Harry Bridges, the ILWU, and Race Relations in the CIO Era

Bruce Nelson*

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In memory of Walter Williams (1918-1995)

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During the years from the mid-1930s through the late 1940s, the unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) emerged as formidable challengers to the conservative, narrowly job-conscious, and often racist unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Given the inclusive character of industrial labor markets, CIO leaders were well aware that they had to organize blacks as well as whites if their unions were to survive. Moreover, unlike the AFL, the early CIO included a substantial number of left-wing activists—mainly Communists and Socialists—who had a strong commitment to the goal of racial equality. Thus, at its founding convention in 1938, the CIO declared its “uncompromising opposition to any form of discrimination, whether political or economic, based on race, color, creed, or nationality.” In language that reflected a widespread—but finally inadequate—understanding of the roots and role of racism in American society, the new federation denounced racial prejudice as an employer weapon designed to “create false contests between Negro and white workers.”

In recent years there has been a lively debate among labor historians about the CIO’s record on race. Although no consensus has emerged, the poles of the argument are clear enough. On the one side are those who argue that in spite of its real failings and the daunting obstacles it faced, the CIO’s record was essentially a positive one. The new federation “hardly created a racially integrated society,” says Lizabeth Cohen in a prize-winning study of industrial workers in Chicago, “but it went further in promoting racial harmony than any other institution in existence at the time.” On the other side are those who point to a negative continuity, emphasizing that historically organized labor, including the CIO, has served as a vehicle for defending the relatively privileged position of white workers vis a vis their minority competitors in the labor market. The best known advocate of this perspective is Herbert Hill, a scholar at the University of Wisconsin, who came to know the trade union movement intimately through his

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many years of service as NAACP labor secretary. Hill maintains that “the great promise of the CIO, the promise of an interracial labor movement, was never realized.”

How does the history of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) fit within the framework of this argument? Did the leadership of ILWU President Harry Bridges, his undeniable association with the Left, and his union’s “Red” reputation mean that the ILWU’s record on race was markedly different from that of more conventional CIO unions? Moreover, did the remarkable power achieved by the self-proclaimed “Lords of the Docks” at the “point of production” lead to a new willingness to incorporate African Americans into a labor force that had long been “lily white”? In this essay I will seek to answer these questions by focusing on the ILWU’s history, from its emergence in the labor insurgency of the 1930s to its expulsion from the CIO in 1950 on the charge of “Communist domination.” In particular, I will examine the ILWU leadership’s stance on race and compare it with the record of one of the union’s most important affiliates, Local 13 in San Pedro, which represented longshoremen in the port of Los Angeles.

I

The place to begin is with an assessment of the long-term evolution of race relations on the waterfront. Over a period of many years, dockworkers developed their own special pattern with regard to race and ethnicity. On the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) found it necessary to embrace a mosaic of nationality groups and above all to find a way of achieving an accommodation between blacks and whites. In some ports, whites predominated; in other ports, the two races divided the work equally; in still others, African Americans constituted the overwhelming majority of the labor force. In these circumstances, said scholars Sterling Spero and Abram Harris in 1931, the black worker “probably plays a more important role [in the ILA] than he does in any other labor union.” But the accommodation that occurred was only partial, and it sometimes gave way to bitter conflict. In New York, the nation’s largest port, Spero and Harris noted that “the Negro’s presence . . . is now accepted by the white man. He has a right to be there; he has a right to work; he has a right to belong to the union. Yet he is by no means regarded as an equal.” There were “many piers . . . which refuse to employ Negroes,” and this remained a persistent problem. In 1949, the president of the port’s “Negro local” expressed the fear that the ILA had “a program of gradually ‘weeding out’ Negro longshoremen from city piers”; and as late as 1961, black trade union leader A. Philip Randolph could charge that “with increasing severity Negro longshoremen are being denied equal job rights and are made the victims of race violence and intimidation on the piers of New York.”

On the West Coast, before the renaissance of unionism in 1933 and the founding of the ILWU in 1937, there had been very little accommodation between blacks and whites. Here, the black population was much smaller than in the Atlantic and Gulf ports, and, operating squarely within the white supremacist craft traditions of the AFL, white dockworkers and their unions had succeeded in excluding African Americans altogether, or nearly so. Insofar as black workers found a place on the West Coast waterfront before the famed “Big Strike” of 1934, it was mainly as strikebreakers, and then—for the most part—only temporarily. According to census data,
African Americans constituted 1.4 percent of the dock labor force in California in 1930, and an even smaller percentage in the Pacific Northwest. Economist Herbert Northrup reported that on the eve of the 1934 strike, there were only 23 black ILA members along the entire West Coast.5

From the standpoint of official union policy, this situation would change dramatically during and after the Big Strike, the 83-day walkout that began in May 1934 and ended in a great triumph for the union (at that time, the Pacific Coast District of the ILA). The strike victory led not only to union recognition but to a coastwide agreement, union control of hiring, the six-hour day, and—overall—a remarkable turnaround in the relationship between dockworkers and their employers.6 Insofar as the Big Strike also led to a new departure in race relations, it was mainly—indeed, overwhelmingly—because of the growing influence of Harry Bridges and the Left. Bridges began working as a longshoreman in 1922. In the early Thirties, he was among the leaders of a caucus of longshore unionists in the key port of San Francisco that included a number of Communists. He and his allies argued that building a strong union necessitated the recruiting of black longshoremen into its ranks and ending the pattern of racial and ethnic segregation that prevailed in waterfront work gangs. During the 1934 strike, Bridges spoke at black churches and “implored blacks to join him on the picket line.” Nearly a decade later he recalled, “I went directly to them. I said: ‘Our union means a new deal for Negroes. Stick with us and we’ll stand for your inclusion in [the] industry.’” And, he declared, “Almost without exception, they stuck with us. They helped us. The employers were frustrated in their attempt to use them for scabs.”7

With the formation of the ILWU in 1937, and its affiliation with the CIO, San Francisco’s Longshore Local 10 quickly distinguished itself as a “haven of racial equality.” The presence of a sizable left-wing cadre in the local was vitally important to this achievement, as was the fact that Bridges and other leaders of the international union were based in San Francisco and played an active role in Local 10’s deliberations. A third factor was the immigration of thousands of black workers during World War II, when the port of San Francisco boomed and, according to some estimates, provided employment for as many as nine thousand longshoremen. More than two thousand of these workers were African-American. Many of them became full members of the union and eventually constituted a critical mass that, in alliance with the Left, had a significant impact on the local’s internal life. Although the union did not use race as a category in counting its members, informed contemporaries estimated that blacks made up about twenty-five percent of Local 10’s membership in 1946, and about forty-five percent by the mid-1960s.8

Within the black community, especially in San Francisco, the ILWU’s record on race received high praise, and Bridges was given much of the credit. The president of the Baptist Ministers’ Union called him “a Godsend among men.” The Sun-Reporter declared that “minority people have fared better in the ILWU under Bridges . . . than they have in any other labor union in the United States.” Dr. Carleton Goodlet, a physician and civil rights activist, characterized the ILWU and the Marine Cooks and Stewards, another Left-led maritime union with a large black membership, as “the guardians of the Negro community and its economic backbone.” Even the staunchly anti-Communist Wilson Record conceded in the pages of an
NAACP publication that “whatever one may think of the left-wing tendencies of the Bridges-controlled [ILWU], the fact remains that through it Negroes have obtained a fair break in job opportunities and union participation.”

