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THE ILWU IN NEW ORLEANS: CIO RADICALISM IN THE CRESCENT  
CITY, 1937-1957

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

The International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union was a militant, racially-integrated labor organization affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations and based in San Francisco. In 1937 representatives of this union came to New Orleans to organize waterfront workers and warehousemen. The ILWU's failure to displace the International Longshoremen's Association (AFL) as the bargaining agent for dockworkers did not prevent it from establishing a local affiliate among warehouse workers, under the leadership of Willie Dorsey, a Louisiana Negro.

In 1943 representatives of the International union expelled Dorsey and four fellow officials of the New Orleans local for misappropriation of union funds. Despite the maneuverings of Dorsey and his supporters in the Catholic church and the New Orleans labor movement, Local 207 was re-organized under the new leadership of Andrew Nelson, a young black Communist. Nelson led the union during the height of its strength in the years following World War II.

The post-war campaign against Communism in the United States led to the expulsion of the ILWU from the CIO and the decline in influence of Local 207 during the Truman administration. Nelson was convicted of falsifying the Taft-Hartley anti-communist affidavits in 1956 and died shortly afterwards. Local 207 merged with the United Packinghouse Workers Union in July, 1957.



## INTRODUCTION

The appearance of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) on the New Orleans waterfront in 1937 marked the beginning of a new era for the labor movement in that Southern city. To be sure, dramatic strikes and radical agitators had disturbed the tranquility of the port before. The Crescent City had been shut down for three days in 1892 by the first general strike in the American South; over 30,000 workers had been involved. Both the Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World had spread their doctrines of class struggle and racial solidarity among Louisiana workers. But it was not until the upsurge of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the Great Depression that a militant, racially integrated labor organization led by political radicals could gain a foothold in New Orleans, organizing local workers, negotiating contracts with local employers, and serving as a local forum for left-wing ideology.

To date, little has been written about Local 207 in particular or about the Louisiana labor scene in general. F. Ray Marshall's Labor in the South (1967) provides the only account of the ILWU's experiences beyond the waterfront campaign of 1938, and even this narrative leaves the reader with the mistaken impression that Local 207 disappeared in the mid-forties. Still, Marshall's book is one of the few monographs on Southern history that focuses on the labor movement.

Students of Louisiana history do not have much more. They can begin with Roger Shugg's Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana (1939), which



examines "poor whites" during the period from 1840 to 1875. For later events, one must turn to Shugg again; his undocumented address to the Louisiana Historical Society, "The New Orleans General Strike of 1892," was published in the Louisiana Historical Quarterly (1938) and remains the only source of information on that event. For the dramatic period of the Depression, a Tulane University graduate student, Arthur R. Pearce, produced an unpublished M.A. thesis, "The Rise and Decline of Labor in New Orleans," which appeared in 1938.

Occasional insights can be found elsewhere, especially about the nineteenth century organizing of black workers in New Orleans, but such information is scattered and incomplete.<sup>1</sup> Few labor leaders left behind memoirs or extensive records. Oscar Ameringer, a socialist journalist who was active in several organizing campaigns in New Orleans during the early 1900's produced the only published autobiography, If You Don't Weaken (1940). One of his associates, I.W.W. poet Covington Hall, however, left an unpublished manuscript, "Labor Struggles in the Deep South," which provides a rich narrative from the perspective of another radical participant of those campaigns.

If the history of the labor movement in Louisiana and the South has been neglected for too long, surely the CIO period now merits attention as one of the least examined, yet significant eras in the evolution of the modern South. The twenty year history of Local 207 of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union in New Orleans from 1937 to 1957, tests both the barriers and possibilities of radical industrial unionism in the deep South.



## CHAPTER I

## THE CIO INVASION

Beginning in 1936, the CIO conducted the most massive organizing campaign in the history of American labor. Unlike the American Federation of Labor, the CIO advocated open and equal membership for all industrial workers, black and white. There were no constitutional restrictions, no segregated locals, no Jim Crow rituals. Black organizers were employed to take the CIO message directly to the rank and file. National CIO leaders such as John L. Lewis knowingly hired members of the Communist Party, primarily because of their special interest in the unity of black and white workers and their achievement of such unity in unions set up by the Trade Union Unity League, a left-wing forerunner of the CIO.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most militant and radical of the CIO unions was the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, based in California and led by the Australian-born leftist, Harry Bridges. The dramatic general strike in San Francisco in 1934 had set the stage for the CIO upsurge on the West Coast and thrust Bridges into the spotlight in the role of radical labor agitator. In 1937, he led his union out of the old AFL-affiliated International Longshoremen's Association and into the CIO, resolving to unite in one organization "all workers, regardless of race, religion, creed, color, political affiliation or nationality." Like other CIO unions, the ILWU set up interracial anti-discrimination committees



to insure that no members would be fired or mistreated because of race or color. Over and over again, the ILWU in meetings, publications, and direct contact with the workers, attacked racial discrimination and segregation.<sup>2</sup>

The ILWU combined its integrationist policy with a democratic union structure, militant negotiating, and an aggressive program to organize the unorganized. The union's experience in the 1934 general strike had not only demonstrated the close relationship between longshoremen and other workers along the waterfront, but it also convinced the union leadership of the need to form a warehouse division for those workers who handled the freight after it left the docks. Young warehousemen such as J. R. "Bob" Robertson learned the lesson of solidarity in 1934 and led the "march inland," organizing thousands of workers in the Bay Area's public warehouses, cold storage plants, grain, flour, and feed mills, and wholesale grocery warehouses. The union often had to fight the Teamsters as well as employers' associations on the road to becoming "an entrenched power" on the California labor scene.<sup>3</sup>

By late 1937, with locals established up and down the Pacific Coast from Seattle to San Diego, the ILWU had set its sights on New Orleans, second largest port in the nation and a key Southern city with a long history of bloody labor struggles.<sup>4</sup> Longshoremen in the Crescent City were organized by the ILA into segregated locals, both descendants of company unions formed by the New Orleans Steamship Association during the open shop days of the 1920's. Rank and file dockworkers resented the "shape-up" hiring system endorsed by the ILA, which also required its members to pay five percent of their weekly wages back to the union.<sup>5</sup> Of the 10,000 or so warehousemen in New Orleans, few belonged to any



union at all and none were protected by collective bargaining agreements. Longshoremen at that time earned wages of 75¢ per hour; warehousemen rarely earned more than 35¢. The great majority of these workers were unskilled, uneducated blacks, toiling long hours under the poorest conditions. Stricken by a succession of misfortunes--first, company unionism followed by racial strife, strike-breaking, corruption and double-dealing by AFL officials--many New Orleans workers secretly longed for a new Moses to lead them out of the bondage of the depression-ravaged South.

The ILWU sent its best organizer, Bob Robertson, on its mission to the Gulf port. A big, rugged Texan, Robertson had left his poor farm family while still in his teens, worked as a field hand, lumberjack, and other jobs which a grade school dropout could get. He even boxed for awhile under the name of K. O. Rhodes, until he decided that getting beat up and splitting \$25 with his manager wasn't worth it. He arrived in San Francisco in 1932 and went to work in a grocery warehouse, where he discovered unionism and helped organized the warehouse division of the ILWU. Later he would become Director of Organization and First Vice-President of the International, Harry Bridges' right-hand man.<sup>6</sup> Robertson and his team of CIO organizers found a receptive group of militant black workers on the New Orleans riverfront, some veterans of a violent dock strike in 1936 and others participants of the bitter factional fights still going on in the ILA.

One of these men was Willie Dorsey, a burly black longshoreman from Lumville, Louisiana, who had worked on the river for twenty years. Dorsey had been a member of the original Longshoremen's Protective Benevolent Association<sup>7</sup> and ILA 1419, but he had converted to the CIO and now went to work for them as an organizer. A former Baptist preacher, Dorsey



could spell-bind an audience with the gospel of industrial unionism, as he did one evening in October, 1937, at the corner of Adele and Tchoupitoulas Streets.

"We have suffered untold misery for fourteen years," he reminded a crowd of hundreds of dockers. "Thanks be to God the CIO has come. . . . Get into the march, for we longshoremen and dockworkers are three million strong and are bound to win." He stressed that CIO unions were for all workers, skilled and unskilled, black as well as white, and predicted that soon "craft unions will be swept off the face of the earth." He also emphasized the democratic aspect of CIO unions, which he insisted were "for the rank and file, with officials chosen by the membership."<sup>8</sup>

During the winter and spring, CIO organizers signed up enough cards to petition the National Labor Relations Board for a representation election among waterfront workers. Robertson, Dorsey, and the other CIO men planned to give the ILA a run for its money. Harry Bridges himself came to town in April, 1938, and spoke before a mostly-black audience of several thousand maritime workers. He emphasized his West Coast union's policy of multiracial unity and attacked the hated five percent fee required by the ILA.<sup>9</sup> Though he received a warm reception from the workers, Bridges must have realized that it would take more than speeches to break the ILA hold on the New Orleans waterfront.

A hearing before the NLRB was set for June 20, 1938, to determine whether a representation election between the ILA and ILWU should be held. The hearing began amid the turmoil of a violent truck drivers' strike. Eight hundred workers belonging to the CIO-affiliated Transport Workers Union struck nine transfer companies on June 21. Violence broke out between strikers and AFL Teamsters, as two strikers were shot and twenty-



two were arrested for "loitering." Later that day, police rounded up 75 more CIO members and jailed them in a "preventive" move.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, at the hearing concerning the waterfront, numerous long-shoremen testified that workers had to hide their CIO membership in order to get work. They charged that the ILA leadership assessed each man one dollar for a fund to fight the growing influence of the CIO. One long-shoreman, Paul LaGraize, testified that New Orleans dockers were dissatisfied with the local "shape-up" hiring system, which forced workers to gather as early as 4:30 in the morning to get work assignments beginning at 7:00. His own special complaint was that the shape-up left the workers vulnerable to favoritism by the stevedore companies' hiring foremen. LaGraize stated that though the CIO had 3000 longshore members, few were willing to admit it openly, since they faced discrimination in hiring.<sup>11</sup> If the NLRB investigators had any doubts about the fears expressed by LaGraize, New Orleans police quickly dispelled them.

One June 24, city police raided the CIO headquarters at 222 Crossman Street. Eighty-four people were arrested and charged with vagrancy and loitering. Six women office workers were also arrested under the city's "dangerous and suspicious characters" ordinance. Acting Chief of Police John Grosch stated: "There is no room in New Orleans for CIO communists and reds, and if I can run them out of New Orleans, I'm going to do it."<sup>12</sup>

Grosch did his best. The next day, police picked up Bob Robertson and told him to leave New Orleans or else. "Else" meant being taken to a back room in the Tenth Precinct station where he was beaten until two vertebrae were broken.<sup>13</sup> Two other CIO organizers were also beaten by police who confiscated union records and membership cards in a second raid on CIO headquarters.



While CIO activists criticized the police actions as fascist, Louisiana legislators in session in Baton Rouge feared the possible results if CIO unionism were allowed to spread throughout the state. Only July 2, 1938, the legislature adopted unanimously a resolution condemning communism, directly all municipal and state officials in Louisiana to stamp it out. Speakers for the resolution linked John L. Lewis to the Communist Party and urged that John Brophy, national CIO vice-president scheduled to speak in New Orleans later that week, "be dumped into the Mississippi River." While not mentioning the CIO as an organization by name, the resolution noted that in New Orleans the "organization of negroes" had "unfortunately taken root" and now "endangers white supremacy." Undoubtedly referring to Harry Bridges, the legislators denounced ideas brought to Louisiana by "alien emissaries and agitators" and "imported alien radicals."<sup>14</sup>

This anti-communist hysteria was fueled by violent clashes between CIO members and rival groups affiliated with the AFL. As summer drifted into fall, things appeared to cool off leading up to the NLRB certification election on the waterfront. Bridges returned to the city for a final speech, predicting that the ILWU would win by 80% over the ILA. He had miscalculated badly; on October 14, the ILA received 2701 votes to only 874 for the ILWU.<sup>15</sup> The results surprised everyone. What happened to all the men on the docks who held CIO membership cards?

Simple vote-buying may be one answer. Retired longshoreman William Lombard recalled that the day before the election thousands of dockworkers received envelopes containing a \$10 bill and instructions to gather at Shakespeare Park that night for the purpose of "sweeping the wharf." At the park the ILA supplied free food and liquor at a huge

Racist  
anti-  
Communism

← p. 8



party which lasted until the wee hours. Paul Hortman, president of ILA 1419, provided transportation on police-escorted trucks to and from the party, as well as to and from the polls on S. Front St. the next day.<sup>16</sup> Another dockworker who campaigned for the CIO, Avery Alexander, estimated that the AFL spent over \$100,000 in the drive.<sup>17</sup>

Paul Heide, one of the organizers who had come down to New Orleans with Bob Robertson, concluded that fear in the hearts and minds of the workers prevented them from voting for the CIO. This fear had its roots in generations of slavery and subservience, a fear of the "white boss" among black men who wanted improvement and a better union but were afraid to fight for it. The white boss was represented in Louisiana politics by the Democratic party machine, led by New Orleans mayor Robert Maestri and Governor Richard Leche, both of whom were reported to have appeared on the docks to urge the men to vote for the AFL. On the job, foremen at T. Smith and Son Stevedore Company called workers together and warned of a 50% wage cut if the CIO union won the election.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Heide expounded, this fear stemmed from religion and superstition: "The Southern Negro is only one step removed from the primitive superstitions of the African jungle tribes. For generations in this country their preachers, like modern day medicine men, have taught them to obey, lest they be shipped down the river." Local churchmen, with the exception of a few Catholic priests, took a stand against the CIO from their pulpits.<sup>19</sup>

Fear of unemployment was perhaps the underlying fear. A black longshoreman with an ILA card was a black man with steady work and, in that sense, was better off than many of his peers during the 1930's. Heide made this clear in his report: "The Negro worker exists on



practically nothing, getting the bare necessities of life from his work on the riverfront, and no more. He has no reserve, and no chance of getting any. It is almost impossible for him to get relief here, and the fear of unemployment causes him to go against all of his inner convictions."<sup>20</sup> Fearing for their jobs, many probably failed to recognize the more equitable division of work assignments which would come through a joint union-management hiring hall, such as the one gained by the ILWU in San Francisco. Too few New Orleans longshoremen understood this reform system, designed to correct the traditional "shape-up" arrangement which had led so often to favoritism and corruption in hiring practices by company foremen. ✓

Heide's analysis of the climate of fear among the New Orleans workers falls short in one aspect, that which he probably could not admit to himself. A white Californian who viewed Southern blacks as "only one step removed from the African jungle" was probably perceived by those blacks as being somewhat strange himself. The ILWU men, dedicated and idealistic as they were, still came from far away and brought new ideas. The white press and the white bosses regarded them as "aliens, outside agitators, and communists." If the average blue-collar worker did not know what these terms meant, he probably still feared the trouble which they stirred up. ILA president Joseph Ryan was smart in relying on "Big Paul" Hortman, a home-grown New Orleans black man, to head things up for his union in this conflict. No doubt many local black dockworkers looked at Hortman and said, "he may be a no-good corrupt so-and-so, but at least he's our no-good corrupt so-and-so." ✓



## CHAPTER II

## THE DORSEY YEARS: CONFLICT AND CRISIS

Following their defeat in the waterfront election, the ILWU leaders returned to California, leaving the affairs of their New Orleans affiliate in the hands of Willie Dorsey. The ILWU continued to represent one small unit of longshoremen, those who worked for the Morgan Lines. This company shipped freight for the federal government and continued to employ around 100 ILWU dockers under a collective bargaining agreement which was unaffected by the NLRB election. Blackballed from the ILA and therefore virtually banished from the waterfront, Dorsey was to use the Morgan Lines Local 202 as a base from which to agitate among longshoremen for several years.

