

Marine Transport Workers IU 510 (IWW)

Direct Action Unionism

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Melvyn Dubofsky, in his “standard” history of the IWW, *We Shall Be All*, writes that the Marine Transport Workers IU510 of the IWW was “the one stable and effective IWW organization outside the Western states.”¹ Yet he gives the MTW only a scattered handful of paragraphs. Other historians of the IWW have done little better, and the Marine Transport Workers—which remained a vital presence in the maritime industry from 1913 through the mid 1940s—is little known.

While the MTW signed agreements only on the Philadelphia docks, scores of shipping lines found themselves obliged to hire seamen through MTW halls or to accede to MTW demands—typically delivered by a crew committee as the ship was preparing to sail. The MTW called several successful strikes, and played a key role in several others despite the fact that only a minority of maritime workers ever held IWW red cards. The MTW’s persistence and its many successes demonstrates what revolutionary unionists have always known: that a union can wage effective struggles and win better conditions without legal recognition, or even majority status.

Although there were moments, particularly in the early 1920s, where it appeared that the MTW was on the verge of becoming the dominant union in the maritime industry, it was not able to dislodge the dominant business unions in the field, the International Seamen’s Union and the International Longshore Association. But Wobblies were not content with being a pressure group or caucus with the business unions, or with propaganda and agitation for a future in which the IWW might establish a working majority in maritime. Rather, the MTW turned to direct action, fighting for better conditions wherever the situation permitted ‘and conducting relentless propaganda—of literature and by the deed—against business unionism and class collaboration. Even ports where there were only a small handful of Wobblies were able to have an impact far beyond their numbers because of the MTW’s reputation among maritime workers as a militant, fighting union; because their hit-and-run direct action tactics maximized workers’ power; and because the MTW never accepted the divisions of trade, port, etc. that enabled maritime employers to isolate workers’ struggles. When longshore workers struck, the MTW called on seamen to refuse to haul scab-loaded cargoes (and vice versa). If ships or cargo left one port through scabbery, MTW pickets would meet them at the next port of call. Over the years, even many business unionists came to appreciate the superiority of these tactics.

Wobblies on the Waterfront

While seafaring is an intrinsically transient occupation, the IWW was able to establish a stable presence among longshoremen, who provided some of the union’s most stable job branches and often helped maintain the MTW halls that were a vital part of the union’s continued presence on the waterfront. Most well known is the IWW’s organization on the Philadelphia docks, where a bi-racial MTW held job control from 1913 until 1921, when a Communist Party-dominated General Executive Board suspended the Philadelphia branch as part of its efforts to wreck the union. (The CPers remained active in MTW several years after they abandoned the union as a whole, leaving only in 1926 after rank-and-file resistance thwarted their efforts to seize control of MTW headquarters. The CP then formed the “Marine Workers Industrial Union” in a blatant effort to trade on the MTW’s reputation, before liquidating into the ISU and ILA (and soon re-emerging as the NMU and the ILWU) in the 1930s.) The longshoremen quickly returned to the IWW, once

¹ Melvyn Dubofsky: *We Shall Be All* 2nd Edition. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 287.

again forming the backbone of the MTW until the 1924 Emergency Program split weakened the organization enough that it could no longer withstand the combined attacks of the employers, the government (which controlled many docks) and the International Longshoremen's Association and its goons.

The Philadelphia dockworkers voted to join the IWW at a 1913 strike meeting, after hearing from IWW and ILA organizers. IWW organizer Ben Fletcher reminded the strikers (many of whom had once belonged to the ILA) that the AFL was made up of "labor fakirs," while the IWW was "the labor movement. All else is fake and fraud." The dockworkers won that strike, and the ILA responded in other ports by temporarily abandoning its policies of excluding blacks. The IWW won a 1914 strike by having undercover Wobblies cross the picket lines when scabbing started to 'undermine the strike; the Wobs made sure no work got done, and the employer quickly capitulated. By 1916 the IWW had won job control at all but two of Philadelphia's docks, and had won wages and conditions substantially better than those at ILA docks. The MTW struck again in 1920, demanding a 20 cent per hour wage increase and a 44-hour week (they were then working 54 hours), shutting down the entire waterfront when employers refused. Hundreds of nonunion dockworkers joined the union during the strike, boosting membership from 4,700 to over 7,000.

There were a few scabs, but union firemen refused to provide steam, union cooks refused to feed them, and union coal hoisters refused to refuel ships loaded with scab cargo. Two British crews informed their captains that they would not sail if scabs loaded any cargo. The employers threatened to divert ships to other ports, but the MTW responded that any such effort would be futile as they would only be met with strikes there.

