

Longshore industry.

PACIFIC MARITIME ASSOCIATION

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THE LONDON DOCK STRIKE
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FOREWORD

This narrative of the London Dock Strike of October 1954 is timely, not only because of its recent conclusion but because one of the issues most publicized was that of overtime -- an issue involved in the jurisdictional dispute between sailors and longshoremen on the Pacific Coast current at the time of this writing.

This study also sets forth the many problems confronting British dock employers: problems arising because contending unions operate on the docks; problems caused by the influences of conflicting political ideologies within the unions; and problems derived from the varying effectiveness of union leaders. All of these are familiar to employers on the Pacific Coast. The degree of success the British have achieved in solving these problems will be equally familiar to many PMA members.

Source material for this research report consisted largely of English newspapers, as indicated by the footnotes, reports published by the American press, and interviews with the Labor Advisor to the British Consul-General.

GLOSSARY

- NASD -- National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, a London port union of about 7,000 members, organized mainly on the Surrey docks on the right bank of the Thames. Like most British unions, NASD was affiliated with the Trade Union Congress until suspended during the strike for raiding their fellow dock union, the
- TGWU -- Transport and General Workers Union, one of the largest and most powerful British unions has a membership of 1,250,000. It includes the majority of the British dockers, men employed in road transportation and other general workers. Never officially on strike, many members went out in sympathy with NASD, as did the
- WLTBU -- Watermen, Lightermen, Tugmen and Bargemen's Union, composed of the men who move ships from dock to dock in the port. In other ports of Great Britain, these men are organized in the same union with dockers, but in London, they form a separate union. Like most other unions, it is affiliated with
- TUC -- Trade Union Congress, a national union organization comparable to a combined AFL-CIO in this country. Like the AFL or CIO, it is an affiliation only; each union does its own bargaining and is completely autonomous. The dockers' unions negotiate with
- National Association of Port Employers. This association joins with the unions in forming a National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry which

negotiates the National Master Contract. The National Association is composed of local associations such as the Port of London Employers Association which bargains with the union locals on local matters not included in the Master Contract. Both the employers and the unions are represented on the

National Dock Labour Board -- which is composed of an impartial chairman and vice chairman, four members chosen from the employers and four persons representing the unions. This board was appointed by the Minister of Labour to administer the

National Dock Labour Scheme -- A scheme to decasualize dock work, growing out of the Dock Workers Bill, passed in 1946. Too complex a system to explain here, it should be mentioned that both employers and unions are obligated to abide by its regulations. The present strike quickly lost impetus after a Government Court of Inquiry decided the NASD was in violation of the Dock Labour Scheme.

THE LONDON DOCK STRIKE

Introduction

Workers on the docks of London agreed to return to work on Monday, November 1, following a 28-day strike that immobilized 340 ships and delayed 200 million pounds (\$560 million) worth of exports and imports. Of even more far-reaching importance was the strike's possible effect on British trade unionism, for this was a work stoppage led, in many instances, by unofficial strike committees while the responsible union officials pleaded vainly with the workers to return to their jobs. Much of the blame for the dock disturbance has been charged against the Communists. There is no doubt that they played a substantial role but their strategy was one of taking advantage of the existing disputes in a situation "so confused that it may be in doubt if one in twenty of the men who have loyally come out on strike has much idea why he is striking." 1/

Perhaps the clearest method of describing the London dock strike is by means of a chronological history -- a day-to-day account of actual happenings and the reasons behind them. Such an account will indicate clearly to anyone familiar with waterfront labor problems that strikes in England -- as in this country -- are on the surface often

1/ Manchester Guardian Weekly, October 7, 1954, p.9

based on relatively inconsequential "beefs" rather than concern with major wage settlements. Indeed, this was the conclusion reached by the British Government's Court of Inquiry into the Dock Strike whose report stated that "the issue is a narrow one and should be capable of solution without difficulty in the industry's negotiation machinery."^{2/}

Causes of the Dock Strike

On October 1 a thousand dockers went out on an unofficial strike over rates paid for handling meat cargoes. The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers -- the smaller of two waterfront employees' unions in London -- voted to make the strike official on Monday, October 4, and on that date all 7,000 members of this union refused to work. The issues at stake have a long history:

Prior to the war, dockworkers were paid special rates for sorting meat into various categories. Even though wartime meat rationing made such sorting unnecessary, the special rate was continued through the war years. When rationing ended and sorting was reinstated, the men immediately asked for higher rates and more men to each gang so that individual dockmen would not lose piece rate earnings while the sorting delayed loading meat cargoes. The employers did not believe the men were entitled to any more money for this particular assignment but agreed to discuss the matter

^{2/} London Times, October 28, 1954

with the Transport and General Workers Union, a powerful labor organization representing workers in other phases of the transportation industry as well as dockers. NASD refused to join in the negotiations with the employers unless the discussions were broadened to include other topics.