But his main task following the '38 defeat would be the New Orleans version of the "march inland," an organizing assault on the warehouse industry. Over the next four years Dorsey, along with a white organizer named Caleb Green, signed up over 300 workers in eighteen different warehouses in the New Orleans area. Green, hired by the ILWU as International Representative, also traveled to Mobile, Gulfport, and Baton Rouge, organizing for the ILWU. The New Orleans local was assigned number 207 and was known as the Warehouse and Distribution Workers Union, ILWU-CIO. The Union succeeded in winning contracts at such establishments as the Letellier-Philips Paper Co., J.T. Gibbons Feed Mill, George Matthews Feed Mill, the Kentucky Coffee Warehouse, New Orleans Cotton Compress,



United Rice Mills, and A. Marx and Sons Scrap Iron. Though conditions varied in these businesses, generally the work involved heavy lifting and packing in hot, poorly-ventilated buildings for 10-12 hours a day at less than 50¢ an hour. The great majority of these workers were unskilled and uneducated; most were black; few had ever belonged to a union before.

But they responded to Willie Dorsey, a man very much like themselves: church-going, gregarious, a country boy with a second-grade education, who left the little town upriver to work on a tugboat and ended up in New Orleans. The CIO had called him out of the hold of a ship, recognizing his talents as a strong, dramatic speaker who could still relate to the workers as one of their own. According to Dorsey's son John, his father had attracted the attention of the union one day at the pay window on the waterfront. Dorsey accused the foreman of "skimming," or not paying the men for all the time they had worked. When Dorsey challenged the foreman to a fight, he established his reputation as a man with guts and leadership ability.<sup>1</sup>

Running a union, however, requires more than fighting for the men and speaking out. Dorsey's lack of formal education must have been a factor in his failure to keep written records concerning his organizing activities and duties as president of Local 207. This task was left to Caleb Green, whose rather sketchy reports to the International furnish the only written records of the local during the period from 1939-42. During that time, the union encountered several problems that finally boiled over in the crisis of 1943.

In the spring of 1940, the union conducted strikes at the Kahns Pickery Cotton Warehouse and at Southern Scrap Iron, a firm still notorious



for its deplorable working conditions. Both of these strikes ended in failure, partly due to white workers crossing the picket lines of black strikers. Still the union continued to organize, beginning a drive at the Flintkote Tar Paper Mill, which employed several hundred men. In January, 1941 the union lost a certification election at Flintkote by only 55 votes. Green felt that the stumbling block to victory at this plant and in other shops around town was the fact that the officers of Local 207 were all blacks, and the majority of the workers at Flintkote were white. Green suggested that the ILWU issue a separate charter for the formation of another local for white members, though this type of organization was antithetical to ILWU principles and its constitution. When the International leadership ignored this proposal, Green went ahead and organized the Jim Crow section anyway.<sup>2</sup>

Dorsey, meanwhile, was involved in intrigues of his own as he continued to intervene in the affairs of the ILA. In that union, rank and file resentment against the hated five percent fee forced an investigation which revealed financial irregularities of over \$200,000. The NLRB placed Local 1419 in receivership temporarily after Paul Hortman resigned. In the ensuing struggle for power, Dorsey supported the "Progressive" faction led by his old friend J. Harvey Netter. Netter had campaigned with Dorsey for the CIO in 1938 but had managed to keep his ILA membership following that defeat. Now he ran for president of 1419 on a reform platform, promising to bring union democracy and an end to the five percent fee. Netter was elected in April, 1941, in a highly suspicious vote in which only one-fourth of those eligible cast ballots.<sup>3</sup>

The next year saw a series of internal disorders in ILA 1419 that nearly tore the union apart. An opposition faction went to court to have



Netter's election thrown out. During the trial, the judge sentenced Netter for contempt and ordered a new election to be held. A union meeting at the Elks restaurant turned into a free-for-all fight, as opponents charged Netter with misappropriation of funds. In all the confusion, Netter "forgot" to abolish the five percent fee. Willie Dorsey turned away from his old friend in May, 1942 and announced his support of Netter's opponent in the election set for June 1. "I believe there will be another money scandal . . . worse than the one under the Paul Hortman regime," Dorsey predicted. On the eve of the election, Netter was shot and wounded by "unknown assailants." Still, the election drew another poor turn-out, and Netter won.<sup>4</sup> New Orleans police never arrested anyone for Netter's shooting. Many longshoremen concluded that Netter orchestrated his own assassination attempt, just as he had rigged numerous union meetings and elections.

The bizarre events in Local 1419 foreshadowed the coming crisis in Dorsey's own union. His prediction of "another money scandal" might well have referred to Local 207, as the petty, nagging problem of delinquent dues payments grew into a dilemma which finally required action by the International union. Local 207 fell behind in its payments of "per capita tax" to the International in 1940, as the union fought two long strikes. Moreover, Dorsey tried to explain in letters to the ILWU treasurer that local members were reluctant to pay dues, since most of the ILWU contracts were open shop arrangements with no dues check-off. Besides, the scandals in the ILA made many New Orleans workers justifiably suspicious of dues payments.<sup>5</sup>

Green proved to be no more adept at financial management than Dorsey. The union lost another strike at Rickert Rice Mills, then lost one shop



which had been under contract. According to Green, dues-paying membership fell to one-third of the men at A. Marx and Sons because the workers became dissatisfied at the union's inability to win a wage increase. He decided that a strike was the only solution to this problem.<sup>6</sup>

To make matters worse, the Morgan Lines discontinued its service from New Orleans to New York, throwing all of the ILWU longshoremen out of work. Local 202 was dissolved; Dorsey prevailed on Harvey Netter to take some of these men into the ILA. About this time, Green also received a charter for his pet Jim Crow outfit, dubbed "unit 2" of Local 207. Given the problems which the union was having in New Orleans, the International was not about to turn down any new members; it sent a note of congratulations and promise of support to the new section.<sup>7</sup>

Despite an upturn in the union's progress in late 1941, per capita dues payments continued to lag four or five months behind schedule. Bob Robertson visited the city and instructed Dorsey and Green in the proper methods of dues collection and record-keeping. When the situation still did not improve, Robertson had the new ILWU Secretary-Treasurer, Eugene Paton, send the New Orleans officials a "sharp" letter.<sup>8</sup> Green had also kept postponing repayment of a personal debt he had incurred to the International. In August, 1942, Robertson finally issued Green an ultimatum: 1) immediately report income for the local for January-July, 1942; 2) close the local's books on the first of each month; 3) send the International's per capita tax by the tenth of the month, accounting for every dues-paying member; 4) explain this policy to the local's executive board. He warned that if the dues problem was not cleared up in sixty days, the International would have to step in, as they had been patient and understanding up to that time. If the local officials "are not capable



of following a constructive program, then it will be necessary for International officials to do this for them."<sup>9</sup>

When Green was unable to comply with these instructions, Robertson again traveled to New Orleans to investigate the situation and attempt to put the affairs of the local in order. With him came Howard Goddard, who became International Representative after Green's resignation on October 15. Goddard's left-wing background was to become an issue in the ensuing conflict in Local 207. A veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Goddard had been wounded fighting Franco in the Spanish Civil War. He returned to California where he became involved in Communist political campaigns and worked for the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, one of the leading radical unions in the West. A political struggle in that union resulted in his dismissal; he was then hired by the ILWU and sent to New Orleans in September, 1942.<sup>10</sup>

Goddard and Robertson met with Dorsey and worked out a program for "consolidation" of the union. The program involved a reform of office practices, standardization of dues collection, strict adherence to a budget, no more cash disbursements, a separate account for International dues, and regular staff conferences between Goddard, Dorsey, and a new organizer, William Spooner. Spooner, a young black man just out of school, was an intelligent, hard-working rank and file union member from the Matthews Feed Mill. Dorsey agreed to all the measures and procedures laid out by Robertson, but grew more and more antagonistic to them and to Goddard, once Robertson had returned to San Francisco. It appeared that Dorsey had gotten along much better with the easygoing Caleb Green. But now Green was out of the picture, having resigned soon after the arrival of Goddard and Robertson. His letter of resignation

Spencer



claimed that he had been under a great deal of "mental strain" and quit under the advice of his doctor; Goddard later felt that Green had "seen the handwriting on the wall."<sup>11</sup>

As fall gave way to winter, relations between Goddard and Dorsey became cooler and cooler. The big break came in January, as Dorsey wrote a strong letter to Robertson (sending copies to Harry Bridges and Philip Murray, national president of the CIO), protesting Goddard's handling of union affairs, which Dorsey claimed were "detrimental to the interest of our union." Instead of meeting regularly with him, Dorsey said, Goddard and Spooner often conferred with other unions and organizations to discuss the affairs of Local 207. The letter went on to charge Goddard with handling contract negotiations without any input from Dorsey, taking all the credit for the agreements in press releases which failed to mention the president of the union. Furthermore, Dorsey charged, Goddard ran the office in a high-handed manner. He ordered Spooner to write a \$2 check for a subscription to the Daily Worker on one of the three checks in the office, with the result that Dorsey did not get paid until the next week. Goddard had hired a secretary, Lydia Ferrand, whom the executive board wanted to replace. Goddard refused to allow her to be fired. Goddard had borrowed Dorsey's keys to the building, office, and meeting hall, but had returned only two of the keys. Now Dorsey could not get into the building after regular hours. Finally, Dorsey accused Goddard and Spooner of meeting regularly with representatives of the Communist Party; he objected strongly to their "coming into the union and attempting to apply these outside programs and policies." Perhaps because Goddard had earlier charged Dorsey with red-baiting, Dorsey carefully framed his critique: "We wish to go on record as being opposed to red-baiting.

✓  
Spooner



On the other hand, we are equally opposed to injecting into the affairs of this union the program or policy of the Communist Party." The letter closed with a plea for Robertson to take steps immediately to correct the situation.<sup>12</sup>

To Goddard, Dorsey's letter amounted to a declaration of war. His own political experiences in Spain and California had prepared Goddard well for the subsequent conflict for control of the local. In a five-page, single-spaced letter to Robertson marked "Confidential and Personal," Goddard briefed his boss on the development of the rift and then laid out his battle plan. His letter is perhaps the most remarkable document contained in the files of Local 207. Its opening paragraph describes Dorsey as "an extreme nationalist who regards every white man as his natural enemy, a red-baiter, a petty thief and racketeer, and a supreme egoist . . . a stool pigeon and a rat to boot."<sup>13</sup> The letter proceeds to relate Goddard's version of Dorsey's initial indifference and eventual resistance to the program for consolidating the union instituted during Robertson's visit in September.

From the beginning, according to Goddard, Dorsey showed little enthusiasm for the activities designed to encourage rank and file participation of the union, since Dorsey claimed that the members were too "backward and ignorant" to appreciate them. After Spooner was hired, Dorsey simply stopped carrying out his duties and devoted all of his time to "playing big shot among the Negro people on Rampart Street and around Shakespeare Park. All of his efforts in connection with union were devoted to the staging of dances, raffles, festivals and other petty rackets, designed to promote money out of the pockets of the workers for the personal benefit of Dorsey and his machine." The litany of

*The following  
account (to p. 28)  
is based solely on  
Goddard's letter*



accusations ran on: Dorsey had quit coming to staff conferences or to the union office at all, except on the occasion of general membership meetings, forcing Spooner and Goddard not only to carry out the program but also to administer the everyday affairs of the local from October to January.

Still, no changes were ever put into effect without securing Dorsey's agreement to a wide range of reforms--a new budget, close checking of dues reports by the stewards, and separate accounts for International per capita tax and CIO War Relief donations, etc. Generally the next few months witnessed greater efficiency in office procedure and financial management as well as an increase in rank and file participation through regular meetings of members at the plants. Goddard's letter stressed his personal concern to "work with and develop" Dorsey, building him up with the membership, frequently spending long hours talking with him about "fancied grievances" and "ridiculous rumors" which were causing conflict between the two. Goddard sometimes found it difficult to "track down" Dorsey for these talks, as evidently he was keeping pretty busy conferring with associates in other unions.

Goddard began to suspect that Dorsey was involved in intrigues in a fellow CIO union, the Transport Workers. A small caucus of blacks had begun a campaign against the white leadership of that union. Goddard's investigation of the situation revealed that a cabal of James Burke, black vice-president of the TWUA, Dorsey, and Ernest Wright, all close friends, were taking direction from Franz Daniel, a socialist leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers who was the "ideological leader of all the red-baiting disruptive elements within the CIO here." Ernest Wright, Goddard maintained, was a "clever, scheming Negro organizer for Amalgamated,

Ernest Wright



who was put on the payroll by Daniel and who is Dorsey's closest friend and confidant." Around Christmas time, Wright apparently had a change of heart; he swore to Goddard that Dorsey had been offered \$250 a month to work for the FBI, making reports on "reds" in the CIO. Furthermore, Wright said that Dorsey told him that "this sounds like a good proposition and I'm going to accept it." Dorsey later denied all the charges, but the denial merely strengthened Goddard's belief that it was all true.

To Goddard's face, Dorsey continued to promise that he would cooperate and work for the union program. But, on January 12, he ran into Spooner at the New Orleans Cotton Compress, where he told the younger man that he was through hiding his true feelings and that he intended to "fight it out with Goddard and the International Union in the executive board meeting of the local." That night a meeting was held and an argument between the two antagonists ensued. Nothing was decided and Dorsey raised none of these issues at the general membership meeting three days later. Then on January 18 matters came to a head when Dorsey came into the office and tried to fire Lydia Ferrand. Goddard wanted to keep the secretary, because she was the most competent office worker the union had found. Goddard and Dorsey again argued, whereupon Dorsey adopted a "sullen attitude" and left. The next day Goddard received word that Dorsey was calling a secret meeting of the executive board for the same evening. Here the simmering feud boiled over into a full-scale crisis.