After two weeks on strike, the ILA stepped in and offered to ship in scabs willing to work on any terms the employers dictated, forcing the MTW to compromise on a 50-hour week. The Philadelphia MTW was handicapped in these struggles by the MTW's inability to organize other ports and by the lack of solidarity from other maritime unions. During a 1922 strike against an employer-run hiring hall and longer working hours, for example, the MTW strike initially closed most docks, though the employers' fink hall did succeed in dispatching a handful of scabs. But as the strike continued, the ILA again encouraged scabbing and the strike ultimately collapsed. "As long as vessels from Philadelphia are freely unloaded in New York, Boston, Baltimore, San Francisco and elsewhere, the success of the strike in Philadelphia is in peril," the MTW noted.

"Workers in these ports should demonstrate their solidarity with the Philadelphia workers by refusing to handle scab cargoes."²

The IWW remained a continuing presence on the Philadelphia waterfront for another two decades, periodically lining up thousands of dockworkers before being beaten down again.-There

² Jeff Stein: "Ben Fletcher: Portrait of a Black Syndicalist," *Libertarian Labor Review* #3 (1987), pp. 30-33; "Longshore Lads Show Dock Bosses What's Solidarity," *Industrial Solidarity*, June 12, 1920; "The 44-Hour Lockout on Philadelphia Waterfront," *Industrial Solidarity*, Oct. 28 1922; "The Marine Workers in Philadelphia Appeal to Their Fellow-Workers in Other Ports for Support," *Strike Bulletin* #2, IWW Archives, box 70 folder 2, Wayne State University. For the Communist attempt to take over the MTW, see circular by MTW General Organizing Committee members Pettersson and DeChanoigny and related documents in the IWW Archives, box 70 folders 17-21. The CP ran Joseph O'Hagan for MTW General Secretary-Treasurer on a platform of increased organizing. Once elected O'Hagan announced his intent to affiliate MTW to the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU), a move which had earlier been rejected by referendum vote, and to work towards amalgamation with other maritime unions. After a prolonged struggle, in which the MTW was briefly suspended by the IWW General Executive Board, O'Hagan was expelled and the MTW's Brooklyn Branch (the base for O'Hagan's "Progressive Rank and File Committee") was closed.

were also strong MTW presences among longshoremen in Baltimore (where Ben Fletcher lined up 1,400 black dockworkers into the IWW in 1916), Hoboken, New Orleans, Norfolk (where the IWW was especially strong among black longshoremen), Portland and San Pedro. Hoboken Wobblies faced sporadic warfare with ILA gangsters imported from the “union’s headquarters in nearby New York City, after one such visit an MTW member was hospitalized with a bullet wound to his head. In New Orleans, the MTW was never more than a small minority; but Wobbly activists played an important role in encouraging industrial organization and greater militancy, and used its influence among seamen to discourage them from loading vessels during strikes.³

The 1923 to 1924 Portland strike exemplified some of the difficulties facing IWW longshoremen. As in other cities, the ILA had only a fraction of longshore workers as members. But employers had agreed to hire through the ILA hall which gave preference to ILA members. But during busy seasons, most of the longshore work was handled by “casuals,” many of whom had taken out IWW cards. In April, 1923 the employers stopped hiring from the ILA hall, reinstating the shape-up system where workers were hired by foremen at the docks. When the ILA struck, the MTW honored its picket lines and requested seats on the strike committee. The ILA, however, insisted on going it alone, and negotiated a partial settlement with the US Shipping Board after a couple of weeks which forced the MTW to either carry on the strike alone (the ILA said it was still on strike against the other docks, but virtually all its members were working) or return to work. It was impossible to maintain the strike under those conditions, and each union accused the other of scabbing.

The MTW continued organizing among the “casual” longshore workers, and when employers began blacklisting IWW militants, the ILA and MTW struck together on Oct. 18th, the ILA having learned that it was not strong enough to fight alone. Police arrested 275 Wobblies within a few hours of the beginning of the strike, and after a week had practically the entire membership in jail—prompting an appeal-for footloose Wobs to reinforce the picket lines. Not wanting the city to be flooded with vagrants (and after the employers had recruited 600 scabs to work the docks), the authorities quickly opened the jails after securing an agreement that the IWW would withdraw the appeal for reinforcements.

Portland Wobs issued an appeal to marine transport workers around the world after 76 days on strike, noting that while some maritime workers (notably in Australia) were refusing to handle scab cargo, most Portland cargo was being diverted to nearby ports where it was loaded by ILA members.