This position was taken by the union because NASD wished to discuss the question of overtime. In January, the NASD had placed a ban on overtime work in protest against the employers' refusal to agree that overtime was "voluntary". The employers' position was that under the National Dock Labour Scheme to which both employers and workers are responsible, there is an obligation on every man to work for "reasonable periods" which includes necessary overtime. There had been no complaints from the London branch of the TGWU about overtime work but the NASD insisted that some employers in London were making arbitrary demands for overtime which placed a hardship on the men involved. NASD took the position that whether or not one should work overtime was an individual decision which each man should make for himself. The employers said they were willing to discuss the issue if the union withdrew its ban on overtime work but this the NASD refused to do. Thus, the negotiations which preceded the October strike excluded the NASD solely because that union refused to limit the discussions to the immediate problem of special rates for meat cargoes.

Consequently, the negotiations resulted in a higher rate of pay and an increase in the size of gangs handling meat cargoes. Usually, gangs from the two unions work at different docks (NASD men are concentrated at the Surrey Docks) but in times of gang shortages or surpluses at particular docks, gangs from the two unions will work side by side, sometimes handling the same cargoes. When NASD members discovered that only their fellow workers who were members of the TGWU were entitled to the higher rate of pay on meat sorting, they walked out. The employers offered again to discuss the issue of meat rates if the men would return to work; the secretary of the union, Richard Barrett, asked the men to postpone their strike action; both appeals to the men failed.

Diary of the Dock Strike

When the strike began officially on October 4 with the 7,000 members of the NASD, unofficial efforts were made to persuade TGWU members to join their fellow dock workers. Arthur Deakin, secretary of the TGWU and the most powerful figure in the British trade union movement, condemned the strike as a "reckless attempt to involve the ports of this country in chaos" and stated categorically that members of his union would not join in the walkout.

By October 5, the strike had, nevertheless, spread unofficially to the TGWU. At a mass meeting of strikers over

the weekend, Vic Marney, a member of the TGWU, "who has been prominent in past unofficial strikes in the port" 3/ was elected chairman of the unofficial strike committee. Observers feared that the strike would spread to ports in England where the picture is further confused by inter-union rivalry. Until recently, the NASD was organized only in the port of London; in all the provincial ports, dockworkers were affiliated with the TGWU. On October 3, NASD took in 1,600 Birkenhead dockers who were dissatisfied with the TGWU and announced it was accepting membership applications from discontented TGWU members in Hull. TGWU protested this "poaching" of its members to the Trade Union Congress, the national labor organization to which almost all unions in Great Britain belong. (The Trade Union Congress would be generally comparable to a combined AFL-CIO in this country.) Concurrently in Manchester, there was a one-day token strike in protest against the dismissal of eight men by the Dock Labour Board following the questioning of these men regarding an unofficial strike the month before.

By October 7, 13,000 men were idle in London -- 7,000 officially on strike from NASD and 6,000 sympathetic strikers from TGWU. At this point, the P & O Steam Navigation Company used Lascars (Indian seamen) to move baggage and mail. The union hailed this as a breach of agreement and a "violation of the National Dock Labour Scheme." The employers denied that loading baggage and mail was an infringement of the dock labour scheme on the grounds that it had never been established

3. London Times, October 4, 1954

that the loading of passengers' luggage and mail was dock work. Nevertheless, this action drew the permanent men (clerks paid on a weekly basis) into the strike. By October 8, 17,000 men were idle which meant that at least half of the TGWU were striking despite their leaders' pleas to remain on the job. On this day, loading and unloading of ships at the London docks came to a complete standstill.

On October 9, 18,700 men were striking, including employees of the cold storage depots along the waterfront. TGWU officials attempted to persuade the tally clerks to return to work but this they refused to do so long as the Lascars were being used to move luggage. Concurrently, the Trade Union Congress, after a special investigation, found that the NASD had violated the agreement between unions not to "poach" each other's members and ordered the Stevedores and Dockers to cease organizing activities in any ports where they did not have members prior to August 17. The NASD retaliated with an announcement that Liverpool dockers had asked for application forms to request affiliation with this union.

By October 14, the strike had spread to 21,000 men and other complicating factors had been added: 1) Dockworkers in provincial ports refused to handle any ships diverted from London because of the strike. 2) Southampton dockers struck for 24 hours to manifest their sympathy to the London men. 3) Executives of the Watermen, Lightermen, Tugmen and Bargemen's Union recommended that their members join the strike. This

union is small, but powerful, in that it controls traffic along the Thames River and strike action by it would hamper the supply of coal and fuel oil to factories on the Thames and the disposal of refuse from London. On October 16, all 4500 members of the bargemen's union walked out.

