerstle argues, being “American,” despite its ambiguity, had become the basis for legitimacy, the only grounds on which claims for rights could be made. For Mexican American dockworkers, then, joining the union could have an additional layer of meaning; it provided a venue for publicly demonstrating the Americanness that legitimated their claims. They demanded recognition as part of the newly empowered

⁷⁵ Annual Meeting Minutes of National Cotton Compress and Cotton Warehouse Association, 10-11 May 1939 Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 3d42, folder 3, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 3-4.

working class. Despite these efforts, as Morin and Hernandez' letter made plain, they struggled to convince many black and white union members that they were indeed fellow citizens as well as fellow workers.

The complaint letter of 1939 attacked longshoremen for refusing Mexican Americans the opportunity to pick up extra work. ILA policy required that when one local had more work than they could handle (this often happened at the height of the cotton season), they must “give preference to any union man whose Local is affiliated with I.L.A.”⁷⁶ The members of 1581 had serious financial difficulties and, facing a declining compress industry, wanted to take advantage of these opportunities for extra work. However, their fraternal brothers preferred to hire non-unionized men over Mexican American ILA men to fill these work shortages. Additionally, the members of 1581 did not shy away from blaming the other ILA locals for the failure of 1309 after two “poorly supported strikes” and made it clear that without “reasonable support” they too would have trouble surviving. They concluded that they had been made to feel “that they are not wanted in the I. L. A.,” despite the numerous sacrifices they had made for the cause of unionism.⁷⁷

The language of Morin and Hernandez's complaint highlights the distance between these men and the rest of the union. They chose not to engage in any of the rhetoric that was standard to the union. Union correspondence almost always called upon the relationship of fraternal brotherhood and spoke about the rights of citizenship. This complaint contained almost none of the usual language but was instead a citation of the

⁷⁶ Proceedings, 1939, 52.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

contractual regulation which had been broken. The writers of this letter emphasized what they thought would be most influential with their audience. They presumed that the bulk of their audience would share the dominant racist perception of Mexican Americans and therefore would not be moved by the language of brotherhood and Americanism coming from a local made up exclusively of “Latin American men,” as they referred to themselves. The use of the term “Latin American” was clearly an attempt to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with Mexican immigrants. There was a feeling within the union that the “importation of cheap Mexican labor [was] a threat to everyone.”⁷⁸

In addition, the term “Latin American” also emphasized the desire of these men to be recognized as mainstream American workers. Though little else in their letter seemed to speak of an American identity, this term invoked that identity. Typically, non-Mexican American ILA members referred to their Mexican American brothers and others working on the docks as Mexicans, a term that in the late thirties continued to be “firmly associated in the popular mind with poverty, illiteracy, and lack of ambition.”⁷⁹ The writers of this letter focused on a legalistic argument, but the underpinning of their argument was their status as equals in rights, equals as Americans. They shared the ILA’s belief in Americanism but applied it to themselves through their identity as Latin Americans. Considering that many of the Mexican American members of the ILA had also been members of the first Houston chapter of LULAC, an organization that stressed

⁷⁸ Speech by William Mora, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e309, folder 13, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁷⁹ Matt Meier and Feliciano Ribera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972),158.

the American identity and loyalty of its members, this is not surprising. But the letter also invoked their identity as breadwinners by mentioning that “Most of our members have families” and many of them are in “hard circumstances.”⁸⁰ They portrayed themselves as fathers who struggled to support their families. Like all American working men, they had a right to fulfill this paternal role. From their point of view, the ILA should have been working to make this possible, should work as an agent on their behalf. Instead, their “brothers” regularly denied them their right to work and thereby their right to be men.

Morin and Hernandez’s letter asked that this discrimination be forbidden in the future and also for reparations in the form of debt-forgiveness, a concession that they wanted granted to “their sister Local of colored brothers, if their delegate so requests.”⁸¹ These two locals worked together closely. In the early 1940s they succeeded in negotiating a joint contract that improved their wages and working conditions. However, their relationship was not a sign of a deeper common connection between blacks and Mexican Americans in the ILA. Black and Mexican American workers within the union did not develop a special bond through their common position as people of color. Black compressmen could become longshoremen. This was a chance to move up in the world of dock-working that was denied to Mexican American workers. Editorials in the prominent black newspaper of Houston also indicate that many in the black community shared the white view of Mexican Americans as more foreign than American; many black longshoremen certainly shared these prejudices. In an editorial entitled “All for

⁸⁰ Proceedings, 1939, 52.

⁸¹ Proceedings, 1939, 53.

Aliens” the *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman* lamented the fact that the city of Houston was building a ten acre park for “Mexicans of Houston” when it has “never in its history bought one foot of ground for park purposes for the loyal Negro,” despite the fact that “Negroes are ... as loyal and true citizens as this state and country has even [sic] known... [and] Mexicans are aliens [sic].”⁸² Certainly the park in question was not being constructed only for the immigrant population, but the *Informer* conceived of the whole Mexican / Mexican American population in Houston as “alien” and therefore less deserving of city services than the local black population.

Nor did Mexican American workers likely see themselves as non-white. Mexican American activists in Texas during this time worked hard to claim legal whiteness. ILA leaders respected this legal definition, placing Mexican Americans in locals that were technically “white,” though most were exclusively Mexican American. While no Mexican Americans had membership in black locals, Local 1350 in Galveston had both white (non-Mexican) and Mexican American members. White locals then had the greatest burden to include Mexican American members as all parties saw those locals as the closest fit. Clearly, most white workers did not view Mexican Americans as equally white, or equally white *and* American enough to merit access to the best jobs. For both black and white Texas longshoremen, racial identity precluded identifying with “aliens.”

The number of Mexican Americans active in the longshoring industry in Texas did not compare with the number of African Americans. They did not have the strength in numbers or the long union history necessary to fight their way into the well paying,

⁸² “All for Aliens,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 5 May 1934, 2.

more highly esteemed longshore jobs. They were organized by the ILA for pragmatic reasons, but were never welcomed into the union brotherhood. Although legally categorized as white, they were segregated into their own locals. The ILA clearly did not consider them equals within the union and little pretense was made that they were “brothers.”

Conclusion

Members of the ILA in Texas challenged Jim Crow norms to unite together to defend their common rights as workers and men. Their unity had strict limits; they organized into mostly segregated locals and excluded Mexican Americans from the best jobs. In public statements, and at their own union events, leaders spoke about the value members placed on “brotherhood.” This was not merely empty rhetoric, but the fraternal feelings were qualified. ILA members certainly forged strong bonds of brotherhood, but this brotherhood did not extend across the lines of the segregated locals. Across locals, men still fought over the very basic union issue: control of work. So while the rhetoric of fraternity may have resonated with those in attendance at the conventions, it was a limited brotherhood that they embraced. Their “brothers” of another race were often more competitor than comrade, especially to white workers who believed strongly in their racial superiority.

As all ILA men came to see themselves as worker-citizens entitled to the means to support their families, different interpretations of that citizenship, based ideas about race

and nation, divided them. White ILA men sought a superior position within the union to mirror their superior citizenship outside of the union. And both white and black members judged Mexican Americans to be deficient, too alien to merit an equal claim on work.

But their possessiveness towards their work also brought them together. When outside forces threatened their work or their wages, these competitors did become comrades in arms. The same men who fought among themselves, also fought together against scabs, the police, and company goons. The ideal of fraternal brotherhood could not erase the lines of racial division. But the intensity of strikes, with the concomitant phenomena of threats to livelihood and to personal safety, blurred these lines and created circumstances in which the men of the ILA sincerely saw themselves as united against common enemies.

Chapter Two

The Fight of Breadwinners

Bill Follett, a white Houston longshoreman, considered himself a progressive both in terms of labor policy and racial attitude. During the 1930s, he tried to include black longshoremen in his project to move the ILA towards less conservative policies. In 1936 he co-founded a dissident movement on the docks, the Maritime Federation of the Gulf, which attempted to forge an alliance between the ILA and the nascent CIO. In the 1940s he tried to hire Mexican Americans to work mainstream longshore jobs.¹ However, Follett did not hesitate to kill black strikebreakers during the strike of 1935. Fifty years after the incident, Follett related his role in the fatal attacks on unidentified black scabs without remorse. He and his accomplices stood on a hill and as a car full of scabs headed towards the docks, they pushed a small boulder at the vehicle. He believed the accident

¹ Mers interview, 51.

was fatal and described the victims as “black, by golly, as the ace of spades.”² Blacks were often the victims of violence during ILA strikes since many blacks worked as strikebreakers. However, strike violence did not always ally whites against blacks. In fact, it often brought black and white strikers together against those who threatened their livelihood.

The threat of scab labor created an urgency that often united black and white workers. On the afternoon of November 8, 1935, Will Ballinger and his brother-in-law Samuel Brown, both black strikebreakers, left the safety of company-provided housing on the Houston docks and walked into town. Since shipping companies limited their freedom to move about, they probably had to sneak out of the warehouses where scabs were staying under the “protection” of armed guards. Many men left to try to rendezvous with women, and Brown may have wanted to see his wife. Unfortunately, they instead met up with a group of black and white longshoremen. Recognizing them as scabs, the ILA men pursued Ballinger and Brown. Two of these men, T. S. Burroughs, white, and Joe Haney, black, caught Brown and gave him a severe beating. The others continued to chase Ballinger as he fled. Though evidently not an accomplished swimmer, Ballinger chose to jump into Bray’s Bayou to evade his attackers. Witnesses reported that the three black pursuers stood on the shore and, as Ballinger tried to swim away, “threw sticks and stones at the man until he went down the third time.”³ He did not resurface. His body

² Bill Follett, 1987 interview, 41.

³ “Probe Drowning-Murder of Strike-Breaker in Bayou,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 16 November 1935, 1.

was recovered later that day and the identity of his killers was never determined. Haney and Burroughs were charged with “assault to murder and malicious mischief.”⁴

Some ILA men were willing to kill to protect their livelihood. They acted to defend their right to work and to care for their families and maintain their homes. When long strikes kept them from their jobs and lack of income made them reliant on hand-outs, they resorted to physical violence as a means to protect their manliness and win back their rights as working men. The most relevant line dividing people was union versus non-union, not black, white, or brown. The threat to the “sacred right” to work united men who often competed amongst themselves on the same side of a life or death struggle. ILA men of all colors faced violence at the hands of company police, their families all suffered, and together they manned picket lines and attacked scabs. The men of the union were never more united than during strikes when the intensity of their situation sublimated the racial tension that so often characterized their relations into rage at ship owners and scabs. Still, differences in their experiences of the strike, and the degree to which they benefited from strikes, remained.

Violence during strikes was a controversial weapon and discourse about violence proved just as important, if not more so, than the actual violence itself. Longshoremen, their wives, and an alliance of shipping owners and city officials engaged in a contest for public support that involved portraying one’s side’s use of violence, as more just or legitimate than the other. In the eyes of dock workers, greedy company officials, aided by shiftless scabs, took the bread out of their children’s mouths. Conversely, companies

⁴ “Dock Worker Fleeing Trio Dies in Bayou,” *Houston Post*, 9 November 1935, 1.

depicted strikers as unreasonable brutes who endangered the safety of local citizens. ILA men and their families tapped into New Deal rhetoric to present themselves as workers fighting for their rights against the greedy capitalists who had caused the depression.⁵ Their struggle was the struggle of all workers. Women were essential in this battle, but they and their husbands did not always see eye to eye on the best way to gain public support for their strikes.

The public debate between the ILA and their adversaries centered on different understandings of the priorities of citizenship. ILA men and their wives viewed their actions as part of a fight for the rights of working men. As one of their representatives argued during the strike of 1935, the strike was a battle for “the rights of every worker that we thought were guaranteed to him under the constitution of the United States.”⁶ Greedy shipping companies and the stevedores with whom they worked denied ILA men their constitutional rights. As citizens, the longshoremen felt compelled to fight, both literally and figuratively, to protect their rights. However, the shipping interests, usually aided by the mainstream press and city officials, presented another interpretation of longshoremen’s actions. They emphasized the ways that longshoremen failed to be good citizens. Neither their demands nor their actions were legitimate because they violated the contract between citizen and community. By breaking the law, creating public

⁵ Nelson Lichtenstein argues that the focus on solving the problem of under consumption during the 1930s led to a villainization of “corporate greed;” see *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 25-29. Longshoremen sought to portray shipping company owners as the bad citizens during strikes; their greed and refusal to recognize the rights of worker citizens created the strikes, not longshoremen. Clare Sheridan finds this tactic being used by labor in the 1920s (as the economy had already begun to decline) in Texas to attack companies that paid low wages. In her words they were “not being good citizens... they were selfish capitalists unconcerned with the good of local communities and the nation.” Clare Sheridan, “Contested Citizenship: National Identity and the Mexican Immigration Debates of the 1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Spring 2002, 21.

⁶ “Dock Strikers Air Case at Mass Meeting,” *Houston Post*, 18 October 1935, 2.

disorder, and hurting cities by slowing revenue, longshoremen proved that they were not good citizens. Stevedores succeeded in portraying longshoremen as a danger to their communities rather than as victims.⁷

Strikes, and the violence that accompanied strikes, were only one way that longshoremen sought to improve their jobs. Longshoremen struck four times during the 1930s. The strike of 1931 was an abysmal failure and resulted in lower wages. The strikes of 1934 and 1935 had mixed results, but neither could be considered a complete success. In this chapter I focus on the 1935 strike, the longest and most contentious of the four, as a representative example that illuminates the struggles over competing meanings of citizenship. Not until 1937 did the ILA have the strength in numbers to undertake a successful strike. Ultimately, the growth of the union itself, especially the inclusion of former scabs after the 1935 strike, proved to be the most successful strategy for improving their work situation, including wages and hours.

This chapter begins by briefly analyzing the methods that longshoremen used to address their complaints before resorting to strikes, their central strategy to pressure ship owners. It then turns to its main focus, an analysis of three central aspects of strikes: the strikers' need for community support, the use of violence both to control strikers and by strikers, and the debate over this violence in the media. Finally, it concludes with a analysis of the contentious role of the ILA's international president in resolving strike issues.

⁷ Linda Kerber describes this responsibility of citizenship in her work *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

Job Actions

Recognizing that strikes were difficult and costly, longshoremen also tried a number of other strategies to improve their conditions before resorting to a strike. They worked with other labor groups to form coalitions to tackle common problems. A few locals benefited from National Labor Relations Board intervention. Other locals found success through on-the-job actions through which they were able to change their working conditions or the power dynamics between their local and their stevedore. Each of these approaches, however, had significant weaknesses.

The ILA tried to maintain unity across locals within each port by forming Dock and Marine Councils. These interracial bodies, composed of representatives from all of the ILA unions in a given port, acted as the first line of defense. The representatives discussed problems of safety on the job and mistreatment by stevedores. They attempted to determine a common course of action and to negotiate with employers. In time of strike, the president of the Dock and Marine Council often acted as a representative for all the locals. Unfortunately, stevedores did not put much weight on the actions of the Dock and Marine Councils. These committees served more as a forum for discussion or to work out intra-union issues rather than as a force to fight unfair working conditions.

Hypothetically, the men of the ILA should also have been able to turn to the Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL), the state-level AFL body, for assistance and intervention in the case of significant problems. The TSFL had been somewhat influential in state politics during the Progressive Era but its influence declined during the 1920s. During the 1930s, the TSFL lobbied the state for pro-union legislation. The ILA,

though a member in the organization, benefited little from the TSFL's work. The TSFL was stymied by a growing anti-union conservatism in Texas government after the mid-1930s and had little power to aid AFL workers.⁸

Without larger structural support, ILA men were also encouraged to handle some of their problems by "job action." Gilbert Mers, a longshoreman and activist, came to Corpus Christi in 1929 from Arizona and soon found work on the docks. He joined white ILA Local 1224 after gaining six months experience. In his book *Working the Waterfront: The Ups and Downs of a Rebel Longshoreman*, Mers remembers President Dwyer encouraging him and other Corpus Christians to take matters into their own hands in order to improve their working conditions. According to Dwyer, "if it's something you're not going to stand for, you have to tell them when it's happening and where it's happening."⁹ Dwyer recognized that there were limits to what could be negotiated in contracts and during strikes. Enforcement was often a problem. All ILA men had to be constantly vigilant in protecting their own and one another's safety and seeing that stevedores did not run roughshod over safety standards and rules.

Inspired by Dwyer's encouragement, Mers led several gangs to resist the authoritarian control of a particularly difficult walking foreman by the name of Si Borison. Local 1224 did most of their work for the stevedoring company of Boyd-Campbell Co. Boyd-Campbell employed three walking foremen who supervised the work of longshoremen.¹⁰ These men were not chosen by the union and did not have to be

⁸ For more on the TSFL's history, see James C. Maroney, "Organized Labor in Texas, 1900-1929" (Ph.D Dissertation, University of Houston, 1975).

⁹ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

union members.¹¹ Walking foremen often harassed longshoremen and pushed them to work at what the union considered unsafe speeds. They also pushed longshoremen to carry heavier loads and move more cargo in each sling-load lifted onto the ship with the winch. Longshoremen resented the encroachment of men like Borison into their work. Borison, who was very strong, often moved cargo alongside the ILA men. His help sped the process along, shortening the time it took for longshoremen to complete their job, and since their work was paid by the hour, they felt that he was stealing their legitimate income. Mers ordered all ILA men to hang back and stop working. The gangs of ILA men ceased work and simply watched Borison. When Borison realized he was moving cargo by himself, he angrily yelled at the ILA men, but ceased moving cargo from then on.¹²

On another occasion, Borison banned some ILA members from working Boyd-Campbell ships on the grounds that they had broken some cargo and must compensate the company for, in this case, two boxes of prunes. Longshoremen could hardly afford to be held responsible for every broken container. When Borison refused to allow the “prune men” to work, Mers and some of his ILA friends decided that no one would work the holds designated for white Local 1224; black Local 1225 agreed not to work them if Boyd-Campbell should call upon them to replace their white brothers. Local 1224’s

¹¹ Walking foremen should not be confused with gang foremen. Gang foremen are ILA men who hire and supervise ILA gangs, the groups of six to eight men in which longshoremen work. Walking foremen are stevedore company employees who represent that company’s interests and oversee the work of multiple gangs. After WWII, the union succeeded in mandating that these men also be ILA men.

¹² Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 46.

boycott worked. The banned men returned to work and the company suddenly “realized” that poor ship maintenance had caused the damage to the cargo.¹³

On-the-job actions were often a response to speed-ups by stevedores. Longshoremen were hired by stevedores who were usually private contractors working for shipping companies. Shipping lines paid stevedores by amount of cargo moved, while longshoremen were paid an hourly wage. These different pay scales created a conflict of interest and a constant source of tension between stevedores and longshoremen.¹⁴ Stevedores’ best means of maximizing profits were either keeping longshore wages low and/or pushing longshoremen to work at unsafe speeds. This set the stage for particularly hostile worker/employer relations. Unsafe working speeds was only one of the safety issues confronting longshoremen. Deteriorating machinery, overloaded ships and the (un)loading of hazardous materials were all major issues tackled by the union.¹⁵ Long hours often accompanied the speed-up, creating even more opportunity for accidents to occur. The *Monthly Labor Review* noted that during the peak cotton

¹³ Ibid., 63.

Longshoremen also engaged in occasional theft from the ships they unloaded, supplementing what they viewed as unfairly low wages with goods. For example, during a meeting of longshoremen, men volunteered to be on a “theft committee” to steal lumber to build bookshelves. Account of a meeting of the Progressive Committee, 18 June 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, 2e307, folder 3, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Ogg, *Longshoremen and Their Homes: The Story of a Housing ‘Case’ Study Conducted Under the Auspices of Greenwich House* (New York: Greenwich House, 1939), 22.

¹⁵ Specific mention of these safety concerns is made in the *Proceedings of the 21st Annual Convention of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District International Longshoremen’s Association*, 1931, T331.88 In8, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 43. Additionally, a review of the Gulf Coast Dock and Marine Council Minute Book, AR 269, box 1, folder 3, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, reveals that safety was a constant subject of discussion.

season in Galveston, longshoremen worked shifts of thirty hours straight.¹⁶ All ILA men faced these dangerous conditions and shared the goal of ameliorating them.

According to Gilbert Mers, the men of Corpus Christi successfully combated the speed-up. The two locals, black and white, agreed to limit their speed. They had established themselves through on-the-job action and Boyd-Campbell had come to take their position seriously.¹⁷ The ILA men of Corpus Christi had the advantage of working mainly with one company and only having two locals. They worked together well and established a relationship with Boyd-Campbell. This approach did not work as well in other ports, nor did it work well in trying to secure better wages. On-the-job actions provided some longshoremen with a means to address concerns with their working conditions. However, the effectiveness of these actions were intimately tied to the particulars of each local's context, member's personalities, and relationship with employers. Therefore, these actions were not a useful strategy to empower the ILA as multi-port organization trying to negotiate improved regional contracts.

Federal intervention seemed to hold promise for providing the ILA with more power in relation to their employers, but federal labor boards also proved to be more beneficial on a smaller scale. After the passage of new labor legislation in 1933, longshoremen and compressmen could turn to their regional labor board for intervention. Some locals found this to be a fruitful endeavor. One labor board decision granted an ILA local a significant sum in back wages.¹⁸ The labor board oversaw elections for the

¹⁶ "Longshore Labor Conditions - Part 1," *Monthly Labor Review*, Oct. 1930, 816.

¹⁷ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 56-57.

¹⁸ "Longshoremen Get Back Wages," *Galveston Examiner*, 3 August 1939, Bertram Jackson Collection, microfilm reel 1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, 3.

ILA on several occasions. The labor board also sought to avert the strikes of 1934 and 1935, but failed to negotiate a settlement satisfactory to both the ILA and the shipping interests. Longshoremen struck to increase their wages and to expand the number of ports covered under their contracts. Negotiations between the ILA and stevedores over these two issues often proved quite contentious. When neither their own representatives nor the interference of the government's labor board could bring a satisfactory outcome, the ILA turned to their last option: the strike.

The Importance of Community Support

In each of their major strikes of the 1930s, the ILA sought the support of the community and the press. In 1931 the main issue was wages. The shipping companies and the Master Stevedores Association, the assembly of stevedore representatives that negotiated with the ILA, wanted to reduce the longshore wage by ten cents an hour, from 80 cents to 70 cents. The ILA struck for twenty-two days but the use of strikebreakers and the declining shipping industry made the strike ineffectual. The ILA eventually accepted the wage reduction through 1933.¹⁹

The 1934 strike, on the other hand, achieved a number of significant gains. The ILA fought to include the Sabine District in the same wage contracts as Houston, Galveston, Corpus Christi, and Texas City. The Master Stevedores Association agreed to restore the pre-1931 strike hourly wage, raise the cotton wage, and include the port of

¹⁹ Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Convention, 1932.

Lake Charles, LA.²⁰ The inclusion of Lake Charles would help raise wages in Texas ports by eliminating a lower paying nearby alternative for shipping companies. Lake Charles wages would now be the same as Texas wages. Mers suggested that this relative success resulted from a lack of concerted preparation on the part of the stevedoring and shipping companies. He claims that when they signed the 1934 contract, the stevedores were determined to be better united when it came to negotiating the 1935 contract.²¹ The 1935 strike did indeed prove to be the most difficult.

During strikes, ILA men looked to their communities for aid. They needed the monetary support of other AFL unions. They benefited from donations and lines of credit from grocery stores. They also hoped that positive public opinion would pressure the shipping interests to cooperate with the ILA to get business moving again. The union devoted many of its resources to these ends and depended on the support of family and community during difficult times.

ILA men particularly relied on the help of their wives during strikes. Since their families had to endure serious deprivation without the main breadwinner's income, their wives usually felt compelled to support the strike. Both the black and white Ladies Auxiliaries engaged in many support activities to make strikes possible. Members of the Auxiliaries personally delivered sandwiches and coffee to grateful black and white longshoremen who manned the picket lines at all hours. They also worked in strike kitchens which provided food for families of all the striking men. The Ladies donated money from strike funds they had developed ahead of time and continued doing

²⁰ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 82-83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

fundraising activities. Perhaps most importantly, the Ladies worked alongside their husbands to change the public opinion of the strikes and the striking men.

Mexican Americans did not partake equally in the relief supplies for striking families. Partway through the strike of 1935, Gabriel Cruz, a member of the Corpus Christi warehouse local, informed white ILA members that the Mexican American members had not received any aid from the relief kitchen. In Corpus Christi, grocery donations were supplemented by Gulf shrimp and fish caught by union men. One of the men owned a shrimp boat that made regular trips out to supply the striking men.

According to Cruz, many of the Mexican American families were in dire straits but had not been invited, nor did they feel that they were welcome to, a portion of these supplies or of the relief money. This incident made Gilbert Mers realize that “we had formed an elitist strike committee from Local 1224, treating our warehouse unionists like stepchildren.”²² This attitude was ubiquitous throughout the strikes and ports.

Longshoremen dominated the strike committees. They directed the strike, set the agenda and determined which demands had priority. Houston’s Mexican Americans fared worst during the strikes. White and black longshoremen showed little concern for advancing their interests. While the Corpus Christi warehousemen and compressmen (who included some white members) did get recognition in the 1934 strike, their Houstonian counterparts (entirely Mexican American and black) would find their employer recognition regularly dropped from the list of essential strike demands.²³ Recognition of Houston compressmen was not central to protecting the work of longshoremen and black

²² Ibid., 92.

²³ Ibid., 44.

and white longshoremen did not feel a commitment to protecting the worker citizen rights of Mexican Americans, whom they viewed as less American than themselves. Even though strikes brought ILA men closer together, the experience of strikes remained different for blacks, whites and Mexican Americans.

Members of the black community of Houston saw the strike of 1934 as a response to a specific attack on black longshoremen. They argued that the companies that refused to cooperate, to negotiate a higher wage, were those that had contracts exclusively with black longshoremen. Carter Wesley, the editor of the *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, implied that racism drove the intransigence of these ship owners. Shipping representatives from companies that worked with both white and black workers found it reasonable to raise wages, but the Southern Steamship Co., Luckenback, and Southern Pacific, which “employ all Negro longshoremen” held out.²⁴ Their refusal to negotiate sent multiple messages. To black longshoremen it said that their labor was worth less than that of white workers. It also told white workers that they would be better off separating themselves from black workers, which would, of course, leave black workers to negotiate wages on their own. However, this attempt to divide longshoremen on the basis of race failed. According to the *Informer*, “Throughout this strike the whites have stuck with the Negroes, not only on the waterfront, but to arrange for food, medical care and everything else.”²⁵ The *Informer* lauded the ILA for holding together despite this

²⁴“Longshoremen Give Their Version of the Strike and Alleged Violence,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 2 June 1934, 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

divisive tactic, saying that “This kind of interracial good will and cooperation holds in it the future of Negro labor.”²⁶

Wesley and the *Informer* consistently supported the ILA throughout the 1930s, during both strikes and peacetime. Darlene Clark Hine describes Carter Wesley as one of the most influential black editors in Texas.²⁷ He would, in the late thirties, work closely with many longshoremen in revitalizing the local NAACP chapter. Wesley and the black members of the ILA shared a vision of community activism in which middle class and working class leaders joined forces to mobilize more Houstonians to participate in poll tax campaigns, NAACP membership drives, and community chest fundraisers. For both Wesley and the ILA, unions were sites of community organization.

As an ally of the union, Wesley used his newspaper to build public support for the ILA. In stories like, “Longshoremen Give Their Version of the Strike and Alleged Violence,” Wesley presented the ILA’s argument for going on strike in 1934 and also implied that most black Houstonians supported the ILA: “Negroes in this section are in sympathy with the Longshoremen ... Knowing the habit of employers to seek to pay Negroes less, Negroes generally think the longshoremen are entitled to support.”²⁸ Wesley’s argument for supporting the strike incorporated a long history of discrimination towards blacks. However, despite Wesley’s assertions, the black community of Houston was not entirely united in its support of the longshoremen. C. W. Rice, editor of the

²⁶ “The Future of Labor,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 19 May 1934.

²⁷ According to Hine, under Wesley’s editorship, the *Informer* expanded to producing local editions for Austin, Corpus Christi, Galveston, Tyler, Beaumont and several other cities during the late 1930s. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 161-163.

²⁸ “Longshoremen Give Their Version of the Strike and Alleged Violence,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 2 June 1934, 1.

Negro Labor News, regularly condemned the ILA strikes, seeing black ILA members as ignorant dupes of the organization. He feared that white workers would take advantage of their black colleagues and benefit more from the union. Even though black longshoremen made sacrifices during strikes, he contended, whites would place their needs above those of black members and would reap the most reward. Rice advocated independent, all-black unions.

Though the *Houston Informer* lauded the ILA for its interracial cooperation during the 1935 strike, C. W. Rice's take on the situation was not wholly wrong. Many white longshoremen viewed their black colleagues with some skepticism during strikes. According to white longshoreman Ralph Landgrebe, "the Negro Union men stick by the ILA on a strike because they know what they'll get if they don't. One thing to remember ... is that most of the Negroes in the ILA were scabs at one time or another."²⁹ Landgrebe implied that black longshoremen were only held in check by the threat of reprisal from their white counterparts and that their true nature was to scab. Other white longshoremen believed that black longshoremen were less likely to hold out. Whites believed that blacks preferred to settle early, and remained convinced that ILA strikes would have been more successful without black longshoremen pushing for a quick settlement. In the eyes of some whites, white workers had the perseverance and self-sacrifice necessary to stay the course, but black workers did not.

²⁹ Notes from Interview with Ralph Landgrebe, President of local 1273, 30 June 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

In the 1931 strike in particular, many whites blamed African Americans for the unfavorable outcome. According to rumor, a black local in Galveston was ready to break ranks and go back to work. As a result, several white locals felt that they had to settle more quickly.³⁰ Some apparently believed that they would have had a better chance at a more favorable settlement if they had held out longer. It is unlikely that a longer strike in 1931 would have created a more favorable settlement. Regardless, the persistence of the rumor reinforced the perception that black men were not real union men to the same degree as white men. They lacked the perseverance and integrity of their white brothers and were more “naturally” inclined to be scabs. But these disagreements remained private during strikes. Longshoremen put a great deal of weight on conveying a united front of interracial cooperation.

Divisions in the white labor press mirrored those in the African American press. The *Labor Messenger* supported the longshoremen and gave them space to explain their position, as did the *Informer*. The *Messenger* endorsed the ILA strikes of the 1930s and tried to convey the sometimes complicated reasons for those strikes to their readership. Like the *Negro Labor News*, the *Labor Journal* condemned strikes as radical actions encouraged by outside agitators. The editor of the *Journal* could not imagine that “any question could arise affecting the welfare and wages of longshoremen that could not be settled equitably, and to the reasonable satisfaction of all concerned.”³¹ The *Journal* had once been the official mouthpiece of the local AFL, but had since disassociated itself and become an independent, conservative labor commentator. The politics of the *Journal* and

³⁰ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 41.

³¹ “The Longshoremen’s Strike Threat,” *Houston Labor Journal*, 30 March 1934, 1.

Negro Labor News demonstrated that even among working people, longshoremen did not enjoy universal support. ILA efforts to win more public endorsement during the strikes of 1931, 1934 and 1935 were not limited to the middle class and business owners, but were aimed at members of the laboring community.

Stevedores, Ship Owners, and their Law Enforcement

During strikes, the primary concern of stevedores and ship owners was to keep cargo moving. In Texas, cotton was the primary cargo and limits placed by the Agricultural Adjustment Act restricted cotton production and precipitated a significant decline in the amount of cotton shipped out of Texas. Already faced with declining business, the shipping interests needed to keep cargo moving in order to minimize the financial impact of strikes. To do so, they hired independent laborers in Texas cities and also imported strikebreakers from elsewhere. In 1935 workers were brought in from Alabama and Mississippi to keep the flow of goods moving in and out of the ports.³² These men were housed in warehouses on the docks and “guarded” by private police hired by the company. Company police sometimes even used violence against strikebreakers who wanted to leave company provided housing. In the disastrous strike of 1931, the Houston papers reported that 600 strikebreakers worked the docks.³³ The

³² Notes from Interview with C. H. Chambers of colored warehouse local 1331, 1 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

³³ “No Settlement Near in Dockmen’s Strike,” *Houston Labor Journal*, 9 October 1931, 1.

ability to maintain a large workforce gave stevedores and shipping companies a significant advantage during strikes.³⁴

The companies' own police forces were often supplemented by local police and Texas Rangers who protected company property and restricted the activities of ILA men. Most ports experienced heavy police presence during the strike of 1935, partially in response to the strike of 1934. Luckenbach Lines refused to do business in the port during that strike in part because they claimed that there was "no police protection in Houston for the shipping interests."³⁵ This loss of revenue for the city certainly would have caused great concern for the city council. In 1935, the city responded by having ample police resources in place before the ILA even declared a strike in effect. The *Houston Post* headline the day before the strike was announced read, "Police Ready to Guard Docks."³⁶ A close reading of newspaper sources reveals that a group of city officials, police, and company representatives *together* determined how to proceed and address the strike. Throughout the strike, this group worked as a united front against the ILA.

This pattern did not hold true in all ports, however. According to Bertram Jackson, the editor of the *Galveston Examiner*, the officials of that city were sympathetic to the strike of longshoremen and supported them. Jackson attributed this difference to the relative economic impact. In his view, the city of Galveston relied heavily on the income of working class consumers and was thus more sympathetic to their point of view. In Houston, bigger business drove the economy and strikers received no sympathy

³⁴ See Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) for a study of the development of strikebreaking as an industry and how it strengthened the position of capital vis-à-vis labor.

³⁵ "Can This Be True?" *Houston Labor Journal*, 11 May 1934, 1.

³⁶ "Police Ready to Guard Docks," *Houston Post*, October 6, 1935, 1.

from city officials who either directly assisted the shipping interests or turned a blind eye to their illegal activities.

Shipping interests used violence to maintain their upper hand and prevent ILA men from interfering with strikebreakers. During the strike of 1934, railroad operators cooperated with the ILA and refused to transport out-of-town scabs to the wharf via railcar. The Southern Steamship company loaded men onto a boat, the *Wichita Falls*, and brought their scabs to the pier on the ship channel. ILA men and their families gathered on the docks to meet them. Mr. Nelson and Mr. Curtis of black Local 872 remembered about 400 to 500 people gathered there to prevent the scabs from getting off the boat. The company police aboard the *Wichita Falls* then fired into the crowd, killing eight people and causing a stampede in which women and children were injured. F. N. Hunter of white Local 1273 remembered that “these sort of tactics by the Companies have received the sanction of city officials.”³⁷ At the very least, city officials did not censure the Southern Steamship Company.³⁸

The police also supported the shipping interests by selectively investigating the deaths of waterfront workers. C. H. Chambers, a black warehouseman, reported witnessing the murder of a white ILA member. The white worker in question was riding

³⁷ Both Hunter and Mr. Nelson and Mr. Curtis, both of local 872, recalled the events of the 1934 shooting from the *Wichita Falls* in interviews in 1936. Notes from interview with F. N. Hunter, 30 June 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. Notes from interview with Mr. Nelson and Mr. Curtis, 1 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin., 1.

³⁸ Howard Kimeldorf indicated that the violence experienced by Texas workers during the 1930s was more intense than that experienced by the East and West Coast counterparts. He attributes this to the interracial cooperation of the workers, which proved to be a thorn in the side of employers. Stevedores and shipping companies knew that they could pay black workers less and drive down white workers wages if the two groups were in competition. Kimeldorf implies that these interests expressed their anger over losing this tactical advantage through more intense physical abuse. *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

on the running board of a car when he was shot. A police car was right behind and Chambers asked the police why they did not arrest or pursue the killers. The police responded that they had no jurisdiction to do so.³⁹ But police did investigate the murders of strikebreakers. Police arrested and judges convicted white longshoremen for killing black scabs. The Houston and Corpus Christi law enforcement agencies suddenly developed a vigorous interest in pursuing justice for black victims that was not generally representative of Texas justice. White ILA man C. O. “Blondie” Reeves, prize fighter and longshoreman, together with H. J. Freeman, white, and S. P. Brown, black, were indicted for killing three black men during the 1934 strike. They attacked their victims as they were making their way to the docks, apparently to work as strikebreakers. They were indicted by the Harris County grand jury on murder charges.⁴⁰ By selectively investigating and prosecuting strike violence, the police and district attorneys not only allowed the ship owners and stevedores to perpetrate crimes with impunity but contributed to the perception that longshoremen were the only people engaging in illegitimate, criminal uses of violence.

In 1935, one interracial group of men in Corpus Christi sought to rein in abuse by Texas Rangers in that city by making sworn depositions about the inappropriate treatment they had received at the hands of law enforcement, especially Rangers Allee and Wright. Allee and Wright, while investigating the attempted murder of Bibian Solis, a white

³⁹Notes from interview with C. H. Chambers, 2.