“Capital is international and cares little about where and how profit is made. So we find that grain, which ordinarily is shipped through this port is being transmitted through other ports...In vain have we applied to the craft unions in Seattle and Tacoma, Wash., as well as other cities, to take action together. They still continue to work and help our bosses, totally blind of the fact that

³ “Marine Transport Workers Reorganizing Philadelphia,” *Industrial Solidarity*, March 18, 1925; “Philadelphia Lockout—Thousands Join IWW,” *Industrial Solidarity*, April 18, 1925; “Waterfront Drive Waking Workers Up to Need of Industrial Unionism,” *Industrial Solidarity*, March 9, 1927; “Longshoremen, Read & Compare” (wages lower under ILA contract than they were when workers were organized with the IWW), *Industrial Solidarity*, March 16, 1927. “Hoboken IWW Longshoremen Victorious in Skirmish with ILA Gangsters,” *Industrial Solidarity*, October 7, 1922, pp. 1, 4; Daniel Rosenberg: *New Orleans Dockworkers*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988, pp. 94–97, 172. The Hoboken longshoremen were ultimately provoked into an unsuccessful strike which ended with the majority herded into a company union. “What Happened at Hoboken,” *Industrial Solidarity*, Aug. 18, 1923, pp. 1, 6.

whatever becomes our fate will be theirs as well...Every piece of cargo from this coast is colored with our fellow workers' blood. Don't touch it!"

Solidarity was not forthcoming and the strike was defeated several weeks later when ILA members began drifting back to work. The MTW was never able to reestablish a strong presence on the Portland docks.⁴

ISU Built on Scabbery

Like the ILA, the AFL-affiliated International Seamen's Union was built on scabbery. The Sailors Union of the Pacific, which founded the ISU and was always its strongest affiliate, was founded on the craft union model of the union as job trust. From the start, the SUP and ISU emphasized powerful officers, harmonious relations with the employer, respect for contracts, and legislation. When the SUP's San Diego branch struck a ship in the early 1890s, demanding wages higher than those the union's officers had negotiated, SUP founder Andrew Furuseth dispatched a crew from San Francisco to scab on the strike.⁵ The SUP refused to 'honor other unions' picket lines. In 1901, when longshoremen spearheaded a drive to form a federation of waterfront unions, the SUP joined only to "prevent the younger and less experienced unions from...making unreasonable demands upon ship-owners." The SUP did strike with other federation members later that year, but in 1906 SUP members loaded and sailed vessels to Alaska in defiance of a longshoremen's strike. Longshoremen repeatedly asked the Sailors' Union to refuse to accept cargo loaded by nonunion men, but the SUP always refused. SUP contracts pledged that "union" members would accept cargo from all longshoremen, regardless of union status. When a union crew in northern California refused to accept lumber from scabs, Furuseth dispatched a crew from union headquarters to replace them.⁶

Even the Sailors' Union of the Pacific's official historian concedes that the IWW's Marine Transport Workers had the support of the majority of east coast seamen by 1913.⁷ The International Seamen's Union was hampered by its exclusionary policies, its racism, its class collaboration, and its outmoded craft organization. A majority of deckhands on the Atlantic coastal routes were Blacks, and while the ISU constitution did not bar Blacks from membership, the union in practice refused to admit them. As late as 1916, a meeting of the ISU's Boston branch overwhelmingly rejected a motion to organize Black seamen despite a Furuseth speech arguing that only by organizing Black sailors could they hope to win better wages for themselves.⁸ In 1909, the ISU began organizing Spanish-speaking firemen (most firemen working from the east coast), but refused to allow them to run their own locals. As a result, they withdrew after a disastrous strike in 1912—their federation voted to join the IWW, and a few thousand took out membership in

⁴ "The Portland Waterfront Strike," *Industrial Solidarity*, Jan. 6, 1923, pp. 1, 5–6; Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 32–34. "To All Marine Transport Workers in Every Port of the World," *Industrial Solidarity*, Jan. 13, 1923; "Mayor of Portland Fails to Crush Waterfront Strike," *Industrial Solidarity*, Oct. 28, 1922.

⁵ Hyman Weintraub: Andrew Furuseth: Emancipator of the Seamen. Berkeley. University of California Press, 1959, p. 23.

⁶ Weintraub, pp. 60, 75, 80–81.

⁷ Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific*. San Francisco: Sailors' Union of the Pacific, 1986, page 38. Schwartz's history makes it clear that Wobblies honored ISU picket lines despite ISU advocacy of anti-IWW blacklists, ISU-run hiring halls and other anti-IWW practices.