Although Bridges and San Francisco were often the focal point of attention, the ILWU’s achievements in the realm of race relations reached far beyond Local 10. By 1946, the union’s research director concluded, “approximately 22% of our longshore and warehouse membership consists of Negroes. This amounts to about 11,000 Negroes out of approximately 50,000 members in these two categories.” Beyond these two categories, there was the union’s extraordinary breakthrough in organizing sugar and pineapple workers in the fields of Hawaii. Here virtually the entire labor force was made up of “minority peoples.” In 1946, Filipino and Japanese workers constituted nearly 90 percent of the ILWU members in the Islands, and the emergence of Hawaii as the union’s greatest source of growth meant that people of color would soon account for nearly half of the ILWU’s total membership.

Given the increasing importance of this multiracial constituency, the union moved aggressively in 1945 to suspend the charter of the Stockton Unit of Warehouse Local 6 because its members refused to work with a Japanese-American who had recently been released from a wartime relocation camp. Bridges told the press that “the position of the ILWU on the question of equality for all, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, is clear and unequivocal. We cannot and will not compromise on it for one moment, for to do so would be to pick up the banner of fascism where Hitler dropped it.” When the vast majority of the Stockton rank and file refused to sign pledge cards affirming their willingness to abide by the union’s racially egalitarian principles, the suspension went into effect and, according to historian Harvey Schwartz, “an angry Harry Bridges . . . tore the Stockton Unit charter off the wall and drove back to San Francisco.”

There is little in Bridges’ background that would explain his strong commitment to racial equality. He was born in 1901 in Australia, which at that time was an openly white supremacist society. When he migrated to the United States, he lived and worked mainly among whites in a country that was also permeated by racist assumptions and practices. It’s true that he belonged to the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for a short time; and the IWW’s outspoken racial egalitarianism may well have influenced his long-term attitude toward this issue. But there were more than a few IWW-influenced seamen who operated comfortably within the confines of the rejuvenated Sailors’ Union of the Pacific (SUP) in the 1930s; and the SUP became famous for the way it combined on-the-job militancy and syndicalist rhetoric with an unrepentant racism that meant the complete exclusion of African Americans from its ranks.

In explaining Bridges’ dissent from American society’s prevailing racial mores, it seems clear that in this regard, as in many others, he was influenced much less by the IWW than by the Communist party, which was almost unique among predominantly white organizations in its close identification with the struggle for black equality. On the basis of their own experience, even some of the party’s bitterest opponents on the Left were willing to admit this. Frank Marquart, a Socialist autoworker in Detroit, credited Communist shop papers in the late 1920s
"for making me conscious of the fact that Negroes have special problems as a minority group, apart from the general conditions of wage earners." "The CP," Marquart concluded, "opened my eyes to things about which I had been stone blind!" Trotskyist Martin Glaberman also acknowledged that "on a personal level and on the shop floor, CP members were the most consistent and principled element in the labor movement in fighting for the rights of black workers."

Although Bridges steadfastly denied being a Communist party member, he readily acknowledged his respect for the party and some of its ideas and programs. Moreover, he was instrumental in opening the door to Communist influence in the ILWU. Over the years, the union developed a reputation as Left-led, or "Communist-dominated," and one of the sure signs of this relationship was the ILWU's unusually strong commitment to racial equality. Summing up its history in 1955, the union declared proudly that "the ILWU banned racial discrimination and segregation twenty years before the United States Supreme Court found the courage to do so."

This statement may be an accurate indicator of the leadership's intent, but as a summation of the union's history it can obscure as much as it reveals. Bridges' own commitment to racial equality must be seen in relation to other principles he embraced—especially seniority, local autonomy, and a belief in rank-and-file democracy. When the practical application of these principles clashed with the ideal of racial equality, as it often did, the ILWU president was compelled to negotiate a course that, perhaps necessarily, compromised one principle while upholding another. In relation to the recurring fluctuations in the waterfront labor market, and the consequent ebb and flow of job opportunities, Bridges' clearest commitment was to seniority, which he called a "fair and honest trade union principle" that "no fair-minded, honest union member can oppose." He was convinced, moreover, that dock workers should be sharing abundance rather than scarcity. "We readily admit that . . . the peaks and valleys of demand for longshoremen will present problems," he told a Congressional committee in 1955. "But we are not prepared to return to the jungle of the New York waterfront and the west coast of pre-1934 in order to have a permanent surplus of men available at each dock gate. That way is the way of sharing starvation."

His strong opposition to "sharing starvation" led Bridges to propose on one occasion that a thousand longshoremen from his own Local 10 be laid off, even though he knew full well that black workers, because of their low seniority, would be disproportionately affected. He made this proposal in 1949, after San Francisco longshoremen had been working "short" weeks for well over a year and had, additionally, lost substantial income during a 98-day strike in 1948. According to the Local 10 Longshore Bulletin, Bridges declared that "many men on the front" had asked him to do something to "remedy the situation, as they could no longer make a living." But in this instance Bridges' allies on the Left deserted him, and so did the African-American longshoremen, who immediately recognized the serious problem layoffs would cause for them at a time when black unemployment in the Bay Area was very high. In fact, among the membership as a whole the solidaristic spirit that had prevailed during the 1948 strike reasserted itself, and Bridges' proposal was overwhelmingly defeated.
As this incident suggests, Bridges and other union leaders were frequently constrained by the fact that they operated within the framework of a democratic organization whose members had minds of their own and a strong commitment to local autonomy. More often than not, the membership also demonstrated a strong tendency to favor “son, brother, neighbor, or friend” when jobs became available on the waterfront. The ILWU could, and did, incorporate the principle of racial equality into its constitution and insist that all of its affiliated locals abide by this ideal. But in practice the principles of local autonomy and seniority, and the “brother-in-law” system of allocating new jobs, often took precedence over the goal of racial equality. When conflict arose over racial issues, the union was compelled to seek resolution in a larger context that became increasingly precarious. The glory days of maritime unity in the mid-1930s soon gave way to intercraft friction that was rendered more complex and bitter by the jurisdictional warfare between the AFL and the CIO. And when the ILWU was expelled from the CIO in 1950, it became even more vulnerable to raiding by hostile unions. The ILA, and the Teamsters, stood ready to reap whatever benefits might accrue from conflict between the ILWU leadership and locals that resisted its attempts to enforce a policy of racial integration.\(^\text{17}\)