⁴⁰“Local Longshoremen Indicted in Killings,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 4 August 1934, 1.

strikebreaker, by ILA men, interrogated and harassed a number of dockworkers.⁴¹ T. A. Donald, a twenty-eight year old longshoreman of Corpus Christi, was dragged out of bed at three in the morning by a group of Rangers who took him to the police station and questioned him about whether or not he had pulled the trigger in the Solis case. Ranger Davenport then informed Donald that he would “rather have your dead asses down in front of me pistol-whipping you than anything else that I know of, and I’d sooner shoot ...you than a mangy yellow dog.”⁴² Most of the seventeen longshoremen who made reports of mistreatment included descriptions of both physical violence and abusive language. James Newport, a thirty-eight year old native of Galveston who was working in Corpus Christi as a longshoreman, reported that Ranger Allee approached him and a group of longshoremen and sailors with a machine gun and instructed them to “stand back you dirty bastards or I’ll kill every God-damn one of you.”⁴³ Corpus Christi’s ILA men faced arrest, illegal search and seizure, and police brutality. They were outgunned and their enemies had the support of all branches of law enforcement. Longshoremen particularly complained about the abusive language. Police and Rangers humiliated longshoremen by deriding them, often publicly, while restraining them physically or at gunpoint. Texas Rangers Allee, Wright, and Davenport threatened the manliness of these men, who took pride in their physical prowess, by degrading them in such a manner and exposing their vulnerability.

⁴¹ According to newspaper accounts, Solis was an “independent laborer” whose car was set upon by longshoremen. He and others were pulled from the car and beaten. Solis was shot while running away.

⁴² Sworn statement of T. A. Donald, 27 November 1935, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e304, folder 12, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁴³ Sworn statement of James Newport, 27 November 1935, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e304, folder 12, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

They responded to such treatment with affidavits meant to expose the excesses of their abusers. Advised by an attorney, the ILA sent these affidavits to Governor James Allred and asked that he remove the Rangers from Corpus Christi. Their message was clear: The men sent to protect scabs were not staying within the limits of the law, but were cruel and sadistic. The governor should protect the rights of ILA men and remove the offending officers. They received no response.⁴⁴

Mers, not a native Texan, was shocked at the fear that the presence of Rangers induced in his fellow dock workers: “There was something about the Ranger tradition that struck terror in people raised with it.”⁴⁵ While a third of the men had been “going armed” before the arrival of the Rangers, many men disposed of their weapons when the Rangers came to town. Rangers succeeded in getting scabs to the docks to work despite ILA pickets.⁴⁶ They held pickets at gunpoint while bringing scabs through the line, limiting any possibility of interference. They also weekly chose one member of the interracial picket line to beat.⁴⁷

Not to be deterred, ILA wives, armed with copies of the affidavits, went out into the streets and sought to build public sympathy for their men. They went door to door, asking Corpus Christians to read the affidavits and sign a petition for the removal of the Rangers from the city. Certainly they assumed that women would make more sympathetic figures than the dock workers themselves. Though they may have raised

⁴⁴ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 99.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁷ Mers refers to these weekly beatings as Ranger “lessons,” 98.

awareness of the problem, the women failed to gather many signatures.⁴⁸ The Houston Labor and Trades Council, a body composed of representatives from all the local AFL unions, also sent a telegram to the Governor protesting the presence of the Rangers in Corpus.⁴⁹ Again, nothing came of it. For white workers this police brutality was an experience in second-class citizenship. The institutions designed to support and protect them from the abuses of government did not do so. They were subject to violence without official recourse. The government refused to acknowledge their rights.

Not all longshoremen were harassed in the same manner. Ned Dixon, the only black longshoremen to submit an affidavit, recounted a story with many of the same elements as the others. He was threatened by Ranger Monroe, who told him to “Get out of there you black son of a bitch. ... you ought to be in your grave.” He was physically assaulted with a flashlight. But he was also treated in a more condescending manner than were white union members. The tenor of his interaction with Ranger Monroe was different than that of the white longshoremen’s. Ranger Monroe wiped his dirty hands on Dixon’s clean shirt and face, then slapped him “a number of times.” But after he was through beating Dixon, Monroe forced Dixon to act out the role of the “happy darkie.” “He asked me was I mad at him and I told him no. He walked up to me then and told me to smile. I then smiled. He told me then to give him a cigarette and I gave him one. He said ‘I’ll show you I’m not mad and I’ll smoke with you.’ Then they got in the car and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁹ “5,000 Negro Workers Hit by Longshoremen’s Strike,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 26 October 1935, 3.

drove away.”⁵⁰ For Dixon, the encounter undermined all that the union promised: independence, pride, and equality with white workers. In his treatment of Dixon, Monroe reinforced the inferiority of black men in Jim Crow society. Though many aspects of the strike experience altered racial norms by granting non-white scabs special protection or uniting longshoremen across race lines, racial difference did not completely disappear.

Though longshoremen of all races experienced violence during strikes, the violence to which blacks and Mexican Americans were subject differed from that of whites not only because of the distinct treatment they met at the hands of Rangers, but also because they experienced it in a different context. During the 1930s, both the Mexican American and African American communities of Houston had ongoing problems of police brutality. Mexican Americans organized to demand accountability for the death of a member of their community Elepidio Cortez who died at police hands. Though the case went to trial, the officers in question were acquitted.⁵¹ Black Houstonians also regularly encountered mistreatment at the hands of police. The city had experienced widespread racial violence in the Race Riots of 1917. After the Riots, the Klan gained popularity and maintained this atmosphere of danger well into the twenties.⁵² Police brutality and a history of racial violence contributed to an environment in which blacks felt that violence was imminent should they step out of their “place.”⁵³ During

⁵⁰ Sworn statement of Ned Dixon, 27 November 1935, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e304, folder 12, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁵¹ F. Arturo Rosales, “Shifting Self Perceptions and Ethnic Consciousness Among Mexicans in Houston, 1908-1946,” *Aztlán*, Spring 1987, 87.

⁵² Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, “Introduction to Section IV,” *Black Dixie*, 160-163.

⁵³ James Sorelle, “Race Relations in ‘Heavenly Houston,’ 1919-1945,” *Black Dixie*, 176-177.

strikes, Mexican Americans and African Americans put themselves in the way of abuse that they otherwise worked to avoid.

The ILA Strikes Back

The success of strikes depended on the ability of longshoremen to prevent companies from continuing to operate without their labor or to make their operations as difficult and expensive as possible. Longshoremen engaged in two main strategies to deter men from “scabbing” their jobs: picket lines and violence. All union men shared the responsibility of maintaining a constant picket line. Their picket lines were always interracial, a public demonstration of their unity and cooperation. Men who considered strikebreaking, and were not brought in on bus, train or boat by the companies, had to cross the picket line in order to reach the docks. Those manning the picket line tried to deter these potential scabs either by eloquent argument or, if police were not present, by fist.

Longshoremen employed violent tactics without shame or doubt about the legitimacy of their actions. Ralph Landgrebe, President of Local 1273, said that “longshoremen make no bones about the kind of tactics they employ during strikes to prevent scabs from taking their jobs. They hunt out the guilty parties and beat them up.”⁵⁴ In Landgrebe’s eyes, scabs were the “guilty parties.” They took the jobs of longshoremen and threatened their livelihood not just in the present but long term, and

⁵⁴ Notes from interview with Ralph Langrebe, 30 June 30, 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 2.

undermined their “right” to work.⁵⁵ In the eyes of ILA men, scabs like Gus Jackson and Jack Andrews deserved to die for working their jobs during the strike of 1935. The labor of men like Jackson and Andrews enabled ship owners to keep ships moving in and out of port, thereby weakening the strike’s effectiveness. An interracial group of ILA men attacked Jackson and Andrews, who were black, as they were driving near Dock 11 in Houston on November 9th. They were pulled from their car and Jackson was beaten to death, his body not discovered until mid-December.⁵⁶ Their attackers hoped that this punishment would deter others from scabbing.

Longshoremen did not just target scabs for these strategic reasons, but for emotional ones as well. Mers described the scabs as “enemies, traitors to their class.” According to Mers, longshoremen felt a sense of ownership of their work. When scabs undercut their aims, it was personal: “you watch these other workers, those scabs, taking *your* jobs, drawing *your* pay, and tearing down *your* working conditions. Hate sets in. You hear an ambulance heading into the docks, you exult.”⁵⁷ Scabs cost longshoremen in very real ways. They lost wages and their families suffered without regular income. Some men lost their homes, a powerful symbol of their success and ability to provide for their families. Longshoremen lashed out even when they knew retribution would be

⁵⁵ Kevin Kenny describes the violence of the vigilante group the Molly Maguires as violence to enforce a vision of social justice. The men of the ILA also see themselves as fighting for their vision of social justice based on their belief that their rights as citizens have been denied by corporations. Unlike the case of the Molly Maguires, where trade unionism stood in contrast with vigilantism, in the Texas ILA, violence was embraced as a union tactic, accepted by the members as necessary. *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 186.

⁵⁶ “Body of Gus Jackson Found; Two Charged With His Murder,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 21 December 1935, 1.

⁵⁷ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 40.

swift. Ralph Tamez, one of the few Mexican American longshoremen in Corpus Christi, attacked a scab in front of Texas Rangers. He knew he would suffer for it and he did.⁵⁸

Tamez's actions pointed to a unique aspect of strike violence for people of color: Strikes provided one of the rare venues where blacks and Mexican Americans could use violence against whites with some white support, either from their union brothers or from the companies that hired them. In *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, Stephen Norwood describes the empowering experience of strikebreaking for many African Americans in the early twentieth century, "Strikebreaking thus allowed African American men to challenge openly white society's image of them as obsequious, cowardly, and lacking the ability to perform well under pressure. It enabled them to violate the prevailing norms of conduct for black men in the South..." When black worker Ned Dixon was forced to smile, it was precisely this subservient role that Dixon's attacker wanted him to reaffirm.⁵⁹

In the strikes of 1934 and 1935, the ILA needed to scare away not only scabs brought in from out of town but also local, independently organized black workers. In Houston, the Colored Lone Star Benevolent Association, a union not affiliated with the ILA, AFL, or any other labor organization, regularly worked some of the piers. During strikes, these men did not respect the ILA picket line but instead took advantage of the ILA members' absence to claim more work for themselves. Longshoremen resorted to a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁹ Stephen Norwood. *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 80.

“virtual reign of terror” to try to discourage this. This included dragging men from their cars and beating them, as well as planting explosives in people’s homes.⁶⁰

Ultimately, this wave of violence resulted in a more powerful union when after the 1935 strike, the Lone Star Colored Benevolent Association joined the ILA and became Local 1409. One can imagine that this merger could be somewhat awkward as men whose friends’ homes had been bombed by ILA men now called their attackers “brother.” Gilbert Mers wanted nothing to do with men who had scabbed against the union and found this alliance, encouraged by Labor Department arbitrators, particularly odious.⁶¹ Members of black Local 1306 felt that they had to prove themselves, since they too were former independents who had recently joined the ILA. Member J. M. Taylor noted that “Local 1306 had participated in two strikes while in the ILA and has proven its loyalty in both. Only one man deserted the ranks in the 1935 strike, and he was killed.”⁶² The threat then to men who might go against the union was very real. Though these mergers of longshore groups were problematic, they ultimately made the union stronger by eliminating a local source of potential scab labor.

Longshoremen also engaged in small reprisals intended to make the job of the police sent to guard them more difficult. In Corpus Christi the port authority shone a spotlight on the ILA headquarters, sending a not-so-subtle message that they were watching. Mers described this experience as a “humiliating” and arrogant use of power. The men of 1224 responded by assaulting the dock warehouse with rocks. Under cover

⁶⁰ “Bomb Strikes Longshoreman’s Home,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, 12 May 1934, 1.

⁶¹ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 114.

⁶² Notes from Interview with group from Local 1306, 27 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e305, folder 11, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

of darkness they used a slingshot to briefly pelt the building. The sound of the rocks bouncing off the sheet metal walls sounded like gunfire and kept the company police on edge.⁶³ Though effective in irritating their enemies, this exchange reveals the weakness of the union's position. These acts may have provided some emotional satisfaction to union members, but did little to significantly change their situation.

Longshoremen also fought the recruitment of strikebreakers in other ways. Bill Follett went to New York to attend a strike-related meeting. He reported small-scale actions taken by sympathetic men in that city. Some men signed up with scab recruiters to go to Texas but after receiving money for transportation simply left town — after giving half of the money to the strike relief fund. Follett especially enjoyed the irony of the “scab-herders” money going to fight the shipping companies.⁶⁴

Did ILA violence and its publicity deter men from stealing ILA jobs? During the 1935 strike, ILA attacks on scabs made the use of strikebreakers more difficult and expensive for ship owners. In this way, it was effective. Strikebreakers had to be contained on the docks. The cost of providing for them and hiring the police to both protect them and keep them, increasingly against their will as time went on, became formidable. The records of the Houston Cotton Exchange, an association of cotton merchants, indicate that these costs posed a significant problem for their organization. In 1935 they spent over \$60,000 to keep the port functioning. This cost ultimately contributed to the end of the strike. However, the violence also worked against the longshoremen, often resulting in a stronger police presence on the docks. In one

⁶³ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 100-101.

⁶⁴ Bill Follett, 1985 interview, 13-14.

instance, the state responded to the shooting of a white strikebreaker by increasing the presence of Texas Rangers in Corpus Christi, despite the efforts of the ILA and its Ladies' Auxiliary to have them removed.⁶⁵

In sum, the tactics of longshoremen during the strike of 1935 had an ambiguous effect on the outcome of the strike. By increasing the expense to the companies, longshoremen made the strike impossible to sustain forever. However, their use of violence brought serious repercussions from the state and the shipping companies in the form of increased police repression. Additionally, ILA men weakened their own appeal for public support since they could more easily be portrayed as dangerous and therefore undeserving of sympathy. However, they also used words and symbols in addition to guns and rocks, often with results. Longshoremen and their wives engaged in a discursive battle to defend their right to decent pay, fair treatment, and safe working conditions.

The Discursive Fight Over Violence

Longshoremen believed their use of violence was just. However, because it violated the law they struggled to convince the public that it was legitimate. Shipping companies and stevedores' use of violence had the support of city and state government and therefore had an aura of legality that ILA violence lacked. Violence undercut public support for longshoremen since the mainstream press successfully portrayed it as a public

⁶⁵ Three additional Texas Rangers were sent to Corpus Christi because of an ILA shooting. "Charges Filed in Shooting of Dock Worker," *Corpus Christi Caller*, 5 November 1935, 1.

danger. In addition to their actual fighting, both sides engaged in a fight for public opinion, using the press and public demonstrations to justify their actions and portray their actions as legitimate. Shipping interests emphasized the dangerous behavior of longshoremen and the unreasonableness of their demands. The ILA responded by emphasizing their familial responsibilities and the connection between their problems and the plight of all workers during the Great Depression. ILA dock workers wanted other working people in Texas to support them and in order to achieve this they remade themselves into symbols of the working class.

Even before longshoremen started to use violence, ship owners and police in different Texas port cities created a public fear that they would become violent. By increasing the number of officers on duty at the ports, police sent the message that they expected violence. As we have seen in Corpus Christi, the City Council requested the assistance of Texas Rangers who remained in that port, investigating (and perpetrating) violence for the duration of the strike.⁶⁶ In Lake Charles, LA, a judge ordered the port closed after an act of violence resulting in the death of a guard. The port remained closed for 26 days and was only reopened in conjunction with an injunction that prohibited union men from “congregating” near the docks, carrying arms, and harassing or intimidating people working the docks.⁶⁷ By publicizing their readiness for violence, city officials portrayed longshoremen as a threat to public safety. A strike was sure to be a dangerous affair for the city at large.

⁶⁶ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 90.

⁶⁷ “Lake Charles Port Is Opened by Injunction,” *Houston Post*, 8 November 1935, 1.

Ship owners and police in Houston made the biggest splash in portraying ILA men as a public threat by recruiting the famous Frank Hamer to take charge of security. On October 12th, 1935, the *Houston Post* headline read “Frank Hamer to Head Dock Police During Strike.” Hamer had been hired to lead a special police force despite the fact that longshoremen had left their jobs “without violence of any sort.”⁶⁸ Hamer had achieved national fame the previous year when he, along with a group of Texas and Louisiana police officers, shot and killed Bonnie and Clyde. A Texas Ranger at the time, Hamer was credited with ending the crime spree of this notorious duo. Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker allegedly killed 13 people and committed numerous robberies from 1932 until their deaths in 1934. Many of their crimes took place in Texas. The hunt for Bonnie and Clyde received a great deal of coverage in the press. By bringing in Hamer to handle security, Houston ship owners implied that longshoremen on strike were like criminals on a rampage. The port commission gave Hamer the authority to “take whatever steps he considered necessary to protect the property of the navigation district.”⁶⁹ Additionally, a separate force consisting of 14 motorcycle officers and 31 patrolmen was already policing the waterfront before a picket line had even been established.⁷⁰

The mainstream press assured the public and the striking longshoremen that Hamer would “not interfere with their just rights, but neither will he tolerate any infractions of the law.” The local Communist Press disagreed, comparing Hamer to “murderous gunmen” and arguing that his hiring was part of “preparation for WAR

⁶⁸ “Frank Hamer to Head Dock Police During Strike,” *Houston Post*, 12 October 1935, 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

against the longshoremen.”⁷¹ In fact, Hamer violated a number of the labor rights of ILA men during his tenure as special director of police. NLRB records reveal that Hamer worked for the Wald Transfer and Storage Company in Houston as well as for the port commission, running a spy organization through which Houston ship owners were able to remain well informed about ILA plans. Hamer developed a reputation as a scab-herder. The regional labor board discovered Hamer’s spy ring, but too late to prevent it. It appears that they did not pursue charges.⁷² This information did not make the headlines, and Hamer continued to enjoy the support of the public.

Carl White, the editor of one of Beaumont’s local papers, the *People’s Press*, claimed that the campaign to portray the striking dock workers as a danger to public safety worked very well in that city. The sheriff Bill Richardson commissioned eight hundred men to protect the property of the Texas Company, the central shipping interest in that port. According to White, the wives of company officials thought that “Bill Richardson saved their lives during this strike.”⁷³ Eight hundred men was an excessive force for a port the size of Port Arthur, a port that one Works Progress Administration agent described as having a labor movement that “follows a more Chamber-of-Commerce-cooperate-do-no-violence policy.”⁷⁴ A police presence this heavy intimidated strikers, reassured the Texas Company that the strikers would not be in control or be able

⁷¹ Flyer published by local Communist Party district committee, undated, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 4, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁷² Letter to Benedict Wolf, Fort Worth Regional Board of Labor from Karl Mueller, Regional Attorney, 9 December 1936, National Labor Relations Board Archives, RG 25, National Archives, Fort Worth Depository.

⁷³ Notes from Interview with Carl White, 27 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e304, folder 11, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁷⁴ Notes from Interview with Claud Keltner of WPA Beaumont, 27 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e304, folder 11, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

to successfully intimidate imported strikebreakers, and also conveyed a sense of potential danger to the general public.

Longshoremen responded in part by trying to portray themselves and their struggle as representative of all working people. During the 1935 strike, the ILA called a mass meeting in Houston to explain their reasons for striking to the public, especially other members of the working class. ILA speakers emphasized to the two thousand attendees that “the present strike is more than a strike of longshoremen, but symbolized the plight of the American workman, and is of utmost importance to every worker in America.”⁷⁵ Press coverage of the event also carried their message to the general public. ILA men tried, through this event, to combat the negative publicity directed towards the working class community by the *Labor Journal* and *Negro Labor News*, which regularly published articles condemning the strike. Houston’s ILA members also tried to appeal to the Houston union community by portraying their strike as an effort to make that city’s labor movement stronger. Houston longshoremen and their wives held a parade the day after the mass meeting during which they carried signs saying, “Organize: Make Houston the Strongest City in the Country” and “Open Shop Towns Suffer Poverty: A Union City Enjoys Prosperity.”⁷⁶ These signs emphasized that the ILA strike was part of the larger struggle between workers and capital and that if unions like the ILA could gain a stronghold, all workers in the city would benefit.

In the public relations struggle the ILA benefited from the outspoken and unsolicited support of the Communist Party which echoed these themes in their

⁷⁵ “Dock Strikers Air Case at Mass Meeting,” *Houston Post*, 18 October 1935, 1.

⁷⁶ “Dock Strikers Stage Protest Parade in City,” *Houston Post*, 19 October 1935, 1-2.

publications. The local CP, under the direction of Homer Brooks, published and circulated flyers which reiterated the longshoremen's argument that this strike was part of the broader struggle of all working people. Brooks explained that:

The local City Council, Port Commission, Chamber of Commerce, and the Texas State Government are, in a united front with the shipping interests, making it necessary that the working class allies of the longshoremen step into action. A defeat of the longshoremen by the combined financial and industrial interests of the Gulf Coast would open the way for a concerted Open Shop, union-smashing drive against every trade union in the area.

The CP flyers and the words of the longshoremen themselves sought to re-focus the debate away from the violence of the strike and onto class tension. During the New Deal President Roosevelt talked about the battle between the common man and “economic royalists.” Longshoremen engaged with the larger national discourse about class conflict to justify their position. They described themselves as members of a larger community of good citizens whose rights were being violated by greedy capitalists.⁷⁷

Their strike was one skirmish in this larger battle.

In part this strategy was necessary due to the complicated nature of the demands of the union. Longshoremen struggled to explain their position to the public while ship owners and stevedores convincingly represented the strike demands to the public as irrational. The ILA wanted recognition of locals of their union in other ports in the Gulf, especially New Orleans. Most shipping companies also had contracts in New Orleans

⁷⁷ Gary Gerstle describes how many labor groups tapped into this language of class warfare to advance their positions. Because the Depression was seen to be caused by low wages of the 1920s, and since wages were kept low to maximize profit, corporate greed was seen by many as a social evil and “greedy capitalists” or “economic royalists” as bad citizens whose actions harmed the nation. *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 150.

and their refusal to recognize the union there meant that longshore wages in New Orleans remained very low. As a result, longshoremen in Houston and Galveston faced the threat of ship owners sending their ships to New Orleans if Texas longshoremen demanded wages that affected the ship owners' profits. As one labor official put it, "when our committees went before employers to ask for a raise they have repeatedly told us that until we brought New Orleans up and on equal terms ... they could not meet our demands."⁷⁸ The ILA struggled to explain the complexities of this situation to a public and local business community whose sympathy for the longshoremen was challenged by the financial difficulties caused by the long strike.

Flexing their financial muscles, the shipping associations bought large ads in the Houston papers that placed the blame for the strike squarely on the shoulders of "unreasonable" longshoremen. The Houston Maritime Committee, a conglomeration of business interests such as ship owners and stevedores, took out ads in local newspapers, including the *Houston Labor Messenger*, the pro-union labor paper, attacking the ILA for going on strike. An ad taking up one third of a page denounced the ILA men for leaving their jobs when ship owners did not meet their "impossible and utterly senseless demands."⁷⁹ By advertising in a labor paper, the Maritime Committee sought to undercut the most likely source of support for longshoremen – other members of the working class. However, the Committee did not limit its strategy to the labor community but used

⁷⁸ "The Longshoremen Strike of 1935: Background and Causes." Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e304, folder 11, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 2.

⁷⁹ Advertisement, *Houston Labor Messenger*, 18 October 1935, 2.

the mainstream white press as well. The *Houston Post* also regularly editorialized against the strike, arguing that:

The Houston ship owners are not in position to coerce the New Orleans ship owners into agreeing with the demands.... Under such circumstances the obligation clearly rests upon the authorities to see that the port is kept open, no matter what measures may be necessary to do so.⁸⁰

This line of thinking was especially damaging to the ILA cause because, in addition to completely denying any legitimate grounds for striking, the editorial called for complete public support of the city police and strikebreakers.

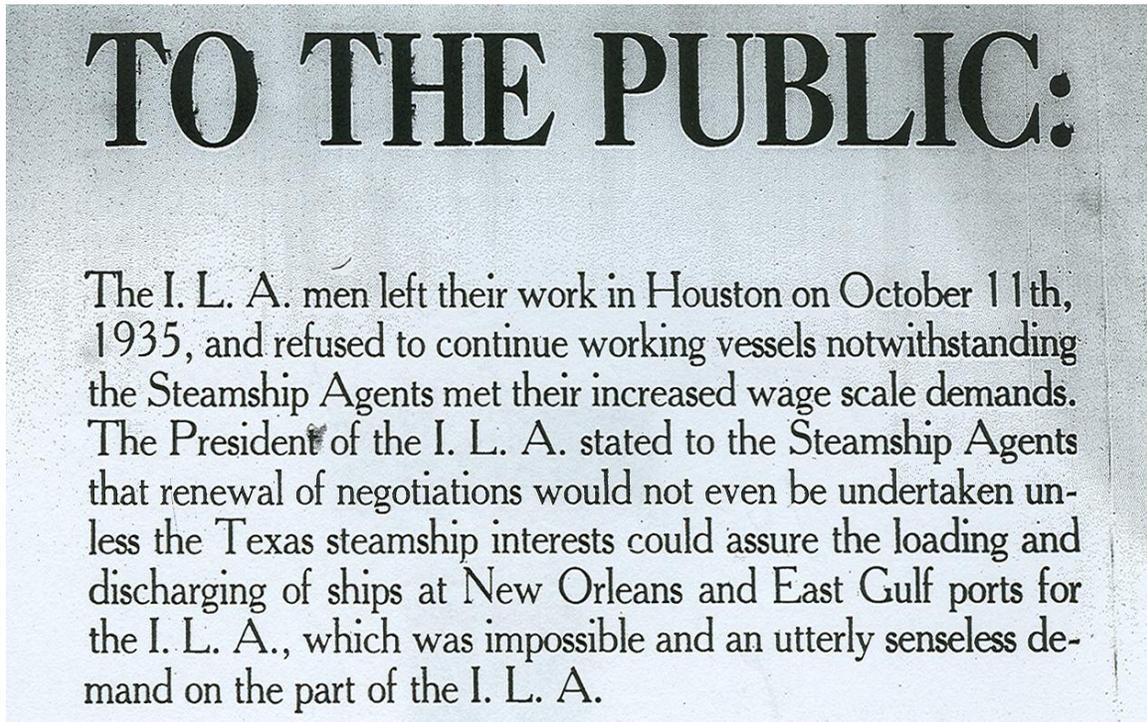


Figure 2.1 Excerpt from an Advertisement by the Maritime Commission, *Houston Labor Journal*, 18 October 1935, 3.

Longshoremen and their wives responded, in part, by trying to present their argument in the local labor and black papers. In the same issue of the *Labor Messenger*

⁸⁰ "Keep the Peace," *Houston Post*, 13 October 1935, 4.

that carried the Maritime Commission's ad, an ad paid for by the ILA expressed their reasoning for the strike: "With the I.L.A. crushed in other ports, Houston and Galveston I.L.A. could then easily be crushed by the ship owners."⁸¹ However, they lacked the financial resources to advertise as heavily as the Maritime Committee and were compelled to make their case in other ways. Led by the women of the Ladies' Auxiliary, the men of the ILA downplayed their particular demands and emphasized their class and gender identity in parades and public statements.

Women and the Battle for Public Opinion

The women of the ILA eagerly joined the battle for public opinion. This struggle put them up against ship owners and stevedores who used their deep pockets and influence to shape public opinion against the strikes. Women responded with the best weapon they had: their roles as wives and as mothers of children dependent on the breadwinning power of good hardworking men. This work is first evident in the strike of 1931 when women organized a parade during the strike. By parading through the city of Houston together as husbands and wives they publicly demonstrated the family nature of the union and reminded Houstonians that women and children also suffered because of the refusal of the stevedores and ship owners to meet their demands.

⁸¹ Advertisement, *Houston Labor Messenger*, 18 October 1935, 3.

During the 1935 strike, they again used this parade strategy to change public opinion. Through the parade, the ILA men could show their respectability as well as their need and right to a family wage and control over the conditions in which they labored.



Figure 2.2. Photograph which appeared in the *Houston Post*, 19 October 1935, 2.

Press coverage made clear the family nature of the protest. The *Houston Post* ran a picture [figure 2.2] of the parade on page two with the following caption:

A silent protest parade was staged on the downtown business streets of Houston Friday afternoon by members of the International Longshoremen's Association who are now on strike. Approximately 2000 longshoremen, their families and friends, comprised the line of march...A number of the parade participants carried babes and young children in their arms.⁸²

The dramatic photograph features a longshoreman carrying his young child. That the press chose to run that particular picture, with a caption specifically highlighting the family, indicates that these values resonated in the community. The sight of women marching alongside their husbands and fathers, children in tow, drove home the message that the striking men were family men. To parade during strikes was to publicly display the justification for striking.

The marchers hoped that their presentation of themselves would tap into a larger discourse about gender and the rights of worker/citizens created by New Deal programs and propaganda. The men of the ILA cited New Deal programs which bolstered the rights of workers, such as the Wagner Act, as the inspiration for demanding their "rights." President Roosevelt spoke about the rights of the "citizen and his family." ILA men and women believed they were fighting for the rights promised in New Deal policies. Suzanne Mettler has argued that New Deal politics and programs privileged the role of men as family breadwinners and reinforced a secondary citizenship for women.⁸³ During this strike parade, the men and the Ladies Auxiliaries presented themselves as men and women who embodied the New Deal model of dependent wives and

⁸² "Dock Strikers Stage Protest Parade in City," *Houston Post*, 19 October 1935, 2.

⁸³ Suzanne Mettler analyzes the ways that New Deal programs were implemented at the local, state and federal levels and finds that these programs were implemented in ways that reflect / reinforce specific gender and race roles. See *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

breadwinning citizens in an effort to garner public support and perhaps also the sympathy of government investigators sent to look into the strike.

In parades, women's bodies spoke for them. Their supportive presence made their message clear. But the Ladies Auxiliaries also spoke publicly on behalf of their husbands. They did this first in their fundraising activities when they spoke directly with other labor groups and business people. They also turned to the newspapers where they expressed their understanding of the issue at stake in the strike: the survival of the family.

No one knows better...their salaries, because we are the ones who have had to spread that small salary to cover the bare necessities. We want our children to have milk and the foods that will build their bodies into strong men and women. We want them educated, so that they may grow into good useful citizens.⁸⁴

Mrs. Liles, spokeswoman for the white Ladies' Auxiliary, based her understanding of the strike issues on the impact on her children. Her words stressed not only her dependence and that of her children on their breadwinner, but also a desire to raise children who will live up to New Deal values of citizenship as well. While the ILA presented the issue as one of union strength and development, the Ladies, through their words and public displays, revealed the human side of these issues. While the men had difficulty in presenting their complicated case, the women could appeal for support on grounds with more public resonance. Still, the Ladies had difficulty making their voice heard because they only had limited access to the local labor papers in which to publish their point of view.

⁸⁴ "Port Commissioners Deny ILA Auxiliary Right to Go On Docks," *Labor Messenger*, 25 October 1935, 1.

Anti-union Houstonians also recognized the important influence that women had with their husbands and sons. On the eve of the lengthy 1935 strike, the conservative *Houston Labor Journal* directed a lengthy editorial at the “Wives and Mothers of Longshoremen.” The editorial recognized the suffering these women had experienced in the strike of the year before: “anguish of fear which you felt for your men...grocery bills, doctor bills, hospital bills distressed you.” It called upon them to act against the strike: “For the good of yourselves, your men and the entire community do what you, and only you, can do to avert the disaster!” It also laid out the possible repercussions of a strike: “Many of you have spent sleepless nights for fear of being forced to apply for government relief.”⁸⁵ Seeking government relief would bring into question their husbands’ ability to take care of their families. Though many women likely feared the repercussions of a strike, the Ladies Auxiliaries publicly supported it. Though they did not have an official vote in choosing to go on strike, they adopted the cause as their own.

However, both black and white women did not agree entirely with their spouses on how best to gain public support. Women wanted their husbands to change their behavior to better fit the mold of responsible worker citizen. Women used their influence not only to reshape the public’s perception of their husbands, but to reshape their husbands’ behavior as well. Since so much depended on the men of the ILA meeting the standards of family providers, women sought to shape their extracurricular activities to match. The women of the Auxiliary found it problematic that their husbands’ public reputation ran to the seedy and drunken rather than the industrious. In part because the

⁸⁵ “An Open Letter to Wives and Mothers of Longshoremen,” *Houston Labor Journal*, 5 July 1935, 1.

vagaries of longshore work required that longshoremen spend a good deal of time loitering around the docks, often passing the hours in dockside bars which were points of dissemination for work related information, ILA men had a less than respectable reputation.⁸⁶ Ruth Allen, in an academic study of Houston longshoremen in the 1930s, described their reputation in the general public as men with “brutish strength ... and violent propensities.”⁸⁷

Members of the white Ladies’ Auxiliary took their husbands to task for being “bestly drunk” at union meetings. “[H]e has no right trying to conduct business or take any part in a meeting when his mind is so fogged up with liquor that he can’t think of anything but fighting.”⁸⁸ Such behavior reinforced negative stereotypes of longshoremen who spent a fair amount of time in waterfront bars. The behavior of these drunken men offended members of the Ladies’ Auxiliary who themselves had limited official ability to participate in union decision making processes and whose livelihood depended on both the reputation of their husbands and the decisions they made in these meetings.

The Ladies developed alternative social activities for their husbands which involved spending time with their wives and families. Women of the black Ladies’ Auxiliary of Houston were particularly active in putting on social and religious activities for the community. They involved their husbands in putting on musical programs at local churches. Women of the white Ladies Auxiliaries sponsored social nights of dominoes and card playing for their husbands. However, instead of the husbands’ usual homosocial

⁸⁶ Rubin, 22.

⁸⁷ Ruth Allen, *Wage Earners Meet the Depression*. University of Texas Bulletin no. 3545, Bureau of Social Science Research., 59.

⁸⁸ “A Letter from a Member of the Ladies’ Auxiliary” *Ship Channel*, 17 April 1936, 2.

gambling, these nights provided a chance to spend quality time with their wives.⁸⁹ These opportunities for family-centered fun sought to change the perceived and real social habits of men into something considered more respectable by their wives.

Women also acted as caretakers for the memory of the union. In this, they simultaneously sought to shape public perceptions of union violence and memorialize fallen longshoremen. The white Auxiliary in Houston devoted a remarkable amount of time and energy in the late 1930s to memorializing Sam Brandt, a longshoreman who was killed in the strike violence of 1935. They held memorial ceremonies, maintained his grave and perpetually tried to raise funds to build a memorial in his honor.⁹⁰

According to the Ladies, Sam Brandt was “a martyr to Labor” who was “murdered... by a bunch of lousy strike breakers.”⁹¹ Through memorializing him, the women worked to bring attention to the violence that their men faced during strikes at the hands of strikebreakers and corrupt police hired by powerful ship owners.

In the Ladies’ eyes, public perception of strike violence as created by the newspapers needed to be changed. They wanted to portray their husbands as victims of violence, rather than as perpetrators. During strikes, newspapers ran frequent stories detailing attacks made by ILA men on scabs and men seeking work on the docks. Headlines such as “Youth Beaten at Waterfront” certainly did not endear the ILA to the public. This front page *Houston Post* story contended that a group of longshoremen

⁸⁹ Notice of Ladies’ Social, *Ship Channel*, 1 August 1936, 8.

⁹⁰ Meeting minutes of ILA Ladies’ Auxiliary no. 1, 1934-1939, AR 19, International Longshoremen’s Association, Local 1273, Houston, Texas, box 1, folder 3, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections. As late as 1939 the Ladies still have entries in their minutes about plans to memorialize Brandt.

⁹¹ “Memorial Day”, *Ship Channel*, 5 June 1936, 8.

forced a teenager off the road and questioned him as to whether he was planning to seek work on the docks. He replied that he was not. The longshoremen then asked him if he supported the strike. When he responded in the negative, his abductors punched him.⁹² Apparently the young man had not read enough of the newspaper coverage to realize the danger he faced.

Press coverage even suggested that Sam Brandt, the martyr to labor, was harassing strikebreakers and probably threatening them with violence when they shot him. Men and women of the ILA were horrified at the killing when it took place. They lost one of their own, someone they knew personally. The way the women of the ILA interpreted his death portrayed longshoremen as labor martyrs rather than instigators of violence.

ILA women continued in their efforts to memorialize Brandt for years after his death. The violence of the 1935 strike continued to shape the public attitude towards the ILA for years to come. Women worked to change these memories of violence which might inhibit widespread support for future strikes. In 1939, the *Galveston Examiner* quite dramatically invoked the suffering that occurred during 1935 in expressing relief that another strike had been avoided in a contract settlement:

Citizens recalled the dreadful scenes of the 1935 labor strike, in Houston. Men were murdered! Women and children were slaughtered! Property was destroyed! Families were torn apart, when women left their striking husbands! Starvation struck down the useful bodies of innocent babies! Souls were tortured by FATE!⁹³

⁹² "Youth Beaten at Waterfront," *Houston Post*, 12 November 1935, 1.

⁹³ Bertram M. Jackson, "Bombshells and Roses," *Galveston Examiner*, 4 November 1939, Bertram Jackson Collection, MSS 285, microfilm reel 1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Men of the ILA were less willing to put money and energy into memorializing Brother Brandt, perhaps because they saw violence as more acceptable. As the Ladies accusingly noted, “Many of our men have apparently forgotten or lost interest in the fact that Brother Sam Brandt died a martyr to Labor.” Though they strongly objected to the strong-arm tactics of the police and ship owners, they also expressed little remorse over their own use of violence. Men saw the use of professional strikebreakers as wrong and the use of the police as an illegitimate use of violence. But with little power to use against scabs, violence was a necessary tactic, and they did not see the need to change their tactics in exchange for more respectability.