⁸ Boston Branch Meeting Minutes Feb. 22, 1916. in Victor Olander Papers, Chicago Historical Society, box 86.

the IWW's Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union. Other ISU Atlantic officials quit when the "International" refused to allow them to fight a pay cut, and the ISU was left with a paper organization that did not attempt to organize anyone but white, English-speaking workers. As a result, Furuseth's sympathetic biographer concedes, "The IWW was now firmly entrenched on the waterfront. It gained complete control of the port of New Orleans, where it conducted an unsuccessful strike in 1913. It even invaded Furuseth's stronghold on the Pacific Coast and made substantial inroads, especially in San Pedro and Seattle." So substantial were those inroads that Furuseth reported to the ISU executive board that he feared an effort to re-affiliate the ISU's only stable affiliate, the SUP, to the IWW.⁹

While the ISU was firmly entrenched in the halls of Congress (where it lobbied for legislation to bar foreign seamen from US-flagged ships, but also for greater legal rights for seamen), it was far from a strong union. In 1920 it reached its peak strength under the protection of the US Shipping Board (a government agency which took over shipping during the war, and cut sweetheart deals with the ISU in an attempt to curb the IWW and other radicals). But when the war ended it quickly fell from 115,000 members in 1920 to 16,000 in 1923, most on the Pacific coast. Some of this decline was attributable to the decline in shipping and to the general anti-labor offensive waged by US employers after the war. But it was also a result of the ISU's predilection for expelling its most militant members and even entire affiliates—whenever they refused orders to capitulate to the employers. By 1934 only 146 members of the ISU's Sailors' Union of the Pacific voted in a coast-wide strike vote. The Marine Transport Workers joined the resulting strike, bringing out nearly the entire Gulf coast (the ISU had no halls in Gulf ports), until scabbing by the Communist-dominated MWIU undercut the strike. The MTW's role was officially acknowledged in the SUP Strike Bulletin, and many Gulf coast employers granted better conditions in the strike's aftermath.¹⁰

Many of the vanished members joined the Marine Transport Workers. In March of 1922, ISU President Furuseth reported that the IWW had taken complete control of the Boston waterfront, and that the ISU's Boston branch was so demoralized it was no longer able even to hold meetings. The IWW was so strong there for a time that the Marine Transport Workers Secretary issued crew menus with the IWW seal affixed and posted them on mess hall bulletin boards before ships left the harbor. Cooks and ship owners who refused to follow the menu were confronted with direct action.¹¹ In 1923 the MTW accepted 1,995 paid-up craft union membership cards in lieu of IWW initiation, but the IWW did not have time to build a permanent presence. The ISU and the International Longshoremen's Association abandoned their jurisdictional warfare with each other and the bosses to concentrate their fire on the IWW. "In the end, the combined forces of the AFL, the government and the ship-owners defeated the IWW."¹² Many of the MTW's new

⁹ Weintraub, pp. 101–05. ISU officials campaigned to bar "Orientals" from US ships, backed the Chinese Exclusion Act and tried to extend it to all Asians, and successfully lobbied for a bill requiring 75% of seamen to understand English. Atlantic ISU officials were expelled after they testified against the latter provision in behalf of their Spanish-speaking members. (pp. 112–17) Andrew Furuseth report, July 26, 1913, in Olander papers box 84.

¹⁰ Schwartz, pp. 91–111. The 1934 strike, and the role of the Communists, is recalled in 1940 issues of the Houston MTW paper, *The Rip-Tide*. IWW Archives, box 71 folder 35. Folder 11 contains copies of the Strike Bulletin.

¹¹ Furuseth to Hanson, March 8, 1922 Olander Papers, box 89. Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas and Deborah Shaffer, editors: *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the IWW*, Chicago: Lake View Press, 1985, pp. 177–78.

¹² Weintraub, p. 162; Minutes of the First Convention of the MTW IU 510, Oct. 26–Nov. 6, 1923, IWW Archives box 70 folder 3. Delegates noted that the MTW faced a severe financial crisis caused by the expense of its rapid expansion, the need to maintain 16 halls in the US alone and to carry out intensive propaganda to respond to the

members were lost in the aftermath of an unsuccessful general strike called in May, 1923 in an attempt to force the government to free IWW prisoners.

