

CARTON 8:11

HISTORY OF LOCAL 207

1999

(*This account is based on "The ILWU in New Orleans: CIO Radicalism in the Crescent City, 1937-1957," a Master's Thesis written by David Lee Wells (Baylor University, 1979)

The hardships of the Great Depression inspired a new wave of union organizing spearheaded by militant industrial unions in the AFL. The radicals^{JWILWU, by} advocated organization of all workers in the same industries -- black and white -- into the same unions; they opposed the AFL concept of racially segregated locals. The radicals were opposed by the craft union leaders of the AFL, and in 1937 the industrial unions were expelled from the AFL. They formed the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO). The CIO launched a national organizing drive that took one of its unions, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), into New Orleans to challenge the ILA as the bargaining agent for dockworkers. Just a short time earlier, ILA members on the Pacific Coast had broken away from the ILA and formed the ILWU under the leadership of Harry Bridges, an Australian-born political radical who was a militant waterfront leader at the time of the great strike in San Francisco in 1934. (Bruce Nelson, Workers on the Waterfront, p. 122, 238)

The situation in New Orleans, the nation's second largest port, seemed ripe for a new organizing drive.

Longshoremen in the Crescent City were organized by the ILA into segregated locals, both descendants of the company unions formed by the New Orleans Steamship Association

[employers] during the open shop days of the 1920s. Rank and file dockworkers resented the "shape-up" hiring system [a discriminatory and corrupt system by which workers were selected each day by employers for work on the docks] endorsed by the ILA, which also required its members to pay five percent of their weekly wages back into the union. 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 cents per hour; warehousemen rarely earned more than 35 cents. 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. (Wells, p. 5)

The struggle between the ILWU and ILA in New Orleans was bitter. The ILWU sent its best organizer, Bob Robertson, a veteran of the San Francisco struggles. Willie Dorsey, a black longshoremen and former Baptist preacher with twenty years' experience on the riverfront in New Orleans as a member of the ILA, was recruited as an organizer. Through 1937 and into 1938 Robertson, Dorsey and other organizers signed up enough workers to petition the National Labor Relations Board for a representation election, which was scheduled for October. Harry Bridges came to New Orleans in April and spoke to a mostly black gathering of several thousand maritime workers. Bridges, who was already being hounded by the government as a "red", and other ILWU organizers stressed the theme of interracial unity and union democracy. They denounced the corrupt "shape up" system and proposed replacing it with a union hiring hall.

The AFL, along with the police, local and state officials, went all-out to stop the CIO/ILWU drive. Violent

clashes between AFL and CIO supporters became common, and it was estimated that the AFL spent over \$100,000 to stop the CIO organizing drive. City police raided the CIO headquarters in June, arresting 84 people. The police also picked up Bob Robertson and told him to get out of town or else. When Robertson refused to depart he was beaten by police and two vertebrae were broken. Many other CIO supporters were beaten and arrested, and union records and membership cards were seized by the police. In July, the Louisiana legislature unanimously adopted a resolution condemning communism and directing local and state officials to stamp it out. The resolution deplored the "organization of negroes" which had "unfortunately taken root" in New Orleans and now "endangers white supremacy." In an apparent reference to Harry Bridges it denounced the ideas of "alien emissaries and agitators" and "imported alien radicals."

When the representation election was held in October, the ILA received 2,701 votes to only 874 for the ILWU. The outcome surprised CIO organizers who counted on the support of some 3,000 members among the dock workers. But the anti-communist hysteria along with police violence and intimidation had taken a toll among ILWU supporters. No doubt vote-buying by the ILA and the ILA's access to ~~work~~ jobs contributed to the CIO defeat. ILA president Joseph Ryan was also smart enough to choose a black man, "Big Paul" Hortman, to head up the struggle against the ILWU. Finally, local

church leaders, with the exception of a few Catholic priests, publicly opposed the CIO.