The classic example of this conflict was Portland’s Local 8, which along with its counterparts in Seattle, San Francisco, and San Pedro was one of four major longshore locals on the West Coast. For several decades, Local 8 remained an acute embarrassment to the ILWU and a blot on its reputation for racial egalitarianism. (“The ultra-liberal union directed by flaming liberal Harry Bridges has not admitted Negroes to its Portland local,” the Oregonian reported in 1959.) According to an Oregon Bureau of Labor study, Local 8 had “an unwritten policy and system that kept Negroes from being employed as longshoremen.” During World War II, when about fifteen thousand African Americans came to the city seeking employment, and the local took in 557 newcomers in a one-year period, Local 8 remained “lily white.” As late as 1961, when there were about twelve hundred regular and probationary union members on the Portland waterfront, the local continued to exclude blacks. This situation would improve in the 1960s, but only slightly. Even Bridges was unable to persuade the members of Local 8 to change their ways. Several times, when he addressed local union meetings and raised the issue of race, he was “unceremoniously booed out of the hall.”\(^\text{18}\)

Clearly, the ILWU leadership’s commitment to racial equality was not, by itself, sufficient to shape the practice of the Portland longshore local. And the Portland example raises a broader question about the racial attitudes and practices of the union’s white rank and file, including the famed “generation of the 1930s.” The men who fought the 1934 strike and built the foundations of the ILWU have been justly celebrated by scholars—above all, perhaps, by this author—for their courage, their militancy, and their unusual commitment to a progressive political agenda.\(^\text{19}\) Their behavior during the Big Strike is the stuff of legend; and in the aftermath of the strike, they achieved an extraordinary degree of control of the work process, so much so, an employer spokesman complained, that union stewards “establish the manner in which, and the speed at which, work is to be performed on the waterfronts of the Pacific Coast.”\(^\text{20}\)
To be sure, there was plenty of job-related militancy among industrial workers in the 1930s, highlighted by the sit-down strikes that helped spearhead the organization of the auto and rubber industries in Flint, Detroit, and Akron. But the West Coast maritime unionists, and first and foremost the longshoremen, were practically unique among American workers in the way they extended their militancy from the realm of "porkchops" to the world of "politics." They protested, and even engaged in symbolic strikes, over political issues such as the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Japanese aggression against China, and Republican Spain's desperate fight for survival against a counterrevolution supported by Hitler and Mussolini. Longshoreman Henry Schirmpf declared that the goal of the maritime workers was not just to win better wages and conditions for themselves but to "generally advance the human cause." Schirmpf, who was closely identified with the Left at the time, may not have spoken for all of his fellow workers, but his statement conveys an essential ingredient of the spirit and vision that animated many of them during the Turbulent Thirties.21

As the case of the Portland longshoremen suggests, however, the record may look quite different when viewed from the standpoint of race. During the Thirties the issue of racial equality remained more rhetorical than substantive, because in the context of the Great Depression there was hardly any influx of new workers of any race or nationality on the waterfront. Census data indicate that in California as a whole, the overall number of longshoremen increased by about five hundred between 1930 and 1940, but that the number of black longshoremen actually dropped, from 91 to 83.22 Insofar as race had an important effect on the union's development in the 1930s, it was not on the Pacific Coast, but in the Gulf of Mexico, and the port of New Orleans in particular.23 We tend to take it for granted that the ILWU is—and always has been—a West Coast union. But that was not the intent of Harry Bridges and his allies when the ILWU was founded. In the summer of 1937, the Pacific Coast District of the ILA voted to leave the American Federation of Labor and affiliate with the CIO, whose "tremendous march," Bridges declared, was "sweeping everything before it." CIO spokesmen were soon predicting that they would win over the ILA locals on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts after "two or three months' intensive work."

Of course, such sweeping predictions of the ILA's imminent demise proved to be wishful thinking at best, as the ILWU would soon learn, not only in New York—where its organizers were assaulted by the abundant supply of ILA goons—but also in New Orleans, which became the major focal point of the campaign to make the ILWU into a national union of dockworkers. In the famed Crescent City, which at that time was the second largest port in the nation, waterfront workers were organized into separate ILA locals on the basis of craft and race, and among the longshoremen blacks outnumbered whites by nearly three to one. Even in a union notorious for its corruption and lack of real democracy, the New Orleans ILA locals were infamously corrupt and undemocratic. On top of that, they bore "the stigma of company domination." ILWU organizers were thus confident that they would win a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election and thereby replace the ILA as the representative of the Crescent City's longshoremen. But it was not to be. When the NLRB election was finally held, in October 1938, the ILA won a stunning—and, from the standpoint of the CIO, totally
unexpected—victory. For Crescent City longshoremen, there were separate elections at twenty different companies. The ILA won eighteen of them; the ILWU, one. In the twentieth, the ILWU received one more vote than its rival, but neither had a majority. Overall, the ILA piled up huge majorities at one company after another.

Why the ILWU's crushing defeat? The first and most obvious answer is intimidation, and the fact that "the employers, the [city] administration, and the A. F. of L. joined in impressing on the workers that if the C. I. O. won [the election], they would lose their jobs." To make sure that the dockworkers got the message, the New Orleans police force and AFL goon squads launched a closely coordinated reign of terror against the CIO that led to numerous arrests, the raiding and wrecking of the CIO headquarters, and the brutal beating of a number of the ILWU representatives who had come from the West Coast to direct the campaign. One organizer had his spine fractured in two places and another suffered a ruptured liver, as a result of beatings they received while in police custody.

It would be wrong, however, to attribute the vote against the CIO entirely to intimidation. Bridges reported at the time that "the only companies we won were those with white longshoremen." The black dockworkers, many of whom had signed ILWU pledge cards, clearly voted overwhelmingly for the ILA. This came as a shock to the racially egalitarian ILWU, which had challenged the pattern of racial separation in the Crescent City by attempting to organize one, interracial local of dockworkers on a portwide basis. But it is clear in retrospect that in spite of their courage and their real commitment to racial equality, the ILWU organizers simply did not understand the dynamics of race relations on the New Orleans riverfront, where since the mid-1920s, most jobs had been for reserved for African Americans. With the full support of the employers, they had established a fragile enclave of black advantage, and they never stopped believing that white dockworkers were "scabs and finks" who were scheming to take away their jobs. This was a fear that leaders of the ILA and some members of the black community in New Orleans were only too happy to exploit. Whereas the ILWU chose to appeal to black longshoremen on "a strictly trade union basis," its African-American opponents did not hesitate to speak the language of racial solidarity. On the eve of the NLRB election, a black ILA spokesman declared that "anyone voting for the C. I. O. tomorrow is a traitor to his race." And a "Colored Citizens Committee" addressed a broadside to "My dear Longshoremen" declaring that "a vote for the C. I. O. will be a vote to drive the colored longshoremen from the highest paid jobs enjoyed by colored men of the United States and replace them by unemployed C. I. O. longshoremen and other unemployed radicals from the West Coast." The citizens' committee concluded, "It is your duty to your race, your family and your God to vote in this election and to vote for the I. L. A."

In the final analysis, the fact that the ILA had long offered black workers a place on the waterfront at wages that were among the best available to African Americans anywhere in the South was a major factor in the outcome of the election. Moreover, for all of its good intentions, the ILWU in New Orleans was never able to overcome the suspicion that it was a "white man's organization." For black workers in the Crescent City, the familiar terrain of segregated unionism provided an arena for the development of autonomous black leadership, so much so
that black ILA locals in the Gulf would resist pressure to merge with their white counterparts, until they were ordered to do so by a federal court order in 1983.