The period from 1913 to 1924 was the peak of the Marine Transport Workers' influence, but the union did not disappear. "Specific ships remained under IWW control, and in various ports groups of longshoremen carried two union cards...When captains or owners were not agreeable to IWW demands, entire crews might be pulled from a ship just as it was about to sail..." Wobbly organizer Fred Hansen recalled that most ships changed crews every voyage, making it hard to maintain a union presence. But "some ships were pretty solidly IWW. On the Sinclair line we had a ship that was almost 100 percent for several years" in the late 1920s. But it became harder and harder to maintain that IWW presence. By the 1930s, "Any time we walked off a ship, the International Seamen's Union would have a crew there..."¹³

The ISU feared the IWW. ISU officers called on all branches to keep them informed of IWW activity and influence in their ports, and ISU minutes are replete with references to IWW organizers. The ISU's Boston branch tried to drive the IWW off the waterfront by adopting a resolution that ISU-organized sailors (the ISU (mis)organized sailors, firemen, and cooks and stewards into separate affiliates) refuse to sail with IWW firemen. The organizer reported that they must force the firemen off the ships or lose the sailors to the IWW as well. However, "the shortage of Anglo-Saxon (sic) at the present time is a severe handicap, if we had fifty firemen available we could break this up in the Eastern and every other line." Ship-owners preferred to hire docile ISU members, but were unable to find them. As part of the effort to break the IWW firemen, the ISU encouraged one line to import southern Blacks to work for \$5 less per week than the MTW crews.¹⁴

The situation became so desperate that the ISU even attempted to organize Spanish-speaking workers. In January 1916 the ISU's Atlantic District drafted a leaflet aimed at Spanish-speaking seamen claiming that the ISU organized regardless of nationality. In 1916 the New York ISU branch voted to establish a weekly newspaper in English and Spanish in order to combat the influence of the IWW-affiliated *Cultura Obrera*. A few weeks later, their organizer reported that "The I.W.W. have joined a large number of colored sailors, nearly all of these men have able seamen's certificates and will constitute a great menace to this Association." But by August things were looking up: "We forced the IWWs off the City of Memphis and the City of Montgomery here this week..." Two days later, Wobblies were ousted from the City of Columbus. As maritime workers were forced to choose between their union and their jobs, many abandoned the IWW. But while the ISU accepted IWW firemen into their ranks, they often refused to allow known Wobblies to join their sailors' affiliates.¹⁵

attacks of the ISU and the ship-owners, and the ongoing "dissension due to the nefarious activities of certain borers-from-within." They saw no prospect for cooperating with the ISU, which, they resolved, was not a union "but rather an organized group of cowardly labor fakers backed to the wall, now trying to maintain their easy living by sending out venomous propaganda against the very men whom they have robbed and exploited for years, who have found that the Marine Transport Workers is their union."

¹³ Bird, Georgakas and Shaffer, pp. 178, 185-87.

¹⁴ Boston Branch Minutes, April 18, 1916, April 25, 1916, May 3, 1916. All in Olander Papers, box 86. Boston officials felt importing Blacks to undercut IWW conditions was a bad idea, as it was hard to defend to other unionists. Thomas Hansen to ISU officers and branches, August 15, 1922, Olander Papers box 89.

¹⁵ "Attention. Spanish Seafaring-Men. Attention." The English text of this leaflet includes a handwritten note by G. Brown announcing that it was being "printed in Spanish for the men it is intended for I am tired of our organization being sabotaged by the I.W.W. so will try to do some sabotage for our own." Victor Olander Papers, box 86, folder

The ISU also attempted to persuade seamen to abandon the IWW. In 1922, the ISU's Eastern & Gulf Sailors Association issued a leaflet claiming that MTW delegates were paid a weekly wage and 50% of all dues collected, amounting to as much as \$165 a week (many times what a seaman could hope to earn). "Yet they have the brazen gall to talk about the so-called 'pie-card' and the 'high salaries' paid the officers of the bona fide Seamen's Unions." (An IWW rebuttal figured the delegate would have to sign up 330 new members each week, since delegates were not salaried and received no commission on dues collections, but did receive 50 cents commission on each initiation.¹⁶

ISU officials were particularly proud of a pamphlet by Basil Manly which portrayed the IWW as a strike-breaking outfit controlled by private detectives, predicting that it would be the final nail in the IWW's coffin if.¹⁷ ISU President Andrew Furuseth joined the campaign, issuing an 8-page circular painting the IWW as an undemocratic, bureaucratic organization which offered few if any benefits to its members. "The I.W.W. ...was organized...for the purpose of transforming human society," Furuseth concluded, contrasting it to the ISU's evolutionary methods. "Like a blighting pest coming through the air it has descended upon place after place to leave nothing but wreckage, misery and despair behind. It is always to be found watching, especially the losing struggles of the workers, waiting like buzzards to finish and consume the sick and the wounded; then gorged by its feast, it flaps its wings and raucously croaks democracy while passing from its latest place of achievement."¹⁸

January 1–18, 1916. New York Branch minutes May 29, 1916, July 12, 1916, August 16, 1916; Pat O'Brien to 'Dear Comrade,' Aug. 18, 1916; all in box 86 Olander Papers. New York Branch minutes Nov. 21, 1916, Olander Papers Box 87. The warfare continued for many years. ISU Secretary Thomas Hanson wrote the ISU's Agent in New Orleans, P. Jacobsen (Sept. 1, 1921): "I am glad to know that you have been successful in your fight against the IWWs, in that you will meet out the proper kind of justice to them as time goes on..."