The physical violence used by ILA men corresponded with the physicality of their work. Longshoring required great physical strength. The men took great pride in their physical prowess and much of their masculinity was invested in their strength. Photographs from the thirties reveal longshoremen working shirtless, muscles displayed for the camera. Beating a scab was a similar display of brute strength. Rather than standing idle, they put their skills to work. The way that men of the ILA understood their masculinity encompassed both providing for their families and using physical force.⁹⁴

Citizenship did not require that they abstain from using violence; in their interpretation it

⁹⁴ Gilbert Mers discusses at length one of his longshore brothers who was openly gay. He seems to have shared the longshoremen’s ideas of physicality as central to manliness. That he was accepted and respected by his co-workers seems to indicate that, as Steven Maynard argued, working class homosexuals found support among their co-workers and were not necessarily forced into a closeted lifestyle. “Without Working? Capitalism, Urban Culture and Gay History” *Journal of Urban History*, March 2004, 378-398. He seems to have found little conflict between his sexuality and the work and union values. Unfortunately, there’s little evidence of more gay longshoremen living openly, so it is unclear how sexuality played out – especially as the wives of longshoremen took such pains to emphasize men as household patriarchs and thus deserving of higher wages. This discourse certainly is more alienating to gay longshoremen than the male conception of manliness based on physical strength and performance.

required that they use violence to protect their access to rights and to provide for their families.

The 1935 Strike Ends

The men of the Texas ILA also had their international leader Joseph Ryan to rely on for assistance in maintaining the strike and bringing it to a favorable conclusion. In 1935, Ryan repeatedly threatened to bring the power of the entire ILA organization to bear by enacting an east coast boycott of all ships loaded in the Gulf during the strike. However, from the point of view of many Texas longshoremen, Ryan failed to come to their aid. The promised boycott did not materialize for over a month, and then on a much smaller scale than anticipated.

Many longshoremen in Texas criticized Ryan's leadership of the ILA. Gilbert Mers, a Corpus Christi longshoreman, had accused Ryan of undercutting them in the 1934 strike. According to Mers, Ryan pushed district leaders into accepting a deal for less than they could have gotten.⁹⁵ Other critics of Ryan cite his paltry contribution to relief during the lengthy 1935 strike. L. M. Balderach of Galveston complained that the International only sent the whole district one thousand dollars in relief "which was ridiculously low."⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Notes from interview with Gilbert Mers, 1 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁹⁶ Notes from Interview with L. M. Balderach, 10 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.



Figure 2.3. Joe Ryan and local ILA leaders. Photograph appeared in the *Houston Post*, 4 November 1935, 1.

Complaints against Ryan included the accusation that he had monetary ties to some of the shipping lines. Ralph Landgrebe, of white Local 1273, claimed that Ryan did not come through in the 1934 strike because he owned stock in a New York bank with interests in the Southern and Morgan Lines.⁹⁷ Monetary interests may also have played into his hesitation to enforce a boycott of Gulf South ships coming through the Northeast. Ryan may not have wanted to lose the income he gained through graft in northeast ports if the flow of goods through those ports slowed.⁹⁸

Though the east coast did not follow through on a boycott until December, the west coast, affiliated with the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union,

⁹⁷ Notes from Interview with Ralph Landgrebe.

⁹⁸ Ryan's illegal activities ultimately landed him in jail and are chronicled in Howard Kimeldorf's *Reds or Rackets*.

not the ILA, did. Aid from the ILWU may have undermined the loyalty of many longshoremen to the International, fueling the growing dissident movement, to be discussed in chapter five, of which Mers and Follett became leaders. The Labor Department Board of Arbitration, which participated in the negotiations at the end of the strike, cited the west coast boycott as the issue which propelled the shipping companies to the negotiating table.⁹⁹

When Ryan failed to act as he had promised, Texas ILA men took matters into their own hands. Seven locals wrote up a resolution calling directly upon their fellow ILA members in northeast ports to stop unloading or loading “hot” cargo. The letter asked them to go through with the boycott “regardless of Ryan's instructions, because President Ryan has failed in his duties as President.”¹⁰⁰ One east coast local that did abide by their request found themselves at the receiving end of Ryan’s ire; he dis-affiliated their local for allegedly engaging in communist activity.

Despite all of their efforts, public opinion did not favor the longshoremen until the very last days of the strike. In late November, seven weeks into the strike, Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor, appointed an arbitration board to negotiate a settlement between the Master Stevedores’ Association and the ILA. Initially, the stevedores refused to participate. Hoping to avoid participation, they argued that independent unions must be included in the settlement along with the ILA. The ILA and the arbitration board

⁹⁹ “Preliminary Sketch of the History of the Labor Movement in Texas” by Alvin Scaff, UT research assistant, undated, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e301, folder 6, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 5.

¹⁰⁰ “To All Locals of the International Longshoremen’s Association in the North Atlantic,” Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 4, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

objected to this. Ultimately, this tactic worked against the stevedores. It earned them the ire of many in the public who wanted the strike to end as soon as possible. The gridlock ended when Joe Ryan called an east coast boycott, pushing the Stevedores Association to the negotiating table.

Even with a shift in public opinion toward their side, the ILA could not defeat the coalition of powerful organizations arrayed against them. They did not win the strike. New Orleans remained unorganized until 1938 and the ILA accepted wages that had been offered to them before the strike began. They also did not get recognition for the compressmen in Houston, although Corpus Christi's mostly Mexican American compressmen did get employer recognition.

Despite the paltry concrete gains, the 1935 strike was not a total failure. The union survived and, in fact, entered a period of growth and increasing wages after 1935. Incorporating the former scabs, though controversial, solidified their control over the ports. Three years later they did have the power to hold and win labor elections in New Orleans. And if, as the local communist party feared, this strike had been the first step in creating an open-shop Houston, the longshoremen's solid resistance to ship owners and their allies slowed momentum for this movement. After 1935, the ILA remained firmly established and would not face a serious threat to its control of the docks until the technological changes brought on by the move to containers in the 1960s.

At least fifteen men lost their lives during the strike of 1935, only one of them a member of the International Longshoremen's Association.¹⁰¹ Longshoremen killed with

¹⁰¹ "The Longshoremen Strike of 1935: Background and Causes," 9.

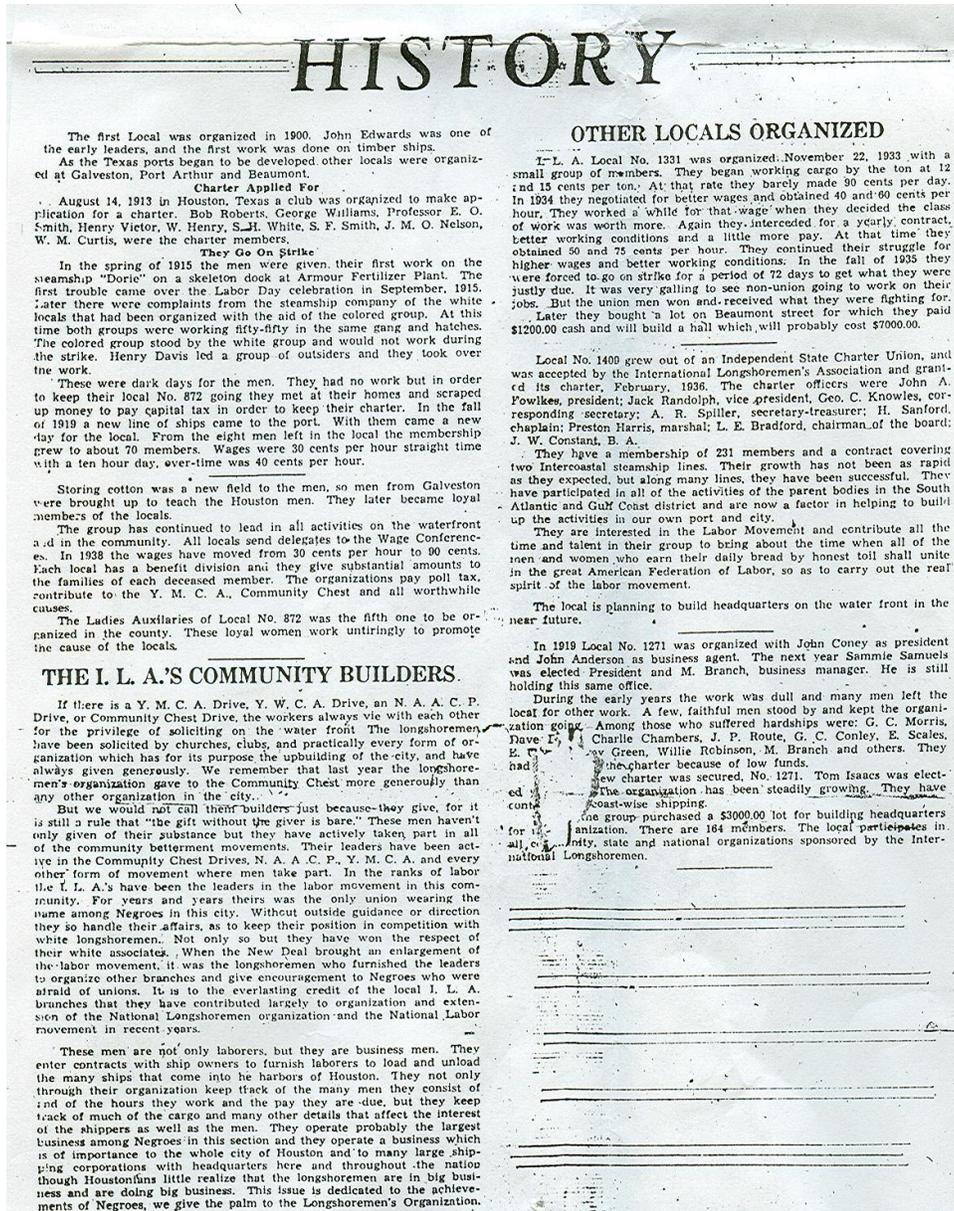
little remorse to protect their jobs and their families. They were motivated by their understanding of workers' rights and believed in the justice of their cause. They succeeded in protecting their union and securing their jobs. With their position on the docks increasingly stabilized, they were able to focus more of their efforts to building up their community and contributing to the growth of the labor movement off the docks. In this way, their actions in 1935 had a ripple effect, which benefited both the labor movement and the black and Mexican American port communities.

Chapter 3

Off the Docks

In an August, 1937 special anniversary edition of the *Houston Informer*, that paper honored the four black Houston locals of the ILA and their Ladies' Auxiliary with a special two page spread. These pages included a full list of the membership of the four locals, nearly eight hundred members strong, as well as photographs of thirty-eight of the male leaders and the President of the Ladies' Auxiliary. Centered among the pictures and names, several paragraphs described the history and activities of the organizations. The author, most likely editor Carter Wesley, of the section entitled, "The ILA's Community Builders" praised the longshoremen for financially supporting "every form of organization which has for its purpose the upbuilding of the city." But, the *Informer* goes on to say, their support has not just been monetary, "for it is still a rule that 'the gift without the giver is bare.' These men haven't only given of their substance but they have actively taken part in all the community betterment movements." The *Informer* specifically mentions the YMCA, YWCA, and NAACP as examples of organizations with which the longshoremen have "actively" worked. Additionally, the author goes on to praise the locals for working to organize other black workers, even off the docks: "When the New Deal brought an enlargement of the labor movement, it was the

longshoremen who furnished the leaders to organize other branches and give encouragement to Negroes who were afraid of unions." The *Informer* concludes: "This issue is dedicated to the achievements of Negroes, we give the palm to the Longshoremen's Organization."¹



Excerpt from the newspaper spread of the *Houston Informer*, 14 August, 1937, 6-7.

¹ *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 14 August 1937, 6-7.

When the author of these words of praise used the term “community,” he meant the blacks of Houston. In Wesley’s eyes, the longshoremen were first and foremost part of the local black community. They shared an identity and a world of experience, including racism and segregation, with other members of their race living in that locality. The *Informer* honored the longshoremen because they fulfilled an unwritten obligation, to use their success for the benefit of others within their racially-defined group. They acted as good citizens, performing their civic and Christian duty.

All ILA members were part of the same community: the union. As members of the union or its Auxiliaries, these men and women recognized a common identity as workers with a common power position vis-à-vis their employers. The exercise of violence by both their employers and themselves affirmed the bounds of their community. But for no member of the ILA was the union their only community. All members identified with other groups who shared their values or experience, be they religious, social, or racially-defined communities. In Texas, racially-defined communities were extremely important. For the non-white men and women of the ILA, work within their race-based local communities became an extension of the ILA’s mission.²

² Laurie Mercier discusses the complexity of the term “community” and the many varied meanings it can have for workers in the Introduction to her work *Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana’s Smelter City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Her book is part of a growing trend in labor history recognizing the importance of locating labor unions within their communities, recognizing that unions both shape and are shaped by their communities. I argue here both that the ILA was active in shaping their communities and also that their ability to use the union in that way was not tangential but of central importance to the members. Other recent histories that evaluate the role of communities include: Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), Gilbert Gonzalez, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Workers Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the*

This chapter explores the actions of the different locals off the docks – a theme that will continue in the next chapter with a focus on civil rights activity. All of the locals were involved in some community activities. For everyone, this included working to build the labor movement; all locals perceived themselves to be a part of the labor movement community in some way. To begin with, all ILA locals provided benefits for their own members. But their labor communities did not end there. Mexican Americans and African Americans worked to recruit other members of their racial group into organized labor.

Mexican American and African American ILA members also became leaders in other community activities. They used their locals as vehicles for involvement in their race-based communities, sponsoring cultural events and participating in community betterment programs. For them, the work of the union expanded beyond the labor movement. They used their organized strength in numbers to influence their racially-defined communities, support cultural programs, and battle some of the problems of those communities. While for whites, their community activities focused almost exclusively on the white working class affiliated with the AFL.

Mexican Americans and African Americans acted on a different interpretation of the union's purpose. Both groups acted on a sense of responsibility toward their wider racially defined community, not just working class people. Nor did they limit their visions of the union's purpose to addressing labor problems. Their understanding of the labor movement could not be separated from the contexts in which they lived. African

Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

American longshoremen were united with other blacks in Houston through their common experience of segregation and racism. Mexican American compressmen shared a similar experience with other Mexican Americans and Mexicans. As responsible members of those communities, ILA men had to use their locals to address shared problems.³

With their influence came a status and recognition that white longshoremen did not receive within their race-based community. Segregated worlds created separate experiences for the men of the ILA and for their wives. White, black, and Mexican American communities perceived the unions differently. Mexican American and African American organizations consulted with the longshore locals and leaders about community issues. In the case of African Americans in Houston, the longshore locals were lauded by the press and local leaders, and their wives became respected pillars of the community. The mainstream white press gave almost no coverage to the white longshore locals except that related to strikes and labor negotiations. No records indicate that white longshore locals were consulted by other white community organizations or played significant roles in religious or cultural movements as did their non-white counterparts. The system of Jim Crow segregation benefited white Houstonians of all classes. But in this particular situation, non-white longshoremen experienced greater relative social standing in their own communities than their white union brothers.⁴

³ In *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas*, Emilio Zamora argues that shared grievances against racial discrimination “often blurred differences” in the Mexican / Mexican American communities, 86. F. Arturo Rosales finds this to be the case in Houston during this time period. He argues that segregation “created cohesion” in Houston in “Shifting Self-Perceptions,” 77.

⁴ It is not my intention to imply that Texas’ system of segregation did not have overwhelmingly negative consequences for the Mexican Americans and African Americans living in Houston. However, Jim Crow did not always work as anticipated – to put whites in a universally superior position. The status

Mexican Americans and African Americans had a more similar experience of being working class people. Both groups found themselves involved in cross-class alliances. For whites, the experience of being working class was more insular – their alliances and partnerships almost always involved other working class people. Not so for black and Mexican American ILA members who had a less isolated experience. They were simultaneously members of the working class and integral members of communities that crossed class lines.

Leaders of Heavenly Houston

Houston's blacks often referred to black Houston as "Heavenly Houston" because blacks experienced less violence and overt hostility in the Bayou City than in other Southern cities.⁵ James Sorelle in his study of the city, "The Darker Side of Heaven" argues that despite the name, Houston's blacks suffered problems similar to those of blacks in the rest of the South: residential segregation, limited occupational options, and a plethora of civil rights violations. According to the 1930 census, Houston had the largest black population of any Texas city. Just over 63,000 blacks lived in Houston in several segregated wards of the city, making up close to twenty percent of the general

that Mexican American and African American ILA members acquired due to their affiliation with the union was not paralleled in the experience of white longshoremen.

⁵ Merline Pitre has another point of view on Houston, one which emphasizes the Borderlands positioning of the city. Rather than describing it as the least hostile city of the south, she describes it as the "most segregated city of the southwest." *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lula B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 19.

population.⁶ According to Sorelle, the Depression negatively affected the job opportunities of many African American men, including longshoremen. But the longshoremen's relative job security and independence stood in stark contrast to the many black workers who saw their jobs go to white men.⁷ Their organization put longshoremen in a good position to take a leadership role in the black community of Houston. Their economic success gave them the ability to contribute financially to community endeavors and thus claim a roll as leaders. And since their work was secured in annual contracts, they could be public activists without fear of losing their jobs should their activism offend white employers.

In the special issue of the *Houston Informer*, two of the featured photographs were of Freeman Everett and Mrs. R. P. Randall, two of the most prominent ILA activists in Houston. Frequently mentioned in the paper, they were often the main speakers or emcees of longshore-sponsored events. Everett, long-time longshoreman and President of Local 872, was particularly devoted to labor organizing. Randall, affectionately known as "Fashion Plate," led the Ladies' Auxiliary of Local 872. As no Mr. Randall appears on the rolls published in the *Informer*, it seems likely that Mrs. Randall was a widow.

⁶ Residential segregation was de facto rather than de jure in Houston. According to the census, the black population increased to approximately 86,000 by 1940. Beeth and Wintz, "Introduction to Section IV," *Black Dixie*, 88-89.

⁷ James Sorelle, "The Darker Side of Heaven: The Black Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1980). Beyond Sorelle, few histories of the black community in Houston have been written. Standing out are Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training During Segregation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003) and Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992). For a more personal look at black Houston, see the Carroll Parrott Blue's memoir of her Houston childhood, *The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003). In addition to describing her own experience, Blue eloquently describes her mother's the profound effects of segregation on her mother who, though a college-educated club woman experienced great anguish at the ways that racism circumscribed her life's opportunities.

Randall and Everett maintained their respective presidencies throughout the 1930s. They both served as leaders in the multiple community endeavors of black longshoremen, including recruiting more workers into organized labor, providing mutual aid services for their members, participating in religious services, and doing charitable works.



Photograph of Mrs. R. P. “Fashion Plate” Randall, featured in the *Houston Informer* two-page spread, 14 August, 1937, 6-7.

The first responsibility of black longshore locals was to their members, for whom they provided a wealth of services. More so than other ILA locals, black locals acted as fictive kinship networks in which members supported one another financially and spiritually. Local 872, for example, ran a café for its workers where they could spend their leisure hours together. More importantly, they also ran a loan office for their members – an invaluable service for working class blacks who had limited access to capital and routinely faced unfair treatment at banks.⁸

The Ladies also provided mutual aid services. The Auxiliaries paid sick benefits to their members, redistributing dues money to those in need. They recognized the

⁸ “I Visit the Longshoremen,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 6 April 1938, 1.

financial value of women's work and compensated those members unable to contribute to their households because of illness. They did not do so casually, however. Payments to sick members usually required a note from a doctor verifying the illness and its incapacitating nature. Additionally, the Galveston Ladies required a verification of health before accepting members, not wanting members who would be an ongoing financial drain.⁹ In this way they acted as a union local, treating homework as formal work and compensating those workers unable to do their job.¹⁰

Religious instruction was another benefit of union membership. In 1934, the men of Local 872 decided to make the job of chaplain a full time position. "L.A. Tucker, young man of unusual religious information," originally worked as a longshoreman and taught Bible classes part time, but his religious instruction became so popular that it became a full-time position. Every morning between 9:30 and 11:30 am Tucker ran a religious class open to any men who were not called up to work.¹¹ That year 872 and its Auxiliary also sponsored a Thanksgiving Day service for their men and their families

⁹ Records of the Galveston Ladies' Auxiliary includes both letters from doctors verifying that members were ill and qualified for sick benefits, as well as a letter certifying that Mrs. Etta Davis is in good physical condition and could be re-instated in the local. Signed EM Stanton, MD, dated 14 May 1941, ILA Local 851 Records, Microfilm 83-0003, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, p. 1845.

¹⁰ It is not clear what percentage of longshore wives worked outside of the home. A good number of longshoremen made sufficient income to support their families – factors like seniority, number of men in the local sharing work, and injuries would determine how much income a family needed from their wives. Longshoremen were much more likely to be able to provide for their families alone than many other black workers because of their high wages, especially during the Depression. Even those women who did not work outside the home, likely performed work at home that contributed to the families' income, in addition to the important work of maintaining the home and raising children. Regardless of how many Auxiliary women worked outside the home, this work was never addressed by the Auxiliary in a public way. They distanced themselves from their paid work in their public activities, stressing their identities as wives and community leaders.

¹¹ "I.L.A. Regularly Gather in Bible Class at Docks," *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 29 September 1934, 1.

which included Bible study and a sermon on the “Sin of Ingratitude.”¹² In this way, the local operated as an extended family whose members shared not only common working problems but also the Christian faith.

The benefits that the local extended to its membership at times ventured into the humorous. In 1932, Freeman Everett arranged for each member’s family to receive a turkey for Christmas. The year had been difficult as work was scarce. Hoping to bring some holiday joy to the membership, Everett decided to distribute the turkeys *alive*. According to the Brief History of ILA Local 872 there was some pandemonium as a result: “You should have seen the funny stunts some of the members performed when those live turkeys got loose.” Fun was not without its place. Black longshoremen bonded over such mishaps, as well as recreational activities, such as fielding local sports teams.

But the work of black longshoremen was certainly not limited to supporting one another. First on their list of priorities was building up the local labor movement. Everett took the lead in this effort. He regularly spoke to other black workers and tried to encourage them to join unions. Everett’s leadership within his local began in the 1910s when he was selected to be the official chaplain for the organization. He gathered the men early in the morning to hear him preach, to sing praise, and also to pray, often for “more work and more money.”¹³

¹² Thanksgiving Day Program at ILA Hall,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 4 December 1934, 5.

¹³ Charles J. Hill, *A Brief History of Local 872*, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

Everett believed strongly in the American Federation of Labor. In addition to being President of 872 throughout the 1930s, he worked as an organizer for the AFL, routinely speaking at meetings of other Houston workers and workers in the region. In May of 1937, Everett spoke to a gathering of workers at the Reed Roller Bit Company, where he addressed the predominant concern of workers regarding the AFL: racial inequality.¹⁴ Black workers feared that joining the AFL would mean subjugating their needs to those of white workers and settling for a disparity in wages and work opportunities. On these occasions Everett could assuage their fears by speaking truthfully about his experience in the ILA, in which the men of his local and those of their white counterpart earned the same wages and performed the same jobs.



Photograph of Freeman Everett from the *Houston Informer*, 15 August, 1937, 6-7.

In 1938, Everett, representing Local 872, co-led a “program and platform meeting” at Miles Chapel CME Church with Randall. Their event, which included musical performances and religious readings along with union boosterism, received front-

¹⁴ “Race Workers Are Urged to Join A. F. of L.,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 8 May 1937, 1.

page coverage in the *Informer*. The paper lauded the two organizations for “doing much to organize and keep organized the men of our race who work at the ship channel.”¹⁵

With Randall by his side, Everett spoke to those assembled about the benefits of union organization, though he took pains to stress that he did not support the CIO. The program “attracted a large crowd” who heard “much valuable information on labor problems.”¹⁶

These types of programs indicate that the longshoremen and their wives saw themselves as having a certain standing in the community. They had a responsibility to share their message about the benefits of unionism, as well as to put on entertaining and spiritually uplifting programs. They had prestige enough to draw the public to attend.

As the most successful group of organized blacks in the city, the men and women of the ILA were proud to be a moral and labor-organizing example to other workers. Encouraging others to join unions increased their number of allies in the labor movement and made that movement stronger. But it also, if their experience was a guide, would help their fellow blacks attain economic citizenship rights. The ILA had helped African American longshoremen to secure and maintain wage equality with whites, and Everett and others presented the AFL as an organization that could extend that equality to other workers in the black community, protecting them from the worst of work-related racial discrimination.¹⁷ Their work on behalf of the labor movement was also work to uplift the

¹⁵ “Longshoremen Will Hold Platform Meeting Sunday,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 26 March, 1938, 1.

¹⁶ “ILA Platform Meeting Attracts Large Crowd” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*. March 30, 1938, 1.

¹⁷ See Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Bates discusses the concept of economic citizenship rights as fundamental to the struggle of the Pullman Porters during the 1930s, a period in which the organization became more radical and strident in pressing for those rights.

community. From their point of view, a strong labor movement would improve the lives of black workers.

The black members of the ILA also maintained a public presence in many other small ways. ILA affiliated musical groups performed regularly in Texas. The black locals sponsored a thirty-six member band that often performed at large-scale labor events. In Houston, an ILA quartet often performed at church-related celebrations. Houston's ILA also had competition in the music department from the ILA Gospel Singers. The *Galveston Examiner* described the Gospel Singers as “young talented religious singers ... known through the state of Texas and Louisiana as radio artists and outstanding Christian characters of the musical world.”¹⁸ They performed regularly at both religious and labor functions throughout the state. Not to be outdone by their male counterparts, the women of the Ladies Auxiliaries often put on musical and religious performances of their own. For example, in October of 1937, the *Informer* publicized a musical performance on behalf of the women affiliated with Local 1331, which featured “readings, solos and quartet numbers.”¹⁹ The men of Local 1331 worked as warehousemen and did not earn the same income as men in the other black locals in Houston. However, this did not prevent their wives from asserting themselves and making a contribution to the religious and cultural milieu of black Houston. These members certainly acted out of their own love for music and religious belief, but they also re-affirmed the position of the members of the ILA as good Christians and community leaders.

¹⁸ Photo Caption, *Galveston Examiner*, 28 October 1939, 4.

¹⁹ “Coming Events,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 9 October 1937, 5.

The black men and women of the ILA pronounced their Christian faith publicly. More so than whites or Mexican Americans they publicly affiliated the union with Christianity and connected their activities to Christian principles. However, they did not affiliate exclusively with one church in Houston but rather maintained ongoing relationships with multiple congregations. Not only did longshoremen occasionally attend services together, but they also used churches as venues for ILA activities. In Galveston, Local 851 held its installation of officers for both the local and its Ladies' Auxiliary at St. Paul Methodist Church. The pastor, Reverend J. W. White, gave the main address.²⁰ In August of 1937, Local 1271 had its annual Sermon Sunday at Mt. Corinth Church. This included a ceremony in which local officers were presented, the president of the local spoke, and the preacher gave a sermon.²¹ In using churches as space for their activities, black longshoremen partook in a long tradition in black communities wherein the church acts as gathering place and site of community formation. Additionally, in associating so publicly with the church, they portrayed themselves as respectable and moral individuals, rather than the un-virtuous roughnecks longshoremen were sometimes perceived to be.²²

African American longshoremen and their wives also lived out their Christian faith and demonstrated their concern for other members of the black community through

²⁰ "Local 851 I.L.A. and Auxiliary Install Officers," *Galveston Examiner*, 13 April 1940, 1.

²¹ "Local 1271, I.L.A. to have 19th Annual Sermon Sunday at Mt. Corinth," *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 14 August 1937, 8.

²² See Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Higginbotham discusses the role that the church has played in black communities as an organizing force and venue for social functions. She also discusses the historical role of the church as a moralizing force and a means for both claiming and spreading norms of Victorian morals and respectability.

a variety of charitable activities. The Ladies made regular “sick tours” and often donated money to the infirmed.²³ For Christmas in 1937 the men donated “Christmas cheer” baskets, “containing groceries of not less than \$3 in value” to fifty families. These fifty families did not include needy members of the local, who also received assistance. In all likelihood, the women of the Auxiliary took part in these activities. Men would certainly have relied on their expertise in purchasing appropriate groceries for the gift baskets. They also donated over \$400 to the Community Chest that year and ILA leaders ran membership drives for the YMCA.²⁴ Additionally, they made a financial donation to the Wiley College endowment drive.²⁵ Wiley College, though located in Marshall, Texas, also held classes in Houston.²⁶ The funding that longshoremen and others in the community provided for Wiley College and other educational endeavors helped to offset the generally poor funding that education for blacks in Houston received from local government. Though some improvements in school buildings had been made in the 1920s, dramatically fewer resources were consistently dedicated to black schools than to white schools, and college level opportunities remained limited.²⁷

Houston’s black longshoremen were not alone in putting their money, influence, and time into efforts to make their communities better. In Galveston, the black longshoremen and their Ladies’ Auxiliary worked with other local groups to provide

²³ “We Cover the Waterfront,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 20 October 1937, 4.

²⁴ “Labor Happenings Here and There,” *Negro Labor News*, 18 December 1937, 1.

“Jemison and Everett Lead Y Campaign,” *Negro Labor News*, 18 December 1937, 2.

²⁵ “XMAS Baskets Given to Needy By I.L.A. Local,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 2 January 1937, 3.

²⁶ Beeth and Wintz, “Introduction to Part III,” *Black Dixie*, 96.

²⁷ Sorelle, “Race Relations in Heavenly Houston,” *Black Dixie*, 182.

services for their community. They financially supported a nursery school that both provided child-care and jobs for a number of Galvestonian women.²⁸

The black longshoremen of Port Arthur used the influence of the larger AFL community to try to improve the lives of other Port Arthur blacks. At the request of Dudley Brown and Ivory Green, the two longshoremen appointed to the Port Arthur Trades and Labor Council, its secretary wrote a letter to the city's Mayor of Port Arthur requesting that a light signal be installed at an intersection near the city's black elementary school. Several accidents had taken place there, and the longshoremen feared for the safety of the "colored children." The Trades Council members had unanimously agreed that they should support the black longshoremen in this endeavor.²⁹

Black longshoremen lived out the Christian edict to care for their neighbors. In the midst of the depression they cared for the needy and sought to make the streets safer for children. Furthermore, through their economic donations they sought to counter the effects of inferior citizenship: Donations to the Community Chest and similar organizations countered the inadequate aid that reached the black community from federal and local sources. On the local level, the cities of Houston, Galveston, and Pasadena joined together to create a Tri-City Relief Agency to provide Depression relief. This agency refused aid to African Americans and Mexican Americans.³⁰ African Americans should have had access to federal funds but the local officials who made aid

²⁸ "When Success and Business Combine," *Galveston Examiner*. 2 December 1938, Bertram Jackson Collection, microfilm roll 1, Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

²⁹ Letter to Honorable F. L. Bachert, Mayor, City of Port Arthur. October 31st, 1939. Sabine Area Trades and Labor Council Collection, box 3, folder 2, Special Collections, University of Texas Arlington.

³⁰ Rosales, "Shifting Perceptions," 78.

decisions did so in a discriminatory manner.³¹ African Americans had to turn to one another for support. Black longshoremen and their wives, as people who had relative economic security, and the organization power of their locals, had to be engaged in civic life.³²

Black longshoremen and their wives claimed a public role for themselves as labor organizers and benevolent philanthropists. The public embraced them as leaders, attending their events in large numbers and recruiting their involvement in fundraisers and other community betterment movements. Houston's black newspapers, the *Negro Labor News* and the *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, though they agreed on very little, both presented the longshoremen as outstanding civic leaders.³³

The *Informer* was the more laudatory of the two, dedicating a surprising amount of newsprint to the ILA and its Auxiliaries. The activities of the black Houston Ladies Auxiliaries were covered regularly in the Society Pages of the *Houston Informer*. The *Informer* reported on their election of officers, their special public presentations, even the proceedings of their regular meetings. All told, in the month of October 1937 alone, the bi-weekly *Informer* published six articles about the longshoremen and auxiliary. One of these articles was part of an ongoing, occasional series entitled "I Visit the

³¹ James Sorelle provides several examples of discrimination in federal aid programs in Houston in "The Darker Side of Heaven," 138-139.

³² Another aspect of discrimination that was intensified during the Great Depression was job discrimination. Longshoremen were insulated from this experience, kept their jobs and thus were able to make monetary contributions. Even before the depression, most African Americans had few job opportunities in Houston and were limited to unskilled and service jobs. During the Depression, they were "first fired." Beeth and Wintz, 91.

³³ C.W. Rice, editor of the *Negro Labor News*, was staunchly against the AFL and in the late 1930s had a public fight with the ILA, accusing them of losing work to Galveston's ports. However, he too appreciated the work that longshoremen did in the community and gave coverage to their work with the Y's, the Community Chest, etc.

Longshoremen.” In the “human interest” vein, these articles chronicled the daily activities of longshoremen, their prayer and work activities, leaving the reader with the impression of the longshoremen as good Christian gentlemen, as opposed to the violent portrayal they received in the white press.³⁴ Carter Wesley, the editor of the *Informer*, explained his respect for the longshoremen because of their activities for themselves and others:

They have bought property together; they have cast their votes together; they have paid their poll taxes in a united program; they have pooled their funds to help sick members and the widows and orphans of deceased members of their group. I would like for somebody to send me the name of a group of Negro teachers, doctors, lawyers, editors or any other group of so-called educated Negroes which has been able to do half as much.³⁵

In chiding Houston’s black professionals for their relative inactivity, Wesley forced readers to reexamine their assumptions about the roles of the classes in the black community. Though the elite class was expected to lead and to accomplish, in Wesley’s eyes, it was working-class longshoremen who had proven themselves to be the true leaders of Houston’s black community. In this he undermined the idea that only educated blacks could serve as leaders for the black community. As an editor, and himself a representative of the elite, he acknowledged that these working-class longshoremen met vital community needs by taking on a leadership role.³⁶

³⁴ In the interest of full disclosure it should be noted that the offices of the *Informer* were briefly housed in a building owned by the black ILA locals and in which they held their union meetings. Not only was there likely personal interaction between the ILA members and the news staff, but the locals were in fact the landlords of the paper and collected rent from them.

³⁵ “The Grovey Speech,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 25 May 1935, 12.

³⁶ While many scholars have found overt conflict and tension between the middle class and working class, that does not seem to be the case here. In fact, the ILA worked closely with middle class members in organizations like the YMCA and, to be explored in the next chapter, the NAACP. For a strong study of class tension see Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

Black longshoremen did not take the place of professionals in all community activism, despite Wesley's critique. Rather, they joined with the doctors, small business people, and editors like Wesley, to address problems like disparities in Depression relief, problems that originated in the racial ideologies of Texas and the system of Jim Crow segregation. In so doing, they asserted the place of working class people among the ranks of community leaders while fighting these markers of their second-class citizenship.³⁷

Sponsoring Culture in Magnolia Park

Houston's Mexican and Mexican American population was small in the 1930s, growing from 15,000 people in 1930 to approximately 20,000 by 1940. The community was divided into several different barrios. The men of the ILA predominately lived in the area known as Magnolia Park, which was located relatively close to the Ship Channel.

³⁷ Black longshoremen and their wives used their position as economically successful working class people to push against class boundaries. Their experience suggests the inadequacy of terms such as "working class" and "middle class" to explain the identity and social standing of people of color. In her book *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction*, Michele Mitchell coined the term "aspiring class" to differentiate the class experience of African Americans from white Americans. At once broader and less stable than the white middle class, she defines members of this class as those able to "save a little money as well as those who worked multiple jobs to attain class mobility," but whose "socioeconomic status...tended to be particularly tenuous" because race limited their economic opportunities especially during economic downturns. Like the longshoremen, members of the aspiring class are marked by an "abiding concern with propriety" as part of their desire to improve themselves and the community as a whole." Mitchell's formulation indicates that there is room within black communities for successful working class people to become influential in society by combining relative economic security with a motivation to work for racial uplift. Black longshoremen fit into this middle ground; their concern with working class issues taken in combination with their status in the black community of Houston defies simple class categorization. Though less financially successful, Mexican American ILA members occupy a similar position within their community. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9-10.

This neighborhood was diverse, composed of both Mexican and American citizens. Though largely working class, it also included a small but growing number of professionals and entrepreneurs. Magnolia Park had a vibrant cultural life including theatrical productions sponsored by the local printer, several Spanish language newspapers, and a wide array of dances and public festivals sponsored by community organizations. Mexican and Mexican American workers in Houston experienced high unemployment during the Depression.³⁸ While Mexican American compressmen and warehousemen in the ILA did not make high wages, they still were able to transform their position as organized, AFL-affiliated workers into a position of influence within Magnolia Park.

Like their black and white counterparts, Mexican American ILA members sought to encourage other workers in their racially-defined community to unionize. The first Houston local of Mexican Americans, Local 1309, was organized in 1934. They quickly worked to increase the membership of their union and create dialogue about unions. They spread their message through a series of advertisements in the Spanish language newspaper, *El Puerto*. They ran their advertisements in both English and Spanish, which was highly unusual – *El Puerto* used almost no English at all. Their use of both languages conveyed that they considered themselves to be of two worlds – American and Mexican. In Spanish, the advertisements invited workers from the compresses in the city

³⁸ Arnolde de Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston* (Houston: Mexican American Studies Program, University of Houston, 1989). De Leon's work remains the only significant history of the Mexican American community in Houston. Emma Perez includes some material on Houston in this time period in her work *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999). Also useful is Thomas Kreneck's biography of Felix Tijerina, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur and Civil Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2001)

of Houston to an open meeting given by the ILA. In English, the ad invited “all who believe in organized labor” to a meeting for “the good of the man [sic] who earn their bread by the seat [sic] of their brow.” Local 1309 wanted to attract new members to solidify their organization so that they could confront their employers and “demandar el reconocimiento de nuestra organizacion.”³⁹ They also wanted to interact with other pro-union members of the community to gain their support and aid and build connections. These meetings were not held in the union hall but rather in the local office of the Comité Patriótico of Magnolia Park. This was likely to allay the fears of workers who did not want to be spotted by employers walking into the ILA hall. Yet it also demonstrates support by the local community for ILA members.