On the Pacific Coast, race began to "matter"—to have a dramatic impact on the union's development—with the coming of World War II, when the vast expansion of production on the "home front" required the hiring of thousands of new workers on the waterfront, for the first time in a generation. Many of the new workers on the docks were African Americans, especially in San Pedro and San Francisco, where the pace of black migration far exceeded that in the Pacific Northwest. A closer look at the experience of the generation of the 1930s in the port of Los Angeles should enhance our understanding of the complexity of the ILWU's record on race and provide a revealing angle of vision on the consciousness of the union's white rank and file.

II

When World War II began, Longshore Local 13, in San Pedro, had about 2,500 members. Although its ranks had always included Mexican Americans, no African Americans found regular—or even irregular—employment on the waterfront before the war. Al Langley, who began working intermittently on the docks in 1934 and became a full member of the union in 1938, recalled that "prior to the war there wasn't one black on the [Los Angeles] waterfront." According to Langley, there were only two black families in San Pedro during the 1930s, and the men of both households worked as janitors in downtown commercial establishments. Tony Salcido, a longshoreman who grew up in Wilmington (which together with San Pedro constitutes the port of Los Angeles), remembered only two or three black families in his community during the thirties. Since Local 13 had a strong tendency to favor local residents and, above all, the family members of working longshoremen in allocating new jobs, blacks were at a great disadvantage. But their absence from the longshore work force was not merely the product of these apparently "natural" circumstances. For Langley recalled that Local 13 included in its ranks "a kind of a vigilante group of ultra-conservative[s]"—men who "had never been around blacks, or else they were southerners," and who were determined to exclude African Americans from the waterfront. On the rare occasions when black longshoremen from San Francisco sought to exercise their right as union members to visit San Pedro and work there temporarily, the local "vigilantes" made it clear that the newcomers were unwelcome. "The [black] guys got the message, said Langley, "and they [left]."

According to a retrospective analysis by the international union, it was not until 1943 that "a handful of Negroes, perhaps two dozen, were registered and became part of the regular working force on the waterfront." This was followed by a "limited registration" that enrolled 409 men, among whom 183—or about 45%—were African American. By January 1945, according to a "rough estimate" by the local union president, the "number of Negro members in Local 13" was "between 400 and 500"—or, at most, ten percent of a work force that had more than doubled since the war began.

In important respects, the presence of African Americans altered the working
relationships among the men on the front. Arthur Kaunisto shipped out on a Liberty ship in 1942 and came back to San Pedro in 1944. He recalled that when he returned to the hiring hall, “I didn’t recognize many people. They were mostly strangers to me”—“a lot of colored people,” and “a mixture that I’d never seen before.” Corky Wilson, who also shipped out in the merchant marine in 1942 and returned to the docks in 1944, made the same point, although much more crudely: “I walked into the hiring hall,” he recalled, “and I didn’t see a white guy anywhere—all niggers, all niggers. . . . We had never had a colored guy up until then, and then . . . the place was packed with colored guys.”

Although Kaunisto’s and Wilson’s recollections overestimate the percentage of blacks among the newcomers to the waterfront, they correctly imply that the transition to a multiracial work force was not an easy one. Longshoring had always required close cooperation in the work process, and therefore a sense of affinity among the men on the job. Some work gangs had been organized on an ethnic basis, and some—in part at least—on a family basis. Thus, for many whites the sudden presence of African Americans on the docks represented an unprecedented challenge to the sense of camaraderie and mutual respect that undergirded their working relationships. Al Langley recalled that “most of the whites were scared of the blacks, because we never had any around here and we never associated with them. . . . When they started to come in, the whites didn’t want to work with them,” and the blacks themselves were “more or less clannish.”

The way the hiring hall operated made it easy to maintain, or establish, a pattern of racial separation on the job, especially during the war, when work was plentiful and labor was relatively scarce. A man who was dissatisfied with his partner or his gang, for any reason, could simply “replace” himself—that is, return to the hall, from which a “replacement” would be dispatched, and then wait for the next available job. Joe Stahl recalled that “a lot of [oldtimers] wouldn’t work with a black guy. [They’d] turn around and call a replacement.” And black longshoreman Walter Williams remembered that “some of the regular ‘longies’ . . . would say, ‘I’m going to call me a damn replacement,’ if they saw a black guy coming down into the hold. And they would call a replacement rather than work with us.”

Williams first went to work on the docks in September 1943. Before that he had been an organizer for the CIO Industrial Union Council in Los Angeles and a welder at the California Shipbuilding Company, where he served as a leader of the opposition to the flagrantly racist practices of the AFL-affiliated International Brotherhood of Boilermakers. He recalled hearing about longshoring from fellow workers, who told him it was “great work”; besides, the pay was more than he was making as a welder; and he had been attracted to the CIO in the first place because of its progressive reputation on matters of race. So he eagerly sought employment on the waterfront. But forty-five years later, he still remembered with bitterness the reception he received there.

I wasn’t on any job [long] before I was reminded that I was a temp worker. [The white longshoremen would say,] “You guys are only here temporarily. What are you gonna do when the war’s over?” And I promptly told them, “I intend to be
here when the war's over. I'm gonna do everything I can to stay here."

It's a strain on a person to have to work in an atmosphere where he knows that people have these racist feelings. From time to time you have to listen to racist remarks and control yourself, or try to control yourself anyway. . . . You had a lot of brawls. You had a lot of fights down there . . . over name calling [that] involved racism.29

The extraordinary tension that accompanied the expansion of the work force in San Pedro was by no means unique to that community or to the waterfront. Rather, it occurred across much of the industrial landscape, as World War II precipitated an earthquake in the labor market. Millions of white men left the workplace to serve in the armed forces overseas. In their place came whites from the rural South; women who had hitherto been denied access to higher-paying blue-collar employment; and more than a million African Americans, many of them also migrants from the rural South. Their presence in factory, mine, and mill—and on the waterfront—placed enormous strains on social relationships in the workplace. Class-conscious veterans of the CIO's organizing wars chafed at the presence of class-unconscious "hillbillies" from the South; men were often ambivalent about—and sometimes actively hostile to—the presence of women. Above all, whites resented—and resisted—the influx of blacks.30

Over time, the interaction among black, white, and Mexican-American workers in San Pedro bred friendship and respect as well as tension. But it would appear that among a clear majority of San Pedro's "'34 men," there was considerable resistance to working side by side with black newcomers, letting them become full union members, and promoting those who did become full members to head a gang. Frank Sunstedt recalled that "no black member had ever been given a gang, and] that any time a black man was about ready to get a gang, the promotions committee members would go around and entice anyone else to get a gang, just to keep a black man out." Black applicants to head a gang would have to appear before union members who would—in Arthur Kaunisto's words—"just kind of roust them around."31