¹⁶ Eastern & Gulf Sailor's (sic) Association, Inc., "A 'Wobbly' Confession," Summer 1922, Olander Papers, box 89; "Just Plain Lies," *Industrial Solidarity*, Oct. 29, 1924. Delegates were not paid, but MTW branch officers received up to \$4 per day to keep the halls open, considerably less than they could earn at sea.

¹⁷ Patrick O'Brien (ISU Organizer) to Furuseth, Oct. 22 1922. Olander Papers, box 89. A leaflet by the ISU's Pacific District Committee, "To the Non-Union Men," told Wobblies their dream was impractical: "You think that you can overturn the 'tub' so that those who are now on top (the employers) will be at the bottom, and that those who are at the bottom (the workers) will be on top...Your numbers are so' ridiculously small and you are so scattered throughout the entire world that all your foolishness brings you nothing but useless hardship and imprisonment...You must by this time be able to see that the time is not ripe for your ideas. Quit gambling with your freedom and come with us." in Olander Papers, Box 90, folder July-December, 1923.

Many other ISU leaflets included denunciations of the IWW. For example, a leaflet by the ISU Port Committee of New York concluded that progress "cannot be obtained by following [the] idle promises of the I.W.W. fakers and cloud pushers." The Manly pamphlet, "Attention, Please," features an article by Basil Manly, "Does Big Business Control the IWW?," a series of affidavits (some quite absurd) charging the MTW with scabbing on AFL strikes, and articles from IWW newspapers encouraging Wobblies to take jobs as seamen in order to help build the IWW's presence. A copy can be found in the Olander papers box 89, folder Nov.-Dec. 1922.

¹⁸ Andrew Furuseth, "Circular No. 2." International Seamen's Union of America, 1921. Copy in Olander papers, box 89, folder Aug.-Dec. 1921. Similarly, after many seamen turned to the MTW in the aftermath of one of the ISU's disastrous strikes and another round of expulsions of rank-and-file militants (accused, as usual, of being IWWs), see Furuseth's "You Have Been Fooled," undated pamphlet in Olander papers box 89, folder Jan.-July 1921. The pamphlet reproduces two IWW letters from June 28 and June 30, 1921 responding to inquiries about lining up the strikers in the MTW. Furuseth paints this as an attempt to displace ISU members from the struck ships (based on the customary behavior of his own organization), insists that the MTW is an integral part of the IWW, attributes all dissension within the ISU to IWW agents, and claims the IWW is paid by the employers. Evidently ISU members were not impressed by this stream of anti-IWW propaganda, to judge by the steady decline in ISU membership.

This warfare was by no means always successful. In March 1917, a lower-paid ISU crew was ousted from the SS *Onondaga* by the IWW, and IWW firemen held Morgan Line ships for several years. ISU officials wrote the US government criticizing the willingness of many ship-owners to hire IWWs and European syndicalists, urging the government to force an end to this “unpatriotic” behavior.¹⁹ Similarly, after the ISU’s Pacific Coast affiliate expelled 26 dissidents (including the editor of its journal) on false charges that they were IWW members, the ISU requested permission to send officers on board ships to identify Wobbly sympathizers so that they might be fired.²⁰ These appeals ultimately had the desired effect. By October 1922, ISU Organizer Patrick O’Brien reported: “The Shipping Board has decided to wipe the ‘Wobblies’ out of the longshore end.” He could not tell if this would be extended to the crews on the ships, “but that they are now doing all in their power to get them out of the cargo end there can be no doubt.”²¹ In February, 1923, the ISU’s Victor Olander presented a report on IWW activities to the US Shipping Board after the Board indicated it would favor a wage hike “if we could give some assurance of assisting in eliminating the I.W.W. from activities on American ships.”²²

Terrorism in San Pedro

The IWW was not only confronted with blacklisting and business union attempts to job-trust Wobblies off the waterfront—it also confronted outright terrorism. On June 14, 1924, for example, the IWW Hall in San Pedro; California was attacked by a mob during a benefit performance raising funds to bury two IWW members who had died in a railroad accident. Armed thugs burst through the window during the concert. One child, who had just finished singing on stage, was thrust into a boiler of hot coffee, while another thug poured a pot of boiling water on a few others (a 5-year-old and two 9-year-old children were hospitalized for several weeks with severe burns). As Lena Milos was thrust in the coffee, a thug told her she wouldn’t be singing at any more Wobbly entertainments. A 13-year-old girl was beaten in the face with a club. Several men, women and children suffered less severe injuries—broken bones, comas, etc. Nine Wobblies were seized by the mob and driven to the desert where they were beaten, robbed, and tarred and feathered. And, of course, the hall furniture and records were burned.²³