Though according to AFL policy the leaders of Local 1309 should have turned away all non-citizens from joining, their advertisements made clear that they considered love of unionism more important than citizenship in this instance. Despite the fact that the ILA was officially only open to citizens, the men of Local 1309 wanted to attract a large group of working people to engage in stimulating discussion about workers’ issues. The citizenship requirement may have been common knowledge. Or the fact that they omitted mention of the requirement in their advertisement could indicate that the men of Local 1309 believed that the benefits extended to American workers should be extended to all workers. Their strong ties to the Mexican community may have made it inconceivable to deny other members of that community the benefits of unionism simply based on citizenship.

³⁹ “Convocatoria,” *El Puerto*, 5 July 1935, 1, A. D. Salazar Collection, microfilm roll 1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

No records exist to relay what happened at those meetings. But Local 1309 created a space in which members of the working class could gather to commiserate over their working conditions and to discuss the merits of unions. Of course, representatives of Local 1309 urged the compress and warehouse workers in attendance to join the ILA. White and black longshoremen likely encouraged these activities since the whole union stood to gain from the growth of the compress locals. However, white longshoremen would not have interpreted these informational meetings as a way for working class Mexicans and Mexican Americans to assert authority within the Mexican community of Houston. But the other activities of Local 1309 indicate that these men did see their union local as a means to join the leadership class of the community.

After their official incorporation into the ILA, Local 1309 wasted little time in joining the social scene of Magnolia Park. In December of their first year, they sponsored their first public dance.⁴⁰ Since Mexicans and Mexican Americans were not welcome in most Houston clubs, music and dance venues were relatively limited. Mexican American social organizations alternated sponsoring dances that provided an opportunity for community members to enjoy themselves. Local 1309's dance was held in the union hall, which became a gathering place for the Mexican community. Other unions used this locale to recruit members and hold meetings. Community organizations also used this space for their dances and meetings. Many white owners refused to rent their establishments to Mexicans and Mexican Americans; in providing a space for

⁴⁰ There are advertisements for multiple dances in *El Puerto*, A D Salazar Collection, microfilm roll 1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

community events, Local 1309 solidified its position as a hub around which the Mexican and Mexican American community congregated.

At this point, Local 1309 had not been recognized by their employers, nor had they seen their wages increase since joining the union. In other words, the compressmen in the ILA still had a great deal of work-related work to do. But, these difficulties did not deter them from taking on other responsibilities. Instead, it rather appears that community standing was one of the first benefits of union membership – even before better wages and working conditions. Men of the union, despite being unskilled laborers, gained, through their union membership, access to some influence within their community. They actively claimed this benefit of union membership through their social participation. Years before these men benefited financially from joining the union, they acquired a place among Houston’s respected Mexican American cultural clubs.

By 1935, the ILA was co-sponsoring public events with other organizations in the Mexican community. Unlike African American ILA members, the men of Local 1309 did not emphasize charitable contributions (which may have had to do with their own economic struggles) or church activities. Surviving evidence indicates that they focused on cultural events, an arena in which many community groups were active. On August 30, 1935 ILA 1309 co-sponsored the installation of the officers of Club Azteca, an auxiliary to the *Comite Patriotico*, the organization that sponsored *Fiestas Patrias* or patriotic festivals. The ceremony and dance were open to the general public.⁴¹ ILA 1309 joined a diverse coalition of organizations that sponsored these public events. In this

⁴¹ “Quedo Instalado el Club Azteca,” *El Puerto*, 30 August 1935, 6.

instance, they worked with a number of different sponsoring organizations, ranging from mutual aid societies like the Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana to the young ladies social organization, Club Feminina Chapultepec. In general, the organizations associated with the Comité Patriótica tended to include people in the middle or upper working class, especially during the Great Depression, when the monthly dues associated with these organizations became an unaffordable luxury for many.

The week following the Club Azteca installation, ILA member Juan Cavazos, who had been chosen by his peers to represent them at the annual District ILA Convention, was also selected to represent them on the Magnolia Park Comité Patriótico. As part of the committee, Cavazos was responsible for putting on the Fiestas Patrias that September for the celebration of Mexican Independence Day.⁴² This celebration included the traditional grito or cry, commemorating the call to fight for independence, as well as parades, dances, and speeches. These events served multiple purposes. On the one hand, they functioned to keep Mexican culture vibrant in the face of assimilationist pressure. As usual, a representative of the Mexican consul participated in these Mexican Independence Day celebrations. On this occasion, the representative implored those present to teach their children about the “heroes of Mexican Independence in order that the liberty-loving spirit and enthusiasm might be imparted to generations yet to come” – a clear plea to maintain a Mexican culture.⁴³ Local 1309 and other organizations sought to serve their community by preserving these traditions.

⁴² “Labores del Comité,” *El Puerto*, 6 September 1936, 1.

⁴³ De Leon, 65-66.

These cultural activities suggest that ILA workers took pains to preserve their Mexican identity, but their work as unionists and civil rights activists placed them solidly in America. Mexican Americans in Local 1309 were necessarily concerned with improving their working conditions within the United States, and thus were invested in their position within the United States. Cultural events, such as the celebration of Mexican Independence Day, also related to that concern. These events emphasized the best of Mexican culture, countering the stereotypes that Mexicans and Mexican Americans were illiterate, lazy and unambitious. Through their public celebrations, ILA workers and their Mexican and Mexican American neighbors sought to represent their community in a positive light to a wider American audience.⁴⁴

The members of Local 1309 thought it appropriate to use the ILA to sponsor Fiestas Patrias. Recognition of this fact forces us to rethink our understanding of the American Federation of Labor. The men of the union were fully aware that they were using an organization that proclaimed its “Americanness” to sponsor Mexican cultural events and celebrate Mexican holidays. They did not see this as a contradiction. Likely, their white and black union brothers had a narrower definition of what constituted proper behavior for Americans, one that did not include speaking Spanish or celebrating Fiestas Patrias. But actions of 1309’s members reveal that a space existed for such practices within this “American” organization. Mexican American ILA workers felt that they had

⁴⁴ Because of their involvement with the AFL and LULAC (discussed in the next chapter), some scholars would argue that the men of Local 1309 were part of the “Mexican American generation,” tending more towards assimilation. In *Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Perez, warns against interpreting these affiliations as assimilation when they may have been strategic ways to survive and struggle for rights. For an exploration of the term “Mexican American Generation,” see Mario Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

the right to maintain their culture and used the union to defend that right.⁴⁵ In their minds, the AFL was not merely an organization to raise wages and improve working conditions, but to preserve their cultural practices. Mexican American ILA members had an expansive definition of citizenship. As an organization to defend the rights of citizenship, their union naturally moved into the community.⁴⁶

The White Working Class

White men were the least visible in asserting themselves outside of labor negotiations. White men and women of the ILA were not welcomed into a cross-class white community in the same way as African Americans and Mexican Americans. The mainstream white press did not provide positive coverage for their events. Nor did non-labor-related white organizations consult with or include them in their decision-making. No evidence suggests that the middle or upper class of the white community held favorable views of the ILA or sought their involvement in any religious, social, or

⁴⁵ I see the men of 1309 as fighting for cultural citizenship rights. For a full explanation of that term see William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

⁴⁶ No records indicate that a Mexican American Ladies' Auxiliary formed during the 1930s. This may be due to the short-lived nature of the first incarnation of the Mexican American local. Local 1309 disbanded in 1936 after failing to get recognition from their employer. Two years later a new local had taken its place, local 1581. The lack of continuity may have made it difficult for a Ladies' Auxiliary to form in the 1930s. It is also possible that the wives of these men had neither the leisure time nor extra money necessary to be involved in an Auxiliary. They likely worked to supplement their husbands' modest income. Both de Leon and Perez describe a multitude of women's organization in Houston with which the wives of the men of 1309 may have been involved, including the Auxiliary to LULAC – an organization that many of these men joined. Unfortunately, no evidence exists to shed light on their activities.

cultural programs. Because the Mexican American and African American communities faced problems that crossed class lines, union members and elites could view one another as allies in fighting racism and segregation. One could argue that white longshoremen and white elites shared the common goal of maintaining white supremacy. But white longshoremen could hardly have made convincing allies in maintaining white supremacy, as they had unionized with two groups of non-white workers.

Furthermore, union membership alienated white ILA members from upper class whites. In general, wealthy Texans, business elites, and many government officials objected to unionization.⁴⁷ This division did not hold true within the Mexican American and African American communities, where elites may have had critiques of unions, but did not have the same investment in or power to protest unions. Nor did black or Mexican American dockworkers have employers within their own racially defined communities, as did whites.

Their alienation from white elites did not mean that white men and women were without a community outside of the ILA. They identified with and worked closely with other white working class people, especially those affiliated with the AFL. In this work, the women of the Ladies' Auxiliary were especially active in using their organization to strengthen the labor movement. Their Auxiliary duties were not limited to supporting their husbands, but extended to building up their community of working class families.

⁴⁷ Chandler Davidson and George Green both argue that in the late 1930s, business elites gained political influence in Texas and contributed to a more conservative, anti-union government. Green argues for a loose affiliation of elites that controlled Texas politics, which he termed "establishment." See Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* and George N. Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics, the Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979).

White men in the union worked to support other AFL members in Texas. For example, Local 1273 of Houston donated over one hundred dollars to strikers at the Myers-Spalti Manufacturing Company, a furniture plant, as well as to assist striking bakers. “Union people on strike must be provided for. We have learned, by bitter experience, that Unions should assist each other during times of vital need.”⁴⁸ The women of the Ladies’ Auxiliary shared this view, they delivered “in excess of one hundred and fifty sandwiches,” made on union-made bread of course, to the picket line.⁴⁹ White men and women saw themselves as connected to these bakers and furniture makers through a shared dedication to the labor movement, as well as practical need.

They also demonstrated their concern for the labor movement at large by hosting speakers from other unions who would educate them about the status of their shared struggle. In February 1931, Local 1273 hosted a speaker from the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). They and their wives would continue to demonstrate a particular interest in the struggle of garment workers for the next several years. Like the ILA, the ILGWU faced great employer resistance in Texas. Not only did the men and women of the ILA follow this organizing struggle and provide moral and financial aid, but the women also sent one of their own members to Dallas to assist the ILGWU.⁵⁰

White men claimed some public leadership among the white working class community. They sponsored an annual Fourth of July Barbecue for the local labor community. The event included food, games, and speakers. Such events created

⁴⁸ “WHOM SHOULD WE HELP?” *Ship Channel*, 15 May 1936, 5.

⁴⁹ “SANDWICHES FOR PICKET LINE,” *Ship Channel*, 19 June 1936, 7.

⁵⁰ “ILA Ladies’ Auxiliary,” *Ship Channel*, 1 August 1936, 7.

opportunities for members of a given community, in this case the white working-class families of the Houston area, to reinforce their bonds with one another. White longshoremen used their locals to create this opportunity for themselves and the other members of their community.

In 1936 this event was advertised in the newsletter, *Ship Channel*. Nowhere in these advertisements was it stated that only *white* working class folks were welcome. However, it is clear from a look at the specific events of the barbecue that this was the case. The highlight of the day was apparently the “Bathing Beauty Revue” in which “Curvacious damsels...parade[d] the latest in beach wear and the ultra-plus-ultra in feminine charmes [sic].”⁵¹ Judges gave awards for “best figure, prettiest girl or lady and prettiest creation in bathing attire.”⁵² There is no doubt that such an event could only have taken place at an all-white social function. White ILA men, or any men in a Jim Crow society, would not have found it acceptable to have their white female relatives parade in such attire in front of African Americans and Mexican Americans.⁵³ The men of the ILA put on an entertaining social event at which white working-class families could enjoy themselves and renew their connections in that community.

The white women of the Ladies’ Auxiliary certainly did not limit their activities to swim-suit contests. In fact, the white ladies of Houston proved to be more outspoken and more engaged in the local labor movement than their husbands, the most outspoken

⁵¹ “Program,” *Ship Channel*, 26 June 1936, 2.

⁵² “Program,” *Ship Channel*, 3 July 1936, 2.

⁵³ In a milieu in which lynchings still took place based on the need to protect the virtue of white women from black men, it would be unthinkable for non-whites to have attended such an event. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

of whom focused their energies on the ILA's internal politics, discussed at greater length in chapter 5. Two women acted as spokeswomen for Houston's Ladies' Auxiliary. Mrs. J. A. Liles served as President of the Ladies' Auxiliary through most of the 1930s. In addition to her presidential duties, Liles wrote a regular column in the local labor paper, the *Labor Messenger*, in which she tried to educate the labor community and inspire her readers to build up the local labor movement. The *Messenger* provided regular coverage of the activities of the white Ladies' Auxiliary – a courtesy it extended neither to the black Ladies' Auxiliary (which received almost no coverage in the *Messenger*), nor to the men of the ILA. A close ally of Liles, Mrs. Zena Lowry was one of the most outspoken members of the Auxiliary. She regularly published her views in the left-leaning local publication, the *Ship Channel*. Liles and Lowry used these publications to fulfill two of the main goals of the Auxiliary: to “instruct our friends and members in the importance of unionism” and to support the campaign to “buy advertised union labeled goods.”⁵⁴ These two women made the labor movement their priority and saw themselves as integral members of that community.

The white Ladies' Auxiliary of Houston worked to support the labor movement primarily by spreading information about union made goods. In addition to trying to “buy union” themselves, they encouraged their husbands to buy union and also spread the word in their community of women involved in the labor movement. They used the *Houston Labor Messenger* to target a receptive audience. When the Atlas dress company signed a contract with the ILGWU, a union that the Ladies actively supported, Liles

⁵⁴ “Mrs. Liles Tells of Ladies' Auxiliary to Longshoremen,” *Labor Messenger*, 17 May 1935, 1.

wrote to the female readers of the *Labor Messenger*, “that means that we ladies can get union label garments made right here in our own city of Houston...Now ladies you can tell your merchant where he can get the union label garments in case he says he doesn't know.”⁵⁵ In 1936, Lowry tried to galvanize Houston's women by writing that she was “in favor of a House Wife Strike” to pressure baking companies into putting union labels on their bread.⁵⁶ The terminology she used emphasized the work of wives as family consumers. By using the term “strike” she put their unremunerated household labor on par with the paid labor of men. They, too, could go on strike to help build up the labor movement.

Lowry, along with other women from the white Ladies' Auxiliary, even worked with other people in the labor community to produce a “buy union” themed play for the working people of Houston. In the play, a young woman, newly married to a working man, learns the value of buying goods with the union label. In this forty-five minute production, the central character meets up with a group of “seasoned union shoppers” from whom she learns where and how to find union label goods.⁵⁷ These women sought to educate themselves and other women in the community about how best to use their consumer skills to advance the labor movement. They saw that the improvement of their lives and those of their husbands relied not just on successful strikes and labor

⁵⁵ “News Notes,” *Labor Messenger*, 13 March 1936, 3

⁵⁶ “Some Dictators,” *Ship Channel*, 17 April 1936, 6.

⁵⁷ “Union Label Show Declared a Success,” *Labor Messenger*, 17 April 1936, 1.

negotiations, but on the growth of the labor movement as a whole. As an Auxiliary they worked to strengthen that movement.⁵⁸

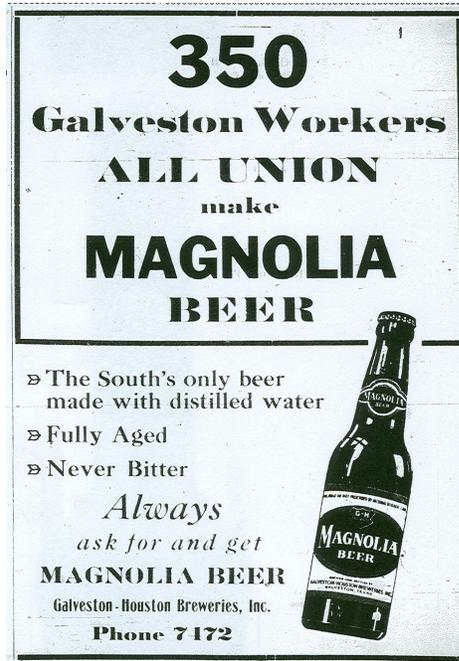


Figure 3.4. Some local businesses responded to the AFL buy union campaign and marketed their wares based on their unionized workers, as this example demonstrates. Advertisement, *Galveston Union Review*, 4 September 1936, 3.

Liles also urged men to spend their money in ways that would help the labor movement. She used the 1936 Annual Convention of the Gulf Coast District of the ILA, a meeting with representatives from every longshore local in the Gulf and South, to announce that the Postal Telegraph Co. should not be used because it furnished information to companies during the garment workers' strike.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power*, for an excellent study on the importance of women's politicized consumption in the success of labor endeavors. ILA women urged working-class women to make buying union label goods a priority, over their own convenience. This meant that they had to make their identification with the labor movement a priority. Frank explores the complexities of this issue in the Seattle labor movement.

⁵⁹ Proceedings of the 27th Annual Convention, 1936, 47.

On one occasion, white women also reached out to black longshoremen directly to try to enlist them in the buy union campaign. Liles, accompanied by Mrs. Barney Egan, a representative of the ILGWU, went to a meeting of the black coastwise local in Houston to speak to the men about the importance of buying items with the union label. No evidence suggests that these men were receptive to their message. No records from the black locals or black Ladies Auxiliaries mention the buy union movement. It does not seem that they supported it, nor that the women of the black Ladies' Auxiliary promoted this issue in their communities, most likely because many of the unions that produced these goods discriminated against blacks.⁶⁰

Though neither their husbands nor other ILA members were as active with the buy union campaign as they would have liked, the white Ladies were not alone in their endeavor to use their “purchasing power” to strengthen the labor movement. Other members of the American Federation of Labor also shared their concerns. The Ladies saw the AFL, especially in Texas, as their community and indeed they shared many of the same concerns and priorities. The meeting minutes of the Port Arthur Trades and Labor Council, a coalition of AFL-affiliated unions in the Port Arthur area, contain regular discussions of which products and companies should be patronized. Women participated in the buy union campaign because it transformed their household labor into active work on the part of the working class. Their participation also enabled them to make connections with other men and women working toward their common goal.

⁶⁰ The focus on buying union or supporting labor friendly businesses also created a way for Mexican and Mexican American businesses to appeal to consumers outside of their race-communities. Many Spanish surnamed business people advertised in the weekly newsletter, *Ship Channel*. In these cases, the common identity of labor-oriented consumption guided whites and blacks to support businesses they may otherwise have ignored.

The Ladies used their household skills to financially support the labor community. Though Mrs. Liles of the white Ladies' Auxiliary, in a plea to be taken seriously said, "We are not just a sewing circle," sewing was a key part of their effort. The members of this auxiliary used their sewing skills to raise money. They consistently had quilts in the making. When finished, quilts were usually raffled off to raise funds for the Auxiliary. They used their cooking skills in the same way, putting on fundraising dinners. Through these activities, the women of the Ladies Auxiliaries transformed their "women's skills" of sewing and cooking into resources employed on behalf of labor activism. Skills acquired to maintain their households became the means to fight for the cause of working people, to support not just the ILA, but the wider labor movement and the people of their communities.

During times of strikes they used their money to provide food to striking men and their families. They also made charitable contributions. For example, they gave money to the Salvation Army to provide clothing for school children.⁶¹ However, the Ladies mostly used the money to make donations to other unions and causes in their communities. The minutes of the white Ladies in Houston indicate that they made donations to other unions throughout the country. The July 13, 1937 minutes record that the Ladies received a letter from striking autoworkers thanking them for their contribution.⁶² This activity also demonstrated their independent thinking. The ILA international and local leaders condemned a 1937 strike of seamen and discouraged ILA

⁶¹ Letter from John Whitehurst to Mrs. J E J Rogers, President of Ladies' Auxiliary, dated 19 September 1933, ILA Local 1273 Collection, box 1, folder 4, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections.

⁶² Minutes of the Ladies' Auxiliary, 13 July 1937, ILA Local 1273 Collection, box 1, folder 3.

men from getting involved, yet the Ladies voted in 1937 to donate money to the seamen's cause.⁶³ These women acted autonomously, making their own decisions about what labor causes were worthwhile and deserving of their support.

The Ladies also used their resources to help build up the spirit of fraternity and contribute to the men's enjoyment off the docks. In a touching letter written to the Ladies' Auxiliary, the men of the ILA Base Ball Club thanked the women for their financial support of the team. "It proovse to us that we have your suport Prayers and best wishes, knowing as we do that no man or any bunch of men ever have gone very far without the Love and encergement of good women we feeel with your suport we can go over the top."⁶⁴ For the white women of the Ladies' Auxiliary, who primarily saw themselves as part of the working class community, providing this support, for their husbands and the labor movement in general, was their duty.

The Lines That Divide

Like their male counterparts, black and white women had much in common as members of the labor community. But, as for the men of the ILA, that identity did not translate into a common experience of what it meant to be a working-class Houstonian. A comparison of black and white Ladies' Auxiliary members is instructive. Both groups

⁶³ Ladies voted to donate \$25 to the seamen, Minutes of the Ladies' Auxiliary, 12 January 1937, ILA Local 1273 Collection, box 1, folder 3.

⁶⁴All errors original to the text. Letter to Officers and Members of the Ladies' Auxiliary from Charlie Wood, dated 5 June 1932, ILA Local 1273 Collection, box 1, folder 4.

provided support for their husbands and for one another. In their own ways both groups worked to increase union membership and to strengthen the labor movement. But these diverse women found few ties to each other. They had starkly different relationships with the men of the ILA, and like their husbands, occupied different positions within their respective race-based communities. Thus, despite their shared class position, they interpreted their roles as women and wives in different ways.

Though their Auxiliaries often pursued similar activities, there was little interaction between black and white women. In the early years of the Auxiliaries, these women did not communicate directly with one another. They shared financial resources during the strike of 1935, but even then white women did not feel comfortable speaking directly with the black women. Rather, white women took the circuitous route of giving messages to their husbands, who then relayed them to black longshoremen, who in turn spoke to their wives.⁶⁵ Though white and black longshoremen had extensive interaction during strikes, neither they nor their wives seemed to think it was appropriate for the women to work closely together.

After the strike of 1935, black and white women in Houston became more comfortable with one another. They developed a respectful, but distanced, relationship. The minutes of the white Ladies' Auxiliary mention the visit of the president of the Colored Ladies' Auxiliary of Houston to their meeting and describes her visit as "very interesting and she also gave us some very good suggestions."⁶⁶ In their relationship with

⁶⁵ "Letter to Ladies' Auxiliary from General Strike Committee," dated 22 October 1935, ILA Local 1273 Collection, box 1, folder 4.

⁶⁶ Minutes of ILA Ladies' Auxiliary #1, 9 March 1937. ILA Local 1273 Collection, box 1, folder 3.

each other, the Ladies seem to have adopted their husbands' public attitude. The longshoremen frequently expressed pride in their ability to work together and not let race divide them. However, this bi-racial cooperation did not spill over into their personal lives. Women, though they developed a cordial relationship, did not socialize with one another or bring their Auxiliaries together. That they all affiliated with the same union and worked towards common goals transgressed the boundaries of appropriate southern race relations. Segregated activities and Auxiliaries demonstrated their respect for southern values.⁶⁷

This respect was reaffirmed in the way that the women (and men) appeared “together” in annual Labor Day parades. Again, the women of the different Auxiliaries approached these events in similar ways. For both, Annual Labor Day parades provided an opportunity to demonstrate the values of the union to the public. Unlike the silent and somber marches of the strikes, these parades had a more festive air. The women made banners and created uniforms, or in flush years used the funds they had earned through sewing and cooking to buy matching outfits and pre-made banners. The minutes of both black and white Ladies Auxiliaries describe the extensive advance planning about dress, banners, and floats for parades. In these parades, the members of the Auxiliaries marched together as women, behind their husbands' locals. Their banners identified them as Ladies' Auxiliary #1 or #5, and thus affirmed their status as official members of the International Longshoremen's Association. In this way they proclaimed their own

⁶⁷ In the *Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 1998), Daniel Letwin argues that the use of separate locals in bi-racial unions reveals that though these unions challenged social norms, they could not discard them. Unions used separate locals both because their members often preferred it and to make themselves less threatening to the communities in which they operated.

contributions to the union. They demonstrated their pride in being part of the organization a productive part of the labor movement.

These Labor Day Parades represented an important opportunity for all of the members of the ILA go before the whole Houston community. Scholars of such public demonstrations argue that these performances are a way to display who belongs within that particular community.⁶⁸ But in this case, the union sent a message of division to observers. Though everyone marched, their particular parade formations demonstrated how the ILA incorporated segregation. The members of the segregated locals and auxiliaries marched in racially-segregated groups – Ladies following their respective men.⁶⁹ This configuration made clear that while the union included people of different races who worked together, they did not intermingle extensively. They did not make a loud public display in support of racial intermingling or social equality.

Black and white Auxiliaries were not simply parallel organizations separated by social norms. The women of these groups, though both devoted to the success of the ILA and both actively supportive of their husbands, interpreted their roles differently. While Ladies of the white auxiliary identified strongly with the labor movement in particular, black Ladies devoted their efforts toward advancing the needs of the community as a whole while simultaneously displaying their respectability.

To a great degree, black and white women of the Ladies' Auxiliaries shared an identity as dependent wives and mothers, which shaped the nature of their participation in

⁶⁸ For a study on the multiple meanings of such events, see David M. Guss, *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁶⁹ "Line-Up for Labor Day Parade," *Labor Messenger*, 4 September 1936, 1.

the movement. Thus, they fulfilled similar roles and engaged in much of the same types of work in support of the union. However, their identities varied. Though both groups identified with the ILA, they also identified with larger black and white communities in Houston. Their different relationships with those communities pushed their work in the Ladies Auxiliaries into different areas as the 1930s progressed. These women's race, class and gender identities formed in relationship to the men with whom they shared their lives and the communities in which they lived. These identities are expressed in the activities of the Ladies Auxiliaries.

Much more so than white women, black women engaged in activities having no direct bearing on building up the labor movement. For example, many of their activities were charitable in nature, designed to respond to the needs of a community suffering from severe economic problems. More importantly, many of their programs reveal that the women of the Auxiliary placed a priority on demonstrating their strong morals and respectability. With their church and musical programs, these women continued a long tradition among African American woman to display Victorian moral values and counter racial stereotypes that degraded African American women as debased. As Michele Mitchell argues, these stereotypes were “anything but benign: such allegations rationalized lynching and ritualized rape, legitimated segregation, and restricted employment opportunities.”⁷⁰ In other words, in addition to supporting their husbands,

⁷⁰ Mitchell, 11.

the women of the black Ladies' Auxiliary used the organization to counter the gendered racialization that justified their second-class citizenship.⁷¹

Additionally, black women appeared in public as partners with men while white women did not. For example, black men and women held joint and public installation of officers. To a great extent, their husbands also seem invested in community display standing and respectability. Considered pillars of the community, they lived up to expectations different from their white counterparts.

Though white women, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, concerned themselves with the respectability of their husbands to bolster their strike demands, they had less need to defend their own morality, and therefore no need to use their organization to display their own respectability, which was not maligned on the basis of their race. They focused almost all of their activities on building up the local labor movement to address the issue of citizenship that concerned them most: the denial of the right of worker-citizens to a certain standard of living. Though they worked during the

⁷¹ The women of the black Ladies' Auxiliary seem invested in displaying "respectability" as outlined by Victoria W. Wolcott in *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Wolcott finds that public displays were central to claiming respectability. It seems that black women participated in activities that could have projected a more refined gender identity than white women, such as musical performances. White women seem unconcerned with such display, nor do they seem to have had access to forums, such as leading church services, etc, at which they could have asserted this identity, at least not in association with their union identity.

For more on the history of black women's claims for respectability see Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent*, Mitchell's *Righteous Propagation*, Chateauvert's *Marching Together* and Deborah Gray White's history of black club women, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999). White and Chateauvert both discuss the class tension that separated many working women from organized club women, in the case of White, and Pullman Porter Auxiliary women, in the case of Chateauvert. Chateauvert finds that Pullman Porter Auxiliary women often alienated the women who actually worked for Pullman as they tried to create an identity based on their role primarily as wives. Similarly, the women of the Ladies' Auxiliary made no action on the part of or to ally with women who worked outside the home, even those who worked on the docks.

1930s to change the reputations of longshoremen and their families, their strongest associations and interactions remained with other members of the working class and the local labor movement, especially with other members of the American Federation of Labor. The activities of the white Ladies' Auxiliary demonstrate a primary identification with the class-specific local and national labor movement.

Perhaps because they had less prestige, white men seemed much less willing than their black counterparts to share the spotlight with their wives. Within the white community of Houston, longshoremen had little power and few political connections. The labor they engaged in was culturally marked by being associated with the black men who performed it.⁷² Longshoremen and their wives did not receive the respect of the white middle class and business communities of Houston and Galveston. Nor did white men and women find many joint projects to bring them together. While black men and women shared the goal of community uplift and worked together towards that goal, white women tended to work towards the improvement of the labor community in gender-specific ways, focused around their role as consumers and employing their skills in running a household. Further, white men seemed to, at times, resent the good intentions of the white women's Auxiliary. On one occasion, a group of Ladies' Auxiliary members were coldly received by the ILA local when they decided to visit the men

⁷² In *The Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger argues that Irish immigrants feared assuming the "degradation" of blacks when they entered industries in which blacks predominated. Similarly, I argue that white longshoremen lost status by unionizing with blacks and working in an industry that in Texas in 1940 was 63.5% black, according to Lester Rubin, *The Negro in the Longshore Industry* (Philadelphia: The Wharton School, Industrial Research Unit, University of Pennsylvania), 1974. It would be ironic if whites were accorded less status in the white community because of their association with non-whites who, in turn, received a higher status in their race-based communities because of their affiliation with the union.

during a union meeting. The men voted to only allow them to stay for ten minutes.⁷³ In this situation the men may have felt that the women were overstepping their bounds by attempting to assert influence where they were unwanted. Men welcomed women's presence and help, but only within bounds.

It is not enough to say that race and gender separated the members of the ILA; segregation shaped vastly different experiences for the three different racial groups. They were separated not merely by their own racism, but also by different experiences of status within their own communities and the different gendered identities that grew out of that status. Though all were members of the working class and all believed in the labor movement, they were not working class in quite the same way nor did union membership mean the same thing to them. For whites in the ILA, the union remained mostly about the labor movement. For non-whites, the work they did off the docks, though not identical, was as important, if not more, than strengthening the labor movement. Their ILA locals gave them an entrée into community leadership. The next chapter continues to look at the work of these three different racial groups off the docks, focusing on how each group sought to use the union to expand civil rights for their community.

⁷³ "News Notes," *Labor Messenger*, 3 April 1936, 3.

Chapter 4

“men ... stand up for their rights”

Guy Tyler, “a friend of...laboring people,” addressed the crowd as one of a series of speakers opening the SA & GCD ILA convention in Galveston in May of 1936. Tyler captured the mood of the convention in his comments when he “urged that all laboring people be men and stand up for their rights.”¹ Previous chapters have examined the ways longshoremen employed strikes, expanded their union, and manipulated public relations in an effort to control their working conditions and earn a decent living. A year before Tyler made his speech, the ILA had taken the additional step, at the 1935 convention, of committing to formal political action in defense of their rights.² Holt Ross, the AFL

¹ Proceedings of the 26th Annual Convention of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the International Longshoremen’s Association, May, 1936, 4. As explored in chapter 2, the men and women affiliated with the ILA promoted a distinctly gendered union identity that reflected the national discourse of citizenship in which men were seen as citizens and their wives as dependents. The ILA and Auxiliary publicly embraced these gendered roles in order to mesh with the national discourse that as bread-winning men with dependent wives they had a right to a decent wage.

² In this chapter I will explore political action of ILA members. However, I do not mean to imply that only acts such as voting, petitioning Congress, or challenging Jim Crow laws are political acts. As previous chapters have explored, the community endeavors of the union, the way they presented themselves to the public during strikes, and the way they and their wives negotiated gender relations all

organizer who worked with the ILA, explained that it was “High time that our representatives in the national capitol [sic] were told what we wanted and expected of them.”³ ILA men and women of all races participated in poll tax drives, wooed local politicians, and corresponded with their representatives in the state and federal governments in order to defend and expand their rights as workers. ILA men felt entitled not only to the right to organize and bargain collectively, but also to the right to earn a living wage.⁴ Black and Mexican American ILA members also found the union to be a useful force for direct political action to demand citizenship rights denied on the basis of race.

As Lizabeth Cohen argues in her study of Chicago industrial workers, the New Deal inspired a greater interest in politics among the laboring class as workers came to see the government as a potentially powerful institution in their lives.⁵ Longshoremen recognized the importance of New Deal programs: The Wagner Act and National Labor Relations Board, compensation acts, and Social Security all touched their lives both practically and by validating their worth as citizens. New Deal labor legislation reversed the long-standing antagonistic relationship between government and the labor movement. Prior to the 1930s, the federal government rarely intervened in

connected to a national discourse about who was American and therefore deserving of the benefits of citizenship. These personal acts were also political statements.

³ Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the International Longshoremen’s Association, May 1935, 38.

⁴ As previously addressed in chapter one, Clare Sheridan articulates a theory of citizenship which she names “economic citizenship” in which citizens are “owed an opportunity to make a living wage by virtue of their citizenship” in “Contested Citizenship: National Identity and the Mexican Immigration Debates of the 1920s” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Spring, 2002, 19. While she locates the development of this idea in the early twentieth century, I argue that New Deal legislation only strengthened workers’ sense of entitlement to a living wage.

⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). See especially pages 252-289.

labor issues, and when it did, generally supported the employers.⁶ More importantly, the federal government had not previously established the rights of unions to organize, to strike, to bargain collectively or to be protected from anti-union subversion on the part of their employers. First in the National Industrial Recovery Act and then the Wagner Act, these rights were “institutionalized,” and during the New Deal workers found new “social and economic dimensions of citizenship.”⁷ Texas dockworkers, like other members of the working class, moved to cement their new position in society. Longshoremen increased their political activity both to take advantage of the government’s new responsiveness to their interests and to prevent the growing conservative backlash of the mid and late 1930s, as indicated in the election of anti-New Deal legislators and the rulings of a conservative Supreme Court.

Through their political efforts, longshoremen joined a national conversation about the meaning of citizenship and the proper relationship between citizens and government. In *American Crucible*, Gary Gerstle argues that the labor movement during the 1930’s actively pushed the Roosevelt administration to move to the left because, as President Roosevelt declared, “For too many of us life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness.” He posited that the federal

⁶ One could argue that labor and regulatory legislation passed during the Progressive era represented significant federal government interest in expanding the rights of the working class. This intervention, however, was certainly the exception and not the rule. In general, before (and after) the New Deal, the government has proved itself more a friend to business than to labor. Additionally, much of this Progressive legislation was toothless and the laissez-faire policies of the 1920s served to undo many of them. For different interpretations, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Lichtenstein sees a more consistent development of labor rights from the Progressive Era through WWII. Melvyn Dubofsky argues that working people have consistently benefited from government intervention throughout the 20th century in *State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁷ Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 3.

government must protect the working class' right to pursue happiness from the power of "economic royalty."⁸ Longshoremen entered this conversation and adopted its ambiguous but powerful language of Americanism. They presented themselves as true, independent Americans, willing to do their duty as citizens, and therefore deserving of the rights of citizenship, including the rights explicitly codified in law as well as those implied by New Deal legislation. They interpreted the words of the President and the actions of the federal government as pledges to protect and expand the rights of citizen workers, and in so doing, to elevate their social status. However, the separate racial groups within the union diverged in their interpretation of these rights and in their definitions of citizenship. White longshoremen believed themselves to be most deserving of the protections of the government and the benefits derived from them. Mexican Americans and African Americans not only saw themselves as equal to their white co-workers in the realm of workers' rights, but also in other aspects of their lives.

Blacks and Mexican Americans moved beyond their common political work with whites to use the ILA to dismantle the racist restraints that kept them from first-class citizenship. Like their fellow union members, they experienced the positive benefits of the new relationship between government and workers. But the racial ideologies of Texas and rigid segregation prevented them from experiencing many of their most basic rights. While union membership validated their citizenship to a certain extent it did not protect them from segregation, voting restrictions, and violence. Non-white dockworkers

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt quoted in Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the 20th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 150.

found themselves caught between a federal government that granted them rights, and local and state governments that relegated them to a second-class position.⁹

Black and Mexican American ILA men shared with whites the belief that union membership required political engagement. But the activities of Houston's Mexican American and black locals indicate that these men had a broader understanding of what that political engagement entailed. For African Americans and Mexican Americans the labor movement was part of their larger struggle for equality. To these men, the union's defense of "rights" included those rights they were denied on grounds of race. Blacks and Mexican Americans faced a "multiplicity of constraints" to their freedoms and sought to use the union to attack them.¹⁰ By fighting the all-white primary, running poll tax drives, challenging employment discrimination, and demonstrating their interest in being politically active, black and Mexican American workers employed the name, reputation and political connections of the ILA to pursue an agenda they shared with their larger racially defined communities. Working with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), they used the ILA to advocate for their civil rights and pushed the

⁹ In *Dividing Citizens*, Suzanne Mettler argues that New Deal programs divided white men from women and minorities. White men were most likely to be served by New Deal programs run by the federal government, such as Social Security. Minorities and women were most likely to be recipients or clients of programs run on the state or local level. Standards of rights were typically lower on the local and state level. Black longshoremen and Mexican American dockworkers seemed to be caught between these two types of citizenship. On the one hand they benefited from the Wagner Act and the ongoing potential intervention of the NLRB. In this way they received the type of support and empowerment that Mettler argues was generally reserved for white men. But local government controlled other aspects of their lives. As such, they were subject to inferior citizenship in the form of segregation and exclusion from voting.