At the outset, it appeared that Dorsey was attempting to deal from a stacked deck. According to Goddard, only four of the eighteen people present at the meeting were members of the executive board, though all 18 spoke and voted as members. This was an obvious violation of the local's by-laws, which required one-third of the members of the board



representing at least five shops to be present to constitute a quorum. Spooner and Goddard attended the illegal meeting, much to Dorsey's chagrin. Goddard hoped to counteract any damage done to the union by Dorsey and his "stooges," and brought Warren Horie, white president of the Transport Workers Union to meet the charges being leveled at him by Dorsey, Wright, and Burkes. Dorsey's first item of business was to eject Horie from the meeting. He then launched a "two-hour emotional appeal during which he resorted to the lowest forms of racism and red-baiting."

This speech was Dorsey's declaration of war. He told those present that the program of the International Union was trying to ease him out, just as Green had been eased out, for the purpose of "enslaving" the workers. Dorsey announced that he would no longer take direction from Goddard, Robertson, or Harry Bridges. The local was autonomous and would do as it saw fit, regardless of the position of the International leadership. In fact, the local would become independent or join the AFL, since he was in constant contact with the AFL leadership, who would welcome him with open arms and a high salary. Dorsey went on to deprecate the leadership of Robertson and other ILWU leaders, while praising Caleb Green as a "true friend of the Negro people." The New Orleans bosses hated Goddard and had secretly called him (Dorsey) into conferences and questioned him closely about Goddard's background and intentions. The bosses were all set to get rid of Goddard, who was a red and a white man whose only desire was to screw the Negro people. Dorsey fired Miss Ferrand because she was placed in the office to spy on him. Goddard had usurped power, given press releases and negotiated with the companies without Dorsey being present, and so on. Dorsey went on to dismiss the program adopted in September, saying that the members had been tired when they



voted to accept it and that Robertson had "crammed it down their throats." He ended by warning that he didn't want to "see anyone get hurt," a statement which Goddard interpreted as a threat of physical violence. After the long speech by Dorsey, Goddard was given a chance to reply.

Goddard focused on the problem which had brought him to New Orleans in the first place: union finances. He noted Dorsey's failure to keep any books, though some facts were "matters of record." For example, from December 1941 to May 1942 the local had an income of over \$5000. Expenditures during the same period were about \$5000, even though the normal expenses of the local never exceeded \$450 a month, including per capita tax. Furthermore, under the consolidation program begun in September, Dorsey was to set up separate accounts for per capita tax and CIO War Relief. Dorsey instead continued to deposit all money in the general fund, spending it faster than it was deposited. Checks continued to bounce back from the bank nearly every day. More than \$150 in CIO War Relief funds had been "misappropriated" by Dorsey, who had failed to pay International dues for the local since November 1. Most of the money had been taken from the union treasury to finance Dorsey's raffles and dances, though this money had not been returned nor any accounting made of the profit derived from these affairs. Goddard's speech appealed for unity and urged the members to ignore Dorsey's racist and red-baiting arguments.

"I might as well have been talking to myself," he lamented in his letter to Robertson. The questions of union funds did not arouse those present at the phony executive board meeting, "inasmuch as many of them were parties to this sacking of the treasury and have been for a considerable period of time." Someone made a motion to send the letter of January 19, which "obviously had been drafted by Daniel and Wright,"



according to Goddard. The motion carried. Even some of the "honest people who had managed to get into the meeting voted with the majority of rats or did not vote at all because of the air of intimidation and the threats of violence from Dorsey's goons."

Goddard left the meeting shaken but determined to act quickly and decisively. In his "confidential and personal" letter to Robertson, he concluded with three recommendations: 1) that the local officers and executive board be suspended from office on the grounds of non-payment of dues, threatening to pull out from the International, and being a group "hand-picked and appointed by Dorsey" and not a legally constituted body; 2) that Goddard be appointed administrator of the local's finances and affairs with authority to appoint a provisional set of officers and executive board until such time as an election could be held; 3) that these recommendations be implemented immediately after authorization from the International, with a leaflet prepared to explain the situation to the rank and file and a special membership meeting called to further explain the matter.

Goddard could have taken his notes of Dorsey's phony executive board meeting and called a special membership meeting to bring out all the issues before the rank and file. Instead he wrote to Robertson for authority to suspend Dorsey from office. His rationale, he explained in the letter, was the "low political development of the workers" and the certainty that Dorsey would try to make the situation a race issue, a struggle between Negro and white." Referring to current affairs in the nation and the South, he observed that the "national question is dynamite among the Negroes at this time," due to the weak position of the Roosevelt administration on the fair employment issue, the treatment of blacks in

sought

Goddard's  
power



the army, the poll tax, and the current "offensive" being carried on by Southern white supremacists. Together with the threat of violence from Dorsey's "goons," the race question might neutralize or sway enough of the rank and file to defeat the International. But if Goddard's proposals could be carried out swiftly, the bulk of the membership would "rally around the leadership being furnished by the International union and give it their entire support." Why did Goddard believe this? Because the majority of the workers, especially in the cotton compresses, "hate Dorsey's guts. They know him for the petty thief and racketeer that he is and will welcome the opportunity to be rid of him." Goddard knew that Dorsey would not give up without a fight, attempting to remain in power by "employing every artifice that Daniel and Wright are capable of contriving for him," possibly trying to bolt with some of the membership or going into court, "although here his fear of exposure of his financial manipulations may overrule his desire to wreck the union." In closing the letter, Goddard concluded that a "swift, clean break is the best manner in our opinion to rid ourselves of this cancer that has been eating into our union here for such a long time. Speed is important, vital to the carrying out of this program. Please answer by return mail. Fraternally, Howard Goddard"<sup>14</sup>

Robertson wasted little time devising his answer. He packed a bag instead. Arriving in New Orleans less than a week after the tumultuous "executive board" meeting, Robertson huddled with Goddard and Spooner. He also discussed matters with Dorsey and other local officers. Goddard and Robertson drew up a statement of policy and program based on the one initiated in September. The policy statement asserted the responsibility of the International union to assist its locals in proper administration



Spooner &  
Goddard  
put in  
charge

of union affairs. The program reiterated the financial reforms of September with Goddard appointed as administrator to audit the books and outlined responsibilities of International representatives and stewards. The stewards were to become "rank and file organizers," whose main duties were to sign up new members, settle grievances on the job, collect dues, keep membership books up-to-date, contact the union office twice a week, and submit a written report to the union every week. Stewards who fulfilled these responsibilities would receive \$3 a month from the union. Those who did not would be replaced. The International rep Spooner would visit each plant each day to help the stewards and take up their dues collections. The administrator Goddard would make reports to the executive board at each biweekly meeting and report to the membership at each monthly meeting. The executive board would have the power to approve all bills and financial reports.

The program mentioned no powers of the local officers, since the intention was that they be suspended. Robertson met with all the officers, executive board, stewards, and Goddard on January 31 to discuss the charges in Dorsey's letter. The meeting lasted six hours. It became evident to Robertson that Goddard's assessment of the situation was accurate: Dorsey had built up a machine composed of local officers, a few stewards, and outsiders. This group had been making a lot of money off ILWU-sponsored affairs, with no accounting of the proceeds to the membership. Also, Dorsey had been "piecing-off" certain stewards by letting them withhold dues collections, again with no records kept. The reform program was designed to end these abuses, and when presented to the executive board on February 1, it was approved. During a long meeting that same day, Dorsey also agreed to abide by the program and promised

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to go with Goddard and Spooner to the plants to distribute copies of the statement to the men.

He never showed up at the union office and avoided Spooner and Goddard all week. Instead, he went to the plants on his own to urge the members to vote against the program at the upcoming membership meeting on Friday, February 5. When Robertson confronted him that morning with reports of these maneuverings, Dorsey denied them, saying he still supported the program. Dorsey was reluctant to take on Robertson in an open fight, realizing that the First Vice-President of the International still had a great deal of credibility in the city where he had had his back broken in 1938. Still, Dorsey was not about to roll over and play dead; he would make his play before the whole membership at the meeting that night.

A heavy downpour right before the meeting caused a poor turnout of about 100 members. At the outset, Dorsey refused to turn the chair over to Robertson, as agreed beforehand. Instead, he attempted to adjourn the meeting before it started; this move was voted down and Robertson took the floor. Before explaining the new program, Robertson introduced a resolution that the union announce its public opposition to the poll tax. After the motion was seconded, one of Dorsey's followers rose and demanded that Robertson read the letter from Dorsey and Day, dated January 19. Robertson refused to read the letter on the grounds that it did not bear the seal of the local and that the individuals who had sent the letter did not have a copy. At this point Dorsey ruled the poll tax resolution out of order and heard a motion to adjourn, which carried, "amidst great confusion, bordering on riot."<sup>15</sup> The entire meeting lasted only twenty minutes. According to Robertson's report to Bridges, "immediately following the meeting Dorsey went into a hysterical rampage, shouting emotionally and incoherently at the top of his lungs."<sup>16</sup>



It was the last meeting Dorsey would ever chair for the ILWU. ✓

Robertson wired Bridges the next day and quickly received permission to place the local in receivership. Local officials were notified by registered letter of their suspension from office pending investigation of the finances and affairs of the local. All employers were notified of these actions. The next week, each side attempted to marshall its forces.



## CHAPTER III

## EXPULSION AND RECONSTRUCTION

On February 8, 1943 Goddard held a meeting of compress workers, attended by over 100 men. There he presented the program, which was adopted in its entirety, including the suspension of Dorsey and four other local officials. A similar meeting was held the next day for members of the warehouse unit. Again the program was adopted. On February 12, a joint meeting of the executive board and stewards council upheld all actions taken by the International and adopted a strong statement for distribution to the membership.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile Dorsey issued his own leaflet entitled "Remember the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg." Amidst a jumbled mixture of metaphors and innuendoes, Dorsey warned the members to beware of false prophets who would "take over in a few days what it took us four years to build."<sup>2</sup> He passed out the leaflet at several plants; at Armour Fertilizer he was reported to have told the workers that "white outsiders are coming in to take control of your union and throw you back into slavery," advising them not to pay dues to the organization. Goddard maintained that the leaflet was typed and mimeographed by Ernest Wright at the office of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

Dorsey's search for allies that week also led him to a pair of Catholic priests, Father Jerome Drolet and Father Vincent O'Connell. These two clerics were adherents of the "social gospel," sympathetic to the cause of blacks and labor but intensely anti-communist. Dorsey



told O'Connell that the Communists from San Francisco were trying to take over the union, had "fixed" the books to accuse him of stealing union funds, and had changed the locks on the union office to keep him out.<sup>3</sup> Drolet and O'Connell had been spoiling for a fight with Bridges' reds and took up Dorsey's cause with a vengeance. The two priests were also closely allied with Fred Pieper, regional director of the CIO, whose office was at 544 Camp Street. This became the headquarters of Dorsey and his supporters.<sup>4</sup>

Encouraged by Pieper, Franz Daniel, and Father Drolet, Dorsey continued to visit plants under contract with the ILWU to agitate against the International leadership and urge the men to quit paying dues. He also called several meetings in February at local churches and one at the AFL Carpenters Hall. The latter meeting had been scheduled for 544 Camp Street, but phone calls from Goddard and Robertson to Pieper forced the transfer of location. Goddard complained to Pieper that other CIO unionists were trying to interfere in the affairs of Local 207. Pieper denied having met with Dorsey and his suspended financial secretary Herbert Smith. Goddard also spoke with Franz Daniel, who promised that he would keep Ernest Wright from interfering in the ILWU situation.<sup>5</sup>

Evidently Pieper's strategy was to "stonewall it" when questioned by ILWU leadership, since he could not afford to make an open break with a CIO affiliate. Dorsey's January 19 letter had been routed back to Pieper from Philip Murray's office through national CIO Director of Organization Allen Haywood. Robertson believed Pieper was running interference for Dorsey's end run to the rank and file and tried to put a stop to it. In a letter to ILWU headquarters, he urged Bridges to notify Murray and Haywood to "keep their Damn noses out of our affairs."<sup>6</sup>



The shake-up in Local 207 was too big a story in the black community to be swept under the rug. The Louisiana Weekly reported the riotous meeting of February 5 in a story entitled "Charges International Clique Attempts to Oust Willie Dorsey," referring to Dorsey as the "father of the CIO in New Orleans." The Weekly's story printed only Dorsey's version of the events, emphasizing that Dorsey was the first black president of a CIO local in the city and endorsing the interpretation that the union conflict amounted to a race issue.<sup>7</sup> The other black paper, the New Orleans Sentinel, quoted both Robertson and Dorsey, who told reporters that Fred Pieper had advised him to file an injunction in court to block the action of the International. Pieper could not be reached to verify that statement.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the struggle, the Weekly continued to support Dorsey, while the Sentinel presented a more balanced picture. Sam Hoskins, editor of the Sentinel, informed Robertson that Ernest Wright and Dorsey had discussed the infamous January 19 letter with him before presenting it to the "phony" executive board meeting.<sup>9</sup>

Following the appearance of the Weekly story, Robertson issued a statement addressed to the "New Orleans Negro Press," in which he tried to clarify the situation with a "forthright statement of the true facts." Robertson's statement played up the theme of unity in the war effort and the need for workers' organizations to function smoothly and efficiently, while fighting discrimination at home and the Axis enemy abroad. The suspended officials were merely trying to "cover up their own neglect of office," forcing the International to step in to "save the union and its membership from any further misdeeds." Robertson included his own warning about false prophets, those who "pretend to be our friends and act like our enemies behind our backs."<sup>10</sup> An additional press release was issued



Andrew Nelson

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the next day by a committee of thirteen stewards and executive board members, expressing their "wholehearted support" of the actions of the International union and urging all members to cooperate with the new program and administration of the local.<sup>11</sup>