The IWW had a strong presence among both longshoremen and seamen in San Pedro, having “picked up the pieces of the shattered AFL affiliate by promising...militancy, solidarity, and bitter-end opposition to wage cuts” in the aftermath of World War I and enforcing these through a

¹⁹ Thomas Hanson to William Wilson, Labor Secretary. June 7 1917, Olander Papers, box 87. No story was too vicious or too false to be used against the IWW. ISU Secretary-Treasurer Victor Olander’s Sept. 30, 1925 Report to ISU officers claimed that the IWW had directed a sabotage campaign against the war effort, and that documents produced in the Chicago IWW trial proved that the IWW received a “plentiful supply” of German money to finance this campaign.

²⁰ The ship-owners refused, apparently afraid the ISU would take advantage of the situation to sign up more members. The ISU claimed the refusal was proof that ship-owners were sheltering Wobblies on their ships and using them as a lever to break the ISU. A.E. Albrecht: *International Seamen’s Union of America: A Study of its History and Problems*. US Department of Labor Bulletin #342, 1923, pp. 101–03. This report is based almost entirely on ISU records and officials, and is thus quite hostile to IWW and rank-and-file efforts. Schwartz (p. 59) puts the number of SUP members expelled as Wobblies at 39.

²¹ O’Brien to Furuseth, Oct. 29, 1922. O’Brien reported on an IWW long-shore strike, apparently in Philadelphia, then in its tenth day, and ILA attacks on the IWW in Hoboken, NJ.

²² Victor Olander, Report of meeting, US Shipping Board and ISU, Feb. 5, 1923, Olander Papers Box 90.

²³ “Mob Scalds Children: Workers—Tarred Feathered and Robbed.” San Pedro, Relief Committee.

series of quickie strikes that hit maritime employers when they could least afford it. In 1923 San Pedro Wobblies won the 3-watch system (the 8-hour day) and overtime pay through a series of quickie strikes. On May 1, 1923, San Pedro was one of several ports tied up by an IWW-called strike demanding the release of class war prisoners. Wobblies also tied up the port of Aberdeen, Washington, and carried out less effective strikes in Baltimore (where J.P. Morgan's yacht was among the ships tied up), Galveston, Mobile (where 18 MTWs were arrested), New York and Philadelphia (though the Shipping Board granted a 15 percent pay hike to combat the strike). San Pedro walked out again for five days beginning July 12 1923 after the conviction of 27 IWW members (many of them MTW members) on criminal syndicalism charges. (San Francisco joined the walkout July 13th, demanding the release of class war prisoners and higher wages.)

While the strike closed down the port, it was not enough to force authorities to stop the repression. Instead, employers turned to terrorism to drive the IWW from the waterfront. During the May 1923 San Pedro strike, more than 5,000 striking sailors, longshoremen and their families packed the main street for three city blocks, singing revolutionary songs for nearly five hours. The meeting had originally been scheduled for a nearby hillside, but adjourned to the street in front of the city jail after police raided the speaker's platform and arrested the speakers. Four hundred strikers were arrested a few days later, as police vowed to throw every "idler" into jail in an effort to break the strike. Shipping remained paralyzed until Furuseth persuaded San Francisco seamen to return to work, and sent scabs down to San Pedro to break the IWW strike. The Wobblies returned to work, vowing to malingering, rather than let the ISU seascabbers take their positions. However, the availability of AFL scabs gave the employers the breathing space they needed to "reorganize" the work, firing 2,300 dockworkers in order to ensure a docile workforce.²⁴

"IWW Tames Wild Captain"

That was *Industrial Solidarity's* headline over an account of a job action by the crew of the SS *Mongolia*. When the crew arrived in Philadelphia, they went to the MTW hall to report rotten conditions including physical assaults by the Chief Mate. MTW delegates quickly lined up the entire crew and forced the captain to agree to their terms if he wanted to continue the voyage. The MTW also wired the next port of call to have a delegate check to make sure the captain didn't backslide.²⁵ The IWW press was replete with stories of seamen forcing better conditions through direct action. Quickie strikes on the eve of sailing prevented captains from slashing wages, officers from beating and harassing crew members, and enforced vacations and working hours. Waterfront workers, too, won better conditions through direct action, including forcing the installation of safety equipment at iron ore docks at Duluth and Superior. The transitory nature of the workforce and the hostile legal climate could make it difficult to maintain union conditions over the long haul, however. One crew the MTW lined up en route from New York to the Panama Canal (there were 3 IWW members when the ship left port, and 22 when it reached

