The Longshoremen during the Seattle General Strike

The call to hold a general strike in the city of Seattle was definitively agreed on at the Labor Temple on Sunday, February 2, 1919. The established time and date was set for Thursday, February 6, 1919 at 10 a.m. The city’s labor newspaper, the *Seattle Union Record*, rejoiced the day following the agreement by stating that

“with a firmness of resolution and a solidarity unmatched in the annals of the American labor movement[,] the workers of the northwest have […] grasped the only weapon over which they have any direct control, determined to make a fight that will demonstrate whether or not they have the power to secure the justice that has been denied them by industrial barons and bureaucratic despots.”

Seattle’s Longshoremen Union (local 12-38), made up of more than 4,000 members and deemed to be one of the city’s largest unions at the time, voted on a referendum held between January 28 and January 29, 1919 in favor of joining the strike to support the shipyard workers. Though unionization efforts by Puget Sound longshoremen date all the way back to the mid-1800s, the Longshoremen’s Union of the Pacific was, as an organization, established on September 29, 1908. It immediately became affiliated with the International Longshoremen’s Association, according to the Waterfront Workers History Project of University of Washington’s Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies. During the second decade of the twentieth century, the union sustained a tense battle for higher wages and better working conditions against the associations that represented longshoremen’s employers in the Puget Sound. Accordingly, on June 1, 1916, as the Waterfront Workers History Project lays out, “International Longshoremen Association

1 “Sixty Thousand to Respond to Call” *Seattle Union Record*. Feb 3, 1919.
members along the West Coast all walked out of the job to protest the open shop laws that ruled the waterfront at that time.”

The waterfront industry in which longshoremen worked experienced significant changes during the Wartime era of WWI, as it became a pillar of the country’s war production efforts. Production in this and other industries was placed under the directive of the US Government, while many ports continued to be operated by private companies. Redistributive measures aimed at securing production characterized the war era.

Under the auspice of the federal government, additionally, mechanisms such as dispute resolution entities were created to mediate conflicts between labor and management. An example of this is detailed in the book *The Working Longshoremen* by Washington State local historian, Ronald Magden: The Puget Sound Industrial Conciliation Committee was established by the Industrial Longshoremen’s Association Pacific District Executive Board, the Waterfront Employers Union Officers, and the National Adjustment Commission to mitigate conflicts before “lockouts and strikes occurred.”

As the war dwindled, so too did the demand for production. Magden describes in his book on Puget Sound Longshoremen’s history how almost immediately after the Armistice of November 11, 1918 employers’ associations that advocated for open-shop agreements, like the National Founders’ Association under the direction of William H. Barr, “called for labor to take a cut in wages and to put in a longer working day to enable the United States to compete with foreign industries.” The measures that came with the Federal government’s attempt at securing peace within the production processes, including the adoption of high wages, no longer served

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3 ibid.
5 ibid, p.99.
that role. The threat that such situation posed for workers all over the US and for returning
soldiers informed unions’ campaign for sustained union mobilization and politicization.

The 1917 Russian revolution similarly impacted the Seattle labor movement and its
politics. The tumultuous political event had, after all, placed the worker, at least discursively, at
the center of the sociopolitical landscape, and purported to have as its impetus the bringing about
of workers’ social, economic and political emancipation. Enthusiasm for the revolution within
sectors of the Seattle labor movement was expressed in manifold ways. Supporters of the
Russian revolution, moreover, included Seattle’s longshoremen, who, in different moments, tried
to materialize this support and effectuate their solidarity by challenging US government’s
capacity to militarily back Russian forces antithetic to the Bolsheviks and other influential
socialist-revolutionary groups within the Euro Asiatic country. Accounts of these actions are
present in the book *The Seattle General Strike* by Robert L. Friedheim, international relations
expert and political scientist.6 The book details how Seattle members from the International
Longshoremen’s Association expressed their willingness to cooperate with arms workers in
undermining production and shipment of arms to Siberia. Seattle longshoremen, accordingly,
“appealed to workers in munitions factories to stop producing war materials for the anti-
Bolshevik forcers” and “promised to cooperate by refusing to load arms shipments already at the
docks, should the arms workers take such initiative.7 Friedheim further details how a month after
the five-day General Strike in Seattle longshoremen refused to “load fifty railroad cars of arms
and munitions purchased by Kolchak from the Remington Arms Company onto” a steamer
“chartered from the United States government.”8 The political and ideological determinations of

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7 Ibid., p.17.
8 Ibid, p.16.
the Seattle longshoremen union, as represented in its acts of solidarity with the Russian revolution, along with its political and economic situation during the postwar at home, contextualizes the level and form of its participation within the Seattle General Strike.