The issue of exclusion came to a head in 1945 and, even more so, in 1946. In the summer of 1945, the union and the employers reached an agreement that a man could not be a gang boss until he had worked in the industry on the Pacific Coast for five years. The pact also applied to winch drivers, jitney drivers, and carpenters—in other words, to the most desirable jobs on the front. Since virtually no blacks had been members of Local 13 before 1943, the agreement effectively placed a ceiling on their job mobility, and, according to Al Langley, "every one of them had to come back in and work in the hold or on the dock. . . . [The issue] had come to a head because the blacks had begun to get acclimated, and they knew their stuff. . . They wanted to be part of the industry too. But the whites weren't ready for it."32

In 1946, another change of policy shifted the issue, insofar as blacks were concerned, from containment to exclusion. In April, Bill Lawrence, who had just completed a term as president of Local 13, reported that "work in this Port has dropped to the extent that we have approximately 700 or 800 men too many for the industry." Lawrence estimated that if the
waterfront’s war-inflated labor force was not reduced, the union would face a situation where some low-seniority men would be dispatched only about once a week; and others, once every two or three weeks at best. Thus, the local decided that its five hundred lowest-seniority members should be "deregistered" and "placed on an unemployed list." This decision was implemented on April 22, 1946, with the understanding that "no new men [would] be taken into the industry until the above 500 men were called back." (The group would become known, in the folklore of the union, as the "Unemployed 500." )

The initial call for a reduction in the work force had come from the employer representatives on the joint Labor Relations Committee in the port of Los Angeles. But the local union leadership had readily agreed with this proposal, and so had the international union. Lawrence and other Local 13 officers discussed the matter with ILWU Secretary-Treasurer Louis Goldblatt and Northwest Regional Director Bill Gettings, both of whom were prominently associated with the union’s left wing, and Lawrence reported that “[we] acted right along the lines that [Goldblatt] suggested.” Bridges himself expressed the belief that the decision was not only “clearly legal, but founded on good trade union principles.”

When he penned these words in September 1947, Bridges could hardly have anticipated that the decision to deregister 500 union members in San Pedro would haunt the ILWU for the next twenty-five years. The problem was that nearly half of the deregistered men were black; and, even more so, that the deregistration served to eliminate about 90 percent of Local 13’s black members. Since the union followed the principle of seniority in determining who would be laid off, Lawrence believed that there were no grounds for complaint; apparently, the international union agreed. But for black workers, the decision rankled, not only because so many of them were laid off, but because, as Walter Williams recalled, some of Local 13’s white members openly boasted that “this union was lily-white before you guys came down here, and [now] it’s going to be lily-white again.” They were just arrogant about it.” In the immediate aftermath of the decision, Lawrence reported that “a few disgruntled colored brothers” had discussed the matter with Rev. Clayton D. Russell, a prominent civil rights activist who had led a campaign during World War II to expand job opportunities for African Americans in Los Angeles. Lawrence complained that Russell was “attempting to make a ‘Big To Do’ about the entire situation,” and was, moreover, “inferring that there might have been some [racial] discrimination . . . involved.” Gradually, the ranks of the “disgruntled colored brothers” expanded dramatically. They built an informal group which they called the Afro-American Labor Protective Society; and in the summer of 1947, about sixty members of the group approached an attorney and began discussing the possibility of achieving legal redress outside the channels of the union.

What served to swell the ranks of the grievants was the increasingly obvious fact that Local 13 was violating its promise that “no new men [would] be taken into the industry until the . . . 500 . . . were called back.” In fact, the union had never intended to apply the terms of this resolution literally. For the question of access was complicated by a number of earlier resolutions that gave priority to longshoremen who had left the docks to join the armed forces or serve in the merchant marine during the war. As these men returned, they were automatically
reregistered. Moreover, the union’s membership committee decided that others should also be reregistered ahead of the Unemployed 500. Thus, Local 13 members who had transferred to other ILWU locals during the war, or who had taken jobs in the shipyards, were given the same priority as military and merchant marine veterans when they returned to San Pedro. In addition, the local continued to follow a policy of making jobs, and union membership, available to sons and other male relatives of longshoremen, even if these family members had never worked on the docks before. Here, perhaps, was the most flagrant violation of the rights of the men on the unemployed list, for Local 13 had voted “That no man be initiated into this Union” before its unemployed members were “called back.”

What all of this meant in practice was that between the end of April 1946 and December 31, 1949, 613 returnees were reregistered and 60 new men were registered on the Los Angeles waterfront. During the same period, as a result of death, retirement, and other factors, 901 men were eliminated from the registration list. And yet, during much of this time, work on the waterfront was increasing and the need for men was growing accordingly. In fact, the employers suggested as early as January 1947 that all of the Unemployed 500 be reregistered. But Local 13 refused. From the time of the original deregistration through the end of 1949, only 58 of the laid off men were reregistered.

The final ingredient that cemented the black workers’ conviction that racial discrimination was at the heart of the union’s practice was the fact that even when men from the unemployed list were called back for reregistration, Local 13 ignored seniority and privileged whites over blacks. The first man reregistered was a white worker who had been registered on January 8, 1946, and initiated into the union on April 4, only eighteen days before his deregistration! He may well have had the lowest seniority of any of the Unemployed 500. Overall, from April 1946 until July 30, 1947, only ten men were reregistered; all of them were white; and all had less seniority than many of the black longshoremen on the unemployed list.

Facing the possibility of a lawsuit, the international union pressured Local 13 to follow seniority in reregistering men from the unemployed list, and this was done beginning in October 1947. Bridges advised the local that men who had left the waterfront and were now seeking reregistration should not be given “any priority” simply because they possessed a withdrawal card. Rather, the ILWU president proposed a formula for reregistering all men in accordance with their real seniority (i.e., actual amount of time spent on the Los Angeles waterfront) that would, he believed, win the acceptance of “any fair-minded working stiff.” But the local ignored his advice and continued favoring virtually anyone who had withdrawn from the union before April 1946 over men from the unemployed list. It was not until the coming of the Korean War, and the consequent expansion of work on the docks, that most of the deregistrants had their active union status restored. In the meantime, in the quest to recover their jobs, some of them had sued the union.

When 138 men were reregistered in December 1950, it appeared that the saga of the Unemployed 500 was finally at an end. But it wasn’t. In May 1965, during the heyday of the struggle for black equality in the United States, twenty-four veterans of the Unemployed 500
filed a grievance against the shipowners, demanding the restoration of their full seniority. This time the international union threw its entire weight on the side of the grievants. The brief filed by ILWU attorney Ben Margolis acknowledged that “when the deregistration took place in April 1946, the virtual lily-white character of the Los Angeles-Long Beach . . . waterfront was restored.” While this factor alone was not sufficient to establish racial discrimination, the union argued that “it does not stand alone,” because events thereafter underscored “the discriminatory character of the entire process of deregistration and reregistration.”