During the week of February 14, Dorsey retained Richard Dowling as his attorney and filed suit in civil court for a preliminary injunction against the actions of the International union. The intra-union struggle caused problems at several plants where Dorsey's following was strongest. At Rosen Materials, the employer informed Goddard that many workers were threatening to quit if he continued to deduct union dues according to the check-off provision of the contract. At Armour Fertilizer, Spooner was run out of the plant by company foremen after he argued with the steward, a Dorsey supporter. Not until late March was Spooner able to set up a plant meeting at Armour. But at the Cotton Trades warehouse workers demanded that they get a new steward to replace Wallace Smith, Dorsey's suspended vice-president, who had "gotten nasty" about some leaflets. At the Federal Compress, workers were more concerned about wages and working conditions than about Dorsey. According to Spooner, they accepted the new program but asked if it would be carried out. The International hired Andrew Nelson, another young black man, to work as business agent on a temporary basis. Nelson and Spooner began to carry the load for the International, attempting to combat Dorsey's agitation among the rank and file.<sup>12</sup>

In his second leaflet, Dorsey advertised a special mass meeting to be held Sunday, February 21 at the Second Baptist Church on Melpomene Street, where he promised to "take the wool off the ~~w~~olves." A post-script advised: "Brothers and sisters of other unions will be present. Many great speakers will speak also. Bring your friends, too."<sup>13</sup>



Andrew Nelson attended and brought his friend Bill Spooner. Dorsey's "mass meeting" attracted thirty people, including five members of the church, five outsiders, and Sam Hoskins. Nelson's report of the meeting was brief, as he wasn't there for all of it. Denied permission to speak, he sat down until Spooner was verbally attacked by Dorsey's supporters. Nelson then tried to rise to Spooner's defense but was shouted down and shown the door. Sam Hoskins was also booed and hooted when he tried to question Dorsey about the union finances. During Dorsey's own rambling speech, he reportedly informed those present that "we few who know are going to control the ignorant masses, regardless if they want us to or not."<sup>14</sup>

Dorsey's third leaflet had a cartoon at the top. The drawing depicted a white man holding chains connected to the necks of three blacks. The caption read: "You all know these people." The text of the leaflet reminded readers of Dorsey's Thanksgiving baskets, help for the poor and orphans, and his history of fighting for working class people. It noted that while Dorsey had never been to college, he had enough sense to keep the International leaders from taking his union from him "after he worked alone to build it." After comparing the International leaders to geese, then wolves, Dorsey in this pamphlet labeled them with the stinging epithet "King Bees" and promised to drive them from their hives.<sup>15</sup>

If the situation in New Orleans had all the labor movement buzzing, a "King Bee" named Harry Bridges was stung by the accusations of racism contained in Dorsey's leaflet. He replied to Dorsey in a letter dated February 25, offering the International convention as a forum for Dorsey to present any grievances about the receivership or actions of Robertson and Goddard. He promised to see to it that a "special place is set aside



on the agenda for you to present any argument or defense" to the delegates at the meeting to be held in San Francisco in June. Bridges assured Dorsey that he was well-acquainted with the situation in New Orleans and had no doubts that the International had acted correctly in the face of numerous violations of the constitution and "loose handling, to say the least, of the finances of the local."

The Australian also reminded Dorsey of the time, energy, and money spent by the ILWU organizing the CIO in New Orleans in 1937-8, including the injuries to key men such as Bob Robertson. "These injuries were incurred working in the interests of building Local 207 and trying to protect the rights--especially of Negro people--to organize and enjoy trade union benefits. . . . It is incorrect for you, or anyone else, to indicate that the building of Local 207 was purely the work of yourself or any other local person." He assured Dorsey that the national convention of the ILWU would be extremely democratic with many black members from all over the country present to hear his side of the story. But he warned the fallen leader that the policy of the ILWU toward blacks was too well known; his attempt to "confuse local Negroes will mislead few if any."<sup>16</sup>

Dorsey never appeared at the ILWU convention; nor did he appear at the hearing conducted by the special trial committee of Local 207 on March 22. This committee was made up of six rank and file members of the local, formed to hear the defense of Dorsey and his four fellow officers to the charges drawn up by Robertson. The list of charges cited thirty-six different sections of the local constitution which had been violated by the suspended officers. The charges ranged from failing to submit reports to the membership concerning activities and finances, to



threatening to take the membership into the ILA. But the most extensive category of accusations concerned union funds. In November, 1941, the local hired an excursion boat for a trip up the river to Baton Rouge. Over 1000 people attended at a cost of \$5 apiece, but no accounting was ever made to the union for the proceeds. In December, 1942, the union sponsored a raffle and made no accounting to the membership. Moreover, "the raffle was for turkeys, but the winners were given chickens instead. This action created much unrest and confusion among the membership." Many hundreds of dollars were paid out in checks unauthorized by the executive board, including some made out to J. Harvey Netter and Ernest Wright. In 1942 the union bought a car which Dorsey put in his name and used for his own personal business. More than \$2000 due the International union for per capita tax was misappropriated. None of the suspended officers had been paying dues themselves, also a violation of the constitution.

Perhaps the most serious charge was that Dorsey had gone to court against the union without first exhausting all remedies available to him according to the International constitution, including an appeal to the International convention. The penalty for suing the union before making all preliminary appeals was expulsion. After the union trial committee had sent copies of the charges and notices of the hearing to the five men by registered mail and they did not appear, the committee considered their absence an admission of guilt. The committee found the defendants guilty and recommended that all five be expelled from the union and that the union take all legal steps necessary to recover the union's property, specifically the auto which Dorsey had not relinquished.<sup>17</sup>

Dorsey ignored the committee and all other official contacts from the union. His strategy revolved around the court case and continued



agitation among the rank and file workers. Father Drolet, meanwhile, formed a Citizens Committee for Willie Dorsey and began to attack the ILWU in his column in the CIO News Digest, a local labor paper edited by Fred Pieper. When Dorsey's petition for a preliminary injunction was withdrawn, his lawyer filed a petition for a permanent injunction with Civil Court Judge Viosca. Goddard learned that Father Drolet's citizens' committee was paying Dorsey's lawyer's fees. Members of the union suggested that a resolution be drawn up to revoke the honorary ILWU membership granted to Drolet in 1939. In the early days of the CIO in New Orleans, Drolet appeared frequently on the waterfront campaigning for the CIO, even during outbreaks of violence. He was known as a militant integrationist who supported the ILWU wholeheartedly.<sup>18</sup>

Following the initial ILWU drive to organize the longshoremen, Drolet had written to Bridges conveying his admiration and gratitude for the part played by the union in advancing the cause of social justice by organizing unskilled workers. In that letter the priest asked God's blessings on the union as it built up the ranks of labor for "Christian Democracy and the common good."<sup>19</sup> The national convention of the ILWU in 1939 read his letter of praise into the minutes of the proceedings and granted his request for an honorary membership. Four years later he had become the union's arch-enemy and a professional anti-communist for the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.

The Dorsey issue came to symbolize a developing rift in the ranks of the CIO in New Orleans. Goddard submitted a letter of reply to Father Drolet's article in the News Digest, which he read at a meeting of the New Orleans Industrial Union Council, local federation of CIO unions. At the same meeting a letter eulogizing Drolet was read by a representative



from the Textile Workers union. Even though the ILWU forces were outnumbered, Goddard succeeded through parliamentary maneuvering to postpone a vote on a Textile Union recommendation that the Council ask Philip Murray and other national CIO leaders to investigate Local 207 and the Dorsey affair.<sup>20</sup>

It was clear to Goddard that Fred Pieper was orchestrating this offensive against the ILWU, though the regional director continued to deny it. The next meeting of the Industrial Council witnessed a compromise, as the anti-ILWU forces withdrew their resolution asking for an investigation of 207. In return, Goddard withdrew his resolution condemning the actions of Drolet. Still, Goddard urged Robertson to exert any pressure he could on the national CIO leadership to put the quietus on Pieper's disruptive tactics.<sup>21</sup>

The attempt to discredit the ILWU derived from the smoldering anti-communism within the ranks of the more conservative forces in the New Orleans labor movement. The federal government had been trying to deport Harry Bridges to Australia since 1939, charging that he had been a member of the Communist Party. Though Bridges continued to deny these accusations through three different trials which failed to convict him, he still carried the stigma of indictment and the reputation of the West Coast's leading "red." During the war years, the national CIO raised money for Bridges' legal defense and Philip Murray himself called upon the Attorney General, the immigration authorities, the Department of Labor, and President Roosevelt to drop the deportation orders which were eventually overruled by the Supreme Court.<sup>22</sup> Officially, the CIO supported Bridges. Officially, Bridges was not a Communist. Unofficially, many acknowledged that if Bridges was not a card-carrying member he was at least



very close to the Party ideologically. The ILWU did not oppose the right of Communists to join or serve as officers of the organization. It is fair to say that the ILWU was heavily influenced by members and "fellow travelers" of the Communist Party, many of whom were conscientious and dedicated trade unionists. Besides, the nation was at war, and the Communist Party--in sympathy with the Soviet Union as much as with the United States--was a strong supporter of the war effort.

Non-communists and communists alike in the labor movement endorsed the no-strike pledge honored by nearly all major unions. Bridges even suggested that the no-strike agreement be continued after the war.<sup>23</sup> ILWU slogans during the war were "Geared to Victory" and "Keep it Moving." In the spring of 1943 the union published in its national paper the Dispatcher its program for "a People's Victory and a People's Peace." The program included as its third point "A Second Front in Europe Now," a principal demand of the Communist Party. If anti-Soviet Americans seethed with resentment against this military policy designed to take some of the pressure off Russian troops, neither did they rally around the ILWU's point eight, "Citizenship for Harry Bridges." Yet few of them could argue with the other points in the ILWU program: "An Overall Production-Fighting Plan; More and Faster Production; No Discrimination Because of Race, Creed, or National Origin; An End to Collaboration With Fascists; Organize the Unorganized; Ration all Essential Commodities and Control Prices."<sup>24</sup> Representing a mixture of war-time patriotism, traditional trade union demands, and left-wing politics, the ILWU epitomized the united front strategy in its strengths and weaknesses. Basic ideological differences remained under the surface of the war-bred unity in American labor, just as they did in the realm of international alliances.



In New Orleans the Dorsey issue brought these differences out into the open, threatening to wreck the CIO unity of the war years, and possibly the ILWU itself.

For the priests Drolet and O'Connell, the issue was not misappropriation of funds or the honest and open administration of a labor union. Rather, the Dorsey case represented a classic struggle between Good and Evil, God and Satan, Freedom and Slavery. After those wretched Communist usurpers had tried to "take over" Local 207, Willie Dorsey would not stand for it; then the Communists used the issue of union finances as an excuse to get rid of him. In a rally sponsored by the Citizens Committee for Willie Dorsey in May, 1943, Father Drolet attacked the "smear campaign" against Dorsey which had been "made up out of thin air by the Communist Party." He praised the former ILWU president for refusing to submit to Communist "dictatorship" and announced that "I am confident that a just court will clear Willie Dorsey of these framed-up charges."<sup>25</sup>

Harry Bridges, under orders from Attorney General Francis Biddle to return to Australia, was waiting for his own appeal of this order to reach a "just court." Though he had legal and political problems of his own, he followed developments in New Orleans closely. In letters to Father Drolet and Philip Murray, he emphasized the charges of misappropriation and misconduct on the part of Dorsey. To Drolet, he asked how the union's attempt to straighten out its finances could be construed as a "red plot." To Murray, he asked how Fred Pieper could allow the CIO News Digest to be used for Drolet's unwarranted attacks on a CIO affiliate. Concerning Dorsey, he indicated that the union first believed him to be more "misled than vicious." It was Dorsey who went to court for an injunction against the union, not the union which sued him. "We have



now decided, however, in view of all the developments, to swear out a warrant of grand theft against Dorsey and prove our charges and bring out the only issue that is in the case, namely, that nobody can racketeer in the ILWU and get away with it."<sup>26</sup>

But first, Dorsey's injunction case had to be tried in Judge Viosca's civil court. The hearing began on June 17 as Dorsey's testimony took up the first day. Goddard noted in his report to Robertson that Father Drolet sat in the jury box "in an obvious effort to intimidate the judge." Dorsey was the only witness called for the plaintiffs, and the hearing was continued for two weeks. The union's lawyer, Richard Ainsworth, advised Goddard against implementing the Bridges threat to press criminal charges against Dorsey while the injunction hearing was still in progress.

Testimony resumed on July 7, as the Dorsey case finally appeared in the daily press. What made the case newsworthy was Goddard's admission under oath that he had been a member of the Lincoln brigade but not a member of the Communist Party. To the New Orleans Item, the only other interesting fact discussed in court that day was the now-famous \$2 expenditure for the subscription to the Daily Worker. Goddard testified that he ordered this payment from union funds as it was merely an outstanding bill authorized by the local executive board long before he arrived in New Orleans.<sup>27</sup>

Following testimony by Frank Day, who identified union records, William Spooner, and the auditor, Judge Viosca ruled that he could decide only one question: was there a delinquency in the per capita tax? If so, was the receivership legal according to the ILWU constitution? He issued his decision on July 14, 1943. Union records proved a delinquency in per capita tax in the amount of \$1731, justifying the receivership. ✓



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Therefore Dorsey's request that the court enjoin the International from removing him from office was denied. The International union could, in effect, rule Local 207 as a dictatorship of the appointed receiver.