The approval to participate in the general strike was obtained by a close margin (a 91-votes difference) and with less than two thirds of the total number of the local union’s members. The local longshoremen union was to join the general strike merely on the basis of solidarity with the shipyard workers, given that it, like other unions, was denied by the Central Labor Council any opportunity to incorporate its own grievances and wage demands. After it had voted in favor of a resolution introduced by the Metal Trades Council, the Central Labor Council excluded other unions’ grievances. With said resolution, the Council opted for “a general strike policy eliminating from consideration all extraneous grievances and concentrating effort on a demonstration of labor solidarity.” The rationale behind the resolution was that the sympathetic general strike, by solely focusing on “obtaining better wages for shipyard workers,” would produce “a better prospect of victory […] with equally good ultimate results.” Such victory could then be used to honor the “just demands” of all other unions. The Metal Trades resolution was purportedly a change in the program originally debated within the Central Labor Council by its 300 delegates, who represented 110 of the 130 unions affiliated with the Council. The resolution was received without objection by the delegates of the council at the time it was read out loud. Some of the same delegates subsequently criticized the change that the

11 ibid.
12 ibid.
13 ibid.
14 ibid.
resolution represented. Harry Shepherd, a labor council delegate representing the longshoremen’s big union, declared his skepticism with respects to this promise that the momentum generated from the possible victories of the sympathetic general strike would then be used to “assist other unions.”\(^{15}\) There had been a strong call by the longshoremen to demand an increase of their wage to the same amount the shipyard workers were demanding, $1 an hour and double that amount for overtime.\(^{16}\) Accordingly, the small difference in the vote reflected a general desire to participate in the mass strike not only to show sympathy with the shipyard workers but “to better the wages and working conditions of every labor organization.”\(^{17}\)

Moreover, a closed shop agreement had been recently reached between the local Longshoremen union and its employers. It was made possible by the longshoremen and the truckers agreeing to combine under the jurisdiction of the Stevedores Union.\(^{18}\) Subsequent to that agreement, the truckers, comprised of 3,000 workers, had gone on strike to demand that they and the longshoremen they worked with at the piers be selected at union headquarters through a list system.\(^{19}\) Among these piers, many of which were operated by their private employers, was one managed by the East Waterway Dock & Waterhouse Company.

This list system that was being adopted by the longshoremen and the truckers had been the product of the Pacific Coast District International Longshoremen’s Association’s efforts to combine with the stevedores, truckers, and checkers months before in 1918. Understood to be ‘One Big Union’, of the kind that the Industrial Workers of the World was known to advocate for, the newly formed association enabled the entering into a closed shop agreement on January

\(^{15}\) ibid.
\(^{16}\) “Strong Opposition to Walkout in Seattle in Longshoremen” Seattle Daily Times Jan 30, 1919.
\(^{17}\) ibid.
\(^{18}\) “Longshoremen Strike Brought to End” Seattle Daily Times, Feb, 1, 1919.
\(^{19}\) ibid.
14, 1919 with the Waterfront Employer’s Union. The latter was an employer association formed by shipping lines, stevedore companies, and wharf operations in 1915 to keep members informed about labor relations and to additionally counter the growing power of the Seattle ILA.\textsuperscript{20} The settlement established the Puget Sound Industrial Conciliation Committee, a final court of appeals that was to deal with wages and working conditions. In response to the Seattle longshoremen joining the general strike, the WEU declared that said contract, along with its provisions, would be terminated, as the ILA had breached it. One of the contract’s provisions specified that “under no circumstances would work stop during a dispute.”\textsuperscript{21} The risk of losing the contract served as yet another reason for voting against the general strike to many Pacific Coast District ILA members. As Ronald Magden describes, for instance, the General Cargo Local 38-3 of the Seattle longshoremen’s union voted against the strike. Moreover, ILA’s president, T.V. O’Connor, declared to the local longshoremen union that he could not sanction the consolidation that had occurred between the longshoremen and the truckers; secondly, that the list system adopted by the local Longshoremen’s Union against Seattle steamship and stevedore companies, as part of that consolidation, violated the constitution of the International Longshoremen’s Association. The local union was, therefore, given by O’Connor until February 3 to revoke the list system. According to historian Friedheim, not only did the ILA not assist the Seattle longshoremen in their negotiations with employers, but “the employers reportedly had the tacit consent of the international officers.”\textsuperscript{22} The decision to join the general strike compelled T.V.

\textsuperscript{21} ibid, p.18.
\textsuperscript{22} ibid, p.160.
O’Connor to threaten the local union with removing its charter should it not rescind its votes in favor of joining the strike.\textsuperscript{23} The local union ignored O’Connor’s ultimatum, nevertheless.