¹⁰ In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 10, Robin D. G. Kelley argues that African Americans often face oppression on multiple fronts; class discrimination and racism to name the two most relevant to this paper. I argue that Mexican Americans and African Americans saw the ILA as an organization that could battle oppression that stemmed both from their class position and their racial identity.

union to stand for a broader definition of “citizen.” Though the larger American Federation of Labor did not make the promotion of civil rights a priority, some of their members connected the AFL-affiliated ILA to fights against racial discrimination.

The ILA’s Political Engagement

During the strike of 1935, Mrs. J. A. Liles, President of the white Ladies’ Auxiliary of Houston, maintained her regular column in one of the local papers, the *Houston Labor Messenger*, not to be confused with the more conservative *Labor Journal*. She used this column to rally other women in the labor community to activism. Liles felt that it was the responsibility of working-class women to support their husbands’ quest to secure economic stability in order to provide their children with the necessities they needed to “grow into good useful citizens.”¹¹

Liles particularly appealed to women to pay their poll taxes. She advocated political engagement as a means to address the inequities of power that she believed characterized the strike:

Ladies, we appeal to you to pay your poll taxes. It is your duty and your privilege to rally to the cause of organized labor.... Let us as wives [sic] of union men show the world that we can fight. Not with our fist or with machine guns...The hand that rocks the cradle can also scratch the names of men on the ballots who take the food out of our children’s mouths by forcing our husbands to face machine guns on a picket line.”¹²

¹¹ “Port Commissioners Deny ILA Auxiliary Right to Go On Docks,” *Houston Labor Messenger*, 25 October 1935, 1.

¹² J. A. Liles, “News Notes from the ILA Auxiliary,” *Houston Labor Messenger*, 25 October 1935, 5.

In her passionate plea for action, Liles invokes New Deal gendered discourse: She recognized and accepted her special responsibility as a woman and a mother to raise good American citizens. She positioned herself as dependent upon her husband, but certainly not passive. She saw herself and other women as part of the working class and therefore involved in the fight for workers' rights.¹³ Without the recognition of these rights, she could not exercise her civic duty because she could not prevent food being "taken out of our children's mouths."

Liles saw a connection between the abuse her husband was suffering on the picket line and the deprivation her family suffered at home and their lack of political power. She argued that longshoremen, who proudly supported their wives and children, deserved protection by and representation in government. Lacking adequate political influence, working-class families were vulnerable to the abuse she, her friends, and their families faced during the strike.

Liles articulated a need for ILA members and their wives to pay their poll taxes and vote, in other words, to be actively engaged in the political system. The immediate context of the strike motivated her and shaped her argument. But Liles was also likely influenced by the ILA's recent emphasis on voting and formal political activism as she developed her analysis of the strike. The men of the ILA had determined that, in response to the New Deal, the union must now participate in the realm of politics.

¹³ Ruth Allen conducted a survey in the winter of 1932-1933. Of 40 white deep-sea longshoremen, 34 out of 40 paid their poll tax. Most of those surveyed paid the poll tax even before the union passed the resolution making it mandatory, suggesting that the rank and file members guided the agenda of the district. Of the 34 men who paid the tax, only 14 "enfranchised their wives." Ruth Allen, *Wage Earners Meet the Depression* (Austin: Texas) UT Bulletin #3545, December, 1935, 75

Several months before the strike of 1935, the SA&GCD of the ILA passed a resolution requiring all members to pay their poll taxes:

WHEREAS: The time having arrived when organized labor is playing a prominent part in the politics of the Nation, and

WHEREAS: Believing that much good for the benefit of the Association can be derived from political activities Be it resolved that the Gulf Coast District of the I.L.A. require the members of its various locals to purchase poll tax receipts each year.¹⁴

In that year's poll tax drive, longshoremen's unions were reported to be "100 per cent 'lousy' with poll tax receipts."¹⁵

This resolution marked the formal culmination of a trend towards greater political involvement and indicated the expansion of the meaning of union membership. Membership in the ILA had long meant more than simply paying dues and working hard. As previous chapters have demonstrated, being a union man entailed an active role in one's community and loyalty to one's country. Now union members also bore the additional responsibility of defending their rights through political action. Longshoremen acknowledged their duty to participate in the political system. To be good union men required that they "stand up for their rights," a struggle to which they had long been committed and now sought to wage through the political system.

It would have been easy for longshoremen to dismiss voting as an avenue of improvement – the poll tax presented a significant financial hurdle for many Texans and

¹⁴ Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention, 41.

¹⁵ The expression "lousy with receipts" indicates that all members had paid their poll taxes. Houston Labor and Trades Council, "Minutes of Last Meeting," *Houston Labor Messenger*, 7 February 1936, 6.

\$1.50 was the base state tax. Some citizens paid more because cities and counties could charge additional taxes. Davidson, 25.

prevented many working-class people from voting. Yet all longshoremen recognized voting as an essential aspect of the citizenship compact. Longshoremen voted for practical reasons of course, but also because the poll tax threatened to exclude them from the right to vote and from the status it conferred. As Judith Shklar has argued, “It was the denial of the suffrage to large groups of Americans that made the right to vote such a mark of social standing.” To be “refused the right was to be almost a slave,” and thus voting acted as an “affirmation of belonging” to the larger American citizenry. Longshoremen of all races wanted to “belong” and have the social standing that voting conferred. By paying the poll tax and voting, they did their “duty to society” and proved their worth as citizens.¹⁶

ILA members resolved to pay their poll taxes, en masse, because of the new relationship between the federal government and the working class. Longshoremen felt that, due to the Roosevelt administration’s legislation and the labor movement’s efforts, “organized labor is playing a prominent part in the politics of the Nation.” The position of organized labor in American society had shifted, as had the status of working people. But conservatives threatened this new status. A “battle of principles” raged in Congress and, as Holt Ross explained, though “President Roosevelt had attempted to help Labor,” workers needed to act on their own behalf.¹⁷ ILA International President Joe Ryan told the 1935 convention about the benefits of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which had recognized their right to organize and provided some protection from certain

¹⁶ Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 226-27.

¹⁷ Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention, 38.

types of employer coercion.¹⁸ He also stressed the need for longshoremen to urge their Congressional representatives to support upcoming labor legislation, especially the Wagner Act.¹⁹ In 1935, the Supreme Court found the NRA unconstitutional. The ILA had grown in strength and numbers under the NRA. The dismantling of this act alerted workers to the need to defend the rights they had gained. The ILA convention sent telegrams to their representatives in Congress asking them to support the Wagner bill, which would secure many of these same rights.²⁰ They vowed to pay their poll taxes and vote in 1936, knowing that those elected would determine the future of New Deal programs. The poll tax resolution and the Wagner bill telegrams signified a change in the self-concept of longshoremen; they embraced their manly duty to be civic participants and to defend their rights through the political system.

Inspired by the federal government to act, longshoremen struggled on the local and state levels to gain more political influence. The Texas legislature adopted the poll tax in 1902 specifically to curtail the political activism of farmers and working-class people who had forged an interracial alliance in the Populist Party. Combined with the exclusion of blacks from the Democratic primary, the poll tax shrank the electorate by approximately two-thirds.²¹ The poll tax succeeded in limiting the voice of the working class, and ILA men sought to fight this disempowerment. Under this system, the Democratic Party maintained control of state and had little political need to address the problems of the poor or laboring classes. Throughout the 1930s, while longshoremen of

¹⁸ The National Recovery Administration was the agency created to enact the National Industrial Recovery Act. In ILA documents the two tend to be conflated.

¹⁹ Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention, 41.

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

²¹ Davidson, 23.

all races became more politically engaged, less than thirty percent of the voting-age population participated in general elections and even less took part in non-presidential election years.²² The exclusion of non-white and working class people from the voting public also severely limited the issues addressed by the government and resulted in a one-party system of government that catered to the wealthy.²³ The Great Depression and New Deal presented a significant challenge to this system and longshoremen sought to be a part of that challenge.

Though most Texas Congressmen initially supported the New Deal, they did so out of deference to the Democratic party rather than enthusiasm for the programs.²⁴ Their support quickly waned as the New Deal moved from recovery to reform. Texas Democrats especially hesitated to support labor legislation.²⁵ Despite having a moderate governor in the person of James Allred for most of the 1930s, the Texas legislature also tended to be conservative, anti-labor, and anti-New Deal. Texas longshoremen and other members of the labor movement worked to prevent the election of anti-New Deal Democrats into state and federal positions. Chandler Davidson locates the beginning of a Progressive movement in Texas politics in this time period. The Texas Democrats split over the New Deal into conservative and liberal factions. The political activity of the labor movement in Texas during the Great Depression would mark the early movement of the “economically and ethnically dispossessed” against the “conservative status quo.”

²² Ibid., 25.

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Lionel V. Patenaude, *Texans, Politics and the New Deal* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 71.

²⁵ Ibid., 72.

²⁶ Both their new status as valued citizens in the New Deal era and the concrete benefits they had gained hung in the balance.²⁷

The anti-labor legislation proposed by Allred's successor, Pappy O'Daniel, and enacted by the state legislature in the late 1930s made the connection between citizens' rights and workers' rights painfully clear. Of particular concern to workers at this time, the O'Daniel anti-strike law criminalized violence that occurred during strikes. Laborers in Texas felt that the governor had written the law in such a way as to outlaw virtually any strike. This would limit their negotiating strength with employers. ILA men, working with other laborers through the Port Arthur Trades and Labor Council, wrote their legislators protesting this law.²⁸ Such laws made clear that rights guaranteed to workers could be infringed because those workers' access to political power was limited by the poll tax.

Despite the general political weakness of working-class people, longshoremen secured the attention of local politicians through their numbers and their known determination to vote. Candidates for local government positions saw longshoremen as a voting bloc to whom they should appeal for electoral support. These candidates took out ads in union papers appealing to ILA members and encouraging them to vote for "A Man

²⁶ Davidson, 24-25.

²⁷ In *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 44, Michael Honey makes the point that, in the process of subjugating blacks, the "white South surrendered some of its own freedoms as well" and "any unorthodox view became suspect." The working class in Texas certainly suffered a great loss of freedoms. Not only were the white and Mexican American working classes weakened because the poll tax so successfully limited the number of voters, but they also lost power they could have had if blacks, largely working class, could have voted in the all-white primaries.

²⁸ The Council was composed of representatives from various AFL-related unions in the Port Arthur area. Several representatives from longshore locals were active on the Council. Sabine Area Trades and Labor Council, Beaumont Texas Collection, AR 62, Box 3, Folder 11, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington.

Who has proven he is a friend to the laboring and union man and is a union man himself.”²⁹ Another promised “street improvements ... tax exemption on owner occupied homes, pensions for needy aged.”³⁰ Albert Thomas, a Congressional candidate in 1936, ran on the declaration that “He knows the federal government and will work for the interests of the working man.”³¹ Thomas’ expertise on the federal level appealed to working people concerned with the Supreme Court’s rollback of the New Deal. Thomas knew that longshoremen cared deeply about national politics and its impact on their lives.

Though working class people continued to have limited political influence on the state level, the organizational activities of the longshoremen did pay off: They attracted the attention of local candidates who brought labor issues into the larger political debate and acted as allies in local labor disputes. Judge Roy Hofheinz appeared at the 1935 local ILA convention to thank “the members of the organization for the support given him during the past election.” He further indicated his support for longshoremen in their struggles with employers when he “scored the guards employed by the Southern Steamship Company for firing on our men [during the last strike]... and pledged his help in any way it might be needed.”³² Though this local political support did not give longshoremen great political power in Texas ports, it did provide them some protection. White longshoreman Bill Follett remembered that, at one point, their “political influence” allowed them to “run around and beat upon scabs, and nothing was done.”³³ Attacking

²⁹ Advertisement, *Ship Channel*, 15 August 1936, 8.

³⁰ Advertisement, *Ship Channel*, 19 September 1936, 7.

³¹ Advertisement, *Ship Channel*, 15 August 1936, 7.

³² Proceedings of the 25th Annual Convention, 4.

³³ Bill Follett, interview by George Green, 14 August, 1987, transcript, Oral History Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington, 42.

scabs with impunity during strikes allowed longshoremen to undermine ship owners' attempts to maintain normal operating procedure without ILA men. In the absence of more active political support, this temporary immunity allowed longshoremen a means to defend their jobs, and perhaps gain the rights they sought through striking.

Women also worked to connect constituents with political candidates. For example, the Ladies' Auxiliary sponsored a free dinner open to all ILA members and their families. The Ladies prepared a "splendid old fashioned good supper... assured of giving your stomach a treat." John Steele, a candidate for Fire Commissioner, provided the funds.³⁴ The supper served as an avenue through which Steele could woo voters. Women parlayed their domestic cooking skills into a vehicle for political negotiation.³⁵

ILA men and women also advanced their political interests and worked to protect the New Deal through regular correspondence with their representatives in government. The Ladies' Auxiliary wrote to protest a bill creating a sales tax that they believed would unfairly affect the working class as a whole.³⁶ One piece of legislation the Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation Act required the ongoing attention of the ILA throughout the 1930s. Longshoremen pushed their representatives in Congress to expand the coverage of the Act and to ensure that it included better medical coverage.³⁷ This Act

³⁴ "Free Supper," *Ship Channel*, 19 September 1936, 9.

³⁵ This activity is similar to the community organizing explored in chapter 3. Women consistently used their "domestic" abilities to promote the labor cause.

³⁶ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 13 October 1937, Records of ILA Local 1273, Houston TX, AR 19, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington. The Ladies' roles as primary purchaser / consumer for the home most likely drove their interest in this issue.

³⁷ At the 1934 regional ILA convention, workers were concerned with improving their options for decent medical coverage. They wanted to make sure that osteopathic treatment would be included in their coverage. Proceedings, 1934, 49-50. At the 1939 convention, their concern revolved around guaranteeing that the nearest living relative, usually their wives, would receive just death compensation. Proceedings, 1939, 56. They also wanted to institute a jury trial for compensation cases, noting that "the jury system is

served to tie dock-working families to the state and federal governments to which they now looked for financial protection. Longshoremen also sought to ensure decent workmen's compensation for others. At the 1934 convention, longshoremen voted to send a representative to the state federation of labor legislative committee to work on strengthening workmen's compensation for workers in general.³⁸ Ruth Allen's survey of income indicates that longshoremen regularly received compensation for time they could not work due to injury.³⁹ Since wives would depend on this support should they be widowed, the issue of worker's compensation drew women into the political process as well. Both men and women viewed this compensation as a right and looked to the government to enforce it with ship owners.

Black, white, and Mexican American ILA men, and their wives, shared a conviction that engagement with the government was necessary to protect their new rights as workers. But, for black and Mexican American members, this political activism carried additional meaning. For example, both of these groups experienced voting not just as part of the working class, but also as members of racial groups excluded from fair government representation. Their goals in poll tax drives were twofold: to bolster the labor movement and to gain recognition of the rights they were denied on grounds of color. Mexican Americans who paid the poll tax asserted their citizenship, claimed their

one of the fundamental protections for American citizenship and is of special value to working men." Proceedings, 1939, 74-75.

³⁸ Proceedings of the 24th Annual Convention, 1934, 48.

³⁹ Ruth Allen found that longshore work was only responsible for about 72% of a longshore family's income. Boarders, borrowing, selling household goods and accident compensation generally made up the rest. At the time that Allen did her study, longshoremen were relying on accident compensation from their employers and the state. See *Wage Earners Meet the Depression*, University of Texas Bulletin no. 3545 (Austin: University of Texas, Bureau of Research in the Social Sciences), 66.

American-ness, and demanded the rights of citizens. Compared to other members of the ILA, Mexican Americans, who made the lowest wages, could least afford to pay the poll tax; Mexican American compressmen generally made half the hourly wage of longshoremen.⁴⁰ Yet records indicate that Mexican American members of the ILA in Houston not only paid the poll tax, but worked with LULAC to encourage other members of their community to do the same.

As described in the last chapter, members of the all Mexican American compressmen's local saw themselves as leaders of the Mexican community in Houston's Magnolia Park section. They recognized the importance of continuing celebrations of Mexican culture and working with other cultural groups, and sought to keep fiestas patrias alive in spite of the Great Depression. These efforts were not apolitical but rather served to challenge racial stereotypes by emphasizing the "best" of Mexican culture.⁴¹ Moreover, Mexican Americans affiliated with the ILA also used the political connections of that organization to secure access to better job opportunities for the people of Magnolia Park. Working alone, and with LULAC, these compressmen used the union to improve their community, create equality of opportunity, and to try to acquire access to citizenship rights for Mexican American Houstonians

⁴⁰ As outlined in chapter one, white and black longshoremen, who controlled most union decisions, did not allow Mexican Americans to be longshoremen. Their only options were to work in cotton compresses, warehouses and, in Galveston, as fruit handlers. Many African Americans also worked as cotton compressmen, but unlike Mexican Americans, were not excluded by race from being longshoremen. In fact, black longshoremen dominated the union in Texas numerically and had great power in union-decision making.

⁴¹ Arnoldo de Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (First Texas A&M print edition, College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2001), 66-67.

Mexican American ILA Activism

Mariano Hernandez was a produce vendor in Magnolia Park who believed that Houston's Mexican Americans could benefit from working with LULAC. Hernandez contacted LULAC and in 1934 received permission to start LULAC Council #60. He planned to hold the meetings in either his home or the home of another member, but this plan had to be abandoned since membership quickly grew to over three hundred men, most of them dockworkers. No records exist to indicate whether or not Hernandez was surprised when hundreds of compressmen from the newly organized ILA Local 1309 joined the Council, though the fact that he did not have alternate meeting space arranged suggests their interest was unexpected. Hernandez probably expected the middle-class members of Magnolia Park, mostly other small business people like himself, to comprise the bulk of the Council. But compressmen joined in such numbers as to make this LULAC Council predominately working class. Fortunately, their union hall was large enough to hold the entire membership of LULAC Council #60 and it became their meeting site.⁴²

LULAC grew out of a number of Mexican American organizations formed in the 1920s. Middle-class Mexican Americans founded a number of groups, including the Knights of America, League of Latin American Citizens, and Sons of America. Leaders of these groups grew concerned over growing divisions within the Mexican American community and in 1929 called a convention to discuss unifying these diverse

⁴² Juvencio Rodriguez, interview by Thomas Kreneck, taped recording, 14 August 1980, OH292, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

organizations. There they merged multiple organizations into LULAC. In the coming years, LULAC councils formed rapidly in cities throughout Texas. Houston's chapter, founded in 1934, was the 60th council in the organization. LULAC's purpose was to convince both Mexican Americans and Anglos that they were "the best, purest and most perfect type of a true and loyal citizen of the United States of America."⁴³ Only American citizens could join LULAC. They committed themselves to fighting discrimination by working within the system to guarantee that Mexican Americans receive treatment equal to that of other white citizens.⁴⁴

Through LULAC, ILA men worked to desegregate public facilities, run poll tax campaigns within the Mexican American community, improve the quality of education for Mexican and Mexican American youth, and secure a white designation for Mexican Americans on Social Security forms. LULAC tried to change the perception that Mexican Americans were less American or less white, and thus second-class citizens. They wanted to distance themselves from the dominant 1920s racial ideology that marked Mexican Americans as peons and immigrants.⁴⁵ As Neil Foley has argued, "LULAC members constructed new identities as Latin Americans in order to arrogate to

⁴³ "Aims and Purposes," *LULAC News*, February, 1932. Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, inside back cover.

⁴⁴ For more on the history of LULAC see Cynthia Orozco, "The Origins of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement with an Analysis of Women's Political Participation in a Gendered Context" (Ph.D. Thesis: University of California at Los Angeles, 1992), Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), and David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴⁵ For fuller descriptions of 1920s racial beliefs about Mexican Americans and problems of discrimination that Mexican Americans faced, see Sheridan "Contested Citizenship" and Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

themselves the privileges of whiteness routinely denied to Mexican immigrants.”⁴⁶ By asserting a white identity and proving themselves loyal Americans, LULACers claimed the rights of first-class citizens, including access to employment opportunities, equal education, and a political voice.⁴⁷

Mexican Americans experienced their disfranchisement mostly through the poll tax, as opposed to African Americans who faced the additional barrier of the all-white primary. In some counties, electoral officials had denied Mexican Americans the right to vote in the Democratic primary, but as a rule this was not the case.⁴⁸ Mexican American civil rights organizations urged people to pay their poll taxes as a sign of their citizenship, to claim what they deserved and to defy the stereotype that Mexican Americans were easily manipulated at the polls by their employers.⁴⁹

Though ILA men did not fit what historians have determined to be the typical LULAC member, they did share important characteristics. They lacked the education and income levels of the typical LULAC member.⁵⁰ It is hard to imagine that poorly-paid

⁴⁶ Neil Foley, *The White Scourge*, 209.

⁴⁷ Securing a legal white identity had real implications in a Jim Crow setting. Many Mexican American Houstonians were invested in this identity. Members of the community succeeded in securing a white designation on Social Security forms for Mexican Americans. For more on this struggle and Mexican American Houstonians attitude towards whiteness, see F. Arturo Rosales, “Shifting Self-Perceptions,” 80-90.

⁴⁸ The Texas Democratic Committee of Travis County decided not to allow Mexican Americans to vote in the Democratic primaries in 1934 because they did not belong to the “white race.” “Bars Voting by Mexicans,” *New York Times*, 27 July 1934, newspaper clipping in NAACP Branch Files. Houston, Tex., 1915-1923, 1925-1939. Papers of the NAACP, microfilm version, Part 12, Selected Branch files, 1913-1939, Series A, The South; Reel 20 (Frederick, MD: University Publication of American, 1991).

⁴⁹ In *Anglos and Mexicans*, Montejano argues that Mexicans and Mexican Americans who worked under the ranch system generally voted according to their employers’ wishes out of fear for their jobs or bonds of loyalty, 251.

⁵⁰ The working class membership of this LULAC Council indicates that there was more variation in the membership of LULAC than generally thought. The decentralized nature of the organization certainly allowed for differences. Perhaps this working class influence was a phenomenon of the early years of the organization. Benjamin Marquez argues that LULAC evolved from a rank and file directed

cotton compress workers could be considered middle class. However the union shared values and tactics with LULAC: Both strongly emphasized loyalty to American citizenship and used the language of Americanism to pursue the goal of gaining access to equal rights. Little evidence suggests that this council of LULAC was more concerned with working class issues than others. One member remarked that the national leadership of LULAC considered the Houston group too radical and wanted them to engage in more restrained, methodical activism.⁵¹ Perhaps this perception had to do with its working class membership. Still, as urban industrial workers, dominated by English-speaking American citizens, ILA members fit the mold of the “Mexican American generation.” Their level of organization and membership in the American Federation of Labor, which projected an emphatically American identity, gave them the respectability that LULAC members sought. Conversely, their LULAC participation solidified their standing in the Mexican American community.

Working-class Mexican Americans found power and authority through the ILA and LULAC. Individually they had little influence over their jobs or in their communities. Together, with the name of the AFL behind them, they became a force. Perhaps they were ideologically inclined to the Americanist rhetoric of the union and LULAC before joining these organizations. Regardless, their union experience, recognized and validated by government agencies, reinforced the legitimacy of this approach to civil rights. As union members, they had benefited to some degree from the

organization to one run by professionals. Benjamin Marquez, *LULAC: the Evolution of a Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

⁵¹ Rodriguez interview.

protection offered under the National Recovery Administration. Congressmen had participated in Labor Board-supervised elections through which they won recognition of the ILA as their official union. These experiences pushed them to organize around their citizenship.⁵² In the final chapter, we will see how Mexican American workers in Galveston turned from this approach because of their lack of success operating within their biracial local. Houston's Mexican American dockworkers, however, stuck with the ILA and the ideologically compatible LULAC despite the encroachment of the CIO in the late 1930s and the development of alternative civil rights organizations.

Stressing their American citizenship status, Mexican American dockworkers separated themselves from the struggles of Mexican nationals, people with whom ILA members likely socialized and worked and had as their neighbors. Not all activists of the 1930s made this choice. While LULAC and similar middle-class organizations flourished, so did leftist Mexican American organizations. The Communist Party succeeded in attracting a Mexican / Mexican American working-class following. The Congress of Spanish Speaking People mobilized working-class people to fight for their rights. These organizations did not seek rights on the grounds of citizenship or by promoting an "American identity." Rather they viewed Mexican nationals residing in the US and Mexican Americans as one group, facing "essentially the same discrimination."⁵³ Unlike LULAC, they argued that non-citizens also deserved the protections of citizenship

⁵² I certainly do not mean to imply that these men were not politically aware before their exposure to the New Deal. However, I do argue that their experiences with the New Deal influenced the particular strategies (embracing Americanism, legal channels) that they adopted in their pursuit of equality.

⁵³ "Call to the First Congress" quoted in David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 112.

on the grounds that their labor had contributed to American society, not because they would integrate into American society, as LULAC proposed to do.⁵⁴

Membership in both the ILA and LULAC bolstered the American identity of their members but their ideologies differed in important ways. LULAC members rooted their access to rights in a white racial identity. They did not deny their Mexican cultural heritage but framed it as an ethnicity that did not and should not preclude their full inclusion in the polity.⁵⁵ The ILA staked its claim on an identity as workers who had earned their rights. ILA men saw merit in both tactics and with their participation in LULAC sought to write the working class more fully into LULAC's definition of a loyal citizen.

LULAC and Local 1309 certainly did not see eye to eye on all matters. For example, LULAC had a written policy against strikes or similarly disruptive protests. ILA members saw a value in such demonstrations. But whatever their differences, both organizations had common goals. Mexican American members of the ILA saw a benefit in working with an established civil rights organization but also maintained their own identity. This allowed them to work in the community in multiple ways. Local 1309 acted as more than a labor union local – members saw themselves as a Mexican

⁵⁴ Here I only mention a few of the alternatives which the ILA men rejected simply to clarify that other options were available to them and that by working through the ILA and LULAC they were making a conscious choice about their identity. For more information on these alternative organizations, see Mario Garcia, *Mexican Americans*.

⁵⁵ In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), Matthew Jacobson argues that during the 20th century, nationalities that had previously been considered racial groups, such as Italians, became subsumed under the increasingly monolithic category of white. Mexican American members of LULAC sought to become another nation group to enter that category. For a different perspective on the process of Italian immigrants becoming white, see Tom Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

American community organization with responsibilities to contribute to that community. Their leadership consulted with leaders from other important community groups on formulating strategies to end segregation, indicating that the Mexican American community viewed them that way also. ILA men acted, outside of LULAC, to create opportunities for their community.

In 1941, the leaders of Houston's all Mexican American ILA Local 1581 desegregated white-collar county jobs for Mexican Americans.⁵⁶ F. J. Morin and Angel Hernández, President and Secretary of the local, approached Carmen Cortés, a young woman they had known when she waitressed at a Chinese restaurant they frequented. Cortés was a high school graduate who had also attended Houston Community College. During high school and college she studied shorthand, typing, and learned to operate a switchboard. In short, she had strong clerical skills, a solid education and good secretarial experience. Morin and Hernandez wanted Cortés to apply to the courthouse for a clerical position. They had discussed the lack of Mexican American white-collar workers in city and county positions with leaders of other Mexican American organizations, such as Club Mexico Bello and LULAC. Until 1941, the city only hired Mexican Americans as temporary labor who did not receive benefits.⁵⁷ Collectively they had decided to back the application of a candidate whose qualifications were beyond reproach. They talked with local government officials who claimed that they wanted to

⁵⁶ By 1941 Local 1581 had replaced Local 1309, which had dissolved. Its members, many of whom likely joined 1581, blamed their failure on employer anti-union strategies compounded by lack of support from the rest of the union. These circumstances are covered in detail in chapter one.

⁵⁷ Rodriguez interview.

hire Mexican Americans but could not find any qualified applicants.⁵⁸ The political connections of the ILA served them well. One of the key decision-makers in the hiring process was Judge Roy Hofheinz, who had appeared at the 1935 convention to thank the ILA for their electoral support. Morin and Hernandez took advantage of this already-established relationship to push their agenda for the Mexican American community. They used union connections and the union name to fight prejudice against Mexican Americans and to create economic opportunity.

Not only was Cortés qualified, but she also had the respectability of being married and the advantage of light skin. In her words, “They couldn’t tell I was Mexican until I said my name.”⁵⁹ The combination of her skills and poise and pressure from leaders of the Mexican American community on city officials secured her the job. They hired her because “they couldn’t find any excuse not to.”⁶⁰ She was the first Mexican American woman to hold a white-collar position on the county payroll. Several years later she earned a promotion. In her new position, she gave the civil service exam that employees had to pass in order to work in the city. She used this position to recruit more Mexican Americans into city jobs.⁶¹ In this way, her hiring unlocked the door for many more qualified Mexican Americans to gain access to white-collar work.

Cortés wanted to participate in this de-segregation action because of her own experiences with work and racial prejudice. Unlike the courthouse and city hall, most

⁵⁸ Carmen Cortés, interview by Thomas Kreneck and Cynthia Orozco, 16 December 1983, taped recording, OH 313 Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

⁵⁹ Carmen Cortés, interview by Thomas Kreneck and Emma Perez, 2 May 1989, taped recording, OH 313 HMRC, HPL

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Carmen Cortés, 1983 interview.

employers did not feel the need to make excuses. Despite her protests that she was an American citizen, she repeatedly heard “we don’t hire Mexicans.” These experiences with discrimination inspired her to undermine the racist misperceptions of Mexican Americans. She wanted to show people that “we weren’t all ignorant, peons, greasers.”⁶²

Why did Local 1581 take such an interest in expanding employment opportunities for Mexican American women and white-collar workers? These men recognized and validated the role of women as workers with rights, unlike their white and black union brothers who showed no concern for women who worked outside the home. Their lower income made women’s work a more essential part of household income. Moreover, as leaders of the Mexican American community, they recognized the need to confront discrimination on many levels. Breaking into white-collar opportunities meant undermining the stereotypes of Mexican Americans as simply blue-collar workers, not fit to integrate into white society. These particular jobs also had the potential to give Mexican Americans insider influence in city and county offices, assisting with integration on multiple levels. White-collar jobs also involved greater earning opportunities and a chance to begin to combat the economic discrimination that kept them at earning levels far below their fellow white citizens. This economic discrimination kept them from realizing the economic rights of American citizenship.

Certainly their own experience of job discrimination motivated them. Within their union they worked the least prestigious, lowest paying, and least independent jobs. This directly derived from the perceptions of their white and black coworkers that, as

⁶² Carmen Cortés, 1989 interview.

Mexican Americans, they were “ignorant peons” who could be denied work simply on the basis of race. Their activism in this instance, as well as their participation in LULAC, addressed this prejudice on a larger scale. Though they had limited power to battle the prejudice they faced within the union, they used their local to counter the same prejudice in the larger community.⁶³

African American ILA Activism

John Fowlkes joined the ILA under difficult circumstances. During the ILA strike of 1935 he was the President of the Lone Star Colored Benevolent Association (LSCBA), an independent union of longshoremen that benefited from the strike by working in the absence of ILA men. As part of the strike settlement, the LSCBA became part of the ILA. Fowlkes remained president of the association, now black ILA local 1409. Despite their past differences, in less than two years, the former LSBCA men and their new union brothers were working together on a wide variety of community issues and Fowlkes became a key figure in ILA activism. Common community concerns assisted their reconciliation.

⁶³ In their concern for the larger community, Mexican American dockworkers continued a tradition of workers caring for the community that Emilio Zamora found to be common among Mexican and Mexican American workers in Texas in the early twentieth century. He argued that “Mexican workers’ organization generally expressed a working class focus and orientation as part of a broad concern for the condition of the entire Mexican community.” *World of Mexican Workers*, 198.

In 1937, Fowlkes ran for the office of Bronze Mayor of Houston with “waterfront workers and friends [lined] up solidly behind” him.⁶⁴ The Bronze Mayor election was a fundraiser organized by the black Chamber of Commerce and Community Chest. According to newspaper coverage, “all of the waterfront” turned out for the kick-off dinner for the election.⁶⁵ During his campaign he gave speeches, wooed the local black newspapers, and tried to rally working class voters to support him. The *Negro Labor News* advocated for him as a “man who toils ... a high-class Christian gentlemen [who] is qualified to represent the Negro citizens.”⁶⁶



Figure 4.1. Photograph of John Fowlkes during his Bronze Mayor campaign. *Negro Labor News*, 18 December 1937, front page.

⁶⁴ “Labor Candidate for Bronze Mayor Looks Formidable,” *Negro Labor News*, 18 December 1937, 1.

⁶⁵ “Throngs of Houstonians Attend Opening Dinner of Chamber of Commerce,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 4 December 1937, 4.

⁶⁶ “John Fowlkes – ILA 1409,” *Negro Labor News*, 4 December 1937, 1.

Though the election was designed as a fundraiser, it also served as a protest of the exclusion of African Americans from the primary elections.⁶⁷ Since they had no real voice in the election of the mayor of Houston, they selected their own mayor, who in many ways functioned as a leader, if a somewhat ceremonial one, of the black Houston community.⁶⁸ The “Mayor” served on boards, spoke at important events, and worked to improve black life in Houston. By participating in this election, longshoremen publicly demonstrated their dissatisfaction with their exclusion from the body politic. Though Fowlkes did not win when he ran for Bronze Mayor in 1937, his campaign provided an opportunity to raise class issues in the black community and to discuss how the black community could best pursue their rights. As the *Informer* put it “the political pot is already boiling with issues of labor versus capital, mass against class...”⁶⁹ Longshoremen used their influence to bring working class issues into public discussion.

The ILA’s involvement in the Bronze Mayor election exemplifies the ways they acted in the community. Though the purpose of the campaign was to improve local services through fundraising and to criticize the limitation on their voting rights, longshoremen also took the opportunity to encourage the community to think and talk about working class issues. For black ILA men, the pursuit of civil rights and workers rights were intertwined: They used the union as a vehicle to pursue access to voting

⁶⁷ According to the *Negro Labor News*, the candidate who brought in the most new memberships to the Negro Chamber of Commerce won the election. Individuals could support their candidate by buying a one dollar membership from him which would give him 100 votes in the election. Professional and Organizational memberships brought in more votes. Editorial, *Negro Labor News*, 4 December 1937, 8.

⁶⁸ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 91.

⁶⁹ “Issues Form in Rousing Campaign for Bronze Mayor,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*. 11 December 1937, 1.

rights and equal protection under the law and expected civil rights organizations, like the NAACP, to aid black workers. The Bronze Mayor election was also a cooperative endeavor. ILA locals regularly cooperated with other community groups to address issues of concern for blacks of Houston. They collaborated most intimately with the NAACP.

Longshoremen all over the state of Texas joined the NAACP, but nowhere in the numbers that they did in Houston. In 1939 alone, over 300 Houston based ILA men joined.⁷⁰ The black locals of the ILA and the NAACP had a formal relationship. Men joined the NAACP not just as individuals, but as members of the union. Membership rolls indicate local affiliation for longshoremen, all of whom gave the union hall as their address. Other members list no occupation, union affiliation or other organization membership.⁷¹ In their affiliation with the NAACP, black locals supported NAACP activities in Houston. They contributed their time and money to the NAACP and joined its work to expand voting rights, boycotted the S. H. Kress store for refusing to sell soda water to blacks, and supported the legal defense fund of John Brown, a caddy at the Brae Burn Country Club, wrongly accused of murdering his supervisor.⁷² The NAACP branch in Houston laid mostly dormant between 1931 and 1937, plagued by cash flow problems and division among the membership and potential members.⁷³ In 1937, Houstonians working with the national NAACP revived the branch and in short order formed a “very

⁷⁰ “Mrs. Lampkin Directs Four Membership Drives in Texas,” *The Crisis*, January, 1940, 20-21.

⁷¹ Membership Report Bank, 26 November 1937, NAACP papers.

⁷² “Branch News,” *The Crisis*, October, 1937, 313.

⁷³ Pitre, 27.

militant branch of the NAACP.”⁷⁴ Longshoremen contributed significantly to this revival.⁷⁵

Longshoremen quickly assumed a leadership role in the newly revived chapter and worked to set the NAACP agenda. Though John Fowlkes lost the Bronze Mayor election, he secured a position as vice president of the NAACP branch.⁷⁶ Freeman Everett, President of Local 872, served on the branch’s executive board, sharing a position entitled “Labor and Industry.” These men brought a concern for working class issues to the attention of what historians often assume was a predominately middle class organization, enjoying the support of the branch President, C. F. Richardson. As one Houston branch member put it, “I think it has been the opinion in a great many quarters that it is a ‘High Brow Society’...I am happy to say that President Richardson is having the fullest possible participation from the classes and the masses.”⁷⁷ As a result, the Houston branch actively addressed working class and economic issues. *The Crisis*, the NAACP’s national publication, reported on more than one occasion that the Houston branch paid “special attention to the problems of Negro workers.”⁷⁸ This included holding a “symposium... on labor problems” which involved representatives from various local union organizers.⁷⁹ They also participated in the “First City-Wide Negro

⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁵ See Merline Pitre’s *In Struggle Against Jim Crow* for a history of the Houston NAACP branch in the 1930s and 1940s. The branch suffered through a period of scandal and alleged corruption in 1939 which is detailed in Pitre’s book. There is no evidence that any longshoremen were among the “grafters and crooks,” 32.