Here Viosca's decision caused complications for the ILWU and created confusion which Dorsey and his supporters tried to exploit. Under a receivership, according to Viosca, local union officers and executive boards are not allowed to function. The receiver makes all the decisions. Therefore, the action of the union's special trial committee in finding Dorsey guilty of charges was "without force or effect," since this committee was not given powers during the receivership. Moreover, following expiration of the receivership, Dorsey would have the legal right to sue again to get his office back.<sup>28</sup>

Goddard immediately wrote to Robertson, explaining the situation and suggesting that the local appoint "provisional" officers to function under the receivership for a full year, holding official elections the day the receivership expired. Goddard felt that Dorsey would now do a "quick fade," as Drolet and the ACTU would no longer finance him. ILWU attorney Ainsworth relayed information given him by Dorsey's lawyer Richard Dowling that Dorsey had been getting money from the House Un-American Activities Committee for reporting on "reds" in the CIO. Goddard and Ainsworth planned to press criminal charges against Dorsey for theft, though they seemed pessimistic that the D.A.'s office would move on this. At any rate, Goddard wrote that "our victory" in court has had a "further salutary effect" on the membership.<sup>29</sup>

If Goddard interpreted the judge's decision as a victory, he was not alone. The same claims of victory were made by Willie Dorsey. Once again the Louisiana Weekly reported Dorsey's reaction to the event, rather



than the event itself. The paper noted that Dorsey was "satisfied" with the decision and explained that the judge ruled that Dorsey and his fellow officers had the right to "claim" their offices at the expiration of the receivership. In his statement to the press, Dorsey acknowledged that, while some workers in the plants were appealing to the NLRB to withdraw from the ILWU, he was opposed to such a move. He thanked Father Drolet for his support and chided the NAACP for not helping. He produced a copy of the auditor's report, which showed \$838 worth of deposits in excess of cash receipts for the period September, 1941 to January, 1943. For the Weekly, this was Dorsey's vindication.<sup>30</sup> ✓

Yet this gross distortion of the findings of the court paled in comparison to the fiction published by Father Drolet in his weekly column "Warning to Americans," which appeared in Catholic Action of the South nearly two months later. "Negro Leader Cleared" read the headline to Drolet's account of Dorsey's "complete vindication." Re-hashing the tale of Dorsey's fearless refusal to follow the Party line, consequent suspension, and court suit, Drolet conceded that the union had been in "financial difficulties." Nor could he avoid the fact that the judge ruled the International's receivership valid. Where Drolet began to tip-toe around the truth was at the point where the judge refused to rule at all: the issue of Dorsey's misappropriation of funds. Drolet declared flatly that Viosca had found Dorsey innocent of all charges. Furthermore, said Drolet, the judge had ruled that the union had expelled Dorsey illegally and "must" restore him and his cohorts to office at the end of the receivership.<sup>31</sup>

The appearance of this article two months after the ruling of Judge Viosca happened to coincide with a remarkable new development in the



Dorsey affair. In August and September the local began talks with the Letellier-Phillips Paper Company for a new contract. A company spokesman told Howard Goddard that they had a letter from the United Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Employees of America (CIO), claiming majority representation in the plant and requesting collective bargaining with the company. The letter was signed by Willie Dorsey, International Representative. Company management said that the NLRB should hold an election between the two unions; in response, Goddard asked that the case be submitted to the War Labor Board. "I have no doubt that Pieper and Drolet are behind this," Goddard wrote to Robertson.<sup>32</sup>

He was right. The CIO and the Catholic Church were two of the largest organizations in America; Drolet knew many important people in each. Through his contacts, the priest traveled to New York and met Sam Wolchok, a Russian-born Jewish immigrant who had risen through the ranks of labor during the Depression to the presidency of the URWDSEA. A soft-spoken man, Wolchok recruited his mostly white-collar membership cautiously and quietly; like Drolet, he saved his hatred for "reds." Wolchok listened to Drolet's tale of the black knight of New Orleans labor and promptly put Dorsey on the payroll. He also issued Dorsey a charter for Local 389 and sent him to raid the ILWU. ✓

Wolchok looked forward to knocking Harry Bridges down a peg or two, if he could. The two had clashed several years earlier in New York, as "Wholesale" and "Warehouse" often meant the same shop and confused the jurisdiction of the two unions. One of the proud boasts of the CIO had been that the industrial form of organizing didn't bring jurisdictional disputes, as did craft unionism. At any rate, John L. Lewis had personally intervened in that conflict, instructing Bridges to stay west of the



Mississippi River and Wolchok east of it. The geography of New Orleans presented the two with a chance to tangle again, since the river winds around and through that Southern city.<sup>33</sup>

Business Week saw the struggle for the New Orleans warehouses as an opportunity for full-scale war to break out between conservative and radical forces in the CIO. The national convention of the labor federation was set for the first week in November in Philadelphia. The magazine predicted that Wolchok would bring Dorsey to Philadelphia to tell his story of "red unionism" using the New Orleans incident as a "tomahawk on Communist scalps in the CIO." If it did come to a showdown between CIO "lefts and rights," the article went on to prophesy, the same organization wouldn't be big enough to hold both of them.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately for the readers of Business Week, the CIO showdown did not come at the 1943 convention. The nationwide coal strike of John L. Lewis' rebellious miners attracted more attention than the organization of warehouses in New Orleans. CIO delegates re-affirmed their own commitment to the no-strike pledge, as Harold Ickes seized the mines under Roosevelt's order, then granted the miners a sizeable wage increase. As the CIO convention came to a close after five days, the miners were back at work, Phil Murray was re-elected president of the federation, Harry Bridges had given a speech against anti-Semitism and discrimination, and not a peep had been heard from Sam Wolchok or his new protege, Willie Dorsey.<sup>35</sup> The CIO war-time unity prevailed, at least on the national level.

Back in New Orleans it was a different story. Dorsey continued to visit his old plants in an attempt to woo the workers away from the ILWU and into the URWDSEA. The degree of his success in this venture was subject to dispute. Marshall's Labor in the South quotes the 1945



Saturday Evening Post article by Frederick Tisdale profiling Samuel Wolchok:

"The outcome of this conflict 'showed Wolchok with the members, Bridges with the books, stationery five-and-dime petty cash box of Local 207.' "<sup>36</sup>

A friend and follower of Dorsey, Joseph August, claimed that eighty per cent of the membership of Local 207 defected with Dorsey into Local 389.<sup>37</sup>

Father Vincent O'Connell also bragged, "We stole that local, everyone except for maybe five members."<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, Howard Goddard had no memory of the union losing any contracts to the URWDSEA, claiming that by the time of his expulsion, Dorsey was "all washed up with the rank and file."<sup>39</sup> In fact, the union had lost five shops under the administration of Caleb Green and Willie Dorsey prior to September, 1942.<sup>40</sup> Willie Chatman, shop steward at Matthews Feed, said that Dorsey continued to come around the mill "to tell his big lie" and persuade the men to join 389, but the men weren't interested. Dorsey never did explain what he did with all the money, and the judge had ruled against him in court, justifying many of the men's suspicions. Besides, Chatman added, the unions down on Camp Street were just "a bunch of company unions," and "you couldn't say nothing at their meetings." The contracts at Matthews Feed Mill improved quite a bit after Goddard and Spooner began to do the negotiating. Whereas Dorsey had rarely been able to win more than a two-cent wage increase, the new leaders generally won a ten to twelve-cent per hour adjustment with each new contract.<sup>41</sup>

Union records reveal no widespread exodus of the membership into the Dorsey camp, though Goddard and Spooner did worry about the Kentucky Coffee Warehouse, a Dorsey stronghold with over twenty dues-paying members including Joseph August. Spooner and Goddard attempted to combat Dorsey propaganda with their own publication "The Organizer," a periodic mimeographed



newsletter featuring news from the various shops, political articles, and monthly financial reports. If this was not enough to put Dorsey to shame, Goddard also found a cartoonist to respond to Dorsey's leaflets. One issue of "The Organizer" depicted Drolet leading Dorsey with a leash. The black man was, in turn, hitched to a wagon drawing two "bosses." The caption had Drolet saying, "C'mon Dorsey. You can lead good. See how the bosses follow you. They know what you will do for them." The accompanying story, laced with rhetoric, attacked Dorsey as a "leech and parasite on the backs of the workers." But Drolet was the real focus of ILWU ire. The article, undoubtedly written by Goddard, accused Drolet of lying about the court decision, conspiring to raid the jurisdiction of the ILWU, and using "his raiment as a priest to disguise his activities and objectives." These aims included capturing the leadership of the union, selling out the workers, red-baiting and deporting Harry Bridges, and delivering the labor movement into the hands of pro-Nazi elements such as Father Coughlin. Drolet also was tagged with the anathema "enemy of the working class."<sup>42</sup>

Widely circulated, this article created a flood of controversy. Philip Murray got his feet wet, having tried to remain above it all for so long. When Emil Rieve, CIO national vice-president and leader of the Textile Workers union, saw the article, he protested to Murray. A devout Catholic, Murray concurred, criticizing the "vicious attacks being made upon Father Drolet by the representatives of the ILWU," sending a copy of his reply to Rieve on to Bridges.<sup>43</sup> Bridges dashed off an indignant retort, noting that even Rieve acknowledged that the Retail union was engaged in raids, with the encouragement of Father Drolet. Bridges argued that CIO policy opposed raiding, that the federation could not tolerate one union seizing on dissident elements in other unions and trying to



disrupt that union's activities and contracts. What Dorsey was doing did not come under the category of organizing the unorganized. Though Local 207 had been "outspoken" in regard to Dorsey and Drolet, Bridges would not apologize. Instead he urged Murray to keep his office from helping Drolet.<sup>44</sup>

Murray responded evasively, "I would not let anything develop there that would reflect discredit upon the CIO movement and disrupt the organizational progress of any of our national affiliates."<sup>45</sup> Bridges' next letter to Murray informed him that Drolet continued to interfere in ILWU affairs, appearing as a witness in an NLRB hearing where he brought up Bridges' deportation case as a factor to be considered. In another instance, he showed up at a hearing of the War Labor Board and attempted to prejudice the panel against the union during the recess.<sup>46</sup>

The president of the CIO never attempted to stop Drolet's activities. The priest continued to be a thorn in the side of Local 207 for several years. Along with the ever-present Dorsey, Drolet agitated among workers at the Flintkote plant when the ILWU returned in a second attempt to organize in 1944. Drolet urged the workers to vote for a competing AFL union, bearing his usual accusations of ILWU communism.<sup>47</sup> In spite of this opposition, the ILWU succeeded in winning the campaign at Flintkote, gaining over 500 new members for their local.

This was a major blow to Dorsey's scheme to raid the ILWU. In desperation, he sued the union again in October, 1944, filing an injunction to terminate the receivership and force Goddard to turn over to him the property and effects of the union. Judge Harold Moise spent one day studying the case before rendering his decision. Referring to the judgment in the original suit, he re-affirmed that the receivership had been legal. He then noted three subsequent developments: 1) the plaintiffs



had been expelled from the union; 2) Dorsey had joined another union; 3) none of the plaintiffs had exhausted their constitutional remedies by appealing to the International executive board or convention. Moise said, "This court is powerless to do a vain and useless thing: to restore to power and office men who have been expelled and are not even now members of the association."<sup>48</sup> Judge Moise denied the application for injunction, laying to rest forever Willie Dorsey's claims to the union he had helped build, tried to plunder, then lost. He never returned the union's car or the official charter of the local issued by the ILWU in 1938. But the union carried on.



## CHAPTER IV

## THE NELSON YEARS: RADICALISM AND REPRESSION

The end of World War II marked an important turning point for Local 207. William Spooner had been drafted in 1944 and did not return to New Orleans: Howard Goddard left the Crescent City for Dallas, Texas, to become the ILWU's chief Texas organizer. Local 207's receivership expired, and the members elected Andrew Nelson president. Along with International representative Chester Meske, sent from California, and business agent August Harris, a local man just returning from the war, Nelson set out on a vigorous campaign to consolidate and expand the union. None was a novice. Nelson had demonstrated such native intelligence as a tough negotiator that he rarely needed a lawyer when bargaining with employers.<sup>1</sup> Meske also came with experience; he had established a militant reputation in a fight in front of the Flintkote plant in 1944.<sup>2</sup> Harris was another proven veteran; he had worked for 207 before going into the service and had proved valuable to Goddard as a political strategist in frustrating Dorsey's attempt to raid the J. T. Gibbons shop.<sup>3</sup> All three men were dedicated unionists. All three were Communists.

The Flintkote Tar Paper Mill presented them with their greatest challenge. Nearly a thousand workers were employed at the North Galvez Street firm, which manufactured roofing materials shipped all over the South. Race was an issue at Flintkote, where a large number of white workers resisted joining a union with a black president. Once the union won the



certification election in December, 1944, however, more and more Flintkote workers joined. For the first time, Local 207's membership became truly integrated, as the union rolls swelled to 850 by March, 1946.<sup>4</sup>

Nelson and his organizers mapped out plans to consolidate their gains at Flintkote and to expand into the wholesale hardware, paint, rice, and food industries. Word came that the national CIO was prepared to launch a massive organizing drive in the South under the direction of Van Bittner.<sup>5</sup> The end of the war had brought an end to the no-strike pledge, and Local 207 soon found itself in need of strike funds and help on the picket line. Unfortunately for 207, Bittner's anti-communism kept the ILWU from receiving any of the resources of the CIO's short-lived "Operation Dixie."<sup>6</sup>

In the fall of 1946, as the postwar strike wave swept across the U.S. in labor's greatest upsurge, Andrew Nelson led his union's bargaining team into contract talks at Flintkote. The union had just won a two-week strike at the Rickert Rice Mill, and rank and file feelings were riding high. During a September breakthrough at Flintkote, two hundred twenty-five white workers, including twenty-six women, joined the union, with complete respect for the ILWU's non-discriminatory policies.<sup>7</sup> When Andrew Nelson--slender, soft-spoken Negro Communist--sat down to negotiate with Flintkote management on September 12, he did so with quiet confidence. For at that moment he was one of the most powerful black men in New Orleans.

After five days of talks, government mediators were invited to join the negotiations. The union demanded a one-year contract with an hourly wage increase of 22¢ over the basic rate of 64¢, a union shop with dues check-off provision, vacation pay, and improved working conditions. On September 12, the company issued an ultimatum and left the bargaining table. As soon as word reached the plant, workers began to walk out,



even before an official strike vote could be taken. Over 850 employees struck, while 100 AFL construction workers honored picket lines.<sup>8</sup>

The strike lasted six weeks, a demonstration of racial solidarity which veteran labor official Ed Shanklin later described as "remarkable." True, most of the white workers at Flintkote had joined the predominantly black union only recently, but Shanklin recalled these fellow strikers as very militant and loyal members.<sup>9</sup> The strike ended in November, as the workers won a 15¢ per hour raise, overtime pay, vacations, and a check-off provision for union members. Management refused to budge on the open-shop issue, however, and Local 207 had to settle for less than compulsory union membership at Flintkote.<sup>10</sup> Still, the union claimed over 98% of company employees as voluntary union members. Such an achievement was remarkable in the face of concerted counterattacks made by local business leaders and the daily press. During the course of the strike, the company had tried to woo white workers away from the union by forming a "Southern Workers" organization, a Jim Crow company union whose only aim was to break the strike.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the New Orleans Item ran a two-week series of articles by John Collier and Flannery Lewis exposing the "Reds in New Orleans," which featured the ILWU prominently.

The series focused on the role of Communists in the local labor movement, based on information given the reporters by infiltrators at Communist Party meetings and by right-wing union officials such as Tom Russell of the United Gas, Coke, and Chemical Workers of America and Steely White of the Seafarers International Union. One article profiled August Harris, who had served as campaign manager for Emanuel Levin, state chairman of the Communist Party who had run for public office in a recent New Orleans election. The article probed Harris's role as head of the Committee for

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Maritime Unity, which the paper characterized as a Communist conspiracy to combine six different unions and control the waterfront. Furthermore, the article quoted the business agent of the ILWU, which had had "about twenty-five strikes in six months," as saying, "our ultimate aim, you know, is to get rid of the bosses once and for all . . . We don't give a damn about the people in management."