During the general strike all of Seattle’s docks were idle. The body in charge of planning and coordinating the different aspects of the strike, the General Strike Committee, made the Longshoremen’s union executive committee responsible for handling maritime exemption requests. The union, furthermore, exempted the receipt and the unloading of “U.S. mails, bonded baggage, perishables, and scows leaking oil.”\textsuperscript{24} Other forms of participation by the longshoremen’s union included the serving of over “1,000 bowls of mulligan stew” by Longshoremen’s Hall, which, according to historian Ronald Magden, “was the largest soup kitchen in the city of Seattle.”\textsuperscript{25} Additionally, the longshoremen union in Tacoma, Local 38-3, originally decided to remain at work during the general strike in Seattle, causing vessels bound to Seattle to be rerouted to Tacoma.\textsuperscript{26} On February 5, 12 longshoremen delegates from Local 38-12 and representatives from other unions traveled to Tacoma and spoke to longshoremen based there to see if they could be swayed to support and to participate in the general strike. A majority vote of 261 versus 246 in favor of the strike took place on February 6, 1919, and the original position was consequently reverted.\textsuperscript{27} The longshoremen in Tacoma walked out without the International Longshoremen Association’s sanction.\textsuperscript{28}

The end of the general strike came on Monday, February 10 when at 15 minutes past the thirteenth hour, “300 delegates from the 110 unions and the 15 members of the General Strike

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  \item \textsuperscript{23} “Longshoremen Warned Not To Walk Out – City Employees Want To Keep Working” P-I. Feb 1, 1919.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} “Vessels Bound to Seattle To Be Diverted to Tacoma” Seattle Daily Times February 3, 1919.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Magden, Ronald., and International Longshoremen's Warehousemen's Union, issuing body. The Working Longshoreman. [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Local 23 of Tacoma], 1991. p.101.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} “Move to Resume St. Car Traffic” Tacoma Daily News, February 7, 1919.
\end{itemize}
Committee” voted to take that direction.\textsuperscript{29} The local longshoremen union was one of the few unions which had decided to continue on strike.\textsuperscript{30} Some articles on the \textit{Seattle Daily Times} published during the days following the general strike’s culmination declared that the longshoremen’s commitment to staying on strike was explained by the union’s desire to address its own grievances.\textsuperscript{31} On Monday February 10, 1919, the longshoremen were still on strike, but two shipping terminals were in operation, thus signaling the likely culmination of the union’s continued participation. According to an article the \textit{Seattle Daily Times} cover page for that Monday, “it was predicted that every pier from Smith Cove to the East Waterway would be handling cargo by tomorrow morning.”\textsuperscript{32} The \textit{Seattle Daily Times} issue for the following day informed that Seattle’s waterfront strike held in sympathy with the shipyard workers had officially been called off at noon on that Tuesday.\textsuperscript{33} Said article also reported that six piers were in operation as a result of union men going “back to work in disobedience to the orders of the officers of their association.”\textsuperscript{34}

During and after the end of the General strike, under the auspices of the Associated Industries of Seattle, which had replaced the Employer’s Association and thus adopted its open-shop campaign, employers intensified efforts to establish the open shop system.\textsuperscript{35} In fact, as the \textit{Oregonian} reported on its issue for February 12, 1919, the International Longshoremen’s union men went back to work on the morning of February 11 with non-union employees as the latter were as “readily” employed as union men.\textsuperscript{36} At the request of the General Strike Executive

\textsuperscript{29}“Tie-Up Broken by Union Members” \textit{Seattle Daily Times}. Monday, Feb 10, 1919.  
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{31}“Seattle Gets Back to Normal Activity” \textit{Seattle Daily Times} February 11, 1919.  
\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{33}“Stevedores Call Off Their Strike”, \textit{Seattle Daily Times} February 11, 1919.  
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{36}“Seattle Strike Off; Industries Resume” \textit{Oregonian} February 12, 1919.
Committee to all of its delegates, the Longshore representatives “implored Teamsters not to return to work until Tuesday [February 11].”

By noon on Tuesday most local unions had returned to work, while the longshoremen, “wanting to be last [...] reported to the docks at 1:00 pm of that same day.” The Longshoremen went back to work in “docks and wharves” that were now operated on the ‘open shop’ plan, which, according to its employers, was to become a permanent situation. This was a different reality to that of two months prior, in which the Seattle’s local International Longshoremen’s Union “for the first time was able to put the ‘closed shop’ plan in effect along Seattle’s waterfront.”

A meeting at the longshoremen’s Hall on Western Avenue by the longshoremen’s union rank and file was planned on February 14, 1919 to discuss what plans were necessary to fight against their employer’s open-shop agenda.

**PRIMARY SOURCES**

Seattle Daily Times (October 1, 1918 – March 2, 1918).

Oregonian Newspaper (October 1, 1918 – March 1, 1918).

Seattle Union Record Newspaper (January 1 – March 3).

**SECONDARY**


37 ibid.
38 “All Hands Hustle to Move Cargoes” *Seattle Daily Times* February 12, 1919.
40 ibid.