But given a set of circumstances in which more than half of the deregistered men were whites, most of whom suffered the same fate as their black fellow workers, how could the union prove racial discrimination? The fact is that it couldn’t, at least not to the satisfaction of the arbitrators who in at least two successive decisions ruled against the union’s claim. In arguing its case, however, the union offered a telling—although indirect—acknowledgment of the mindset of the membership of Local 13 in the 1940s which suggests that racial discrimination was indeed at the heart of the entire process. “Examined in the total context,” said the union, “the deregistration of April 1946 was discriminatory despite the short-lived economic justification therefor. It is true that the majority of the white deregistrees were treated in the same manner as the Negro members of that group.” But this could be explained only by the fact that these whites “were unfortunate enough to be integrated with the first substantial number of Negroes to enter longshore employment in Southern California.” In other words, representatives of Local 13 had reregistered whites from the unemployed list without regard to seniority, and in doing so had flagrantly violated the seniority rights of blacks. When faced with the threat of a legal challenge, they chose thereafter to ignore the seniority rights of whites as well as blacks among the Unemployed 500, with the apparent goal of limiting the number of African Americans in the ranks of Local 13. In the meantime, they continued to reregister virtually all former members who had voluntarily left the Los Angeles waterfront before April 1946 and who now sought the restoration of their union status, and even to register new men, most of whom were relatives of the existing membership. Among the 673 men in these categories, there were fourteen blacks who met the union’s criteria and therefore were reregistered along with the others. But the net effect—and surely the unstated purpose—of this policy was to restore, and then to maintain, “the virtual lily-white character of the Los Angeles-Long Beach . . . waterfront.”

Understandably, perhaps, given the nature of the grievance procedure, the union tried to pin the entire blame for the discriminatory treatment of the Unemployed 500 on the employers. But this argument was simply untenable, for the decision to deregister 500 men was a joint one, made by the union and the employers together. Moreover, in reregistering men thereafter, the employers simply “rubber stamped” the choices made by Local 13’s membership committee. With regard to the laid off men, as arbitrator Sam Kagel pointed out, “the Union was required to be the moving party . . . and it did not move.” (Or, more accurately, when it did “move,” it was in the wrong direction.) The conclusion seems inescapable that insofar as there was a pattern of discrimination, the principal responsibility in this case lay with the union rather than the employers.
The fate of the Unemployed 500 tells us much about the character of Local 13, which seems in some respects to have functioned like an AFL craft union in the building trades. In these unions, there was a long history of reserving new jobs for the family and friends of the current members. By this mechanism, and more formal ones such as the unions’ control of apprenticeships and the dispatching of work, blacks and other people of color were relentlessly excluded from various trades, and local unions retained a high degree of racial and, sometimes, ethnic homogeneity. Local 13 had its own mechanism, “sponsorship,” that served to maintain and reinforce patterns of racial exclusion. To be a successful candidate for employment on the Los Angeles waterfront, one had to be sponsored by a member of Local 13. The membership voted that priority in this regard should be given to the sons of deceased members, and then to the sons and brothers of active members. Thereafter, the right to sponsor would be based upon seniority, with the first choice given to men whose membership dated back to 1933. Since the union assumed that a member would be likely to sponsor a “son, brother, neighbor, or friend,” this practice “naturally” served to reinforce Local 13’s pattern of racial exclusion. For with the exception of a small number of Mexican Americans, all of the local’s most senior members were white; and in the residentially segregated and racially polarized environment of Los Angeles, a Local 13 member’s “son, brother, neighbor, or friend” was almost certain to be white as well.43

In an apparent attempt to further solidify this pattern, the membership voted in 1951 that applicants for employment on the docks had to have been “a resident of Los Angeles County for ten years.” In the short run at least, the implementation of this resolution would automatically have excluded all of the African Americans who migrated to Los Angeles during World War II, along with those who continued the flow of black migration after the war. Even without it, the number of blacks in the union remained small, especially in comparison to the area’s burgeoning African-American population, which grew from 75,323 in 1940 to 464,717 in 1960. According to imprecise estimates compiled by the ILWU’s international and regional staff, there were about two hundred-fifty black members of Local 13 at the end of 1946 (which must have included the blacks on the unemployed list), and “over 300 Negroes” in 1964, when the Los Angeles area’s black population exceeded half a million. In a Southern California variation on a common pattern of ethnic succession, Mexican Americans, who accounted for only a small percentage of the local’s membership at the end of World War II, would gradually become the majority within Local 13. But African Americans were unable to make the same inroads.44

The AFL defended its racially exclusive practices by pointing to the autonomy of its affiliated unions. Although it reserved the right to expel organizations on the grounds of corruption or Communist domination, the AFL Executive Council claimed that it had no authority to interfere in the internal affairs of its affiliates when it came to race. The ILWU leadership also respected the right of its local unions to make autonomous choices on many issues, including the question of layoffs. In 1946, Bridges had informed an “old-time member of the ILWU” that “every Local has complete autonomy in these matters unless there [are] clear . . . violations of the International Constitution.” In the case of the Unemployed 500, the international believed that Local 13 had made a decision that fell within its proper jurisdiction, and asked only that it be implemented in accordance with the principle of seniority. It was not until nearly twenty years after the original deregistration that the international came to recognize
how blatantly the rights of its black members, and the union’s own principles, had been violated.45

III

To gain a broader perspective on the ILWU’s civil rights record, we should compare it with the experience of other CIO unions, especially those that were “Left-led.” Much of the scholarly literature on the relationship of the Left-led unions to issues of race has focused on organizations that were located in the South, and that were based on a constituency that was predominantly African-American. Robert Korstad and Michael Honey have studied the record of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers (FTA) in Winston-Salem and Memphis, respectively, and have concluded, in Honey’s words, that “black support and leftist leadership proved the key to success in many of the places where the CIO excelled.” The FTA aggressively defended the job rights of black workers and also played an important role in fighting for the rights of African Americans in the larger society, including the southern communities where they lived. There can be no doubting that the initiative in this regard came from Communists in the union leadership, who were—to an unusual degree—open about their party affiliation. Indeed, says Korstad, a significant number of black tobacco workers in Winston-Salem joined the Communist party, in large measure because they viewed it as a “militant civil rights organization.”46

Given the circumstances in which they operated, it was entirely natural that the leaders of the FTA would regard black workers not only as the strategic heart of their organization but also as the key to the union’s survival. For blacks constituted an important percentage of the work force in the industries the FTA sought to organize, and they were usually far more open than their white counterparts to both unionism and the politics of the Left. Strategically, however, the FTA leadership may have been guilty of an unfortunate miscalculation, or—perhaps—caught in an insoluble bind. For the reluctance of white workers to identify with what they regarded as a “nigger union” would ultimately help undermine the FTA’s position in Winston-Salem and other southern communities in which it had once played a vital role.47

In discussing the Left’s record on issues of race, it is important to expand our focus beyond the eleven unions that were expelled from the CIO to include organizations such as the Transport Workers (TWU), the National Maritime Union (NMU), and the United Packinghouse Workers (UPWA). The UPWA had a far-flung white majority and a substantial black minority that was represented throughout much of the union’s jurisdiction but concentrated at the heart of its strength, in the stockyards and packinghouses of Chicago. The UPWA also had a left-wing leadership, but one that—overall—was independent enough of the Communist party to survive the purges that racked the CIO in the late 1940s. The combination of an aggressive left-wing leadership and a strategically-located, equally aggressive black minority led to remarkable—perhaps unique—achievements in the realm of civil rights.