Another article described the attempts of Andrew Nelson and other black Party members to propagandize among local black unionists. The article was entitled "Reds Thrive on Racial Bias." Investigating the current Flintkote strike, the Item reporters found that the union leaders had purposefully set a strike deadline even though the talks were making progress and top Flintkote management personnel were on their way to the city from New York in an effort to avert a strike. ILWU leaders, it was obvious, wanted a strike in order to spread "confusion." Furthermore, the union had presented management with demands that were "impossible to meet in New Orleans at the present time," such as the "immediate abolition of all distinctions between white and Negro employees." Flintkote management dismissed this demand as "impractical" and an indication that the union and its leaders were following the Communist Party "line."<sup>12</sup> ✓

The antagonism of the press did not halt communication between the union leaders and the rank and file. Local 207's newsletter, "The Organizer," ✓ helped buoy the spirits of the union's membership. It praised the courage and solidarity of its striking members, not only at Flintkote but at the eleven (not twenty-four) other plants struck by 207 since V-J day. A movement of change appeared in the air. By April of 1947, the union represented over 1700 workers at fourteen companies, and bragged that "the wages of our members have doubled since 1943." The newsletter characterized ✓



the union as democratic, consisting of rank and file workers with equal rights and responsibilities, regardless of craft, age, sex, race, nationality, or political belief.<sup>13</sup> Local racial intolerance and anti-unionism by themselves had not undermined the union in 1947. Foreign affairs and outside forces proved far more formidable to the union's continued progress. ✓

Russian domination of Eastern Europe following the defeat of the Axis produced an almost paranoid response among American conservatives. Our wartime ally could no longer be trusted; the new foreign policy which developed aimed at containing the spread of Soviet influence throughout the world. Abroad, this anti-Soviet impulse created the Marshall plan and the Truman Doctrine. At home, anti-communism produced the Taft-Hartley Act, legislation which curbed the power of labor and required union officials to sign affidavits swearing that they were not Communists. ✓

True, Harry Truman vetoed Taft-Hartley, but Congress overturned the veto and made the bill national law. Within a year, even Truman endorsed the act by invoking special provisions of the law twelve times to break strikes in the "national interest."<sup>14</sup>

Just as the ending of the war had broken up the International Soviet-American alliance, the return of peace to the nation witnessed the collapse of political unity within the ranks of the CIO. Secretary of State George Marshall spoke to the delegates of the national convention in 1947, excoriating the Soviets and outlining his economic plan for rebuilding Western Europe. At the same meeting, CIO leaders Mike Quill of the Transport Workers, Joe Curran of the National Maritime Union, and Walter Reuther of the Auto Workers all denounced the Communists in their unions. The national federation endorsed the Marshall plan and demanded that all CIO ✓

Taft-Hartley Act



affiliates do likewise. During the next year, two influential Communists resigned their posts, Len DeCaux from the editorship of the CIO News and Lee Pressman from his position as CIO general counsel. Harry Bridges was removed from his job as Regional Director of the CIO in Northern California because of his opposition to the Marshall plan.<sup>15</sup> In May, 1947, Philip Murray told the CIO Executive Board: "If Communism is an issue in any of your unions, throw it to hell out, and throw its advocates out along with it."<sup>16</sup>

All across the country, non-Communists in the labor movement turned on the radicals in their midst and began to purge them from positions of leadership in state and municipal bodies and in many locals. Despite the CIO principle against raiding, the left-wing unions found other unions moving into their jurisdiction, even at plants under contract. Employers took advantage of the Taft-Hartley law to void contracts with those unions whose leaders refused to sign the anti-communist affidavits. The radical unions in New Orleans could not escape this nationwide pressure. The management at Flintkote quickly seized on the opportunity to sever its ties with Local 207, which had honored the ILWU policy of refusing to sign the oaths. In December, 1947, the Pulp and Sulphide Workers Union, affiliated with the AFL, campaigned for representation at Flintkote. Workers were given the choice of that union or no union, as the NLRB had disqualified the ILWU for not filing the Taft-Hartley affidavits. Local 207 distributed a leaflet urging workers to "vote no and continue your present CIO contract." Loyal to 207, the workers voted overwhelmingly against the AFL, even though the status of their contract remained in doubt. In any case, the national assault on radical CIO unions was accelerating as the U. S. entered the political campaign of 1948.



Organized labor divided in their search for a presidential candidate. Murray and Reuther saw their "draft Eisenhower" movement fizzle when Ike declined to run, then threw the support of the CIO behind Truman, who promised a repeal of Taft-Hartley upon his re-election. John L. Lewis pursued his independent course and endorsed the Republican Thomas E. Dewey, while the Communists backed the Progressive candidacy of Henry Wallace. Labor radicals who had trooped loyally to the polls for the Democrat Roosevelt now asserted their political independence. This move merely furnished Phil Murray with more ammunition in his war against the Communists. Truman, pressured from the right to step up the crusade against domestic subversion, still waited until after his nomination to allow Attorney General Tom Clark to prosecute twelve leaders of the Communist Party for conspiring to overthrow the U. S. government. Shortly afterwards at the CIO convention in Portland, Oregon, Murray attacked the reds for supporting Wallace and trying to drive Truman from the White House, even though he had tried to do the same thing earlier in the year when he encouraged Eisenhower to run.<sup>17</sup>

In Louisiana, Andrew Nelson served on the state committee of the Communist Party and was active in the Wallace campaign. Since 1943, New Orleans Communists in coalition with local civil rights organizations had worked to help black people register vote.<sup>18</sup> It was a difficult task, but slowly more and more blacks were added to the voting rolls. The favorite candidates of the black voters in 1948 were named Long. Earl, brother of the legendary Huey Long, was elected governor, while the Kingfish's son Russell became U. S. Senator. Henry Wallace came to New Orleans for a major address and dramatically broke segregation customs not only by speaking to a racially mixed audience but also by advocating civil rights



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While most ship-owners resigned themselves to bargaining with Bridges, the federal government decided to take him to court once again. Shortly after the end of the strike, a federal grand jury was impanelled in San Francisco to investigate whether Bridges lied in 1945 when he told the judge admitting him to citizenship that he wasn't a Communist, and whether his two witnesses, ILWU officials Bob Robertson and Henry Schmidt, conspired with him in that perjury.

At about the same time, the Justice Department announced that on April 21, 1949, it had placed the Citizens Committee for Harry Bridges on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations, classified as a Communist front. Bridges' indictment for perjury followed in May.



The ILWU leader interpreted the action as a frame-up by the Truman administration, in retaliation for Bridges' support of Wallace for president.<sup>19</sup> After two delays, the trial was scheduled to begin November 15, 1949, little more than a week after the national CIO convention in Cleveland, Ohio.

At its eleventh annual meeting, the CIO set in motion the machinery to remove its radical minority. The debate at the convention centered on the first of three related amendments to the CIO constitution, designed to facilitate the expulsion of Communists from the federation. The first amendment stated: "No individual shall be eligible to serve either as an officer or as a member of the Executive Board who is a member of the Communist Party, any fascist organization, or other totalitarian movement, or who consistently pursues policies and activities directed toward the achievement of the program or the purposes of the Communist Party, any fascist organization, or other totalitarian movement, rather than the objectives and policies set forth in the constitution of the CIO." This amendment was the first in the history of the CIO to place discriminatory qualifications and limitations on CIO members and unions.

Harry Bridges and Ben Gold, president of the Fur and Leather Workers Union, spoke against the amendment, appealing to unity and democracy in the labor movement. A delegate from the United Office and Professional Workers reminded the convention that such an amendment ran directly contrary to traditional CIO policy, while Joseph Selly of the American Communications Association charged that the CIO was "enacting a little Taft-Hartley into the CIO constitution." But the conservatives and ex-radicals carried the day for Murray's amendments. Emil Rieve, Walter Reuther, Mike Quill, and Joe Curran all blasted the Party and its role in the labor movement. Reuther castigated the ILWU as "the phony Left,



the corrupted Left." In the same vein, Murray questioned Bridges' integrity by reminding the delegates of the ILWU leader's 1945 call for a five-year extension of the no-strike pledge following the end of the war.

Still, Murray could not easily argue for the expulsion of Communist unions on the basis of their lack of militancy. He conceded that throughout the course of the war the Left unions had supported CIO policy and leadership. But "on the day that Japan capitulated," Murray had discovered, "the policy of the Communist Party in the United States and elsewhere changed."<sup>20</sup> According to Murray, that was the real source of the split in the CIO.

In reality, the cold war policies of the United States caused a change in position among the top CIO leadership. The Truman Doctrine posed communism as a world-wide threat; national CIO leaders rushed to remove the threat from their own ranks in order to escape the calumny of hysterical anti-communism and to get in line with national policy. Once the first resolution to ban Communists from CIO leadership was accepted by voice vote, a second and third followed. The second amendment empowered the Executive Board to remove any board member deemed ineligible by virtue of the first amendment. The third amendment gave the Executive Board further power to revoke the charter or expel any affiliated international union whose policies and programs could be found to promote the aims of the previously proscribed organizations. These amendments quickly passed; the convention then officially expelled the United Electrical Workers and Farm Equipment Workers unions and instructed the Executive Board to begin a series of formal hearings against ten other affiliated unions, including the ILWU.<sup>21</sup>

Back in San Francisco, the federal government began its own hearings in the Bridges perjury trial with the selection of a jury that included



a Chinese-American insurance agent who was a member of the San Francisco branch of the Kuomintang. In China, the expulsion of the Kuomintang from the mainland by the Red Army had just heightened the anti-communist fever in America, especially on the West Coast. Judge George Harris sentenced Bridges' lawyer to six months in jail for contempt before allowing him to finish his opening statement. Federal prosecutors, following a pattern established in the previous Bridges trials, put on the stand seventeen witnesses, eleven of them ex-Communists. Finally, Schmidt, Robertson and Bridges were called to give testimony. At one point Bridges complained that it was clear he was not on trial for being a Communist. Government witnesses, themselves naturalized citizens, had confessed to being Communists when they applied for citizenship. Yet the government had not tried to deport them or put them on trial. Bridges insisted that he was on trial because he led an effective union:

As long as I am up here--the three leading officers of the union are up here wasting our energy, our funds and everything, at the same time the Immigration people have got these characters running around in my union trying to sabotage things down below. All kinds of employer interests are at work, and rival unions are raiding our organization; we are being attacked right and left.

It is not because I am a Communist, as I have told you. We are an effective union that packs a lot of weight. We get in people's way. We stop people from putting over their phony and crooked deals. Maybe we get into a lot of trouble because we put our nose into other people's business. We regard the trade union movement as our property. We are part of the trade union movement of the United States. What another union does is our business, and what we do we consider is someone else's business. As long as we are up here having to pay out tens of thousands of dollars to defend the officers of the union and we have to be in the courtroom, that cripples our union, that uses its funds, it ties up its energies, and it makes it more vulnerable to attack.

The case went to the jury on March 31, 1950. Five days later, the jury announced its verdict--Guilty! Judge Harris sentenced Bridges to



five years in jail, two years each for Robertson and Schmidt. The defendants went free on bail, pending their appeal to a higher court. Now Bridges prepared to go to Washington, D.C. where three CIO vice-presidents would conduct the expulsion hearing on the ILWU.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, in New Orleans, the ILWU was being expelled from the Flintkote plant. Another CIO union, the United Gas, Coke, and Chemical Workers of America, had asked for an election at the plant in December, 1948. Again the company refused to allow the ILWU to participate in the election because the officers had not signed the Taft-Hartley affidavits. Faced with no opposition, the UGCCWA had won. Local 207 still claimed jurisdiction. In 1949, Bridges realized that the union would continue to lose shops without access to NLRB election machinery. Word came down to local ILWU officials to sign the affidavits. Nelson did so and petitioned the NLRB for another representation vote at Flintkote. The election was set for June 7, 1950.

All the adverse publicity surrounding the Bridges trial and the CIO expulsion proceedings had a tremendous impact on the vote at Flintkote. The renewed charges of Communism now proved devastating. Two weeks before the election, the CIO hearing in Washington found the ILWU to be Communist-dominated and recommended expulsion by the CIO Executive Board. In New Orleans, the rival CIO union red-baited 207 unmercifully. A leaflet distributed at the plant asked workers if they wanted to be led by Joe Stalin's agents, August Harris and Andrew Nelson. The leaflet mentioned both the Bridges trial and the CIO expulsion; at the bottom a drawing depicted a "sample ballot," with a hammer-and-sickle symbol over the name of the ILWU and an American flag above the name of the UGCCWA. The slogan read, "Vote Right, Be Right, With American Labor."<sup>23</sup>

CP made  
1500  
Harris  
Schmidt  
affidavits



The death blow to Local 207 was delivered by its shop steward at Flintkote, Arthur Ester, a black man who had come under the influence of Dorsey's old friend, Ernest Wright. Ester defected to the UGCCWA and destroyed the racial unity of 207 by taking most of the black workers with him. Most of the white workers surprisingly continued to support the ILWU, but the final tally counted 430 votes for the UGCCWA and 214 for Local 207. The union had lost Flintkote and much of its fighting spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Harry Bridges had lost none of his. When President Truman plunged America into the Korean war, Bridges spoke out against U.S. involvement in what he felt was an internal Asian conflict. When pro-war newspapers clamored for his arrest, Judge Harris obliged by revoking the labor leader's bail and dispatching him to the county jail as a threat to national security. A federal appeals court soon overturned Harris' action, and Bridges was released. His appeal of the perjury conviction went all the way to the Supreme Court. On June 15, 1953, newspapers across the country carried two major stories on their front pages: the armistice agreement in Korea and the Supreme Court's four-three decision to reverse the conviction of West Coast labor leader Harry Bridges.<sup>25</sup>

While Bridges was fighting for his freedom and citizenship through the courts, Andrew Nelson was engaged in a "battle for the very existence of our local union."<sup>26</sup> More raids and disaffections followed the loss of Flintkote. Key members at the Gulf-Atlantic Cotton warehouse, Scott Spears and Ernest Eglen, quit the ILWU and joined forces with union's former ally, the Transport Workers Union, Local 206. In the spring of 1952, they led a drive to repudiate 207 and bring in the Transport Workers, CIO, to represent the employees at Gulf-Atlantic. Spears and Eglen had both been members of the "Special Trial Committee" of the local which had



brought charges against Dorsey in the shake-up of 1943. Now they accused Andrew Nelson of mishandling union affairs and failing to issue financial reports. Their leaflets this time made no mention of Stalin, Moscow, or Communism but referred rather to Nelson as "Stepin Fetchit," the black actor with the drooping lower lip and shuffling gait. Others who knew Nelson teased him about his physical resemblance to the film star, but Spears' use of the nickname was more malicious than good-natured.