⁷⁶ “Branch News,” *The Crisis*. January, 1940, 24.

⁷⁷ Letter from Edw. Snyder to Roy Wilkins, assistant secretary of the NAACP, Undated. NAACP Branch Files –Houston. Papers of the NAACP.

⁷⁸ “Branch News,” *The Crisis*. November, 1937, 344.

⁷⁹ “Branch News,” *The Crisis*. July, 1937, 215.

Conference,” which featured speakers on “domestic employment, trade union activity, relief problems and housing problems.”⁸⁰

The ILA and the NAACP mutually benefited one another. At least twice, in the autumns of 1937 and 1938, the NAACP sponsored an event called ILA DAY. As the *Negro Labor News* described the event: “Something new under the sun will take place at Bethel Baptist Church ... when the Houston branch NAACP stages a public program dedicated to the International Longshoremen’s Association of Houston.”⁸¹ According to the *Houston Informer*, members of the public who attended this program were entertained by the musical stylings of the ILA band, enlightened by speakers on “The Benefits Derived from Organized Efforts” and “What Can Be Done by Negroes in Texas Through Organized Efforts.”⁸² The ILA’s popularity (and significant membership) ensured that large crowd would be exposed to the NAACP’s goals recruitment efforts. The Day boosted the ILA’s prestige and presented them with an opportunity to contribute to the civil rights agenda of Houston by attracting more Houstonians to join the NAACP. They endorsed unionism with the public support of the NAACP, simultaneously building the labor movement and the civil rights movement.

⁸⁰ “A Call to the First City-Wide Negro Conference.” Flyer. Undated. NAACP Branch Files – Houston.

I argue here that working class Houstonians asserted influence in the NAACP and tried to shape its agenda on the local level. In October of 1938, the Houston branch of the NAACP hosted a speaker, M. P. Webster, from the Brothers of Sleeping Car Porters. He gave a speech arguing that working class people could provide better leadership for blacks than the “silk stocking crowd.” Freeman Everett did the introduction at this speech. His appearance and comments suggest a more widespread dialogue among working class people critiquing middle class leadership. “Webster Explodes Theory About Race Prejudice in the AFL,” *Negro Labor News*, 15 October 1938, 2.

⁸¹ “Houston NAACP to Feature ILA Day at Bethel Church.” *Negro Labor News*, 23 October 1937, 1.

⁸² “Houston NAACP to Give ILA Program,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*. 23 October 1937, 1.

Towards their goal of advancing black civil rights, the ILA, inspired by the NAACP agenda, chose to focus on access to electoral rights. The ILA contributed to both poll tax campaigns and legal campaigns to challenge the constitutionality of the all-white primary. In 1938, ILA members sponsored, along with the NAACP and Houston Negro Chamber of Commerce (Everett was also on the Chamber's board), the "biggest poll tax drive ever launched in Houston to get Negroes to qualify for citizenship."⁸³ They cooperated with civic leaders in Dallas to create a competition between the two cities – the city with the most black poll tax receipts would be the victor. Houston's newspapers urged locals to pay their poll taxes in order to beat Dallas.⁸⁴

African American members of the ILA paid the poll tax to protest the exclusion of blacks as a racial group from voting, an exclusion that had been accomplished through the poll tax, the all-white primary, and voter intimidation. For example, the men of Deep Sea Local 872 not only all paid their poll taxes but "almost always voted together," in order to maximize their political voice.⁸⁵ Their white union contemporaries interpreted this bloc voting as evidence of the manipulation of black rank and file members, whom they believed were forced to vote a certain way by their controlling local leaders. An article in the *Ship Channel* urged them to be "union men" not "docile slaves."⁸⁶ But

⁸³ "Civic Leaders Launch Poll Tax Drive in Houston," *Negro Labor News*, 15 January 1938, 1.

⁸⁴ Advertisement, *Negro Labor News*, 15, January 1938, 3.

The revival of the NAACP likely led to the 1938 poll tax being the "biggest ... ever." But ILA members participated in poll tax drives earlier in the decade as well. The *Informer* notes ILA involvement in poll tax drives as early as 1931. "Launch Big Poll Tax Campaign: House to House Solicitation to Aid Unemployed," *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 28 November, 1931, 1.

⁸⁵ Notes from interview with Mr. Nelson and Mr. Curtis of Local 872, July 1936, Box 2e307, Folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁸⁶ "Beware Union Men," *Ship Channel*, 5 June 1936, 9.

instead of blind control, this voting method demonstrates the unity in the black locals and the way that blacks used their organization to protest racial segregation.⁸⁷

When Ruth Allen's research assistants interviewed black longshoremen in 1936, many of them mentioned that all members of their local paid the poll tax. They expressed pride in this accomplishment and a desire to influence politics. As one member of Local 1306 put it, "The men in this organization all pay their poll taxes; they want to be ready when they do get a chance to vote."⁸⁸ Many longshoremen especially expressed an interest in voting for Roosevelt. D. H. Hamilton, President of Local 851 and vice president of the district, thought Roosevelt "made a great president" and feared "he will not be reelected."⁸⁹ Black longshoremen felt they needed to be active in supporting Roosevelt in order to defend advances in their rights, both current and future.⁹⁰

The fervor with which longshoremen paid the poll tax set them apart from other blacks in Houston. According to James Sorelle, in his study of the black community of Houston, most blacks in this period did not pay the poll tax, viewing government as unresponsive to their needs.⁹¹ Black longshoremen then were on the front lines of black

⁸⁷ Merline Pitre discusses this strategy in *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 44.

⁸⁸ Notes from interview with members of Local 1306, Beaumont, 27 July 1936, Box 2e306, Folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁸⁹ Notes from interview with D. H. Hamilton, 17 July 1936, Box 2e306, Folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁹⁰ Like many working class people, black longshoremen saw FDR as largely responsible for the improvement in the condition of the labor movement. Though FDR did little to actively support black civil rights, many African Americans viewed FDR as potentially supportive. His unofficial black cabinet and his wife's open friendship with African Americans certainly contributed to this impression. Black longshoremen then most likely saw FDR's presidency as necessary not only for the defense of the labor movement, but also their best hope for federal voting and civil rights legislation.

⁹¹ Sorelle, "The Darker Side of Heaven," 170.

electoral protests on the Texas coast. Empowered by their union membership, which made them beneficiaries of government legislation, black longshoremen felt entitled to exercise their citizenship rights and had an organized base, their segregated local, through which to act. Black longshoremen saw their union grow dramatically under New Deal protection.⁹² First Section 7a of the NRA and then the Wagner Act greatly helped the ILA to expand and effectively reach many of its goals. As workers, black longshoremen saw that their rights were recognized and protected. Certainly these black longshoremen had fought for access to these rights, successfully organizing into a strong union that maintained equality with whites. Now, they benefited from membership in a strong politically active organization. Inspired by their success in this arena, black longshoremen turned to addressing the abuses of Jim Crow and racial prejudice in their immediate community. They used the power of their organization and joined with other activist groups to protest their exclusion from the rights of citizenship that their white union brothers freely enjoyed.

In addition to the poll tax, the Texas Democratic Party engineered the exclusion of blacks from voting in primary elections to solidify white control of the state. These two electoral restrictions, combined with violent intimidation of black Republican voters, served to reduce the number of voters and secure power in the hands of a white Democratic elite. Texas became a single party state with the Democratic primary functioning as the determining election for local and state offices. Initially individual

According to Julia Kirk Blackwelder, whites had succeeded in eradicating black political influence in Houston by the 1930s through a combination of such electoral restrictions and intimidation. *Styling Jim Crow*, 69.

⁹² As described in greater detail in chapter one, the SA&GCD quadrupled in membership between 1933 and 1940.

county Democratic party executive committees determined who was excluded from voting. However the all-white primary became state law in 1923. Blacks protested this law in multiple lawsuits and actually won two Supreme Court cases: Nixon v Herndon in 1927 and Nixon v. Condon in 1932.⁹³ These victories were short-lived, however; after each verdict, the Texas legislature and Democratic Party managed to restructure the law and the Party to evade implications of these decisions. By defining the Democratic Party as a private, voluntary association, white Texans kept the all-white primary alive until 1944 when the Supreme Court decision in Smith v. Allwright finally signaled its death knell.⁹⁴

W. G. Bell, a well-known Beaumont longshoreman who held a position on the district ILA executive council, filed a lawsuit against his local registrar of voters for refusing to allow him to vote in the Democratic primary. The case ultimately went before the Supreme Court of Texas. The Court found in favor of the county; Bell lost in his attempt to challenge the all-white primary.⁹⁵ The ongoing lawsuits, Supreme Court decisions, and Democratic Party legal manipulations kept black activists and would-be voters on an emotional roller coaster for decades. These developments also resulted in heightened awareness and frequent discussion of this issue among black communities in Texas. Black longshoremen wanted to exercise their basic rights as citizens – something their union told them was not just a right, but a duty for all Americans. Most

⁹³Nixon v. Herndon, et al., 273 U.S. 536 (1927). Nixon v. Condon, 286 U.S. 73 (1932).

⁹⁴ Smith v. Allwright, election judge, et al., 321 U.S. 649 (1944).

For a history of the NAACP's struggle against the all-white primary, including the role played by Houstonians, see Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory*.

⁹⁵ W. G. Bell, et al. vs. Fred G. Hill, County of Clerk of Jefferson County, TX et al. Motion no. 11,520, Supreme Court of Texas, 123 Tex. 531, (1934)

longshoremen did not file their own court cases, but donated funds to NAACP-backed cases. The *Houston Informer* lauded ILA members for their financial support of the NAACP's legal strategy. In 1934, ILA locals donated money to support the case of black Houstonian plaintiff, R. R. Grovey.⁹⁶ This case also resulted in a loss for opponents of the all-white primary. The following year, ILA locals of Houston hosted the district ILA convention. Houston's black locals invited Grovey to appear at the convention as their guest speaker.⁹⁷ By inviting a known anti-white-primary figure to speak to their convention, black longshoremen again declared their support for the invalidation of the all-white primary. They also exposed their white longshore brothers to their activism, perhaps a tentative step toward educating white longshoremen about electoral inequality.

Black longshoremen pursued most of their civil rights activity in their segregated locals, only rarely taking the bold move to try to involve white longshoremen. In the case of supporting a federal anti-lynching law, black longshoremen determined that the possible benefits of multi-racial action outweighed the risks. In 1937 an anti-lynching bill passed the U. S. House of Representatives. The NAACP worked furiously for its passage through the Senate. Black Texans, especially Houstonians, had had recent experiences with lynching that made this issue particularly compelling for them. In the early 1920s, white supremacists in Houston castrated a black dentist and tarred and

⁹⁶The case was *Grovey v. Townsend*, 295 U.S. 45 (1935).

"It is the Cause," *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 29 December 1934, 8.

The Houston branch, with its hundreds of ILA members, continued to raise funds for all-white primary cases into the 1940s. "New Fight on Texas White Primary," *The Crisis*, February, 1941, 54.

⁹⁷"The Grovey Speech," *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 25 May 1935, 12.

feathered another black doctor.⁹⁸ These crimes went unpunished. In 1928, Robert Powell, a Houstonian, was lynched. A jury acquitted two suspects and in 1931, the District Attorney's office dismissed the case against the remaining suspects. This miscarriage of justice outraged black Houstonians.⁹⁹ The NAACP had been working for years for passage of a federal anti-lynching law. Southern Senators typically filibustered such bills to death, a tactic that the *Houston Labor Journal* endorsed. These senators acted on behalf of white southerners, who claimed that the "federal government had no business meddling in the local affairs of any state in the union."¹⁰⁰ The anti-lynching bill took on great symbolic importance; for black activists it was an essential first step in having black rights recognized. Black activism in the 1930s and the election of many New Deal Democrats to the Congress made its passage more likely in 1937 than at any time since Reconstruction.¹⁰¹

The number of lynchings in the South declined in the 1920s but rose dramatically in the first half of the 1930s before dropping again.¹⁰² As had happened in Houston, the vast majority of the perpetrators faced no punishment. The refusal of southern law enforcement to hold these criminals accountable not only endangered the lives and safety of southern blacks, but denied them a basic right of citizenship, the protection of the government and equal justice under the law. Lynching and the continued lack of an anti-

⁹⁸ James M. SoRelle, "Race Relations in Heavenly Houston, 1919-45," in *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* ed. by Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 178.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰⁰ "Filibusters Are Sometimes Justified," *Houston Labor Journal*, 19 November 1937, 2.

¹⁰¹ Additionally, a Gallup poll in 1937 found that 72% of Americans supported its passage, including 57% of southerners. See Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 153.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 59.

lynching law acted as one of the greatest symbols of black legal and social inferiority. According to historian Robert L. Zangrando, “the anti-lynching drive had an urgency, a public visibility, and a dramatic quality that no other civil rights activity quite matched.”¹⁰³ The anti-lynching movement was used to educate the public and to garner support for broader issues of racial injustice.¹⁰⁴

In April of 1937, the Houston Branch of the NAACP passed a resolution:

Whereas, the National Office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people is now in the midst of a strenuous fight for the enactment of the Gavagan Anti-Lynching Bill by the Congress of the United States... Be it Resolved, That the Houston, Texas Branch... does hereby authorize its officers to take such action by letter, petition or telegram as is necessary to influence passage of this legislation by the Senate of the Congress of the United States.¹⁰⁵

Less than one month later, representatives of black and white ILA locals met in their annual South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District Convention. At this convention, a longshoreman from a black Port Arthur local made a motion that the assembled representatives send a telegram to senators and representatives in all of the states in the South Atlantic and Gulf South District requesting that they support the Wagner-Van Nuys-Gavagan anti-lynching bill pending in Congress. The motion carried and the District secretary, also a black Texas longshoreman, sent telegrams to Gulf South legislators. The telegram noted that the assembled body represented “15,000 members

¹⁰³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 18. For more on the history of lynching in the United States see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of the Persons Unknown* (New York: Random House, 2002), William Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1835-1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), and Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

¹⁰⁵ Resolution by Houston Branch, 18 April 1937, NAACP Branch Files –Houston.

in the South Atlantic and Gulf Ports.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, 15,000 *active southern voters* supported the bill. Black ILA members thus used the size and strength of the District to try to influence national civil rights legislation. Though issues like lynching did not pertain directly to work hours or pay, black longshoremen considered such issues to be the appropriate concern of their locals.

Unfortunately, the fight over the anti-lynching bill in Congress contributed to the decline of New Deal politics in Texas. The bill died after a lengthy filibuster by Southern Senators.¹⁰⁷ In the process, divisions between Texas Democrats and New Deal Democrats grew. Several prominent liberal office holders failed to win re-election. And in 1938, Texans elected the strongly anti-labor W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel as governor. In the coming years, O’Daniel’s political appointments and the legislature’s passage of acts like the infamous anti-strike law rallied the ILA and other labor groups to protest.

Segregated locals allowed blacks and Mexican Americans to pursue their own social agendas, which, as we have seen, often directly challenged Jim Crow laws. Born out of racial prejudice on the one hand, segregated locals became hotbeds of activism for social change. More than interracial locals could have allowed, Mexican Americans and blacks used their locals to support non-work-related issues that concerned them. In locals with whites, they would have struggled to push the ILA into work with the NAACP and LULAC. In their own locals, they freely used the name and power of the union to target race problems and undermine segregation.

¹⁰⁶ Proceedings of the 27th Annual Convention, 1937, 90-91.

¹⁰⁷ After 47 days of filibuster by Southern Senators, the bill was laid aside. Proponents of the bill relented to allow the Senate to move on to other business – specifically a New Deal relief bill. *The Crisis*, March, 1938.

How did white participants react to the political activism of their black brothers?¹⁰⁸ Convention records indicate that no one protested the motion to send telegrams in support of anti-lynching legislation. Rather, the motion appears to have passed quickly and easily. This may be due to the power of black delegates, the unwillingness of white delegates to offend their black co-workers, or a sincere shared disapproval of such violence. White longshoremen had suffered their own share of violence at the hands of authorities and ship owners' thugs. Additionally, white longshoremen saw themselves as supporters of the New Deal and New Deal politics. Associated with New Deal progressive reform, the anti-lynching bill warranted their support. Finally, union members, with some exceptions, recognized the importance of maintaining a united front and an image of interracial cooperation.

While there is no record of whites actively resisting the ways blacks and Mexican Americans used the ILA off the docks, evidence indicates that they objected to black activism. Since Mexican American ILA members occupied a clearly segregated position in the union, their outside activities were of less concern to white union members than those of blacks whose equal position in the union already threatened white economic and social privilege.¹⁰⁹ Black longshoremen's assurances to their white cohort speak most strongly to the limited support of whites for black advancement. W. G. Bell, a black longshoreman who sought an additional organizer for east Texas ports, injected some reassuring comments into his speech to the Texas State Federation of Labor: "[W]e have

¹⁰⁸ No Mexican American delegates could afford to attend the convention in that year.

¹⁰⁹ As outlined in chapter one, African Americans worked in longshoring in greater numbers than whites or Mexican Americans. In most ports, they had greater numbers, which translated into a greater share of the work and strong numerical representation on joint committees.

never attempted to inject social equality into our affairs in any way whatever, and we will never do so... why not live peaceably and happily in our own spheres.”¹¹⁰ Bell went so far as to give whites credit for the accomplishments of blacks thus far: “We depend upon you white people. We have always patterned after you.”¹¹¹ Similarly, a representative of the black community announced to the 1935 ILA convention that “the colored people did not want social equality, but only equality in the fields of endeavor.”¹¹² Not long after Bell gave his speech, he filed his lawsuit against the county tax collector – a lawsuit designed to challenge the all-white primary. He also presided over the Laboring Men’s Protective Association, an organization that focused on challenging current election law.¹¹³ The contrast between Bell’s various struggles for social equality and his conciliatory words reveal the precarious place of black activism within the larger labor movement. Black longshoremen reassured whites that they still had social prestige that blacks and Mexican Americans did not have. They played the Jim Crow game – in public remarks they donned masks of appreciation acceptable to whites, even as they continued to pursue their multi-pronged efforts to fight segregation.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ “An address by W. G. Bell, a Negro longshoreman, before the Thirty-Eighth Convention of the Texas State Federation of Labor, 1935.” In Ruth Allen, *Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas*. (Austin: University of Texas Publications, 1941) , 216-217.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Proceedings, 1935, 5.

¹¹³ “Laboring Men’s Protective Association Decide to Push Primary Fight,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 28 July 1934, 8.

¹¹⁴ James Scott argues that the “powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful.” However, if we take these interactions at face value we will miss the ideological insubordination visible in actions and private words. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) xii. Robin D. G. Kelley also argues that historians must seek out the hidden acts of resistance in the everyday lives of oppressed peoples in *Race Rebels*.

In the case of Houston, lip service to white power could not hide the reality that blacks held too much control in the union for white comfort. Despite the fact that black locals had more members, whites sought the support of the city council to obtain half of the work, demonstrating their sense of entitlement to first class economic citizenship.¹¹⁵ Perhaps their awareness of blacks' political activity contributed to their hostility in this matter, more fully discussed in chapter one. Black success and activism on and off the docks threatened what they saw as their rightful place at the top of the socio-economic ladder. This frustration manifested itself not against black civil rights activity, but against black control of work – a much more concrete sign of Jim Crow privilege being challenged and one that affected white longshoremen most immediately. When white Houston longshoremen turned to the city council for a resolution to increase their share of work, they expressed their frustration that “the preponderance of work the Negroes get over the whites” threatened their own “constitutional rights.”¹¹⁶ White longshoremen privileged their rights, beginning with the right to work, over those of non-whites.

The Limits of ILA Civil Rights Activism

The racism of white workers limited the extent to which non-whites could use the union as a vehicle for civil rights. A job dispute within the ILA demonstrates these limitations. In 1935, the ILA district president proudly announced at the annual

¹¹⁵ Building on Sheridan's conception of “economic citizenship,” I argue that white longshoremen felt entitled to this right, even if it came at the detriment of other non-white citizens and union brothers.

¹¹⁶ Notes from interview with F. N. Hunter of white Local 1273, 4 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

convention that the ILA had secured contracts to work two ports that would soon be opening in Texas: Port Isabel and Brownsville.¹¹⁷ They had already organized new locals responsible for the shipping in those two ports and in the Harlingen area.¹¹⁸ As the ILA expanded, they continued to establish the 50-50 black-white work sharing system in each port.¹¹⁹ However, these new ports refused the use of black labor in their cities. As a result, Locals 1368, 1370 and 1371 could not work. Black power within the union clearly had its limits; though black longshoremen in cities like Houston and Galveston had enormous influence within the union and in their communities, they could not change the discriminatory circumstances that blacks faced in new ports where they did not dominate the industry.

The district ILA responded quickly, but ineffectively, to this injustice. At the 1936 convention, the SA&GCD ILA passed a dramatic resolution calling upon various departments of the federal government, including those of labor, commerce, and justice, to investigate a “most unfair, un-American and prejudicial ruling” which “resulted in a deprivation of their American rights” especially their “sacred right to work.”¹²⁰ This resolution demonstrated the longshoremen’s sense of entitlement to government protection from ship-owner abuses. Longshoremen believed that the right to work was both constitutionally guaranteed and sacrosanct. Therefore, ship owners and port authorities could not deny that right on grounds of race. White longshoremen, whose fortunes depended on their union with blacks and Mexican Americans, could hardly

¹¹⁷ Report of the President, Proceedings, 1935, 12.

¹¹⁸ Proceedings, 1935, 33.

¹¹⁹ As outlined in chapter one, all work in each port was to be split equally between the black and white locals.

¹²⁰ Proceedings, 1936, 67.

afford to publicly disagree with this, despite any personal dissatisfaction with that relationship. Unfortunately, the government did not intervene on the behalf of Harlingen's black longshoremen.

This situation dragged on for several years and created division within the union. In 1936, District President Dwyer traveled to the valley "to see what could be done" but determined that "they can't really do anything about it until there's more work and they have a better position from which to argue."¹²¹ For the next two years, Tom Goode and Archie Anderson, the President and Secretary of Locals 1368, 1370 and 1371, continued to seek the ILA's concrete aid in gaining access to their work while their white colleagues benefited from their absence. More and more frustrated with the lack of response from ILA leaders, Goode and Anderson called upon another organization to intervene on their behalf: the NAACP. They asked the NAACP to pressure the International office of the ILA to acknowledge that white longshoremen violated their mutual contract by working without black longshoremen and that they must take action on their behalf. As Goode and Anderson put it, "We are asking for aid and help so as we colored locals can obtain our working wrights [sic] on the waterfronts."¹²² Their communication with the International office had yielded only a letter stating that everything had been done to "give your membership a share of the work" and expressing

¹²¹ Proceedings, 1936, 49.

¹²² Letter from Archie Anderson and Tom Goode to Walter White, 19 January 1939, NAACP administration file. Subject Files. Discrimination – Unions, 1929-1930, 1936-1939, Papers of the NAACP, microfilm version, Part 10, Peonage, labor and the New Deal, 1913-1939; Reel 7 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of American, 1990).

“regret that we have not succeeded.”¹²³ This had been followed by a request that they return their charters and seals until such as time as they could work.¹²⁴ The President of the International, Joe Ryan, appeared more concerned with their inability to keep up with their dues payments than their inability to work. After receiving no response from Ryan by mail, Thurgood Marshall, Assistant Special Counsel to the NAACP, finally reached him by phone. According to Marshall, Ryan promised that “the whole problem concerning your difficulties would be taken up at the Annual Convention in Texas.”¹²⁵

On the first day of the 1939 conference, it became clear that Ryan had no intention of assisting these men. The officers of the district questioned their delegates to the convention about their dues. Their seats at the convention were not guaranteed because they had been behind in their payments and though they were now paid in full, some members argued they should still not be seated. Ryan spoke against seating the delegates, concerned about “locals dropping their [dues] payments immediately after... [the] convention” and not taking them up again until the next convention.¹²⁶ Generally considered controlling and corrupt, Ryan likely resented the intrusion of a black civil rights organization into his affairs.¹²⁷ Though the delegates ultimately remained at the conference, their grievance was not addressed.¹²⁸

¹²³ Letter from Joseph Ryan to Archie Anderson. 19 October 1938. NAACP administrative file. Subject file. Discrimination – Unions, 1929-1930, 1936-1939, Papers of the NAACP.

¹²⁴ Letter from John Owens, Sec-Treasurer Pro-Tem of the ILA to Archie Anderson, 24 January 1939, NAACP administrative file. Subject file. Discrimination – Unions, 1929-1930, 1936-1939, Papers of the NAACP.

¹²⁵ Letter from Thurgood Marshall to Tom Goode, 27 April 1939, NAACP administrative file. Subject file. Discrimination – Unions, 1929-1930, 1936-1939, Papers of the NAACP.

¹²⁶ Proceedings, 1939, 14.

¹²⁷ There will be more on Joe Ryan and his relationship to rank and file members in the final chapter. Ryan is the stuff of legend. He purportedly enforced his rule in the Northeast with thugs hired directly out of jail. He ultimately was brought up on charges of corruption. Mainly for stealing ILA money

The men who were denied access to work in these ports saw that right to work as a right of citizenship. The decision to exclude them denied them their civil rights. The port authorities believed that the right to work did not extend to second-class citizens. They determined that only whites were entitled to this work. White longshoremen's first-class citizenship secured them work denied to other members of their union. From the black longshoremen's perspective, their white union brothers shared part of the blame. They had signed a contract that obligated them to share work with their sister black local, and they did not uphold it. Nor, in the eyes of the unemployed men, did their white brothers exert adequate effort to change the situation. Thus, they were complicit in the denial of their black brothers' rights. Moreover, white longshoremen who continued to work in these ports unfairly benefited from the absence of black longshoremen. To these black union members, the International organization had had an obligation to protect their "sacred" right to work. The union was therefore a civil rights organization failing to fulfill its mission.

White longshoremen interpreted this situation differently. Members of the white locals felt that they had done all that could be done to alter the situation. They had repeatedly expressed their support of the black local to the appropriate officials. The union had sought assistance from the federal government unsuccessfully. What more

intended for anti-communist work. Due to their distance, Gulf south locals exercised a greater degree of independence from him than the Northeastern ports.

¹²⁸ The conference agreed to allow the men of these locals to seek work not covered by contract. But without the port operator's acceptance, even this would not give them access to much work. After receiving help, albeit limited and ineffective, many of the men of 1368 and 1371 joined the NAACP "for their own protection." Letter from Tom Goode and Archie Anderson to Walter White, 4 April 1939, NAACP administrative file. Subject file. Discrimination – Unions, 1929-1930, 1936-1939, Papers of the NAACP.

could they be expected to do? They could not change the reality of Jim Crow segregation or the racial prejudices of those who wielded the power in this situation. They, unlike African American and Mexican American ILA members, did not view this as the role of the union.

The multiracial nature of the ILA presented challenges for the union. White workers refused to sacrifice their work in order that blacks could have access to their right to work. Because white members were not fully committed to equality for non-whites, the association could not consistently be used as a civil rights organization. Though dock workers went on strike frequently in the 1930s to seek better wages, they did not strike, or threaten to strike, despite the clear contract violations at Port Isabel and Brownsville. The white men working in these ports did not see that as an appropriate step, nor did their larger organization push them to do so. The rights of Goode, Anderson, and the other members of 1368-1371 could not be addressed by the union when it required sacrifice by men who did not see that sacrifice as necessary. In the end, white workers remained complacent as long as their own right to work was honored.

White racism was not the only limit to using the ILA for civil rights activity. Mexican Americans and African Americans did not find common cause outside of labor issues. Though white racism, segregation, and Jim Crow laws affected them both, their problems and their goals differed. In the larger context of Texas racial ideologies, Mexican Americans and African Americans were not uniformly inferior and these distinctions evoked varied responses. Mexican Americans were perceived as foreigners but could pursue a strategy of claiming their legal whiteness and emphasizing their

devotion to American values.¹²⁹ ILA men and LULAC chose to pursue this route, making it impossible for them to unite with African Americans. An alliance would have required them to acknowledge a non-white identity and to move beyond their own racist perceptions of African Americans. Though Mexican Americans valued their cultural identity, activities such as creating job opportunities in local government reveal a desire to be more integrated into white society.

African Americans faced the perception that they were fit only for second-class citizenship and the legal restrictions of Jim Crow. However, none of the activities of the black ILA locals or Houston NAACP branch sought more integration into white society, though it is unclear if this is because it was less available to them than to Mexican Americans - or less desirable. Black hostility towards Mexican Americans may also have impeded unity. The editor of the black paper the *Galveston Examiner* wrote that “Mexicans, who have fought against Texas’ freedom and who have contributed far less than Negroes, are permitted to vote without any restraint or restriction;... Texas always finds a way to keep Negroes from voting.”¹³⁰ While Mexican Americans and African Americans may have shared a common identity as workers and citizens, the racial divide remained too great. The nuances of the racism they faced pushed them in different directions regarding civil rights.

In his book *Race and Class in Texas Politics*, Chandler Davidson claims that the AFL was, in comparison with the CIO, politically quiescent during this time period. The

¹²⁹ See chapter one for a more complete explanation of the peculiarities of Texas racial ideology and the perceived differences between Mexican Americans and African Americans.

¹³⁰ “The Garner Candidacy,” *Galveston Examiner*, 15 June 1939, 8. Bertram Jackson Collection, microfilm, reel 1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Refer also to chapter one for further evidence of tension between these two communities.

AFL is generally considered “conservative,” as are the middle class organizations LULAC and the NAACP. This grassroots look at the activities of ILA members in the 1930s indicates that there is more complexity in the make-up of these organizations than has previously been acknowledged. ILA members all embraced their identity as citizens, as Americans, and thus conformed to the general requirements of AFL members. However, the civil rights activities in which Mexican Americans and African Americans engaged the ILA challenged the label of “conservative.” Moreover, their involvement in LULAC and the NAACP indicates that there was a great deal of diversity in both the activities and class composition in these organizations on the local branch level.

Blacks and Mexican American ILA members battled against racism and struggled to expand their civil rights, through the union and in cooperation with civil rights organizations. In so doing, they declared their citizenship as well as their entitlement to civil rights and to freedom from violence and segregation. Both groups viewed workers as essential to the pursuit of these rights in their communities. Though black longshoremen saw themselves as an elite among the working class, they argued that working-class issues and civil rights issues were inextricably linked. They urged their communities to see that working-class organization could contribute to the betterment of the community as a whole and that cross-class cooperation was crucial. They recognized a common race-based struggle across class lines. All black men who were hard-working contributors to their community and who believed in America deserved a voice in the electorate and protection from violence. Mexican American dockworkers also made

common cause with middle class Mexican American men in seeking access to the rights they knew should be recognized on the basis of their citizenship.

Yet, the political activism of non-white ILA members cannot be separated from their union experience. Both express a belief in the expanding civil rights of working people. ILA members, white, black and Mexican American, sought to attain rights they believed were promised them in the Constitution. This required that they engage in activism off the docks. For non-white members, it also required that they challenge the racialized ways they were perceived and judged, both by their brothers in the union and the larger society. For them, their union locals acted as an appropriate weapon for this fight. Their ability to use the union in such a way gave them a powerful reason to be loyal to the ILA and hesitant to embrace alternative forms of unionization.

Chapter 5

Dissent Among the Rank and File

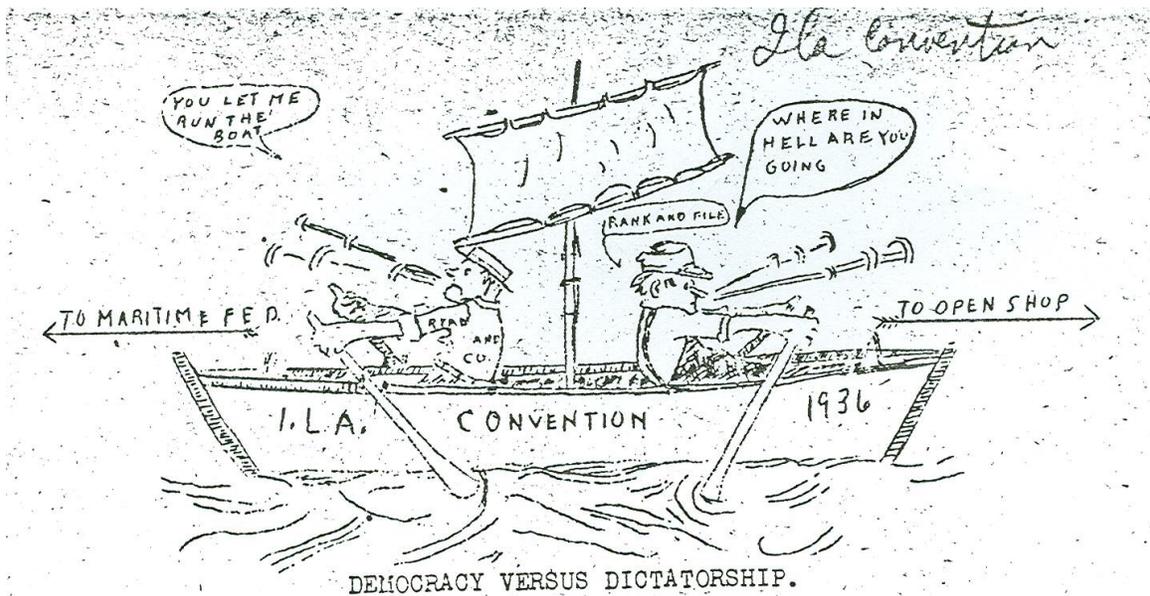


Figure 5.1. Illustration which accompanied the front-page article "Democracy Versus Dictatorship," *Ship Channel*. May 22, 1936

In 1936 a group of predominately white ILA dissidents in Houston, calling themselves the Ship Channel Progressive Committee (SCPC), wrote scathing critiques of International ILA President Joseph Ryan, who had appeared at the most recent South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District ILA Convention. Figure 1 above, which accompanied

one of their articles, illustrates their general complaint: Ryan and the rank and file want to take the ILA in different directions. According to the SCPC, Ryan's union tactics will eventually lead to failure, as signified by the words "open shop," while rank and file ILA men want to row the ILA boat to a Maritime Federation system, modeled after and affiliated with West Coast maritime unions.

The SCPC was part of a coalition of committees located in Gulf Coast ports, collectively known as the Maritime Federation of the Gulf (MFG). Throughout 1936, the men of the MFG fought with the leadership of the ILA, both local and national, in a discursive battle that divided the ILA. Both sides portrayed the other as a threat to the union and used the language of Americanism and the Red Scare to justify their positions. Progressives represented the ILA leadership as undemocratic and ILA leaders, in turn, labeled MFG members as radical and communist. The power of this anti-communist rhetoric limited the ability of rank and file ILA members to propose alternative organizational strategies.

Consequently, the MFG did not survive this onslaught; it dissolved the following year. On its heels, arose another challenge to the authority of the ILA: the CIO. The animosity between the CIO and the ILA had an early start. When John Lewis formed the CIO as a committee within the AFL, he approached Joe Ryan to join him. Lewis believed that the longhore industry, with its low-skill labor, was a natural fit for the CIO.¹ Ryan refused; a decision that his detractors believed had more to do with controlling his

¹ "A Message to ... East and Gulf Coast Longshoremen," issued by CIO Maritime Committee, unsigned, undated, box 2e307, folder 5, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, UT Austin.

vast network of graft than with ideology.² Lewis took his pro-CIO argument to the ILA rank and file by flooding the docks with flyers urging them to defy Ryan and join the CIO. Ryan responded with his own propaganda. So Gulf Coast ILA men became immersed in a milieu of red-baiting propaganda even before CIO organizers began competing with AFL organizers in Texas.

In the late 1930s the CIO made a serious attempt to recruit Gulf Coast longshoremen away from the ILA, with a modicum of success. Both organizations used propaganda to decry the other side's union practices. Again, the discursive battleground was the language of Americanism. Though neither the MFG nor the CIO gave strong evidence of being a front for the Communist Party (CP), the ILA accused both organizations of following a CP agenda. Few who were involved in the MFG or CIO were enthusiastic supporters of communism, much less members of the Communist Party, but the behavior of all the members fit the broad, casual definition of communism employed by those who brandished anti-communist propaganda.

Since the Red Scare of 1919, when numerous labor leaders were deported under suspicion of bolshevism, labor unions nationwide had struggled against the accusation of communist or radical influence. Many unions, the AFL among them, policed themselves, trying to gain credibility as solid American organizations with both the public and the government by eliminating radical elements from within their midst. AFL President

² This was the critique of MFG leader Tom Hency. Notes from interview with L. M. Balderach and Tom Hency [sic], 15 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

Ryan was involved in an elaborate web of graft and corruption, though mostly based in the port of New York. However, he was invested in maintaining the status quo both for his own benefit and those of his partners in crime. For more on Ryan's corruption, see Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*

William Green declared a special drive to do just that in 1935.³ As labor unions grew through the thirties, ILA labor leaders used the accusation of communism to control their own organizations and discredit their new competitor. Unions remained vulnerable to the accusation, even though the Communist Party had little influence in Texas labor unions of any stripe. Historian Don Carleton contends that Texas never had more than six people on the Communist Party payroll at any given time. Still, concerns about communism persisted and occasionally reached a fever pitch, as they did in Houston in 1939. In that summer, the city experienced a “little Red Scare” likely caused in part, by the decision of the Communist Party to open its minimally staffed Texas headquarters in that city the previous year. Houston Mayor Oscar Holcombe ordered an investigation of all city employees; any found to be communist were to be discharged.⁴ Holcombe declared that, though membership in the CP was not actually illegal, “As far as I am concerned, it is.”⁵ He also launched an investigation to determine the extent to which Communists controlled local labor unions. Holcombe failed to prove that Houston’s labor unions were CP controlled and Houston never had more than 200 CP members at its height and perhaps closer to 125 in 1939. However, it seems many Texans shared his concerns. Later that summer, a mob of five thousand concerned citizens surrounded a San Antonio building where the Texas state Communist Party attempted to a hold a

³ “A.F.L. Launches Drive on Reds in Union Ranks,” *Houston Labor Journal*, 28 June 1935, 1.