In a study of a UPWA local in Fort Worth, Texas, Rick Halpern demonstrates how the combined force of the international union leadership and local black activism, spurred largely by
the militancy of younger workers who were veterans of World War II, brought about dramatic changes in race relations in the local union and at the Armour plant in Fort Worth. In 1952, the union leadership forced a reluctant local management to implement the terms of a provision in the national contract mandating the desegregation of all plant facilities; it also confronted—and overruled—the rebellion of a white, segregationist “Local Rights Committee” that was determined to block the implementation of the contract’s antidiscrimination clause. The leadership’s victory marked a turning point in the UPWA’s history, but it came at a price. In Fort Worth, as black and Hispanic activists virtually took over the local, elected people of color to leadership positions, and pushed the union toward an even stronger stand on civil rights, the white majority became more and more passive. Most whites retained their union membership but stopped participating in the local’s affairs. Faced with the same pressures, a number of other locals withdrew from the UPWA. But spurred on by the concentrated force of the black rank and file in Chicago, the union leadership never wavered in its commitment to civil rights and still managed to hold most of the organization intact. In no other CIO affiliate did a union with a white majority take such a strong, and uncompromising, stand on behalf of racial equality, on the job as well as within the larger society. In evaluating this remarkable record, Halpern is unequivocal in concluding that “for a twenty-year period . . . the weight of the international union was the determining factor in establishing the rights and relationships of white and black workers.”

The TWU, whose primary constituency was among workers on New York City’s subway and bus systems, represents a more typical example of the way Left-led unions dealt with the dilemmas they faced. Rhetorically, the Transport Workers’ leadership demonstrated a strong commitment to the struggle for black equality; but in practice the union’s record was far more ambiguous, in large measure because its membership was overwhelmingly white, Irish, and Catholic. According to historian Joshua Freeman, “Irish community life and Irish culture permeated the [transit] industry” and the TWU in New York. Given the historic tensions between African Americans and Irish immigrants, it is not surprising that one of the union’s Communist cadre recalled that “the problem of [fighting racial discrimination] was so overwhelming that you couldn’t win.” More optimistically, the leadership claimed in 1938 to be “fighting discrimination successfully but not miraculously.” Its clear priority, however, was institutional self-preservation, and this meant treading carefully on issues of race. “Many white TWU members did not want to work with or compete for jobs with blacks,” Freeman concludes; and “many TWU leaders feared that if the union took a visible lead in fighting against discrimination a membership revolt would ensue.” The impetus for confronting the stark realities of racial stratification and exclusion in the transit industry came far less from the union leadership than from New York’s black community and, eventually, the federal government.

Few trade unionists would more candidly or accurately acknowledge the constraints that the Left-led unions faced in fighting racial discrimination than Ferdinand Smith, the secretary-treasurer of the NMU. Smith, who was black and—almost certainly—a Communist, informed the NAACP’s Thurgood Marshall in 1938 that the NMU was confronted with “severe problems of organization as well as a split in the labor movement between the C. I. O. and A. F. L.” According to an NAACP memorandum, Smith
made it clear that the Union leadership stood 100% opposed to any kind of discrimination against its 10% Negro membership, and was fighting to break it up. However, he said that the Union was also faced with keeping its ranks together, despite all of these problems. . . . He was firm in his statement that while the Union leadership was going to fight the discrimination problem wherever possible, no intelligent person could defend the Union’s fighting the problem to the extent of breaking up the Union over the issue.50

During World War II, however, the NMU made remarkable strides in confronting racism and rooting out its institutional manifestations. The union negotiated contracts with 125 shipping companies stipulating that there would be no employment discrimination against nonwhite NMU members, and waged an extensive educational campaign within its own ranks. It may be that the distinctive subculture of seamen, and their separation from shoreside society, contributed to a willingness to transgress the norms of the larger culture. But clearly leadership was the decisive factor, because the AFL seafarers’ affiliates were relentless, and unapologetic, in their racism. According to Johnny Gladstone, who was an NMU member and a Communist in the 1940s, “Some of the finest Communist cadres and rank and file members fought the issue out relentlessly. But it was never easy. . . . It was one hell of an enormous job which required constant vigilance.”51

The ILWU’s—above all, Harry Bridges’—stance on racial issues had much in common with the practice of the UPWA and the NMU at times, but in some instances it was more reminiscent of the caution and apparent inconsistency that characterized the TWU. The contrasting realities of San Francisco and San Pedro highlight the ambiguity. In “Frisco,” principle, practical necessity, and political expediency merged in a way that reinforced Bridges’ commitment to the union’s black members. As the war in the Pacific theater heated to the boiling point, the frenetic expansion of the San Francisco labor market meant that thousands of blacks, and many whites as well, found employment on the docks. As a result, the relatively homogeneous membership of Local 10 gave way to a more diverse and ideologically fragmented body politic. In 1947, a “right-wing” slate won control of the local and immediately developed a program that, in some respects, was sharply at odds with that of Bridges and his allies on the Left. Under the new regime, the Local 10 Longshore Bulletin began displaying an American flag on the front page, with the words “God Bless America” emblazoned underneath it. In an implicit rebuke to Bridges, who was becoming increasingly critical of U. S. foreign policy in the escalating Cold War, the bulletin’s editor announced that he had no interest in “Saudi Arabia, Karachi, Pakistan or Moscow,” but was concerned only with “seeing that the brothers make a few more coconuts.” Since the new Local 10 leadership had the support of many whites, old-timers and newcomers alike, Bridges looked for political allies, and a solid base of support, among the black segment of the membership. Black longshoremen—in San Francisco at least—would become his loyal allies in the union’s internal battles, and he in turn would support their aspirations and demands.52

In San Pedro, however, the political situation was dramatically different, and it elicited a different response from Bridges. There the percentage of blacks had always been much smaller.
than in San Francisco, and had been made even more so by the deregistration of the Unemployed
500. Moreover, Local 13 had always been notoriously independent—a “very rebellious . . .
local,” Walter Williams called it. As a forceful but ultimately practical trade union leader,
Bridges recognized the necessity of maintaining lines of communication with one of the most
important locals in the division of the ILWU that remained the “keystone” of the union and its
identity.53

Bridges’ willingness to accommodate himself to the political realities in Local 13 was no
doubt strengthened by the fact that the San Pedro leadership was made up of veteran
longshoremen—whites, of course—who had fought the good fight in 1934 and during the bitter
strikes of 1946 and ‘48. However much Bridges may have objected to policies that marginalized
African Americans in Local 13, he must have recognized the leadership and white rank and file
as fellow workers with whom he had shared much travail and triumph in building the union. But
the blacks in Local 13 were not only newcomers, they were a politically insignificant force; and
many of them had violated the ILWU’s moral code by going to “the law” and suing the union.
This pattern—of blacks as an alienated and marginal element who looked for allies outside the
union to resolve their grievances—would continue for many years in Local 13, and there was no
political payoff for Bridges in aligning himself with such a force. Thus, at the same time he was
aiding and abetting the empowerment of black longshoremen in Local 10, he refrained—for
many years—from supporting the legitimate grievances of black workers in Local 13.