One leaflet posed a number of rhetorical "\$64" questions for Nelson and his "Yes Man," union secretary Albert J. Taylor: "What happened to Flintkote, Matthews Feed, and the Kentucky Warehouse? Why didn't Gulf-Atlantic get a wage increase in 1949? Why did the local spend \$1100 on sending delegates to the International convention in Hawaii instead of paying per capita tax? Why has there been no wage increase at J. T. Gibbons in three years? Who owes for whiskey at a certain barroom located on St. Claude near St. Bernard Avenue?" Another leaflet predicted: "Gulf-Atlantic employees will vote overwhelmingly for TWU-CIO, because they are sick and tired of Stepin Fetchit Nelson with his free beers and wine and softball games and no comprehensive financial reports. Where is the money coming from to finance these recent parties? That is what the rank and file want to know. Will Nelson have the gumption enough to answer that?"<sup>27</sup>

The president of dwindling Local 207 had gumption enough to know that the union could not afford to lose any more members. He formed a special organizing committee to woo the men at Gulf-Atlantic, no doubt using parties and ball games in the campaign. At any rate, the local beat back the raid of the TWU and won the election 97-87. Nelson breathed a sigh of relief, looked over the bills accumulated during the campaign,



and wrote to Robertson asking for exoneration from dues owed the International union.<sup>28</sup>

Robertson sent another union trouble-shooter, Bernie Lucas, to New Orleans to investigate the recurring dues problem. Unlike Goddard, Lucas failed to find any malfeasance or financial incompetence. The problem of dues collection was rooted in the seasonal nature of warehouse employment at that time. Lay-offs lasting several months were common at many of the shops under contract with the ILWU. During the peak season, the local's membership approached 800; at the "off" periods, the number fell to around 400. Nelson sent the International an installment toward the per capita taxes owed and attempted to work out a plan to stabilize union finances.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next four years, the local maintained a low profile and was involved in no major controversies. Now an independent union, the ILWU was not affected by the AFL-CIO merger in 1955. Still, important events in the nation occurred which would affect the local. In 1954, the Supreme Court opened the way for school desegregation in the historic Brown vs Board of Education decision. White racists throughout the South thundered their defiance, as the region witnessed a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Councils. Reactionaries in Congress traveled to New Orleans in 1954 to "investigate" groups which advocated social change and racial equality. The House Un-American Activities Committee held hearings concerning the "subversive" Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Little more than a year later, the Senate's Internal Security Committee, led by arch-conservative James Eastland, summoned several New Orleans leftists to testify concerning their political activities. Winifred Feise, assistant librarian at Newman school, invoked the



fifth amendment. Calhoun Phifer, a recent graduate of Tulane University, argued vociferously with Eastland. Mrs. Betty Liveright, employed at WDSU-TV, also refused to answer questions about her involvement with the Communist Party. All three subsequently lost their jobs. The Committee also subpoenaed Hunter O'Dell, a black waiter whose Louisiana Avenue apartment had been raided by city police, who seized a number of Communist periodicals and documents. O'Dell, however, was nowhere to be found and did not testify. Eastland and his committee left the city in April, 1956.<sup>30</sup>

The next month, Andrew Nelson was indicted by the federal government for falsifying Taft-Hartley affidavits which he had submitted in 1952 and 1953. Nelson telegraphed Bridges in an urgent plea for funds needed to hire a lawyer, James McCain, who wanted \$1000 to take the case.<sup>31</sup> Lucas and Bridges wrote to Nelson expressing shock and anger at the indictment, promising the union's continued support of his defense effort. Lucas attributed the indictment to the current racist hysteria in the South, exemplified by the recent order of a Louisiana judge prohibiting meetings of the NAACP until that organization furnished the state with lists of its members.

The trial began on September 4, 1956, in the court of federal judge Herbert W. Christenberry. All the jury members were white. Newspapers of the day screamed headlines of race riots over school desegregation in Clinton, Tennessee and Mansfield, Texas. While the issue before the court was whether or not Nelson had been a member of the Communist Party in 1952 and 1953, his record as a militant labor agitator and leader of Negro voter registration drives probably did little to endear him to those who would decide his fate.



U. S. attorney Hepburn Many called the government's first witness, Oscar Matlock of San Francisco. Matlock testified that from 1941-1949 he was employed by the FBI at a salary of five dollars per week as an undercover agent assigned to investigate the Louisiana Communist Party. He first met Nelson on June 29, 1941 at a meeting of the state branch of the Party. Thereafter he saw Nelson "thousands of times" at closed meetings in various parts of New Orleans and at CP headquarters in the Godchaux Building. He claimed that Nelson served on the state committee of the Party, was a delegate to the national Communist Party convention in 1944, and became vice-president of the Louisiana Progressive Association, the Wallace-for-President branch in 1948. Matlock described Nelson as not just a Party member but as an important leader in charge of distributing the Daily Worker in the New Orleans area.

Next the prosecution called Arthur Eugene, a light-skinned Negro, who had belonged to the National Maritime Union. Eugene testified that he had joined the Party in 1948, right about the time Joe Curran was cleaning out the Communists in the NMU. After being expelled from the NMU, Eugene went to work for Harry Bridges and the ILWU in San Francisco. In what proved to be the most damaging testimony at the trial, Eugene described a meeting he attended at the ILWU headquarters in 1949. Present were Nelson and other ILWU officials affiliated with the Communist Party. There the decision was made to sign the Taft-Hartley affidavits. Union leaders could remain the Party, if they wished, but would have to assume a low profile in Party activities. Eugene later came to New Orleans, where he often used the ILWU mimeograph machine to run off Party literature, including leaflets urging free use of City Park by Negroes and other flyers protesting the state law which required Communists to register



✓ with and be fingerprinted by state police. Eugene testified that Nelson told him in 1952 that he intended to stay in the Party despite signing the non-Communist oaths and that the Party in Louisiana would not abide by the state registration law.

Finally, the government brought forth W. Leroy Jones, a former member of Local 207 who joined the union and Communist Party while working at Flintkote in 1946. Jones testified that another worker at the plant told him that he could not be a good union member unless he joined the Party. At one Party meeting, Jones told the court, Andrew Nelson read excerpts from the Communist Manifesto to new recruits. Later, Jones drifted away from the Party when he found it to be interested in furthering the aims of Communism, not unionism. "I was interested in the union and better pay," he asserted. In 1952, Jones went to work for the FBI, figuring he owed the government something for the mistake he had made.

✓ ! The prosecution rested its case following the testimony of Leroy Jones. Nelson's attorney McCain made two motions: one for a directed verdict of not guilty, the other for a continuance, based on the "surprise" witnesses brought forth by the government. Judge Christenberry denied both motions, whereupon McCain rested the defense case. He called no witnesses, offered no evidence, and made no closing statement. The jury deliberated less than an hour before returning a guilty verdict.<sup>33</sup> Mayor DeLesseps Morrison's response to the case was one of shock: "It is shocking to every citizen to have such things revealed--such as active Communist organizing right under our very noses in New Orleans. I can assure you that the district attorney and every city agency will do everything possible to wipe out any tinge of Communism in New Orleans."<sup>34</sup>



Nelson appeared as anything but a dangerous revolutionary in the photo published on the front page of the Times-Picayune on September 6. Clad in a plaid sport shirt, tan slacks, and a straw hat, a hollow-eyed, thin-faced Nelson showed the obvious effects of strain and illness in his sad expression. He would have made the real Stepin Fetchit look like Paul Robeson. Gamely, Nelson sent out an appeal to his union brothers in ILWU locals on the West Coast, claiming a frame-up at the hands of racists and reactionaries. The FBI "stoolpigeons" had told "ungodly lies" at his trial; the truth was that he had not been a member of the Party since 1948. Still, his letter did not explain why he offered no defense at the trial.<sup>35</sup>

On October 25, Judge Christenberry sentenced Nelson to five years in federal prison, turning a deaf ear to McCain's emotional pleadings on behalf of a family man in poor health. Free on \$7500 bail pending his appeal, Nelson attempted to raise money for his defense through the printing of books of \$5 stamps to be sold by union members. His health failing, Nelson sent his last official letter to the regional director of the ILWU in November, 1956. The letter mentioned the books of defense stamps he was enclosing "for the people around the office," but somehow he failed to put the stamps in the envelope.<sup>36</sup>

Bob Robertson wrote Nelson requesting a financial report of the defense campaign, so that the International Executive Board could send some money to help.<sup>37</sup> For six weeks the letter remained unanswered. Then 207's second vice-president Peter Sheppard, Jr. wrote Robertson apologizing for not sending a financial report. Nelson, he said, had handled his own defense and all transactions from his sickbed. Sheppard further reported that Nelson had undergone a complete nervous breakdown and was



confined to his home by the doctor.<sup>38</sup> Nelson died of a kidney ailment on January 12, 1957. He left a wife and five children. ✓

Still the government was not through with Local 207. The House Un-American Activities Committee returned in February to take up the work left by Eastland's gang. They subpoenaed Lee Brown, first vice-president of Local 207, to question him about his Communist background. A fiery, bull-necked young black man, Brown insisted upon reading a statement before answering the committee's questions. The committee silenced Brown and ordered him to answer the question: "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?" Still Brown refused to answer, invoking the First and Fifth Amendments. Then the government brought in the FBI's fair-haired boy, Arthur Eugene, who took a seat at the witness table directly next to Brown. Eugene identified Brown as a member of the Party, telling the same story he had already given in Nelson's trial: all about his life in the Party and the labor movement in San Francisco and New Orleans, even the part about the ILWU mimeograph machine. Once again the congressmen instructed the "arrogant" Brown to answer their questions. When he refused, he was ordered from the room.<sup>39</sup>

Lee Brown

Also appearing before the committee was Hubert Badeaux, a New Orleans policeman who had led the raid on Hunter O'Dell's apartment and captured a wealth of Communist propaganda. Badeaux was the head of the city's intelligence division, or "red squad" as it was known, and considered himself an expert on Communist strategy as it related to black people. Three weeks after his testimony in New Orleans, Badeaux journeyed to Baton Rouge to present his evidence to a joint legislative committee chaired by W. M. Rainach. Here Badeaux spoke at length and submitted numerous documents concerning many groups and individuals in the black community



Missing  
minutes  
p. 68

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✓ in New Orleans, including the NAACP and Ernest Wright. But he paid particular attention to Local 207 and its Communist leaders, Nelson, Brown, and August Harris. The detective claimed to have in his possession the minutes of over one hundred meetings chaired by Andrew Nelson. From these records he concluded that Nelson had consistently preached the "Party line" to his union's membership. From support of Henry Wallace in 1948, to their opposition to the government's prosecution of the CP Twelve, Brown and Harris had also echoed Communist Party positions. Moreover, Local 207 had provided a forum for Winifred Fiese and her attack on the Dixiecrats and for Roosevelt Ward, columnist for the Daily Worker. Under the presidency of Andrew Nelson, Local 207 had passed resolutions which

✓ 1) opposed the Marshall plan, 2) supported civil rights for Negroes, 3) demanded action against the New Orleans police department, and 4) urged dismissal of the charges against the twelve leaders of the CPUSA. Badeaux also submitted to the legislators as evidence several packages of Andrew Nelson Defense stamps, intended to be sold for \$5 apiece.<sup>40</sup>

✓ The red-hunting politicians and policemen had done their work well. A confused and disillusioned rank and file elected Thomas West president of Local 207. A non-Communist, West had been a charter member of the union since the early days at the New Orleans Cotton Compress. West met with Bob Robertson, who made his last official visit to New Orleans in the summer of 1957. They agreed that perhaps it was time for the local to cast off from the ILWU.<sup>41</sup> Geography was as much a factor as politics and per capita tax. At a special meeting of the executive board and stewards' council, Robertson gave what was, in essence, a farewell speech. He stated his "sentimental" feeling for Local 207, which he had helped organize "with his bare hands." When he left in 1938, there were over



✓ 1000 [sic] members; now there were scarcely 300. New Orleans had proved to be too far away from San Francisco to get proper service. Recently, he said, Local 208 in Chicago had dissolved and merged with the United Packinghouse Workers of America, a militant, democratic union with traditions and programs similar to those of the ILWU. Robertson recommended that Local 207 follow the example of the Chicago local. Unanimously, the body voted to recommend this action to the membership.<sup>42</sup> On July 23, 1957, Local 207 merged with Local 391 of the Packinghouse Workers. It marked the end of an era for New Orleans labor.



## CONCLUSION

✓ The passing of ILWU Local 207 brought down the final curtain on a labor movement tragedy. While the news of the vote of July 22, 1957, probably caused no champagne celebrations at the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, the disappearance of this militant union did represent a clear victory for those reactionary forces whose impassioned defense of the profit system portrayed every labor organizer as a Bolshevik and every meeting of workingmen as a revolutionary conspiracy. The spreading cancer of anti-communism in the 1940's and 1950's finally killed Local 207 as surely as kidney disease killed its leader Andrew Nelson. The CIO, in trying to purge the radicals from its ranks, hoped to save itself from public attack. Instead, it encouraged conservatives to step up their offensive against the entire labor movement. Employers and politicians pointed to the CIO expulsions as proof that the union movement was Communist-dominated. Louisiana congressman F. Edward Hebert, a darling of business conservatives, even accused a pedigreed red-baiter like Father Vincent O'Connell of being a Communist for advocating the organization of workers.

Though Local 207 never reached the size and influence of other unions such as the ILA or the Teamsters, it nevertheless provided an example of union democracy, racial solidarity, and militance unmatched in New Orleans in the Jim Crow era. Surviving members of the union all agree with Peter Sheppard's recollection that in meetings "everybody spoke their piece," and that "the officers didn't run the union; the membership ran the union."<sup>2</sup>



Every two years the local elected two or three delegates to represent them at conventions of the International union on the West Coast. The opportunity to travel to exciting cities like San Francisco and Honolulu, to meet with fellow unionists from all over the U. S. and Canada--whites, blacks, Hispanics, Orientals, Republicans, Democrats, Communists, Socialists, Jews, Catholics--to listen to and discuss a wide-ranging set of issues was an experience which probably taught the delegates from New Orleans more about democracy in one week than they received in all their education at the Jim Crow schools and in a lifetime of reading the Times-Picayune.