Heretofore, the government had been loath to interfere in the strike, but on October 15, Sir Walter Monckton, Minister of Labour, asked representatives of the port employers and of the unions concerned, to meet with him separately to discuss the situation. The strike had now been in progress for over ten days and the London Times observed

It is now clear that, although many of the dock workers joined spontaneously in the strike, Communists are at work in more than one branch of the transport industry and intend to take advantage of every grievance and excuse to increase the dislocation of services. There is growing evidence of a general plan, directed from a central point and carried out through agitators who have been active in past unofficial strikes. Their work has been made easier by the dispute between the Transport and General Workers Union and the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers over the alleged poaching of members of the TGWU in Hull and Birkenhead by the smaller union. 4/

The Labour Minister appointed a Court of Inquiry and requested the men to return to work while the inquiry was in progress. Instead the number of idle men increased to 22,300 as all the remaining permanent men joined the strike. Birkenhead dockers who had recently joined the NASD struck

4. London Times, October 15, 1954

October 18; Liverpool dock workers went out on October 19; 2000 Hull workers joined the strike October 20.

The unofficial strike leaders in the TGWU were careful not to urge the men to stop work and claimed that the extensions of the strike resulted from the "democratic" vote of mass meetings. Arthur Deakin, head of the TGWU, maintained that both the dock strike and the London bus strike (which was also in progress at this point) were part of a Communist conspiracy:

These people are not concerned with getting settlements of properly formulated wage claims. Their only desire is to provoke and maintain a continuous agitation... My appeal to union members everywhere is to get into their branches and take vigorous and determined action in response to this attempt to subordinate the real interest of trade unionism to the political purposes of the Communist Party. 5/

The head of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers angrily denied this accusation. About the same time the Communist Party publicly attacked the NASD for their "poaching activities" against the TGWU. In reporting this series of events, the London Times added sedately that "many of the unofficial leaders of the TGWU men on sympathetic strike are believed to have Communist associations."

The Trade Unions Congress issued an unprecedented statement regarding the strike, deploring any action likely to destroy the established machinery of collective bargaining. On October 22, at the peak of the strike, 43,500 men and 304 ships were idle. Of the men involved, 10,000 were official

5. London Times, October 18, 1954

strikers of the NASD, 4500 were from the bargemen's union-- the rest, and hence the majority, were unofficial strikers from the TGWU.

During the last week of October, several events indicated the strike effort was weakening. The Government had decided moving troops in to load and unload perishables would only anger the men and perhaps lengthen the work stoppage. It was left to the leaders of the TGWU to persuade the men to resume work and this they made unremitting efforts to do. By October 28, a few dockers had drifted back to work, not because the issue had been settled, but probably because they needed the wages. On the same day, the British Government's Court of Inquiry issued an interim report, upholding the employers' position that individual workers are under obligation to work overtime if necessary and stating that the NASD was in violation of the National Dock Labour Scheme both in their ban on overtime and in the current strike.

In the meantime, the Trade Union Congress decided without dissent to suspend NASD on October 27, because of its enrollment of TGWU members. This marked the first instance in which a union has been expelled from the TUC since 1928 when the National Union of Seamen was suspended.

At a meeting with representatives of the Labour Ministry, London port employers suggested as a solution that if the men would return to work (and this term was to include reasonable overtime) on November 1, negotiations could begin

with the NASD on that date for an agreement on practical arrangements for overtime work. Officials of the NASD said the men would return to work if the National Association of Port Employers would abide by the formula devised by the London employers. The National Association refused to agree to this and were upheld by the Minister of Labour who, in a speech before the House of Commons, pointed out that the dispute on overtime was confined to London and the strikes in provincial ports were unofficial sympathy strikes. For the port employers to take the position asked by the NASD "would involve the recognition by the employers of unofficial strikers who had stopped work in support of the London strike against the repeated instructions of their union, the TGWU..."

Arthur Deakin, head of the TGWU agreed with this position, adding that his union, while asserting that overtime was voluntary, accepted that it was necessary and that any question of its application was a matter for negotiation at the local level. The unofficial strike leaders made the most of Deakin's statement, pointing out to their followers that since the union officially took the position that overtime was voluntary, its leaders would now press for the principle in future negotiations. This attitude was expected, for the strike leaders had been groping for an excuse to end the stoppage since the Government's Court of Inquiry condemned it.

Workers on the London docks officially returned to work November 1 under substantially the same conditions which

had been offered them several times earlier in the strike. The moral victory which they claimed was largely one of semantics. The port employers announced the losses to Great Britain as a result of the strike which were irretrievable: some food cargoes had deteriorated; export markets had been lost; deliveries to sub-Arctic ports in Canada were made impossible because the ice-free season was ending; and exports for the Christmas trade were in danger of arriving too late.

Conclusion

The present peace on the London docks is an uneasy one. The issues which began the strike are still unresolved. Bitter feeling exists between the two unions representing the dock workers: the Transport and General Workers Union refuses to associate with the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers since the latter union enrolled TGWU members. This increases the difficulties of the employer group who have, in the past, bargained with the two unions in one session. They must now bargain separately with each union. The NASD has indicated that it will not accept its suspension from the Trade Union Congress without a fight and that it plans to seek negotiating rights for its new members -- a step which will be strongly resisted by the TGWU and may result in further dock disputes. Some members of both unions are believed to be aligned with the Communist Party and disinterested observers contend that their purpose is to create confusion whenever possible on the London docks. All of these are explosive elements. None is apt to resolve itself.