⁴ Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare! Right-wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985), 26-32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

meeting.⁶ A riot ensued. Holcombe's Little Red Scare resonated deeply with many Texans and anti-communist rhetoric had power in this environment of fear.⁷

Race also emerged as a critical issue in these struggles. During both the MFG movement and the CIO encroachment, black longshoremen remained steadfastly loyal to Joe Ryan and the rest of the ILA leadership, spurning white rank and file insurgencies. White Progressives and CIO recruiters, both white and black, struggled to understand the position of black ILA men. Because neither group understood the broader agenda of these black ILA locals, they could not see why blacks placed such value on maintaining the status quo. Without black locals' support, which was crucial because of their control within the union, neither group experienced broad success.

“Many swore by the federation. And many swore at it.”

Shortly after the resolution of the tumultuous 1935 longshore strike, a group of like-minded men gathered in New Orleans to discuss their critiques of the strike, how International President Joe Ryan had handled it, and craft unionism in general. Among them were longshoremen who had been and would continue to be active and vocal members of their locals, including Houstonian Bill Follett, who had murdered scabs with a boulder during the strike, and his friend from Corpus Christi, Gilbert Mers. F. N.

⁶ Ibid., 32-34.

⁷ For a broader study of anti-communism in the United States, see M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Hunter, who would, in the convention of 1939, hold black longshoremen responsible for his inability to provide for his family, joined the movement, as did Tom Hency, the Galveston fruit handler whose fiery temper often erupted at conventions and meetings. These men, and others who deemed themselves Progressives, created an organization called the Maritime Federation of the Gulf to address what they saw as inadequacies in the ILA. The purpose of the MFG was to promote worker solidarity among marine workers. In other words, they sought to formally ally seamen, longshoremen, and other marine workers to support one another with boycotts, sympathy strikes, and ultimately joint negotiation of contracts. In so doing, they sought to emulate the tactics of industrial unionism.

These men returned to their respective ports and formed Progressive Committees that worked to promote the MFG among local dock and marine workers. According to Mers, this network was fully established by March of 1936. The Ship Channel Progressive Committee, led by Follett and Hunter in Houston, “probably exercised more influence in shaping events than any other local committee.” Part of its power came from its mimeograph machine which allowed them to put out the *Ship Channel* newsletter and also to reproduce leaflets that other Progressive Committees created. They shipped information throughout the Gulf Coast.⁸

Men who supported the MFG believed that unions had to adopt new tactics in order to survive. Tom Hency argued that since the shipping interests were organized and united, a lesson driven home in the recent 1935 strike, that maritime workers “will

⁸ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 128.

have to unite to whip them.”⁹ In Hincey’s mind, industrial unionism mirrored the tactics of their employers. The writers at the *Ship Channel* argued that the tactics on which the ILA relied were “as worn out and out of date as the Model T. Ford.”¹⁰ Labor needed to change with the times, to keep up with industrialists, and joining the Progressives was one way in which ILA members could facilitate this evolution.

MFG members distrusted Joe Ryan and felt that the ILA would not thrive under his leadership. During the strike of 1935, Ryan had promised to help the Gulf Coast strikers by calling a boycott of ships in Northeast ports departing for or arriving from the Gulf, but Ryan delayed implementing this boycott several times. Many Gulf Coast longshoremen chafed at his delays and developed both a personal dislike for Ryan and a critique of his overall leadership of the union. In particular, the writings of the Ship Channel Progressive Committee reveal a distinct animosity towards Joe Ryan, often painting him as a dictator preventing the rank and file from moving the union in the progressive direction that they thought would make the union more powerful, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. Some MFG members also believed that Ryan was in collusion with the shipping companies to destroy the MFG. Tom Hincey alleged that a telegram had been intercepted between shipping companies and Ryan in which the shipping interests asked Ryan to kill the nascent Progressive Movement.¹¹ Such rumors of Ryan’s intimacy with ship owners contributed to rank and file distrust of their leader.

⁹ Notes from interview with L. M. Balderach and Tom Hincey, 15 July 1936, box 2e306, folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰ “Conventions,” *Ship Channel*, 19 May 1936, 6.

¹¹ Bill Follett, interview by George N. Green, 17 June 1985, transcript, Oral History Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington, 22.

While Ryan had hesitated to call a boycott, West Coast longshoremen had followed through with a boycott in their ports. Thus, Progressives looked to the West Coast for leadership as they grew frustrated with Ryan's. In 1934, rank and file ILA men on the West Coast had defied Joe Ryan's leadership and gone on strike. Out of this strike, Harry Bridges emerged as a charismatic leader for West Coast longshoremen and under his tenure, the West Coast consistently challenged Ryan's authority and moved towards independence. Even though they did not leave the ILA and affiliate with the CIO (taking the name the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union) until 1937, West Coast locals embraced the ideas of industrial unionism, which the CIO promoted, early in this period. Given their progressive, anti-Ryan stance, it comes as no surprise that the West Coast ILA joined the Maritime Federation of the Pacific in 1935, an organization designed to "more closely coordinate collective bargaining and job action on an industry-wide basis."¹²

The MFG was seen as a threat because of its connection to the West Coast, not simply because of its own actions and accusations. As the Gulf Coast movement escalated, Ryan continued to deal with the growing intransigence of the West Coast. In 1936, it became increasingly clear that the West Coast would likely dis-affiliate with the ILA. In their desire to emulate the West Coast's Maritime Federation and their criticism of Ryan, the Gulf Coast members raised the specter of another lost region.

MFG members claimed that they had widespread support among ILA men, a claim difficult to prove or refute since the ILA leaders' condemnation certainly prevented

¹² Kimeldorf, 114.

some rank and file supporters from publicly advocating the movement. Regardless, the members of several white locals in Houston, Galveston and Corpus Christi supported the MFG and their goals to a considerable extent. MFG members successfully sold MFG buttons to hundreds of ILA men throughout Texas.¹³ According to Mers, the MFG had the support of white locals from Beaumont, Houston, and Corpus Christi, as well as the fruit handlers' local in Galveston.¹⁴ The authors of *Ship Channel* claimed that “[m]ost I.L.A. men favor this Federation,”¹⁵ however what they certainly meant was that most *white* ILA men favor the federation, since one of their constant frustrations was the reticence of black ILA men to join. Moreover, the Progressive Committees received adequate financial support from ILA men. According to Bill Follett, “longshoremen were our [the SCPC’s] backbone...they contributed quite heavily even though it was during the depression and they wasn’t [sic] making much money.”¹⁶ But Mers also acknowledged that sentiment regarding the MFG was actually “widely divided. Many swore by the federation and many swore at it.”¹⁷ Regardless of how many ILA members secretly supported the concept of a Maritime Federation, the MFG failed to recruit many ILA locals to join the organization formally. Only white deep sea Local 1273 of Houston officially affiliated with the MFG in the face of “bitter censure from the International.”¹⁸

¹³ 325 men in Galveston local 307 purchased MFG buttons, although their local did not officially endorse the movement. Notes from Meeting of Local 1350, 17 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁴ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 126.

¹⁵ “I.L.A. Convention,” *Ship Channel* 15 May 1936, 1.

¹⁶ Follett, June interview, 9.

¹⁷ Rough Draft, 24.

¹⁸ Gilbert Mers, Bill Follett and Ralph Landgrebe, “Anecdotal History of Local 1273, ILA,” box 1, folder 9, Mers Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. 10.

Some critics dismissed the Maritime Federation of the Gulf as “nothing but a dissatisfied faction seeking power,”¹⁹ an assessment that was not far off the mark. MFG advocates thought in terms of power. Representing the rank and file, they needed more power in order to re-fashion the union. But unlike their West Coast counterparts, they could not mobilize the necessary manpower to make their vision a reality.

Some ILA men objected to the principle of cross-union organizing, the basic tenant of industrial unionism, because it violated their sense of pride. At the end of the 1935 strike, Gilbert Mers suggested that the ILA ask the local seamen’s organization to delay negotiating their contract with shipping companies so that they and the Seaman’s union could re-negotiate their contracts jointly. Mers described district President Dwyer as “apoplectic” at the suggestion.²⁰ Other members present for this exchange said that they “would never sully ILA honor by poking their noses into other unions’ business. They’d starve first.”²¹ For these men, their sense of honor as union men required that they succeed on their own. They valued an American identity based on rugged individualism, more in keeping with the traditions of the American Federation of Labor.

Other potential supporters were warned away by ILA leaders, such as Albert Anderson, the District Secretary of the ILA, who described the MFG as a “group of radicals.”²² According to Ship Channel Progressive Committee President Follett, “the only way Ryan and his group could combat our activities was to raise the red scare.”

¹⁹ Minutes, Dock and Marine Council Meeting, 2 March 1936, Dock and Marine Council Collection, Special Collections, UT Arlington, 105.

²⁰ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 115.

²¹ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 116.

²² Notes from interview with Albert Anderson, 13 July 1936, box 2e306, folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, UT Austin.

Follett believed that these warnings deterred longshoremen who would have supported the MFG otherwise. In his view, even though ILA men were inclined to be “militant, ...they were the victims of the red scare.”²³ Actually, Ryan and his “group” found other avenues for suppressing the MFG but Follett’s emphasis on the Red Scare is apt. Men who dared involvement in the MFG risked being portrayed as communists. Follett himself had been the victim of a smear campaign because of his leadership in the MFG.²⁴

MFG men had some connection with Houston Communists but did not receive direction from the Party. Many MFG members knew and respected Homer Brooks, the vocal leader of the local Communist Party. He had spoken out on behalf of ILA members during the 1935 strike, distributing flyers that condemned the shipping interests and police force. But when asked about the influence of the CP, Bill Follett said, “I don’t believe there was much real influence by the communists on this waterfront.” While a number of MFG members may have been “influence[d] to a certain extent by the CP, perhaps indirectly through their influence with the seamen,” few MFG members were also members of the communist party.²⁵ Mers agreed that communists had little authority within the organization.²⁶

However, ILA leaders convinced some longshoremen that the organization was “red.” W. F. Hill, a Port Arthur longshoreman interviewed in 1936, would not get entangled with the MFG because he believed that communists were involved in the

²³ Bill Follett, interview by George N. Green, 29 August 1985, transcript, Oral History Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington, 58.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Follett, June interview, 2.

²⁶ Gilbert Mers, interview by George N. Green, 15 June 1985, transcript, Oral History Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington, 5.

organization and they “kill everything they put their hands to...” Hill particularly feared that, as communists, MFG members would want to push “their ideas on racial equality” which he deemed “too strong” for his liking.²⁷

Ship Channel tried in multiple articles to deny any affiliation with communism. They wrote that when “a longshoreman becomes progressive he is branded a socialist, Communist, or an I.W.W. by whispering campaigns started from anonymous sources. Ryan’s empty threats, whispering campaigns, false statements and the “Red Scare” have kept many good Union men in ignorance concerning the M.F.”²⁸ By making it clear that Ryan used these allegations of communism as a tactic to discredit them, the authors of these articles sought to alleviate the fears of the readers and encourage them to educate themselves about the organization.

They also distributed copies of their MFG Constitution to both the “rank and file as well as the officials of the Unions.” They thought that their Constitution would make clear that “there is not one iota of radicalism, communism or any other ism that will be injurious to the real principles of unionism.”²⁹ In hopes that devotees of the AFL would join the MFG despite its reputation, they included in their Constitution a section which would make any aspect of the MFG Constitution “null and void” if they violated any section of the constitution of the AFL.³⁰

However, the Ship Channel Progressive Committee undermined their own efforts when they wrote favorably about the CIO in articles like “Let’s All Stick Together” in

²⁷ Notes from interview with W.F. Hill, 28 July 1936, box 2e306, folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

²⁸ “Challenge to the World,” *Ship Channel*, 17 April 1936, 1.

²⁹ “Let’s Find Out What the Score Is,” *Ship Channel*, 29 August 1936, 2.

³⁰ “Why Was the Maritime Federation Organized?” *Ship Channel*, 29 August 1936, 5.

which they argued that industrial unionism was compatible with craft unionism within the AFL.³¹ Given the anti-CIO atmosphere, in which that organization was also marked as communist, their endorsement of the CIO acted as further evidence of their own anti-American leanings.

In May of 1936, the tension between MFG leaders and ILA leaders reached a peak. As one of the most prominent members, Gilbert Mers faced most of the censure directed at the MFG. In early May, Mers attended the Texas State Federation of Labor convention, the state-level convention for AFL-affiliated unions, held in the Carpenters Hall in Houston. Despite his open criticism of those in power, Mers was taken by surprise when he was called before the TSFL committee on law, accused of “subjecting the AFL and affiliated unions to ridicule and vilification.”³² Later he wrote that “[a]nybody above the intelligence level of an idiot would have expected them to exercise that power. Honest to gosh – you have to believe – I let it take me by surprise. Dumb, dumb, dumb!”³³ The committee on law voted to remove Mers from the convention, a decision that the other assembled delegates endorsed. In so doing, they overrode the democratic processes of the two organizations in Corpus Christi, ILA Local 1224 and the Corpus Christi Central Labor Union, that had elected him as their representative, fully aware of leadership in the MFG.

Mers was certainly less surprised when he again found himself at the center of the storm at the SA&GCD ILA convention held in Galveston a mere week later. Ryan and

³¹ “Let’s All Stick Together,” *Ship Channel*, 17 July 1936, 7.

³² Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 132.

³³ *Ibid.*

Holt Ross, a representative of the AFL, spoke at length about the MFG and its communist origins. Ryan publicly accused Gilbert Mers of working on behalf of the Communist Party.³⁴ In truth, Mers had joined the party when he first came to the Gulf Coast but had not been an active member for some time and his work on the MFG was not done at their behest. According to Mers, Ryan declared that he was unsure if Mers was just an “unwary dupe” of the CP or a “hard-line comrade,” but his recent behavior suggested the latter.³⁵ Ryan further suggested that Mers had sought to hold offices in his local in order to better gain access to union secrets that he could share with his CP superiors. In his autobiography, Mers wrote about his feelings at that moment: “By now the lying jackass had me so hot that I forgot that I really had joined the CP.”³⁶ But Mers never had a chance to defend himself adequately before the assembled representatives voted to have him removed from the convention. In his autobiography Mers notes that the vote for his removal was “near-unanimous” among blacks and “divided” among whites.³⁷ Like many other white Progressives, Mers’ hostility towards blacks deepened as he increasingly saw black locals as the support that kept Ryan in place.

Discrediting Mers was just the beginning of Ryan’s strategies to thwart the momentum behind the MFG heading into the Galveston convention. On the first day of the convention, the credentials committee proposed a gag rule to bar any discussion of the Maritime Federation. Only one longshoremen spoke against the rule and the majority

³⁴ Ibid., 139-140.

³⁵ Ibid., 139.

³⁶ Ibid.,

³⁷ Ibid., 142.

voted in its favor.³⁸ On the second day of the conference, delegates were forced to sign a pledge that read:

We understand that the American Federation of Labor has ruled that the Maritime Federation of the Gulf is dual to the ILA and as a result of said decision we agree: That we have never been members of said organization, or if we have been that we do now hereby signify our renunciation of said [Federation], and pledge ourselves to refrain from reaffiliation [sic].³⁹

These heavy-handed tactics earned the ire of Progressives but did not pre-empt all debate over the MFG. According to *Ship Channel*, delegates did present a resolution endorsing the MFG, which stirred discussion. However, this resolution was followed by a motion, which was approved and seconded, to have all mention of this resolution stricken from the official convention records.⁴⁰

The SCPC asserted that ILA leaders used anti-communist rhetoric to squelch discussion of alternative organizing strategies. Whenever “a new idea was advanced in any form, we could depend on at least one or two high officials mak[ing] a long and brilliant speech most [sic] ‘red baiting.’”⁴¹ By labeling new ideas “communist,” ILA officials placed them outside of the realm of ideas and behaviors acceptable to ILA men, who prided themselves on their identity as good Americans and good citizens. Given national concerns about communist-infiltration in labor unions, this rhetoric had power.

³⁸ “Resolutions and Motions Taken at the South Atlantic and Gulf District Convention of the ILA,” *Ship Channel*, 29 May 1936, 3.

³⁹ Proceedings of the 26th Annual Convention, 7.

⁴⁰ “Resolutions and Motions Taken at the South Atlantic and Gulf District Convention of the ILA,” *Ship Channel*, 29 May 1936, 3.

⁴¹ “The I.L.A. Convention as it Effects the Progressive Movement,” *Ship Channel*, 29 May 1936, 1.

Finally, Joe Ryan himself attended the conference and suggested an alternative maritime organization to be known as the Maritime Transportation Industrial Council to “insure closer harmony and cooperation between Marine Unions.”⁴² Ryan proposed to meet the need for a maritime federation, but under his direction and control. Rather than interpreting this as a positive response to rank and file initiative, the Ship Channel Progressive Committee warned against the maritime federation that Ryan introduced. “That is only a significance of a TRUCE so take care, for the Federation that they offer you will probably not be for the working man.”⁴³ From the perception of the self-designated Progressives, Ryan and his associates privileged maintaining the status quo in power relations over the success of the labor movement.

Ship Channel depicted the convention as a violation of free speech rights. In their attack on the gag rule, they quoted Voltaire, the Bible, and Thomas Jefferson’s first inaugural address, invoking multiple authorities to buttress their argument. They also painted Ryan and his cohort as undemocratic by referring to him as a “Labor-Lord” who worked for the “Maritime PLUTOCRACY for the exploitation and enslavements of ILA workers.”⁴⁴ MFG members regularly tried to discredit Ryan by portraying him as dictatorial. In one of his flyers, Follett asked “HOW LONG ARE THE LONGSHOREMEN GOING TO OBEY THE DICTATES OF THIS UNION SMASHIN

⁴² “Highlights on Convention,” *Ship Channel*, 22 May 1936, 3.

⁴³ “Firing Big Guns Is Their Job ‘But Oh, the Rebound!’” *Ship Channel*, 29 May 1936, 9.

⁴⁴ “Intolerance versus Toleration: Which?” *Ship Channel*, 22 August 1936, 5-6.

RAT?” He contrasted Ryan’s dictatorship to the federation, which was “UNDER DEMOCRATIC CONTROL.”⁴⁵

The SCPC and other writers regularly raised the issue of “democratic” control or control by the rank and file. They believed that other ILA members valued democracy and wanted their organization to be run in a manner that upheld American principles. Yet, their argument assumes that only white workers’ opinions are legitimate, that the “vote” of black workers, which seemed to be to maintain the status quo, counted less than those of whites. If they valued blacks’ opinions equally, they could not have made the argument that they represented the rank and file point of view. Regardless, the SCPC and other Progressive Committees failed to unseat Ryan or to convince the bulk of ILA men that Ryan endorsed anti-American values.

Ryan handled the Maritime Federation challenge masterfully. By co-opting the maritime federation he slowed the momentum of the movement. Since the Progressive committees organized around this one issue, they had little left to fight for. Even though their real complaint was their lack of power within the organization, they did not make any significant challenge to the power structure of the ILA. By early 1937, the Federation had dissolved. ILA repression, combined with internal divisions, led to the quick end of the Maritime Federation of the Gulf.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Bill Follett, Flyer entitled “Is Joseph P. Ryan a Union Man?” undated, Mers Collection, box 2, folder 10, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, 2.

⁴⁶ Follett, June interview, 14.

The View From the Other Side of the Aisle

The Maritime Federation of the Gulf may have had a longer life if it had indeed been a rank and file movement with *widespread* support. But black longshoremen in Texas refused, almost to a man, to join the MFG. They remained loyal to Ryan's leadership of the ILA. With their large numbers and significant leadership positions in the union, black longshoremen had a considerable amount of political leverage that could have changed the balance of power between the MFG and Ryan.

During its short life, the Ship Channel Progressive Committee in Houston expended a great deal of time and energy building African American support, and to a lesser extent, Mexican American support, for the MFG. They used their publication, *Ship Channel*, to try to convince these audiences that they too would benefit from the creation of a maritime federation.

The SCPC valued the participation of Mexican Americans less than that of blacks, as can be seen by the relative amount of *Ship Channel* space devoted to Mexican Americans. Houston's Mexican Americans lacked the control within the union that made black involvement so essential. Still, *Ship Channel* staff thought that Mexican American compressmen made likely candidates for recruitment and targeted them in the early days of their publication. In one of their first issues, they devoted two columns, one in English and one in Spanish, to the problems of compress workers. The English column was a

letter from “A Waterfront Worker” to the “port boosters whom [sic] broke the [compress] strike last year.” The letter censured people in the community who exploit the labor of Mexican workers, “while you cry to high heaven that they are foreign agitators and should be deported.”⁴⁷ The SCPC wanted to demonstrate that they understood the particular problems of compress workers, both in terms of working conditions and racial prejudice. They said as much in their Spanish language letter directed simply “A Los Latinos.” In their letter they welcome the members of ILA 1309 to join the MFG and claim to have a special understanding and concern for the difficulties they were facing.⁴⁸ In so doing, SCPC members sought to contrast themselves with the apparent indifference of ILA leaders.

Mexican American compressmen had good reason to be frustrated with the leadership of the ILA. Their working conditions and wages had not improved since they joined the ILA. The ILA leadership had provided little support for them in their strike of 1935. After two years in the union, Local 1309 still had not been formally recognized by their employers. Furthermore, the structure of the ILA privileged longshoremen and their concerns. Compressmen and warehousemen had little influence in the ILA due to the small number of compress and warehouse locals. As a result, their particular problems were rarely a priority for ILA leaders. A maritime federation may have appeared to be a way to get out from under the domination and neglect of longshore rule.

However, at a meeting several months later, SCPC members complained that they could not get Mexican Americans to attend their meetings and be actively involved. In a

⁴⁷ “An Open Letter,” *Ship Channel*, 28 February 1936, 3.

⁴⁸ “A Los Latinos,” *Ship Channel*, 28 February 1936, 3.

rather strange exchange, the one Mexican American who regularly participated in SCPC activities claimed that the wives of Mexican American compressmen would not allow their husbands to come to meetings, fearing that they would be beaten-up.⁴⁹ Neither ILA leaders in Houston nor their employers would have approved of their participation in the MFG. They likely feared reprisals from either of those camps. Gilbert Mers believed that the members of Local 1309 were simply “so disgusted with the lack of support in the past that it is hard to get them to take an aggressive attitude.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the combination of risk and past disappointment explains the lack of enthusiasm among compressmen for the MFG.

Alternatively, the men of Local 1309 may have wanted to maintain their local as it was because it allowed them to sponsor cultural events in the Mexican / Mexican American community of Houston. While SCPC authors informed themselves about the particular work issues of compressmen, they likely ignored the other activities of their Local. They failed to understand the whole union experience of Mexican Americans. They would make the same mistake with African Americans.

The Maritime Federation at large, and the SCPC in particular, believed that blacks based their decision to reject the movement on several misconceptions they had about the federation. The Maritime Federation published a bulletin to counter the “slanderous things being said about the mfg” including the slur that blacks on the West Coast (which was the model for the MFG) were treated “unfairly.” MFG activists believed that this

⁴⁹ Notes from interview before and after the meeting of the Progressive Committee, 18 June 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 3, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 6.

⁵⁰ Gilbert Mers, summary of the MFG situation, undated, Mers Collection, box 2 folder 12, Houston Metropolitan Research Collection, Houston Public Library.

rumor partially explained the disapproval of Gulf Coast blacks for the federation movement.⁵¹ In another attempt to allay this fear, they passed a resolution at their MFG convention that stated that the federation was “on record as being opposed to any discrimination because of race, color or creed.” They also urged all of their affiliated groups to take immediate steps to do something to prevent discrimination within their own organizations.⁵²

Ship Channel staff also addressed this issue. Their newsletter frequently featured articles that described the better conditions for black workers on the West Coast. In the April 17, 1936 issue, the editors published a letter from a black West Coast dockworker named Harry Novillo. “Speaking from experience, the greatest and finest organization movement is now under way in Houston, and that is the Federation of the Gulf Maritime, where there will be no discrimination and a square deal for all, especially the colored men of the Maritime Industry.”⁵³ The next month they ran another article, this time from Luther Bruner, an MFG supporter who went to the West Coast to investigate conditions under a maritime federation system. He reported that “Negroes here all have a smile. They are proud of getting an even break with white men and are treated as a brother ... they laugh, play and work together.”⁵⁴

The editors of the newsletter wanted to convince black longshoremen that if the Gulf Coast followed the West Coast model of unionization that they would experience equality. The authors assumed that black workers wanted integration, a la the West

⁵¹ “Gulf Maritime Federation Bulletin #1” undated, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 4, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 2.

⁵² “Resolution from MFG Convention,” *Ship Channel*, 27 June 1936, 2.

⁵³ “Statement by a Colored West Coast Man,” *Ship Channel*, 17 April 1936, 3.

⁵⁴ L. C. Bruner, Letter to the *Ship Channel*, *Ship Channel*, 22 May 1936, 5.

Coast, unaware of the multiple purposes to which black longshoremen put their segregated locals. As a first step, the MFG endorsed working in mixed gangs (usually two or three groups or “gangs” of men from the same local worked in a ship’s hold at any given time). Mers indicates in his memoir that he believed that this would “bring the Negro into the solidarity camp.” The mixed gang system was objectionable to some in the MFG but “[t]o the credit of our white supporters whose race prejudice was hard to deal with, they stuck with us.”⁵⁵ Ironically, the men who decided that proposing mixed gangs would bring blacks into the MFG risked alienating white supporters for a plan that did not even appeal to blacks.

Members of the MFG also believed that black workers were especially concerned that the MFG was a communist organization. In a letter on behalf of the MFG, written to “all workers of the colored race in the maritime industry in the Gulf of Mexico,” S. Nathaniel Smith, a black federation member from New Orleans, tried to assuage concerns that the MFG was a “radical, un-American movement, inconsistent with the principles of the American Federation of Labor” saying, “[w]e have been falsely charged.”⁵⁶

Black longshoremen did have more reason to avoid associating with allegedly communist organizations than did whites. In the South especially, communism was regularly condemned for advocating social equality for blacks. Texas Congressman Martin Dies attacked communism as the “source of any complaints blacks might have with America” and also claimed that communists sponsored “interracial dances” where

⁵⁵ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 130.

⁵⁶ Letter to “All Workers of the Colored Race in the Maritime Industry in the Gulf of Mexico from S. Nathaniel Smith, 2nd Vice President of the Maritime Federation of the Gulf, 30 April 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 4, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

white communist women had sex with black men to “practice ‘social equality.’”⁵⁷ It was dangerous for African Americans to join with organizations with such reputations. Black longshoremen, though they sought social equality, considered it unwise in their Jim Crow world to associate with overtly radical movements which may have brought the more negative attention. Rather, they preferred to continue with the structure that had served their multiple agendas well thus far.

Indeed, in interviews taken in 1936, black longshoremen did cite the radicalism of the MFG as a problem. C. H. Chambers, a black Houston warehousemen, objected to the MFG because it was influenced by “radicals who want to pull off strikes and get into trouble at just any time.” Chambers thought that Texas law did not allow for the regular breaking of contracts, which seemed to work effectively on the West Coast but, in his mind, would be inappropriate in the Gulf.⁵⁸ Many critics of a maritime federation argued that membership in such an organization would require them to go on strike while they still had active contracts, something that the ILA did not do. Despite his distrust of the MFG, Chambers read *Ship Channel*, which he believed had “accurate news.”⁵⁹ But the newsletters’ articles did not convince him that the MFG was an improvement for longshoremen or free of radical influence.

⁵⁷ Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), 134.

⁵⁸ Notes from interview with C.H. Chambers, 1 July 1936, box 2e306, folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

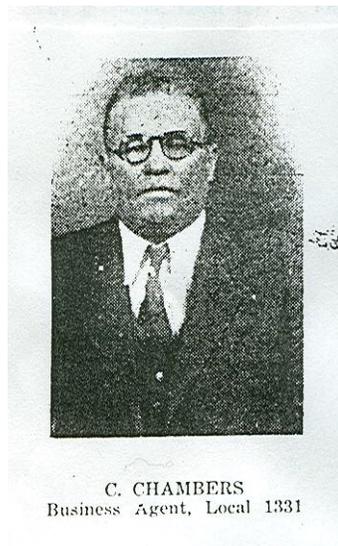


Figure 5.2. Photograph of C. H. Chambers which appeared in the *Houston Informer and Texas Freedman*, 14 August 1937, 7.

Edward Washington, a black Galveston longshoreman, also described the MFG as both “radical” and “bolshevist.” He and his fellow local members got this information from none other than Joe Ryan. Ryan had sent a letter to Gulf Coast locals denouncing the federation on these grounds, and Washington had been convinced.⁶⁰ Alvin Scaff, contemporary graduate student researcher for Ruth Allen, wrote in a report that “[t]here is a good deal of fear among the Negroes of what Ryan would do to them if they were to advocate the Maritime Federation.”⁶¹ Ryan had already demonstrated his willingness to exert force at the Conventions. Additionally, two black locals in New Orleans had recently been stripped of their union affiliation for refusing to work ships against which seamen had been striking.⁶² They acted out the ideas of industrial unionism against ILA

⁶⁰ Notes from interview with Edward Washington, 13 July 1936, box 2e306, folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁶¹ Alvin Scaff, “The Race Problem and the Maritime Federation” undated, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 3, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 1.

⁶² “Mid April Bulletin” produced by the Galveston MFG office, undated, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 4, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

leaders' orders and in violation of their contracts with those ships. Ryan's willingness to exert his power against those who crossed him certainly may have been a factor in the decision-making process of black longshoremen. But many of the white MFG members questioned the role of Ryan and other leaders in the choices of black rank and file, assuming that they did not have their own legitimate reasons for remaining steadfastly loyal to the ILA.

Many white Progressives believed that Ryan and other elected ILA officials had undue influence over the choices of rank and file black longshoremen. Captain Holzapfel, a Port Arthur MFG activist, shared this interpretation of black actions. He spoke to a group of black longshoremen about the MFG and, in his own estimation, they cheered him on. But the next day they were instructed by their leadership to have nothing to do with the MFG and "all the favorable sentiment died."⁶³ Gilbert Mers includes an almost identical story in his autobiography about speaking to a group of blacks in Beaumont. For many white Progressives, frustration at their inability to convince blacks to join them morphed into resentment of blacks. Unable to understand why blacks would not logically view the MFG as a worthwhile movement, they saw blacks as blindly loyal to the ILA leadership. One SCPC member put it this way, "the trouble along the waterfront in the Gulf is the Negro. He is used to a master, and in this case it is Ryan."⁶⁴ Mers expressed similar feelings in his memoir, saying that "Our black Texas longshoremen were great followers of their leaders. It made me bitter to see them

⁶³ Notes from interview with Captain Holzapfel, 27 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, LMTC, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 3.

⁶⁴ Notes from interview with anonymous member of the Ship Channel Progressive Committee, 2 July 1936, box 2e306, folder 7, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

follow President Ryan's dictates."⁶⁵ Mers and his fellow Progressives were unable to see the point of view of black workers.

White progressives discounted black loyalty to Ryan as a result of a defectt in black character. They blindly followed their leaders, who acted either out of fear or corruption. They did not acknowledge legitimate black reasons for maintaining the status quo, which would have undermined their claims to speak for a silent majority.

While MFG boosters wrote articles assuring blacks and Mexican Americans that they would experience racial equality under a federation system, MFG members' own racism undermined their words. Ironically, the contents of *Ship Channel* worked against interracial cooperation. The racism of *Ship Channel* staff came through, not so much in their writing, but in illustrations that accompanied the articles. While they took great care in their writing to appeal to people of color, two drawings in particular reveal a demeaning attitude towards black bodies.

⁶⁵ Mers, *Working the Waterfront*, 120.

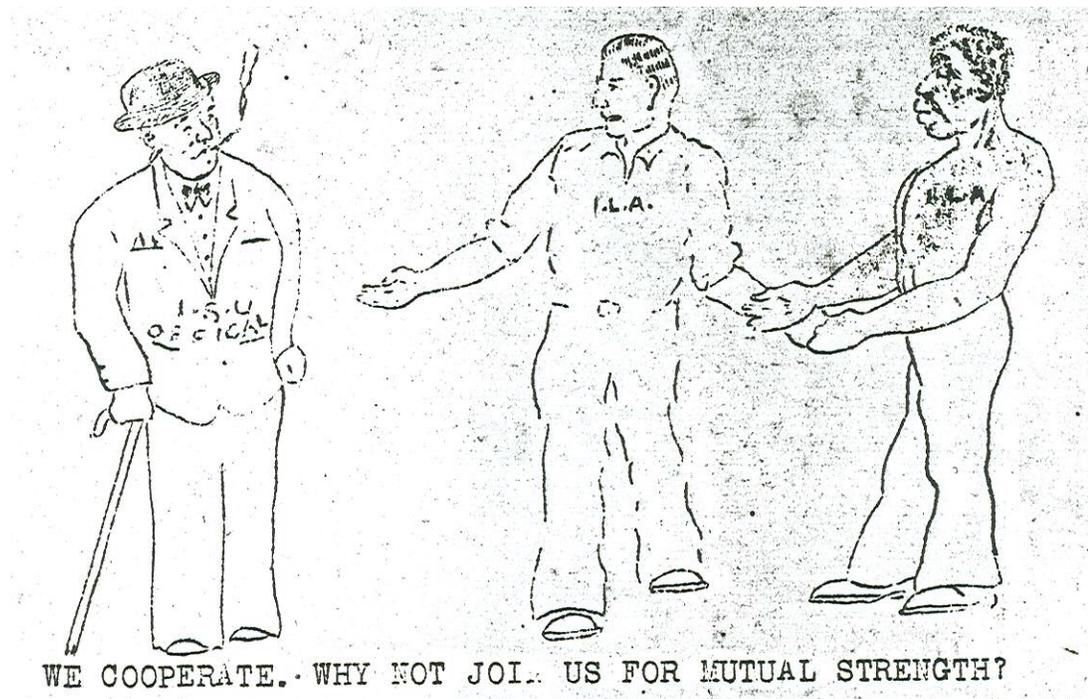


Figure 5.3: Illustration from front page of *Ship Channel*, September 26, 1936.

In Figure 5.3 above, the SCPC tried to convince the members of the International Seaman's Union to join the Maritime Federation of the Gulf. The illustration misrepresents the closeness of black and white longshoremen regarding the MFG, implying that black longshoremen also supported the federation movement. But more significant is the representation of black longshoremen in the illustrated figure. The white longshoreman in the drawing is neatly dressed, appears physically fit, though not overly muscular. His hair is neatly combed and cut short. In contrast, black longshoremen are represented by a barrel-chested, shirtless, almost savage figure, with exaggerated Negroid facial features and mussed hair. The clothed white longshoremen appears more educated, more evolved than the black longshoremen who can only be valued for his physical strength. The positioning of the white figure closest to the ISU

representative conveys that only white longshoremen have the sophistication to negotiate with other organizations. Despite the joined hands which indicate unity, the black figure is clearly subordinate, the follower in the relationship.

Black bodies were used in another illustration [figure 5.4] intended to win over the International Seamen's Union to the MFG. This drawing contrasts the prosperity of West Coast seamen, members of the West Coast Maritime Federation, with the penury of east coast and Gulf Coast seamen who refused to join a maritime federation. On the West Coast, the more successful unions had secured better pay and working conditions for their members. Therefore, the figure representing the West Coast seamen is well dressed. His robust figure indicates good health as he strides confidently to the docks. The ISU affiliated member barely has the strength to carry his meager goods. He is thin, his clothes and hat are cheap. Both in terms of physical well-being and material wealth, the ISU fails its membership where the West Coast seamen are well-served. But the artist brings in a third body to exaggerate the difference between the two figures. The West Coast sailor's success is further demonstrated by his ability to have a black man carry his luggage. Black servitude acts as the marker for white material success and prestige. In this drawing, black men are not partners in building the labor movement, but accessories to success. The black figure is drawn so short in stature as to hardly seem a man at all. He is clearly a servant, expressionless and hunched over by the bags he carries.