But perhaps the ILWU was out of place in New Orleans in that era. Its integrationist policies were too advanced for a Southern city which had not heard of the civil rights movement; its Communist leadership was too efficient and effective for the City That Care Forgot. Willie Dorsey seemed to fit in more with the local political style: the preacher-politico surrounding himself with a core following of loyal henchmen, maneuvering through faction fights with little regard to ideology, and quietly lining his pockets and those of his stooges with funds from the treasury. Dorsey's methods were commonplace in corrupt unions such as the ILA; indeed, Dorsey learned more about union leadership from Harvey Netter than from Bob Robertson or Harry Bridges. When challenged, Dorsey resorted to demagoguery based on personal charisma, anti-communism, and a crude black nationalism.

The left leadership of the ILWU soon realized that Dorsey had to go, unless they wanted their New Orleans local to degenerate into a copy of the ILA. The dedicated work of Howard Goddard in re-organizing and re-vitalizing Local 207 cannot be overestimated. The young leftist not only weathered the storm of Dorsey's removal, court suits, and raids, but he



also managed to straighten out union finances, to organize the unorganized, to train a new generation of local leadership, and to carry on an intense political struggle against the right wing of the labor movement, led by Fred Pieper and his contacts in the New Orleans Old Regular Machine. On Goddard's departure, Andrew Nelson continued with the same style, but he unfortunately had to pick up the red banner just as the Cold War began to heat up in New Orleans and across the country.

Could a known and admitted Communist operate openly as a president of a union local in New Orleans in such a climate of fear and hysteria? For awhile, Andrew Nelson could and did so effectively, at least until the critical years of 1949-50. The ILWU decision to sign the Taft-Hartley affidavits, a seeming compromise of principle, represented a tactical retreat, a survival measure taken during a period of intense harrassment and isolation of the left in America. Still, for Nelson to have resigned from the Party would have been a surrender to the government, whose crusade to banish domestic Communism ran roughshod over the First Amendment. Instead, he chose to keep his membership secret while continuing the effective trade union work begun by a previous generation of radicals in the labor movement.

The odds were simply too great for Nelson. After it was cast out of the CIO in 1950, the ILWU found itself a prime target for police "red squads," FBI informants, and Congressional inquisitors. Confident in their mission, inspired by the reactionary fever of the times, nurtured by a native ignorance of the nature of Communism, these anti-communist forces finally accomplished the goal enunciated by Detective Grosch back in 1938: "There is no room in New Orleans for CIO communists and reds, and if I can run them out of New Orleans, I'm going to do it."



It took twenty years to defeat the ILWU in New Orleans. With Andrew Nelson in his grave and Lee Brown on his way to jail, Local 207 went out of existence in 1957. Its survival for twenty years is remarkable enough: it demonstrated the possibility of organizing black and white workers in a militant union, even in the deep South. Yet its spirit never disappeared completely. The members passed into the Packinghouse Workers, a CIO union which, to its credit, had opposed the national federation's expulsion of the left unions and had fought for freedom of speech and racial equality in the labor movement. There the militant spirit of the ILWU remained, despite the memories of defeat and betrayal. Ed Shanklin, trained in the principles and practices of unionism as a member of Local 207, later became an officer of the Packinghouse Workers and one of the more well-respected black labor leaders in the city. In 1979 Shanklin looked back with nostalgia on his experiences with the ILWU, a "fighting union" in the best tradition of the CIO. He remembered Nelson as a competent, sincere leader whose political radicalism was used by the companies and the government to destroy him. For Shanklin, what happened to Andrew Nelson was more than unfortunate; it was un-American.<sup>3</sup>



## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>Two books which mention New Orleans black labor are The Black Worker by Sterling Spere and Abram Harris (1931) and Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973 by Philip Fenne (1974). John Blassingame's Black New Orleans, 1860-1880 (1973) covers the earliest organizing efforts by black workingmen in the Crescent City.

For background on earlier organizing efforts among New Orleans longshoremen, see Robert C. Francis, "Longshoremen in New Orleans," Opportunity Vol. XIV (1936) and Herbert Northrup's "The New Orleans Longshoremen," Political Science Quarterly, Vol. IV (1942). The most recent and comprehensive study was written by David Wells and Jim Stodder, "A Short History of New Orleans Dockworkers," Radical America Vol. X (1976).



## NOTES TO CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973 (New York, 1974), p. 216.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>3</sup>Harvey Schwartz, The March Inland: Origins of the ILWU Warehouse Division, 1934-1938 (UCLA, 1978), Chapters 1, 2, & 3.

<sup>4</sup>The best single survey of pre-WW II labor in New Orleans is Arthur Raymond Pearce's M.A. thesis, "The Rise and Decline of Labor in New Orleans," Tulane University, 1938. ✓

<sup>5</sup>Herbert Northrup, "The New Orleans Longshoremen," Political Science Quarterly, Vol. IV (1942), pp. 535-7.

<sup>6</sup>Charles P. Larrowe, Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the United States (New York, 1972), p. 317.

<sup>7</sup>See Dave Wells and Jim Stodder, "A Short History of New Orleans Dockworkers," Radical America, Vol. X (January-February, 1976), pp. 42-68.

<sup>8</sup>Louisiana Weekly, 16 October 1937.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 2 April 1938.

<sup>10</sup>New Orleans Times-Picayune, 22 June 1938.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 24 June 1938.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 25 June 1938.

<sup>13</sup>Allan A. Michie and Frank Ryhlick, Dixie Demagogues (New York, 1939), p. 135.

<sup>14</sup>Times-Picayune, 2 July 1938.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 15 October 1938.

<sup>16</sup>William Lombard, interview, 8 April, 1977. Lombard was a member of the original Longshoremen's Protective Benevolent Association and still claims that the remnant of that group has legitimate claim to the charters of ILA 1418 and 1419. Blinded in the violence of the 1936 dock strike, Lombard today is an activist for the Handicapped Voters League.



<sup>17</sup>Avery Alexander, interview, 18 March 1977. Rev. Alexander is now a Democratic state representative and a member of the black caucus in the Louisiana legislature. For the past decade he has been a spokesman for organized labor, civil rights and public education.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Heide to ILWU Secretary-Treasurer Matthew Meehan, 22 October 1938, Files of ILWU Local 207 (Defunct), ILWU library, San Francisco, California



## NOTES TO CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Interviews: John Dorsey, 25 March 1979; Avery Alexander, 13 March 1979; Joseph August, 24 March 1979; Father Vincent O'Connell, 14 June 1979.

<sup>2</sup>Caleb Green, reports to ILWU headquarters, 8 May 1940, 25 May 1940, 15 November 1940, 14 January 1941, and 20 May 1941.

<sup>3</sup>Northrup, p. 542.

<sup>4</sup>Weekly, 16 May 1942 and 6 June 1942.

<sup>5</sup>Dorsey to Meehan, 27 May 1940 and 17 July 1940.

<sup>6</sup>Green to Meehan, 20 February 1941 and 20 May 1941.

<sup>7</sup>Eugene Paton, ILWU Secretary-Treasurer to Sylvester Terrebonne, President of Unit #2, Local 207, 24 June 1941.

<sup>8</sup>Paton to Green, 23 July 1942.

<sup>9</sup>Robertson to Green, 7 August 1942.

<sup>10</sup>Howard Goddard, interview, 5 June 1979.

<sup>11</sup>Green to Robertson, 15 October 1942 and Goddard interview.

<sup>12</sup>Executive Board, Local 207 to Robertson, 19 January 1943. This letter was signed by William Dorsey, President and Frank Day, Recording Secretary.

<sup>13</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 21 January 1943.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Goddard, report to Bridges and Robertson, 18 February 1943.

<sup>16</sup>Robertson to Bridges, 8 February 1943.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER III

- <sup>1</sup>Goddard, report.
- <sup>2</sup>Dorsey, "Remember the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg," leaflet, n.d.
- <sup>3</sup>O'Connell, interview.
- <sup>4</sup>Goddard, report.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>Robertson to Paton, 12 February 1943.
- <sup>7</sup>Weekly, 13 February 1943.
- <sup>8</sup>New Orleans Sentinel-Informer, 13 February 1943.
- <sup>9</sup>Robertson to Bridges, 8 February 1943.
- <sup>10</sup>Robertson, press release, 12 February 1943.
- <sup>11</sup>Executive Board, Local 207, press release, 13 February 1943.
- <sup>12</sup>Spooner, organizing report, 20 February 1943. (Nelson hired)
- <sup>13</sup>Dorsey, leaflet, n.d.
- <sup>14</sup>Andrew Nelson, "Report on Dorsey's Meeting," 21 February 1943.
- <sup>15</sup>Dorsey, leaflet, n.d.
- <sup>16</sup>Bridges to Dorsey, 25 February 1943.
- <sup>17</sup>Ernest Eglen, et al., "Report and Recommendations of Special Trial Committee," 22 March 1943.
- <sup>18</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 20 April 1943.
- <sup>19</sup>Drolet to Bridges, 6 April 1939.
- <sup>20</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 28 April 1943.
- <sup>21</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 5 May 1943.
- <sup>22</sup>Larowe, p. 243.
- <sup>23</sup>David J. Saposs, Communism in American Unions (New York, 1959), p. 152.



- <sup>24</sup>ILWU Dispatcher, 26 March 1943.
- <sup>25</sup>Weekly, 8 May 1943.
- <sup>26</sup>Bridges to Drolet, 25 February 1943 and Bridges to Murray, 17 June 1943.
- <sup>27</sup>New Orleans Item, 8 July 1943.
- <sup>28</sup>Dorsey, et al. v. Goddard, et al., Civil District Court Division D, State of Louisiana, 249098, 3 March 1943.
- <sup>29</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 15 July 1943.
- <sup>30</sup>Weekly, 24 July 1943.
- <sup>31</sup>Jerome Drolet, "Warning to Americans," Catholic Action of the South, 16 September 1943, p. 4.
- <sup>32</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 22 September 1943.
- <sup>33</sup>Frederick Tisdale, "Unwilling Warrior," Saturday Evening Post, 13 January 1945, p. 20.
- <sup>34</sup>"Reds Face Fight," Business Week, 9 October 1943, pp. 90-93.
- <sup>35</sup>New York Times, 1-6 November 1943.
- <sup>36</sup>F. Ray Marshall, Labor in the South (Cambridge, 1967), p. 211 and Tisdale, p. 20.
- <sup>37</sup>August, interview.
- <sup>38</sup>O'Connell, interview.
- <sup>39</sup>Goddard, interview.
- <sup>40</sup>Goddard, report, 1 May 1943.
- <sup>41</sup>Willie Chatman, interview, 13 June 1979.
- <sup>42</sup>"The Organizer," 22 September 1943.
- <sup>43</sup>Murray to Rieve, 23 November 1943.
- <sup>44</sup>Bridges to Murray, 30 November 1943.
- <sup>45</sup>Murray to Bridges, 13 December 1943.
- <sup>46</sup>Bridges to Murray, 20 December 1943.
- <sup>47</sup>Spooner, report, 27 June 1944.



<sup>48</sup>Dorsey, et al., v. Goddard et al., Civil District Court Division  
C, State of Louisiana, 254762, 23 October 1944.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

- <sup>1</sup>Chester Lanier and Peter Sheppard, Jr., interviews, 8 August 1949.
- <sup>2</sup>ILWU leaflet, 3 December 1944.
- <sup>3</sup>August Harris to Robertson, 19 February 1945.
- <sup>4</sup>Nelson to Robertson, 19 March 1946.
- <sup>5</sup>Nelson to Robertson, 23 April 1946.
- <sup>6</sup>Foner, p. 277.
- <sup>7</sup>Nelson to Robertson, 23 September 1946.
- <sup>8</sup>Times-Picayune, 28 September 1946 and Nelson to Robertson, 3 October 1946.
- <sup>9</sup>Ed Shanklin, interview, 14 August 1979.
- <sup>10</sup>Times-Picayune, 11 November 1946.
- <sup>11</sup>"The Organizer," 9 October 1946.
- <sup>12</sup>Item, 1-14 November 1946.
- <sup>13</sup>"The Organizer," January 1947 and April 1947.
- <sup>14</sup>Art Preiss, Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO (New York, 1964), p. 353.
- <sup>15</sup>Saposs, p. 152-159.
- <sup>16</sup>Preiss, p. 337.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 365-77.
- <sup>18</sup>Goddard to Robertson, 28 November 1943.
- <sup>19</sup>Larrowe, p. 298-301.
- <sup>20</sup>Preiss, p. 409.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 404-410.
- <sup>22</sup>Larrowe, p. 303-323.



<sup>23</sup>United Gas, Coke, and Chemical Workers of America, Local 390, leaflet, 25 May 1950.

<sup>24</sup>Nelson to Robertson, 9 June 1950.

<sup>25</sup>Larrowe, p. 326-7.

<sup>26</sup>Nelson to Robertson, 25 July 1952.

<sup>27</sup>Ernest Eglen and Scott Spears, leaflets, n.d.

<sup>28</sup>Nelson to Robertson, 25 July 1952.

<sup>29</sup>Minutes, ILWU Executive Board Meeting, Honolulu, Hawaii, 11 November 1952.

<sup>30</sup>New Orleans States, 4 April 1956.

<sup>31</sup>Nelson to Bridges, 22 May 1956.

<sup>32</sup>Bernard Lucas to Nelson, 1 June 1956 and Bridges to Nelson, 13 June 1956.

<sup>33</sup>Times-Picayune, 5-7 September 1956.

<sup>34</sup>Item, 10 September 1956.

<sup>35</sup>Nelson, "Open Letter to All Members of the ILWU," 10 October 1956.

<sup>36</sup>Nelson to William Chester, 14 November 1956.

<sup>37</sup>Robertson to Nelson, 13 November 1956.

<sup>38</sup>Peter Sheppard, Jr. to Robertson, 26 December 1956.

<sup>39</sup>States, 15 February 1957.

<sup>40</sup>"Subversion in Racial Unrest," Proceedings of the Louisiana Joint Legislative Committee Hearings, 6-8 March 1957, pp. 271-282.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas West, interview, 16 August 1979.

<sup>42</sup>Minutes, Local 207 Executive Board and Stewards Council, New Orleans, Louisiana, 22 July 1957.



## NOTES TO CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup>O'Connell, interview.

<sup>2</sup>Sheppard, interview.

<sup>3</sup>Shanklin, interview.



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## APPENDIX

## GUIDE TO ABBREVIATIONS

ACTU--Association of Catholic Trade Unionists  
AFL--American Federation of Labor  
CIO--Congress of Industrial Organizations  
CP--Communist Party  
CPUSA--Communist Party of the United States of America  
FBI--Federal Bureau of Investigation  
ILA--International Longshoremen's Association  
ILWU--International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union  
IWW--Industrial Workers of the World  
NAACP--National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
TWU--Transport Workers Union  
URWDSEA--United Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Employees of America  
UGCCWA--United Gas, Coke, and Chemical Workers of America



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