After this defeat the ILWU leaders returned to California and Dorsey ran the small ILWU unit that remained in New Orleans. Over the next four years Dorsey, with a white organizer named Caleb Green who worked as International Representative, signed up 300 warehouse workers and established a new local which was chartered as Warehouse and Distribution Workers Union, Local 207, ILWU-CIO. The local was one of the few ILWU units in the eastern half of the country, and its distance from San Francisco did not help communications. Soon Local 207 became involved in several unsuccessful strikes, ^{but a chronic} ~~but the main~~ problem that emerged was between the local and the international union. Starting in 1940 the local began falling behind in its payments of "per capita tax" (a share of dues payments) to the International. This may have been due to the drain of the unsuccessful strikes and the lack of a dues check-off system, but the problem persisted over the next two years.

Eventually, in 1942 the International intervened and appointed another International Representative, Howard Goddard, who replaced Green who resigned. Goddard had fought with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. Financial practices were to be reorganized, but escalating disagreements between Dorsey and Goddard only made matters worse. Dorsey suggested that Goddard was "injecting into the affairs of this union the program or policy of the Communist

Party," and Goddard accused Dorsey of being "a stool pigeon and a rat to boot." Then in early 1943 Bob Robertson was sent back to New Orleans to deal with the situation. After a tumultuous meeting Robertson, with Bridges' approval, placed the local in receivership and suspended Dorsey and four other local officials on charges of misappropriating union funds.

Dorsey accused the International of racism and sought to mobilize support among anti-communists in the labor movement and the Catholic church. Dorsey also sued the union -- twice -- but his request for an injunction was denied. In the course of these events Dorsey's attorney reportedly said that Dorsey had been getting money from the House Un-American Activities Committee for reporting on "reds" in the CIO (Wells, p. 40, 20)

Dorsey was expelled from the ILWU and went to work for a rival union, Local 389 of the United Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Employees of America.

Meanwhile, the International hired Andrew Steve Nelson, a young black Communist, to work on a temporary basis as business agent for Local 207. Nelson began working to rebuild the local. Nelson soon established a reputation as a tough negotiator in dealing with employers. In 1944, when the receivership expired, Andrew Nelson was elected president of Local 207. By then Howard Goddard had moved on to Texas to become the ILWU's chief organizer in that state. Chester Meske was sent from California to replace Goddard as International Representative, and August Harris replaced

Nelson as business agent. Both Meske and Harris were also Communists. In 1944 Lee Brown moved to New Orleans, got a job on the waterfront and joined Local 207. Brown would also join the Communist Party. Nelson and his organizers launched an aggressive campaign to consolidate and expand the union. Their first big victory was at the Flintkote Tar Paper Mill where, at first, white workers resisted joining a union with a black president. But once the certification election was won, more and more workers signed up with the union. By 1946 the union's membership had grown to 850 and was fully integrated.

The period 1946 to 1957 witnessed the ascendancy and decline of Local 207. In its first year under Nelson's leadership the union launched eleven strikes. By April 1947 it represented over 1,700 workers at fourteen companies. But the clouds of Cold War anti-communism were lurking on the horizon and would eventually gather into a furious storm against the feisty interracial union. The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act was aimed at curbing labor militancy by requiring union officials to sign affidavits swearing that they were not members of the Communist Party. Some CIO leaders, such as Mike Quill of the Transport Workers, Joe Curran of the National Maritime Union, and Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers, were also swinging to the right and denouncing alleged Communists in their unions. The CIO would soon act to purge itself of those identified as Communists. Not surprisingly, the AFL seized the opportunity to intensify

its long-standing drive against communism and political radicals in the trade union movement.

In New Orleans Local 207 not only struggled for worker's rights but also for civil rights for African Americans. In coalition with the Communist Party and local civil rights organizations it also actively promoted black voter registration. The union played a part in supporting the Progressive Party presidential campaign of Henry Wallace in 1948.

The 1950 conviction of Harry Bridges of perjury for denying he was a Communist in his 1945 citizenship application (55,58) fueled the anti-communist drive against the ILWU. The International was on the verge of being expelled from the CIO, and in New Orleans Local 207 was being red-baited and facing a challenge from another CIO union for representation of the workers at the Flintkote plant.

Initially ILWU officials had refused to sign the anti-Communist affidavits demanded by the Taft-Hartley Act. This stance had cost Local 207 an election among workers at the Flintkote plant in 1948. The company would not allow Local 207 to participate in the election because its officers had not signed the affidavits. But Local 207 still claimed jurisdiction. By 1949 Harry Bridges realized that the ILWU would continue to lose shops without access to the NLRB-sanctioned election machinery. Word went out to ILWU local officials to sign the affidavits.