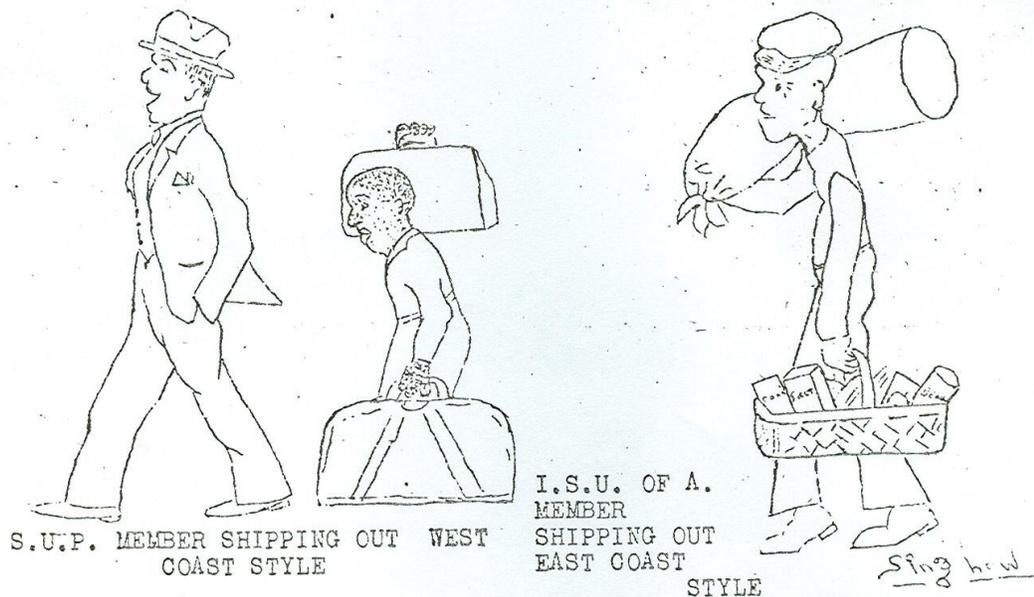


Figure 5.4. Illustration from page 4, *Ship Channel*, August 15, 1936.

In addition to the artist, several members of the Ship Channel Progressive Committee likely saw these drawings before the final newsletter was reproduced and distributed. They did not view them as inappropriate. However, black readers likely were offended by these images. To black readers, these images revealed that, though the Progressive Committee wrote about black equality and asserted that working with them would result in better conditions for blacks than allegiance to the ILA leadership's decisions, the members of the Committee shared the dominant racist beliefs of most white Texans. The committee members undermined their own efforts to recruit black members. White Progressives, like those in the SCPC, expected their black colleagues to trust them and to believe that their interests would be protected under a new type of organization. Yet even within their own publication, they gave black members good reason to avoid affiliating with the committee and the Federation for which they lobbied.

Black Beaumont longshore officer J. C. Ford articulated clear reasons for distrusting the federation movement. He feared that blacks “would not get a fair representation” in a federation that included predominantly white unions. Ford specifically mentioned an alliance with the West Coast federation as problematic because most of the unions in the West Coast federation were not black unions.⁶⁶ From Ford’s point of view, the federation was a potential threat. Joining the federation would mean negotiating with a larger number of white workers and likely losing the influence that his local currently wielded. His local was one of two black locals in Beaumont, which only had one white local. Ford and his fellow local members were accustomed to a great deal of control over union affairs. The power that they wielded in the ILA guaranteed them equal wages and vibrant locals that, as the previous chapters explored, they used for a variety of meaningful purposes. They had more to lose than to gain in expanding their affiliation to include other maritime industries.

Ford argued that the current organizational structure was best for blacks because they had secured power and representation in that system. They did not have to trust white workers to protect their interests; they protected one another. MFG members misunderstood the goals and needs of black workers because they were ignorant of the multiple purposes that segregated black locals served in these communities.

⁶⁶ Notes from interview with Mr. Lawrence, 18 June 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

The CIO Comes to Town

Following the death of the MFG, black longshore locals found themselves targeted by yet another group seeking their help in overturning Joe Ryan's hold on the Gulf Coast docks: the CIO. Again, African Americans remained loyal to Ryan and the ILA. According to C. W. Rice, editor of the *Negro Labor News* and oft-times critic of labor unions, eighty percent of black ILA members remained committed to the AFL and set against the CIO, as opposed to a mere fifty percent of white dock workers.⁶⁷

Freeman Everett took a pro-active role in squelching the CIO. He was concerned not just with the CIO's interest in dockworkers, but all black workers in Houston. He sought, as an official organizer for the AFL, to unionize black laundry workers, auto mechanics, and filling station porters under the AFL banner before the CIO could recruit them. Everett evidently believed that the AFL promised more for all black workers, not just longshoremen, than the CIO.

As part of his work to build up the labor movement, Everett brought speakers to address longshoremen and other working-class community members. In April of 1938, Thyra Edwards came to Houston to speak. Edwards was an established labor lecturer and activist. She had worked as a speaker on behalf of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was an organizer with the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, and

⁶⁷ C. W. Rice, "As I See It," *Negro Labor News*, 12 June 1937, 1.

also led annual trips of black Americans to Europe and Mexico to meet with intellectuals and labor leaders abroad, building international solidarity amongst oppressed people.⁶⁸

The longshoreman must have been excited to welcome Edwards back to the town where she was born and lived through her teenage years. According to newspaper coverage, Edwards, known to be a lecturer whose eloquence “generally left her audience dazzled,”⁶⁹ “charmed her audience in an address on the subject, ‘Labor and the Negro.’”⁷⁰ Everett had assembled a “large and enthusiastic crowd, composed mostly of longshoremen and their families.”⁷¹ He served as master of ceremonies for the event. “Fashion Plate” Randall, the President of the Ladies’ Auxiliary of Local 872 and frequent collaborator with Freeman Everett, presented Edwards with a bouquet of flowers after her speech. Edwards may have connected with the longshoreman by discussing her views on black masculinity and the difficulties that black men faced in being recognized as men deserving of manhood rights, a topic that she often wrote about for a variety of publications like the nationally distributed *Chicago Defender*.⁷² Black longshoremen may well have read her articles in that very publication.

The day after her speech, Edwards asked to meet with ILA leaders in a private conference, at which point it became clear that she was not only an advocate of the CIO, but that her “mission” was to recruit longshoremen to that cause. At this point, ILA

⁶⁸ Elmer P. Martin and Joanne M. Martin, “Thyra J. Edwards: Internationalist Social Worker,” in *African American Leadership: An Empowerment Tradition in Social Welfare History*, ed. Iris B. Carlton-LaNey (Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers Press, 2001), 163-177.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷⁰ “Thyra J. Edwards Speaks to Labor Group in City,” *Negro Labor News*, 9 April 1938, 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 117.

“balked.”⁷³ There were many aspects of Edwards’ career that clashed with their conservative values. Both Edwards’ travel to the Soviet Union and her position on the editorial board of the publication *Soviet Russia Today* would have raised red flags. Though Edwards denied having ever been a member of the CP, rumors apparently circulated that there existed a “Thyra Edwards Unit” of the CP in the United States.⁷⁴ Apparently, Everett had not thoroughly researched Edwards and her agenda.

C. W. Rice of the *Negro Labor News* mocked the ILA for their oversight. “The *News* has no quarrel to make with Miss Edwards for knowing how to do her work well. We tip our hats to master of their professions... We simply want to call attention to the superior type of Negro representatives of the CIO to those of the AFL.”⁷⁵ Rice acknowledged that it was “well-known” that they “call this organization Communistic to the core” but urged them to be more careful in the future lest they “mistake the ‘hands of Jacob for the voice of Esau’ and thereby lose [their] birthright.”⁷⁶

The Edwards’ incident aside, black longshoremen were generally very careful about their associations and vocal in their rejection of the CIO. A group of officers and members of black Local 1271 of Houston wrote passionately on the subject to the ILA paper. “We the members of this organization feel that the only way to blot out dual, and company unions is to stay with the only worthwhile labor movement, the A. F. of L. Our membership in general feels that the CIO [is] detrimental to the labor movement.” The authors of this letter also described the ILA as the “great movement anywhere on this

⁷³ “CIO Advocate Pulls Fast Stunt on ILA’s” *Negro Labor News*, 23 April 1938, 8.

⁷⁴ Martin and Martin, 169, 173.

⁷⁵ “CIO Advocate Pulls Fast Stunt on ILA’s” *Negro Labor News*, 23 April 1938, 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

earth except for the Church of the living God.”⁷⁷ These men articulated a clear reason for supporting the AFL over the CIO; they believed it would keep their unions strong.

C. W. Rice hypothesized that black longshoremen rejected the CIO for solely pragmatic reasons and not because they disagreed with the principles of industrial unionism. According to Rice, black ILA members expected that the CIO movement would be short lived: “[B]ecause of the propaganda that the organization is Communistic [it] will eventually be crushed out by public sentiment.”⁷⁸ Additionally, in his analysis of black attitudes towards the CIO, Rice’s findings echoed the concerns expressed by J. C. Ford regarding the MFG. “A survey shows that Negro ILA’s from New Orleans to Corpus Christi are opposed to changing over to the CIO. They comment that if they join the CIO ... they will lose their jobs. They point out that there are practically no Negroes employed on the Pacific Coast.”⁷⁹ Again, moving to a new system threatened the hold that black longshoremen had on Gulf Coast jobs.

Black longshoremen were not alone in being targeted by the CIO: CIO organizers targeted whites, blacks and Mexican Americans alike. One of the largest contingents within the nascent CIO was the Maritime Committee of the CIO, which included seamen, marine firemen, shipbuilders, and the longshoremen of the West Coast. The Maritime Committee spread its message to Gulf Coast rank and file longshoremen through pamphlets distributed on the docks. In “An Open Letter to the Membership of the I. L. A. from the C. I. O.,” the Maritime Committee informed the rank and file that they had

⁷⁷“Houston ILA Praises AFL Organization,” *Longshoremen’s News*, 14 July 1938, Mers Collection, box 1, folder 5, Houston Metropolitan Collection, Houston Public Library, 3.

⁷⁸C. W. Rice, “As I See It,” *Negro Labor News*, 15 January 1938, 1.

⁷⁹“Dock Workers Fear Loss of Jobs in Change of Union,” *Negro Labor News*, 30 July 1938, 1.

met with representatives of Joe Ryan to try to convince them that joining the Maritime Committee would lead to better working conditions, as it had on the West Coast, but Ryan's representatives had refused to consider joining the organization. The Maritime committee then urged rank and file members to take the matter into their own hands and "make known their attitude on the ... question of affiliating the ILA nationally to the CIO" and the "right of the ILA membership to decide this question by referendum vote."⁸⁰ The Maritime Committee implied that Ryan and his representatives did not legitimately represent the best interests of the rank and file. They further developed this theme in "A Message to East and Gulf Coast Longshoremen." In this pamphlet, the Maritime Committee directly accused Ryan of refusing to join the CIO "because he was not guaranteed the right to remain in control of his men." In contrast, the CIO guaranteed "democracy for its members" rather than Ryan's "gangster methods of running his union." The message concludes by urging rank and file members to "Wherever possible, raise the question in your I.L.A. local meeting, of having a vote on C.I.O. affiliation."⁸¹ In addition to these newsletters, the CIO advertised in the *Shape-Up*, a New York-based longshore publication. They specifically address "Atlantic and Gulf Longshoremen" and "Demand" a "vote on C.I.O." The *Shape-Up*, which was read at least by Progressive Gulf longshoreman, endorsed the C.I.O.⁸²

⁸⁰ Mervyn Rathborne, Secretary of the CIO Maritime Committee, "An Open Letter to the Membership of the I.L. A. from the C. I. O.," undated, box 2e307, folder 5, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, UT Austin.

⁸¹ "A Message to ... East and Gulf Coast Longshoremen," issued by CIO Maritime Committee, unsigned, undated, box 2e307, folder 5, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Center for American History, UT Austin.

⁸² "CIO Issues Appeal to Longshoremen," *Shape-Up*, 23 August 1937, box 1, folder 3, Mers Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Collection, Houston Public Library..

In 1938 the CIO formally separated from the AFL. Shortly thereafter, the CIO Maritime Committee opened an organizing office in Houston for the International Longshoremen's and Warehouseman's Union (ILWU), specifically aimed at replacing the ILA. This was part of a wider campaign throughout Texas to recruit workers to the CIO. In addition to maritime workers, CIO organizers targeted meat packers, autoworkers, oil workers, and canning industry workers. In several industries, the CIO had marked success and the CIO movement seemed to build momentum quickly, despite the strong resistance of both the AFL and business owners. Intensifying anti-union sentiment among conservatives in Texas during this time period certainly related to the growth of the CIO.⁸³ The AFL, including the ILA, participated in the building of anti-union sentiment. The ILA reacted strongly to the CIO's encroachment once it split from the AFL. No longer was the issue one of re-orientation within the American Federation of Labor. No longer did CIO advocates simply want the ILA to affiliate with them. The ILWU directly threatened the ILA as a separate organization seeking its territory.

The ILA leadership responded to the ILWU-Houston office by creating an Emergency Policy Board, an action which stirred great controversy. This Board was an assembly of longshoremen imbued with great authority. A group of white and black longshoremen, supported by President Ryan, proposed the Board as Resolution No. 5 at the 1938 SA&GCD ILA convention. Critics often referred to the Board simply as "Res. No. 5." The purpose of the Emergency Policy Board was outlined as fighting "the dual

⁸³ For a broader history of the growth of the CIO in Texas and other parts of the south see F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

labor movement that was trying to make inroads upon our international organization.” In other words, the Board was specifically designed to fight the CIO.⁸⁴

Much to the chagrin of Progressive ILA members, the Board’s powers enabled them to circumvent the normal democratic processes within the union in order to fight CIO encroachment. The Board could “suspend or expel without trial any officers or members who join dual Unions or the Communist party” or who aided or abetted those organizations. “No trial is necessary being only an instrumentality for aiding our enemies in destroying us.” The Board also had the power to “revoke Charters [expel locals] with the approval of the President.”⁸⁵ Critics of Resolution No. 5 feared the abuse of these powers. Members who had witnessed the suppression of dissent during the MFG movement, recognized that these powers could be used to limit freedom of speech within the ILA. However, Resolution No. 5 passed without a single dissenting vote at the convention. The presence of ILA President Ryan and his support for the resolution, in addition to other pressures, may have inhibited those inclined to vote “nay.”⁸⁶

The ILA further restricted conversation about the CIO. At the 1939 convention, for example, ILA leaders used the same repressive tactics to suppress discussion of the CIO that they had used to quell talk regarding the MFG. Rule 17 of the convention rules, read and accepted by delegates on the first day of the meeting, stated that “at no time will any delegate speak in favor of the C.I.O.” Two favorable mentions of the CIO would be sufficient to have a delegate removed from the convention.

⁸⁴ Proceedings of the 28th Convention, 61.

⁸⁵ Proceedings of the 29th Convention, 76.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 77.

C. W. Rice had estimated that fifty percent of white Houston longshoremen would have supported a move to the CIO. Numbers cannot be known with any certainty, but certainly there were a fair number of white men who would have considered discussing the merits of industrial unionism worthwhile. But ILA leaders tried to limit the conversation.⁸⁷ Rather than allow for free debate they restricted conversation. This prevented assembled groups of longshoremen from openly discussing the CIO as an organizational alternative and perhaps collectively coming to a positive assessment of that organization or some of its ideas. ILA leaders determined that the immediate free speech rights of their members were less important than the long-term threat of CIO encroachment.

Still, many critics did not remain silent and the ILWU happily published their complaints in the ILWU newsletter, *The Bulletin*. Follett, former MFG leader and longtime ILA member, used *the Bulletin* to publish his complaints against the Emergency Policy Board. He framed his attack around the issue of citizenship rights, implying, not so subtly, that Resolution 5 violated basic democratic principles. “I for one am not ready to lie upon Dictator Ryan's altar and sacrifice my rights as an AMERICAN CITIZEN.”⁸⁸ In Follett’s analysis, the Board was as threatening to Americanism as the CIO.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ The tactics used to suppress support for the CIO within the ILA in the Gulf Coast were not as extreme as those in the ports of New York. There, the mob enforced the rule of Joe Ryan. In 1939, a young longshoremen named Pete Panto led a movement within the ILA to support the CIO. Panto “disappeared” and fear and conformity replaced enthusiasm for change. See Kimeldorf’s *Reds or Rackets* for a description of Ryan’s coercive and corrupt control of New York ports.

⁸⁸ Bill Follet, “Letter to All ILA Members,” *Bulletin*, 27 May 1938, Mers Collection, box 1, folder 7, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, 1.

⁸⁹ While Follett found the Emergency Policy Board to be undemocratic, for other ILA members, the Policy Board only expanded on a system they found unfair. Normal, non-“emergency” operations in the district were handled by an executive board. Several groups felt they lacked fair representation on this committee. Compress workers argued that they were not being represented since no members of the

Men who shared Follett's view saw the Policy Board as an attack as much on them as on the CIO. C. N. Cook, four-year member of white Houston ILA Local 1330, wrote to the *Bulletin*:

After reading Resolution No. 5 passed in the Savannah Convention, and carefully considering its contents, I see no chance for keeping our Local or any of the others on a progressive and democratic basis. The only way for the Longshoremen to have a real union is to change to the ILWU affiliated to the CIO. Yours for progress, C. N. Cook⁹⁰

The *Bulletin* authors carried on the theme of rank and file democracy versus a Ryan dictatorship. They urged rank and file longshoremen to the meetings of their locals, which were hypothetically less repressive than district convention, to push for CIO affiliation.⁹¹ They also named Ryan "Czar of the Docks" and described his appearance at the vote for Resolution 5 as "bellowing, and snorting threats as ... he called for the expulsion of all ILA Members who might be possessed with CIO sympathy's [sic]."⁹²

Given the CIO's active propaganda through the *Bulletin*, the Emergency Policy Board began to respond with a publication of its own, a newspaper for the Gulf Coast District, called the *Longshoremen's News*. In this paper and in flyers that they produced, the Board countered the CIO's accusations of un-democratic action by labeling them a

compress and warehouse locals were on the Board which held considerable decision-making power. Multiple compress locals from different ports came together to express their discontent and argue that "in order to be properly represented in any controversial issue that may arise, whether it is with a sister Local of the other crafts or with the employer, there should be a member of our several crafts..." on the Board. Their resolution was rejected at the 1939 convention. *Proceedings of the 29th Annual Convention*, 58.

Non-Texans argued that Texas had too much power. Throughout the thirties, Texas held, at the very least, fifty percent of the committee seats, even after Texans ceased to make up the majority of the district.

⁹⁰ C. N. Cook, Letter to the *Bulletin*, 27 May 1938, Mers Collection, box 2, folder 17, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, 1.

⁹¹ *Bulletin*, 12 May 1938, Mers Collection, box 2, folder 17, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, 2.

⁹² "The 'Czar of the Docks' Bellows Again," *Bulletin*, 12 May 1938, Mers Collection, box 2, folder 17, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, 1.

communist front. The *Longshoremen's News* dedicated whole pages to attacks on the CIO/ Communist Party. In these pages they claimed the CIO wanted to undermine Christianity: "By philosophy, mysticism, the development of liberal cults, and the furtherance of atheism, to discredit all Christian Creeds."⁹³ As a part of the Communist Party, directed by Moscow, the real goal of the CIO was to establish "A SOVIET DICTATORSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES." Longshoremen, by remaining with ILA, could defend their democratic values and "Keep the Waterfront American."⁹⁴ The ILA leadership played on union members' red scare fears. By portraying their competitor as communist, they invalidated both the organization and its critiques of them. They presented their interpretation of the Communist Party's agenda for America as the CIO's true agenda, sending the message that CIO could not be trusted as a labor organization. It had dangerous ulterior motives. Any problems of the ILA were small in comparison to the horror of endorsing the destruction of Christianity. Certainly, the "Czar of the Docks" was not as threatening as a "Soviet Dictatorship" in America.

⁹³ *Longshoremen's News*, Thursday, June 23, 1938, pg 4. From the Gilbert Mers Collection, Box 1, Folder 5. Houston Public Library.

⁹⁴ *Longshoremen's News*, Thursday, June 9, 1938, pg. 4. From the Gilbert Mers Collections, Box 1, Folder 5, Houston Public Library.

CIO AND THE CHURCH

Officials of the American Federation of Labor have repeatedly asserted that more than one hundred and fifty of the leading organizers on the payroll of CIO are members of the Communist Party. This statement has never been denied by John L. Lewis himself—as a matter of fact Lewis, himself, has previously branded some of his chief aides as Communists. No one can deny that Communists are in high position in the CIO. The Communists in the CIO are seeking to use labor to accomplish their purposes.

THE COMMUNIST'S PLAN FOR CHRISTIAN AMERICA

THE ORDERS FROM RED RUSSIA TO THEIR AMERICAN DISCIPLES READ:

RELIGION: By philosophy, mysticism, the development of liberal cults, and the furtherance of atheism, to discredit all Christian Creeds.

ETHICAL: Corrupt morality by advocating promiscuity and advising high school and university students to practice same; introduction of companionate marriage ideas; advocacy of legalized abortions; advancement of theoretical interracial practices. Destruction of the family, abolition of inheritance, even to the extent of names; destruction of all records of title, birth and family history.

AESTHETIC: Cultivation of the ugly, futuristic and aberrant in art, literature, drama and music; the practice of crude orientalism, modernism and degenerate perversion.

SOCIOLOGICAL: Abolition of social opposition by subversive practices; the display of vulgar extravagance, promotion and exaggeration of all social and economic conditions, political corruption, etc., to create unrest, suspicion and revolt by workers, intensify class war.

*The CIO Welcomes Communists---The A. F. of L.
Has Always Fought Communists*

**Members of ILA In The South
Are A God-Fearing People--They
Want No Part of Such A Set-Up.**

Figure 5.5. Emergency Policy Board anti-CIO Propaganda. *Longshoremen's News*, 23 June 1938, 4.

The Policy Board in Action

In the summer of 1938 the Policy Board had occasion to make use of many of its powers when the worst fears of the International were realized. Galveston Local 1350 voted to leave the ILA and join the CIO-affiliated International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU). Moreover, the ILWU was distributing handbills, addressed to "all longshoremen in Galveston," intended to convince more ILA members to follow the Mexican American and white banana handlers of Local 1350. The handbills declared that the ILWU would be victorious in Galveston.⁹⁵

While the ILWU reached out to all of Galveston's longshoremen, no other local was as likely to leave the ILA as Local 1350, whose men had a long history of dissatisfaction with the ILA leadership. In an interview two years earlier, Hency had described his union as the most Progressive in Galveston and stated that most had supported the Maritime Federation of the Gulf.⁹⁶ Before the CIO came to recruit them, they already had a strong inclination towards industrial unionism.

Further, the men of this local wanted to work regular longshore work instead of solely handling fruit. Local 1350 had applied to have its charter changed to that of a longshore local. In 1935, Tom Hency, applied to the Dock and Marine Council requesting that their charter be expanded to include longshore work, arguing that "Since

⁹⁵ "ILWU to Seek to Organize Longshoremen," *Galveston News*, 23 July 1938, clipping, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

⁹⁶ Notes from interview with L. M. Balderach and Tom Hency, 15 July 1936, box 2e307, folder 7, LMTC, CAH, UT Austin.

Galveston has two black locals, there ought to be two white locals.”⁹⁷ Despite its mixed membership, Local 1350 was categorized as “white.” The Dock and Marine Council, which included representatives from the longshore locals in Galveston, refused them. These existent longshore locals may have been unwilling to further divide the available workload. Another possible explanation is that white longshoremen did not want to work side by side with such a large number of Mexican Americans. The re-chartering of 1350 would have set a precedent for Mexican Americans to work in mainstream longshoring. It is possible that the ILA did not consider the fruit handlers quite white enough to be a white local in mainstream longshoring.

Without this change, fruit handlers were stuck in low wage jobs. Before the Depression, the difference between fruit handler wages and other longshore wages had been less severe but in the early thirties, the hourly rate had dropped to a low of 30 cents. Wages increased so slowly that the hourly rate was only about 50 cents when Hency and his fellow union men changed their affiliation.⁹⁸

Local 1350 had been unique within the ILA; it was the only substantially mixed-race local in Texas, being equally composed of whites and Mexican Americans. No evidence records any significant racial conflicts among the members. At the same time, it is unlikely that the Mexican Americans in Local 1350 were able to make much use of their local “off the docks.” No records suggest that they were. It would have been difficult to convince white members that the union should sponsor fiestas patrias or

⁹⁷ Dock and Marine Council Minute Book, Special Collection, University of Texas at Arlington, 100.

⁹⁸ Notes from interview with L. M. Balderach and Tom Hency, 15 July 1936, box 2e307, folder 7, LMTC, CAH, UT Austin.

expend effort and influence to secure rights for other Mexican Americans in Galveston. The fact that Hency, a white man, was regularly elected President and convention delegate, further suggests that the whites of Local 1350 were unwilling to follow the leadership of Mexican Americans. Without high wages, much respect, or the ability to use their integrated local for their own purposes, the Mexican Americans in Local 1350, like their fellow white members, would have had little reason to remain loyal to the union – at least until the Policy Board exerted its power.

Following Local 1350's change of affiliation, the ILWU and the ILA Policy Board battled on multiple fronts: at the docks, in the courtroom, and in the court of public opinion. The Policy Board acted quickly. It revoked the charter of Local 1350 and formed a new local in its place, Local 1576. Within a matter of days, the men of the freshly minted Local 1576 began unloading bananas from United Fruit Co. ships.⁹⁹ ILA leaders must have met with Mrs. Pearce, the President of the stevedoring company for which they worked, J. E. Pearce and Co. Pearce and Co in turn contracted with the United Fruit Company. They convinced Mrs. Pearce to allow them to work instead of the new ILWU local. The local authorities enforced this decision; according to the *Houston Chronicle*, the Galveston Wharf Company police erected a barrier around the wharf and police dispersed "Several hundred of the CIO local who had gathered in the vicinity," to deter these workers.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ "New ILA Local at Island Is on Job," *Houston Chronicle* clipping, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e307, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Once they had joined the CIO, the banana workers took advantage of their new affiliation with other maritime workers to call boycotts on banana ships by sailors. The CIO demonstrated the strength of its labor alliances by asking seamen affiliated with the CIO to refuse to work banana ships that were being unloaded by the men of the recently formed ILA Local 1576. Two crews of seamen walked off in “sympathy strikes” with the CIO banana handlers who had been barred from the docks.¹⁰¹ Though they succeeded in preventing two United Fruit Company ships from leaving the port of Galveston, they abandoned this tactic after only a week on the grounds that interfering with the shipping industry hurt the local economy.¹⁰² But the real reason remains unclear: were seamen reluctant to continue boycotting ships? Were other Galveston workers putting pressure on them, or did they perceive that they were losing the battle for public opinion?

However, the CIO continued to man picket lines and pursued a court injunction against Mrs. Pearce.¹⁰³ The CIO injunction alleged that the contract belonged with the men who had comprised 1350, not the ILA. Mrs. Pearce countered that she understood the contract to be between her company and the ILA, and she would not have made a

¹⁰¹ “Strike Called by Seamen on Banana Ships,” *Galveston Daily News*, 19 July 1938, 1.

¹⁰² “CIO Men Release Ship of United Fruit,” *Galveston Daily News*, 30 July 1938, clipping, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰³ “Injunction Asked in Longshore Controversy,” *Galveston Daily News*, 28 July 1938, clipping, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

contract with these men if they had not been affiliated with the ILA.¹⁰⁴ The courts found in favor of the ILA.¹⁰⁵

While both sides pursued their court cases and actions on the docks, the ILA Emergency Policy Board used the *Longshoremen's News* to spin the banana handlers' defection as an act of CIO / CP trickery. In their version of events, the CIO underhandedly packed a meeting of Local 1350 with their allies. The loyal but apparently absent majority were not represented in strong enough numbers to prevent the secession vote.¹⁰⁶ This alternative narrative undermined the theory that the move was a truly democratic action. They responded to the dissident theme that the ILA was increasingly undemocratic while the CIO allowed for real rank and file leadership and control.

The ILA then appointed two former 1350 members, Mr. Webb and Mr. Salinas, to recruit other men from 1350 to join 1576.¹⁰⁷ Judging by their surnames, it appears that Webb and Salinas were an interracial duo, certainly chosen to appeal to both the white and Mexican American ILA deserters. Webb and Salinas welcomed anyone to return to the ILA, no questions asked, operating on the assumption that most men of Local 1350 wanted to remain with the ILA and had either been duped into joining the CIO or had not

¹⁰⁴ "Contract Claimed Negotiated with Union Local," clipping, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰⁵ "Galveston Dockmen to Take Longshore Fight to U.S. Board," *Houston Chronicle*, 29 July 1938, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰⁶ *Longshoremen's News*, 4 August 1938, Mers collection,

¹⁰⁷ Press Release, National Labor Relations Board, 2 March 1940, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

been present when the decision to do so was made. They claimed that most of the men who had been in 1350 joined 1576.

It is impossible to know exactly how many members remained with the CIO or returned to the ILA, but evidence suggests that more men remained with the CIO for several months than the ILA acknowledged. When the CIO took its final step to re-claim “their” work, an appeal to the National Labor Relations Board, 295 members signed the complaint. At its departure, Local 1350 had had about 500 members.¹⁰⁸ After several months of investigation and deliberation, the NLRB found in favor of the Pearce Company’s interpretation of their contract. The contract was between the Company and the ILA, not the men who had made up that particular local. The work on the Pearce docks now belonged to Local 1576.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Despite their victory against the CIO, the Emergency Policy Board never won the support of the majority of the ILA. The Board ceased its activities in October of 1938 because so few locals paid the assessments that funded it. Some locals paid a part of their assessment, but 34 locals failed to pay anything toward support of the Board.¹¹⁰ Some locals may have withheld their money as a statement against the excessive power many

¹⁰⁸ “Island Firm named in NLRB Complaint,” *Houston Chronicle*, 11 November 1936, clipping, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰⁹ Press Release, National Labor Relations Board, 2 March 1940, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 10, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

¹¹⁰ J. C. Ford, Report of Secretary of Policy Board, Proceedings of the 29th Annual Convention, 66.

longshoremen felt was invested in the board. At the least, the 34 locals who withheld payment did not make fighting the dual union movement a high priority. So, while red scare tactics may have been successful in limiting dissent within the union, the ILA leadership was not as successful in presenting the CIO as an urgent enough threat to the future of the ILA to justify the existence of a Board that could act outside of normal democratic procedure.

While ILA leaders may have lost the Emergency Policy Board, they won the battle with dissidents in Texas and against the CIO. Using a combination of forceful tactics and anti-communist rhetoric, ILA leaders prevented rank and file dissidents from creating a widespread movement. They also succeeded against the CIO which would not take work or Locals away from the ILA in the Texas.

African American longshoremen's loyalty to the ILA shored up the leadership. They were in good part responsible for these victories. CIO recruiters and white Progressives could not understand the behavior of black ILA members. White Progressives turned to racist assumptions to make sense of black loyalty and developed hostility towards blacks who, from their point of view, stood in the way of improving the union. Many whites saw the situation as F. N. Hunter did: Ryan could not be displaced from power, and therefore the maritime federation could not succeed, because of his support by "colored unions."¹¹¹

This situation was a consequence of the deeper divisions among whites and blacks in the ILA. Whites did not understand that black longshoremen operated on a broader

¹¹¹ Notes from interview with F.N. Hunter, 4 July 1936, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, box 2e306, folder 7, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

understanding of the union's purpose. They did not fully realize that black longshoremen had a different experience of being working class. They did not see all that black longshoremen had invested in their membership in the ILA. Thus, white Progressives could not address the real concerns of the black longshoremen they tried to win to their cause. Nor could the CIO. And thus craft unionism and the multiracial, segregated structure of the ILA in Texas survived the Progressive movement of the 1930s.

This segregated structure brought with it a complicated web of costs and benefits for all ILA members. Financially, Mexican Americans paid the greatest price during the 1930s. Their job choices, and hence their income, were limited by white and black longshoremen. Mexican Americans remained on the margins of the union, with very limited access to positions of power and few votes in union decision-making. Under a system of segregated locals, they were penalized for their presumed inferiority. African Americans also found society's racism institutionalized in the union. Although their financial situation and level of influence on union affairs was vastly superior to that of Mexican Americans, they too faced discrimination. African Americans found themselves regularly fighting to protect their access to jobs and limited in their number of formal positions of power, some of which were reserved for white members, despite their numerical dominance of the union.

Despite these significant problems and the efforts of CIO-influenced Progressives, the ILA system endured. It endured, in part, because it provided a venue to challenge the discrimination that pervaded segregated society. Mexican Americans and African Americans transformed their locals into community organizations. Through the ILA,

they worked to better their own lives and the lives of other members of their racially defined communities. In both cases, ILA members found that their activism propelled them into meaningful cross-class alliances through which they were able to confront community problems. They moved beyond solely class-based issues and they themselves acquired status and influence. These benefits made both Mexican Americans and African Americans hesitant to lose the system of segregated locals which contributed to the ongoing resistance of the ILA to integration – a resistance that would continue long after Jim Crow segregation itself had been struck down.

Epilogue

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal provided protections that allowed the International Longshoremen's Association to grow. As it did, its members were able to solidify their position on the docks, increase wages, and reduce hours. On the eve of World War II, the union was dramatically stronger than it had been a decade before.

But the architects of the New Deal generally ignored the problems of racism, providing special protections for people of color neither in the workplace nor outside of it. Mexican American and African American dockworkers were able to transform the government recognition that they did receive as workers into a vehicle for addressing their lack of government protection as people of color. They used their segregated union locals to attack inequality, laying the groundwork for the civil rights movement to come.

Thirty years later, responding to the Civil Rights Movement, Lyndon Johnson's Second New Deal did address the problems of institutional racism, on the job and elsewhere. Johnson's Civil Rights Act empowered the Attorney General's Office to litigate against organizations that discriminated against people of color in employment.

In 1969, the Attorney General filed the last Civil Rights Act violation case of the Johnson administration against the International Longshoremen's Association locals in Texas. In *US v ILA et al.*, the Attorney General asked the courts to order a merger of all the locals on the grounds that segregated locals were a violation of the Civil Rights Act.¹ Almost all of the Texas locals objected to integration and many men testified against desegregation in Court. District Judge Garza of the US District Court for the Southern District of Texas heard the case and rendered a decision in 1971. In his decision, Garza noted that obvious inequalities existed under the system of segregated locals, chiefly having to do with access to work. Black locals continued to have greater membership than white locals and therefore had to split their fifty percent of the work among more men. Individual incomes were higher among whites than among blacks.²

In addition to this widespread problem, Judge Garza highlighted the unique problems of two locals which both started in the 1930s. First, he made note of Local 1368 of Brownsville. This black local, which had turned to the NAACP when local stevedores refused it any work during the Depression, currently had settled for only twenty-five percent of the work instead of the normal fifty percent.³ Judge Garza mentioned in his decision that he had grown up in Brownsville and remembered well the controversy surrounding the opening of the port and the involvement of black workers.⁴ In his opinion, a merger of locals in the past would have prevented the present injustice.⁵

¹ *United States v. International Longshoremen's Association, et al.*, 334 F Supp. 976, (1971)

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

Garza also specifically mentioned the problems of Local 1576 of Galveston. Local 1576, which had replaced Local 1350, was now almost entirely composed of Mexican Americans. However, its members still worked only fruit ships and, the government found, like the Houston compressmen of the 1930s, had to fight with non-union workers for access to extra deep sea or coastwise longshore work.⁶ In Garza's opinion, "There is no question that individuals belonging to Local 1576 have been denied an opportunity to work."⁷

Despite these findings, Judge Garza did not order the mandatory merger of the locals. Instead he ordered the Attorney General's office and the ILA to develop an alternative solution, e.g. merging only hiring halls, that would eliminate the inequality but maintain the separate locals. Garza argued that this would avoid the difficulties of dissolution of separately owned properties and the integration of multiple seniority systems.⁸ Garza may also have been moved by the testimonies of multiple black longshoremen, who all desired maintenance of separate locals. According to the Court's opinion, these testimonies claimed that

by having their own unions and their own union officials, [they] have been able to better themselves by being able to hold high positions in their locals, and have been recognized in the community as a separate, powerful voice for the Negro communities, and has [sic] attained for them and the Negro people of the community, a standing which they could not have otherwise attained.⁹

Negotiations between the ILA and the Attorney General's office became irrelevant in 1974 when, due to a jurisdictional change, such employment discrimination cases became

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

the sole provenance of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC took up the case with renewed vigor and appealed Garza's decision to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, where they secured the decision they sought: the mandatory integration of all locals.¹⁰

Judge Goldberg, who wrote the decision for the 5th Circuit Court in 1975, was not moved by black testimonies in favor of separate locals. The Court found that segregated locals stigmatized black workers. "It does not matter that many of the blacks currently in the segregated local have come to regard it as a voice of the black community. The effect of such segregation is likely to be viewed as a negative one by many blacks considering potentials jobs."¹¹ Goldberg based his decision on his particular understanding of the purpose of the union. "A union is not a social club; it is a fundamental economic instrument in our society."¹² As such, the Court found the community endeavors of the ILA to be irrelevant and dismissed the alternative interpretations of the union that longshoremen had presented.

Goldberg concluded with a passionate condemnation of segregated locals: It "is ludicrous to say in the seventh decade of the twentieth / century ... as our society and courts have struggled with the great task of cleansing the vicious inequities which have beset our black citizens, that segregated unionism is to receive the ... blessing of ... this court."¹³

¹⁰ Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v International Longshoremen's Association, et al., 511 F.2d 273 (1975).

¹¹ Ibid., 17.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid., 20-21

Goldberg's eloquence did not sway the majority of ILA members who continued to protest the Court's decision. All Texas ILA locals, save one, pursued multiple appeals and counter-suits to invalidate the order to segregate. They succeeded in delaying integration for another nine years. Finally, in 1984, the 5th Circuit Court upheld a District court order to merge locals.¹⁴ Having exhausted most of their legal options, the longshoremen submitted to the Court's decision. At that point, the men of the ILA were confronted with the difficult, and long delayed task, of creating a common vision of unionism.

¹⁴ EEOC v International Longshoremen, 746 F.2d 810 (1984).

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