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THE ILWU BOYCOTT OF SOUTH AFRICAN CARGO

by John Williams

It was about 11:00 p.m. on a cool, windy night in November 1984. Wisps of fog swirled around Pier 80 at the foot of Army Street south of downtown San Francisco, in a district of warehouses, railroad tracks, and aging houses. Tall, thin, yet muscular, Leo Robinson drew on his third Camel of the hour, relaxing at the controls of his "whirlycrane," which can jerk up to 70 tons from the hold of a ship and bring it to the deck. However, Robinson was through winching cargo from the bowels of the Nedlloyd-Kimberly, a Dutch vessel. Beyond his hearing, the boss was telling the other members of Robinson's work gang that the Australian cargo was finished, and the South African freight was next. The boss was wrong. That shipment of tons of cold rolled steel, tin plate, auto safety plate glass, apple concentrate, and other cargo would stay in the Nedlloyd-Kimberly for eleven more days. The longshoremen turned their backs on the South African cargo and climbed the ladder to the deck. Robinson left his crane. They all marched from the ship.

"When I saw them starting up the ladder, that's when I started down from the crane," he explained in a February 5 interview for this article. Speaking for the longshore workers, Robinson directed no anger toward South Africa, "I passed the point of anger a long, long time ago," he said. "It's a matter of a certain morality or conscience; it's a law that's never been applied, never been tested—the law of conscience. Martin Luther King described it in his letter from the Birmingham jail, 'Man's law is opposed to a higher law.'"

Under apartheid, blacks in South Africa are constitutionally barred from voting or holding office—although 73% of the population is black. Books and publications critical of apartheid are banned. In the past year, more than 1,000 people have been "detained," i.e., arrested, without charges, including the President of South Africa's largest union. Last September, all meetings expressing any criticism of the government were banned for 21 days, and police killed seven black coal miners and injured 23 during labor demonstrations. Last November, the *New York Times* reported that 40% of the South African labor force participated in a general strike.

Robinson believes that South African labor protests have received scant American media attention compared with events in Poland for instance. Those who shared that belief, helped prompt the boycott of Nedlloyd-Kimberly's South African cargo. "It was time to bring some type of awareness to the community about what was going on," he said. "There were arrests of South African trade unionists, and it was time to make a public statement." He cited another reason. "It's not a question of protectionism, but workers in steel, glass, agriculture—they have a stake here, too. There's huge amounts of South African steel coming in. While auto workers are thrown out of work, Ford is closing here and going to South Africa. GM in particular, and Ford also, cooperate with the South African government. Ford fired its entire black workforce in Port Elizabeth. While Ford was laying off all its workers in Milpitas, it was spending \$245 million in South Africa for a new plant facility."

Within Local 10 of the ILWU, pressure for a boycott of South African cargo had built for several years. In 1976, the local passed a resolution against handling South African freight, and the International followed suit a year later. A South African liberation support group formed to educate the membership about that country's policies. The militant, progressive tradition of the West Coast longshore union, dating back to 1930's boycotts of cargo for fascist Italy, and scrap metal for Japan, combined in this case with what Robinson described as, "... a certain basic morality. ... it's not difficult to understand why most longshoremen object to working South African cargo."

Robinson's shift was the first to refuse to work the Nedlloyd-Kimberly. The next day and night, and for a total of eleven days, the union dispatched work gangs from their Fisherman's Wharf hiring hall to pier 80, where the dock workers turned in their dispatch slips to the boss, refused to work the ship and turned away, ignoring the pay loss of \$198 a shift. "A loss of a week's, a night's, a day's pay, it was not considered after it started," Robinson emphasized. "We were surprised how long it lasted."

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The employer association for the shipping lines, the Pacific Maritime Association, claimed the work stoppage violated the ILWU-PMA labor agreement. The PMA took the union to arbitration, and the referee ruled against Local 10. However, the union argued the workers were protesting as individuals. "The rest of the waterfront was still working," Robinson points out. After the arbitrator's decision, the workers still refused to touch the South African cargo.

The PMA then sought an injunction and fines in Federal District Court, insisting that the boycott was illegal and the union was liable for damages. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 made such legal action possible, when it allowed employers to sue unions in federal court for damages from work stoppages that violate a no-strike clause. Additionally, the 1970 Supreme Court decision in *Boys Market* permitted federal courts to enjoin strikes. It was clear that the district court in this case could subject the Union to substantial fines, and could possibly extend penalties to individual workers. The Union had no practical alternative and was forced to end the boycott. The restrictions of contemporary labor law prevailed once more against the freedom of union workers to express their conscience on a moral issue. Similar kinds of expression have resulted in arrests, jail terms and fines for hundreds of citizens throughout this country in recent months, in widespread picketing and demonstration activities focused on the same moral issue.

The ILWU boycott of the Nedlloyd-Kimberly spurred picketing and demonstrations at PMA headquarters in Oakland in the following weeks. It encouraged continuing efforts to close the Port of Oakland to all shipments of South African cargo. Hopefully, it will lend encouragement as well to UC students in their efforts to convince the Regents that they can and should divest their huge investment portfolio of securities which help to finance the policies of apartheid in South Africa.

-- John Williams

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