The change did not help Local 207 in its struggle at the Flintkote plant. Fierce red-baiting and the defection of a shop steward to the rival CIO union led to a defeat for Local 207 in the election.

Over the following years more attempted raids followed, but Local 207 hung on and even won occasional victories. Ironically, the local was beset by the problem of delinquent per capita taxes owed to the International which had led to Dorsey's downfall. The International investigated and determined that there was no malfeasance or financial incompetence. Warehouse work was seasonal with the result that the local membership swung dramatically over the course of a year, reaching a high of 800 and then dropping to 400 during "off" periods. Nelson sent the International an installment on the dues owed and tried to develop a plan to stabilize the Local's finances.

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring segregation in the public schools unconstitutional was a major step forward in the struggle against racism. But in the McCarthyite climate of the times, the decision inflamed segregationists and opened the door for more anti-Communist attacks. An upsurge of white racism throughout the South and political reaction throughout the nation combined in a hellish assault on progressives, especially south of the Mason-Dixon line. In the years after 1954 a host of reactionaries in Congress travelled to New Orleans to "investigate" individuals and organizations that advocated

social change and racial justice. The House Un-American Activities Committee held hearings on groups suspected of subversion, like the Southern Conference on Human Welfare. Led by ultra-reactionary Senator James Eastland, the Senate Internal Security Committee made a foray to the city to interrogate leftists about their political activities, particularly their membership in the Communist Party. Those who refused to cooperate lost their jobs. HUAC returned in February 1957 to query Lee Brown about whether he was a Party member. He refused to answer. A year later he was on trial in federal court.

The anti-Communists virtually hounded Andrew Steve Nelson to death. In 1956 Andrew Nelson was indicted by the federal government of charges of falsifying Taft-Hartley non-Communist affidavits that he had signed in 1952 and 1953 stating that he was not a member of the Communist Party at that time. The ILWU leadership, which came to Nelson's defense, ^{denounced} ~~characterized~~ the indictment as an outgrowth of the racist ~~hysteria~~ ^{hysteria} and anti-Communist of the times. The trial was held in September, 1956, before an all-white jury. The most damaging testimony was by Arthur Eugene -- a black former Party member who was a paid FBI informer -- who testified that Nelson told him in 1952 that he intended to stay in the Party. Nelson's health was failing -- he suffered from kidney inflammation (chronic nephritis) and high blood pressure -- and he did not testify at his trial, although he did issue a statement saying that he had not been a member of

the Communist Party "at any time since the early part of 1948."

Nelson was found guilty and sentenced to five years in federal prison. His attorney, James McCain, filed notice of appeal. Free on \$7,500 bail, Nelson, despite his declining health, gamely sought to raise fund for his defense. He did not live to appeal the conviction. Andrew Steve Nelson died on January 12, 1957.

With the death of Nelson and with Lee Brown soon under legal attack, Local 207 was rudderless and its rank and file members became confused and disillusioned. Thomas West, who had never been a member of the Communist Party, was elected president. Bob Robertson came from San Francisco in the summer of 1957 to meet with West. It was agreed that Local 207 should cast off from the ILWU, as much for reasons of geography as politics. ILWU Local 208 in Chicago had recently dissolved and merged with the United Packinghouse Workers of America. The UPWA was a militant union with a democratic tradition similar to that of the ILWU. Robertson recommended that Local 207 also merge with the Packinghouse Workers, which it did on July 23, 1957.

With the dissolution of Local 207, an era in the history of New Orleans labor came to a close. For twenty years Local 207 had carried the banner of labor militancy based on interracial solidarity. An integrated union with black leadership, it presented a model of what was possible for progressive workingclass organization and, at the same time,

— especially during the Nelson years —

it represented a threat to entrenched white supremacist power based on racial division. It was inevitable that the white powers that be, at the local as well as national level, would go all out to destroy this beacon that illuminated a path towards a new, democratic America.

Over its history thousands of workers, black and white, learned lessons in the school of labor militancy that Local 207 constituted. In the pages that follow, one of those workers, Lee Brown, recounts a remarkable journey as a person whose life was shaped by the struggles of black workers, and especially the struggles, triumphs and tribulations of Local 207.