In the final analysis, then, the ILWU—during the period we have studied—was a
contradictory phenomenon when it came to the issue of race, and in this regard it had much in
common with other CIO unions, including those led by the Left. At the leadership level, the
organization was aggressively committed to the cause of racial equality; its widely articulated
stance, and many resolute actions, earned the ILWU much praise for its civil rights record. But
the leadership was not entirely free to impose its will upon a sometimes resistant, and famously
unruly, rank and file. On the contrary, Bridges and other union leaders were constrained not
only by their principled commitment to local autonomy and their belief in rank-and-file
democracy, but also by practical considerations that mandated the choice of institutional
self-preservation over what may have appeared at times to be a quixotic attachment to principle.
In the case of San Pedro (and, even more so, Portland), our investigation suggests that the “Lords
of the Docks” fought to hang on to the privileges that accrued to “whiteness” and sought to use
the instruments they had forged in the heroic class combat of 1934 to protect themselves and
those they defined as “our kind” from the demands of African Americans for equal access to the
society’s resources.54

While black workers in San Pedro bitterly resented the racism that kept their numbers
small and denied them access to the best jobs on the docks, they also recognized that their status
as longshoremen made them something of a labor aristocracy within the African-American
community. For the ILWU was a union that “delivered the goods”; in vitally important respects
its policies benefited the entire membership. The “low-man out” system of job rotation through
the hiring hall insured that all longshoremen, no matter what their race or nationality, achieved
equal access to work and relatively equal earnings; and the union won working conditions on the
waterfront that became the envy of other workers and the standard against which they judged their own conditions. Walter Williams, Local 13's most consistent and articulate critic on issues of race, readily acknowledged this reality in separate oral history interviews conducted by the local and international unions forty-five years after his longshore career began. Not only did he characterize Harry Bridges as "one of the best labor leaders... in the history of the labor movement"; he also praised the ILWU for "being the kind of union that it has been... because I don't know of any unions anywhere that can provide [their members] with the kind of working conditions, [and] the type of welfare coverage that we have." Being a longshoreman, he concluded, "was an experience I don't think I'd trade for anything."
Notes

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1. CIO resolutions quoted in Michael K. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 120.


9. "American Minorities and the Case of Harry Bridges" (pamphlet, n. d.), ILWU History Files, folder on Minorities—Blacks, 1960, ILWUA; (San Francisco) Sun-Reporter, Sept. 29, 1951, 10; Cy W. Record, “Willie Stokes at the Golden Gate,” Crisis 56 (1949): 188. When the ILWU was expelled from the CIO, the NAACP at the national level refused to have any further relationship with the union, even when it engaged in a bitter struggle with the AFL and several of its blatantly racist affiliates for the allegiance of marine cooks and stewards on the West Coast. Instead, in a rebuke to NAACP members in San Francisco who were eager to support the ILWU, the organization reaffirmed its official policy that “no Branch or State Conference of the NAACP will endorse, participate in, or co-operate with Communist controlled unions. This particularly refers to those international unions expelled from organized labor for being under Communist control.” “NAACP Issues Policy Statement in ILWU and AF of L Election Controversy,” Feb. 18, 1955, NAACP Records, Group II, Box A343, folder on Labor Cases, California, 1954-55, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.


13. Frank Marquart, An Auto Worker’s Journal: The UAW from Crusade to One-Party Union (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 35; Martin Glaberman, Wartime Strikes: The Struggle against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW during World War II (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980), 73; Nelson, Workers on the Waterfront, 84. Recent scholarly studies have made it abundantly clear that, especially during the 1940s, the combination of Communist leadership and mass mobilization within the black community led to some remarkable achievements in the fight against racial discrimination. See, for example, Nell Irvin Painter, The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem during the Depression (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Korstad and Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found


19. See, especially, Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront;* and Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*. An important step toward a more balanced view is Quam-Wickham, “Who Controls the Hiring Hall?” Quam-Wickham recognizes the extent of the ILWU’s achievements but, drawing on oral history interviews with ILWU veterans, black, white, and Mexican American, is sharply critical of the union’s record on race.

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23. The following account of the ILWU's organizing campaign in New Orleans in the late 1930s is adapted from my essay, "Class and Race in the Crescent City." For full documentation of the material presented, and quoted, herein, see the Notes, in Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*, 210-16.


25. Ben Margolis, "Brief on Behalf of International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Local 13," Apr. 4, 1967, 34, 35; Bill Lawrence to Agnes Quave, Jan. 5, 1945, ILWU History Files, folder on membership Statistics—Negroes, ILWUA.


29. "Walter E. Williams Oral History Interview," conducted by Tony Salcido, Nov. 10, 1988; and by Tony Salcido and Robert G. Marshall, Oct. 4, 1990, ILWU Local 13 OHP, Urban Archives Center, CSUN, 20, 28-30, 61. (Since the two interviews are combined in one transcript, I will not make separate references by date hereafter, but will simply identify the "Walter E. Williams Oral History Interview").


31. Frank Sunstedt, interviewed by Harvey Schwartz, Mar. 26, 1984, ILWU-NEH OHP, ILWUA; Kaunisto interview.

32. Quam-Wickham, "Who Controls the Hiring Hall?," 66; Langley interview, ILWU-NEH OHP.

33. Bill Lawrence to Harry Bridges, Apr. 24, 1946, ILWU, Officers' Correspondence, 1934-1977, Box 18D, folder on Local 13 Correspondence, General, 1945-50, ILWUA.

34. Margolis, "Brief on Behalf of International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Local 13," 6; Lawrence to Bridges, Apr. 24, 1946; Harry Bridges to L. B. Thomas, Sept. 8, 1947, ILWU, Officers' Correspondence, 1934-1977, Box 18D, folder on Local 13 Correspondence, General, 1945-50, ILWUA.


36. Lawrence to Bridges, Apr. 24, 1946; Margolis, "Brief on Behalf of International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Local 13," 16-20, 25, 28; L. B. Thomas to Harry Bridges, Aug. 9, 1947, ILWU, Officers' Correspondence, 1934-1977, Box 18D, folder on Local 13 Correspondence, General, 1945-50, ILWUA.

38. Margolis, “Brief on Behalf of International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, Local 13,” 31-33, 35-36.

39. Ibid. 32; Bridges to Thomas, Sept. 8, 1947; Walter Williams interview, ILWU-NEH OHP.


43. ILWU Local 13 Bulletin, n. d. [July 1951].


45. H. R. Bridges to John H. Williams, March 26, 1946, ILWU, Officers’ Correspondence, 1934-1977, Box 18D, folder on Local 13 Correspondence, General, 1945-50, ILWUA; Bridges to Thomas, Sept. 8, 1947.


See also Junius Irving Scales and Richard Nickson, *Cause at Heart: A Former Communist Remembers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 202-8. Scales maintains (on p. 204) that “the Party . . . generally opposed the easy opportunism of organizing Negro workers while white workers were largely unorganized,” which makes the lack of success acknowledged by Karl Kautsky all the more significant.


50. George Murphy, Jr., “Memorandum,” Nov. 16, 1938, NAACP Records, Group I, Box C284, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, “Communist Unions and the Black Community,” 166.