²⁴ Dubofsky, pp. 474–75. "MTW Strike Biggest Success Ever Known by Seamen in Normal Times; Wages Go Up"; "Mass Arrests in San Pedro Marine Strike"; "Greatest Radical Demonstration in History of California"; "Another Victory"; all *Industrial Solidarity*, May 26, 1923, p. 1. "Morgan Educated by I.W.W.," *Industrial Solidarity*, May 1919 23, p. 1. Schwartz, pp. 64–65. Strike Bulletin (San Francisco), July 13, 1923 IWW Archives box 26 folder 23. Kuneldorf, pp. 33–34.

²⁵ "IWW Tames Wild Captain," *Industrial Solidarity*, July 1, 1925.

the canal) was able to win better food, extermination of the bed bugs that infested their sleeping quarters, and other conditions. But when the ship reached Sydney, the captain fired four of the most active MTWs. When the remaining crewmen refused to sail without them he had 16 more arrested on mutiny warrants. The Australian court sentenced them to a week in jail in a kangaroo court proceeding.²⁶

The IWW retained a strong presence on the waterfront through the mid 1940s, but it was a minority presence. Most seamen shipped by the voyage, and since most hiring was done through union halls Wobblies either had to have at least tacit agreements with ship-owners or captains to hire through their halls or had to carry two (or more) union cards to get jobs. Few ship-owners chose to hire Wobblies, and so the Marine Transport Workers halls could not function as a source of work. And both the rival National Maritime Union (CIO) and ISU (AFL) tried to keep the IWW off ships. When a captain turned to the IWW after the NMU was unable to provide two seamen, the NMU refused to allow them to sail unless they abandoned the IWW and took out NMU cards. They refused, and while the NMU delegate conceded that they had strike clearance, he said they could not sail because they might propagandize the crew.²⁷

Even a handful of Wobblies were often enough to force better conditions or to spark solidarity actions. In 1922, IWW sailors on the steamship Humboldt persuaded their fellow workers not to scab on Santa Barbara, California, longshoremen, helping them win their strike. When the steamer reached San Francisco, however, “the Andrew Furuseth union of sailors had a full crew of scabs ready and waiting for her. They were willing to work for ten dollars less per month than the MTW crew on the boat and they would be delighted to break any longshoremen’s strike they might run into, that being the first principle of craft union morality.” Santa Barbara longshoremen refused to work the ship, but SUP members handled the cargo.

However, in ports further away from SUP headquarters, solidarity often had more lasting rewards. MTW members on the SS *Steel Navigator* were able to win the 3-watch system (the ship had been working 12-hour days) and a pay hike by notifying the captain of their demands the day the ship was set to sail from San Pedro for London. San Pedro was a strong union town and the captain, unable to find scabs, was forced to capitulate. Similarly, when ILA gangsters tried to prevent MTW members from working cargo in Hoboken, New Jersey, his fellow workers abandoned the job. The boss quickly ordered the ILA to keep its hands off Wobblies rather than have the work tied up. Eighteen months later, the MTW’s *Marine Worker* announced that short, on-the-job strikes were winning MTW members the highest wages paid on the east coast, job control on a growing number of ships, and scores of new members. An article offered suggestions for forming ship committees (job branches) and enforce safety and working conditions through a steady stream of individual complaints to the captain, where he refused to recognize the union.²⁸

²⁶ “Job Action Wins in Baltimore,” *Industrial Solidarity*, Jan. 26, 1924; “Job Strikes on Indianic,” *Industrial Solidarity*, March 1, 1924; “Scandinavian Ships Fall Under IWW Job Control” (all Norwegian ships sailing from New York will now hire from MTW hall), *Industrial Solidarity*, May 21, 1924; “Captain Had Hell-Ship; Job Action Beats Him,” *Industrial Solidarity*, Feb. 17, 1926; Fred Thompson and Patrick Murfin, *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years*, Chicago: IWW, 1976, pp. 77–78.

²⁷ “Wobbly ‘A.B.’ Tells NMU Just What He Thinks of It,” *Industrial Worker*, May 29, 1937, p. 3. “To All Marine Transport Workers,” handbill (1936?). IWW Archives, Box 174.

²⁸ Furuseth Union Scabs on Dock” and “A Display of Solidarity,” *Marine Worker*, Nov. 15, 1922; “Solidarity the Only Way,” *Marine Worker*, December 1, 1922; IWW Archives, box 70 folder 26. “Suggestions for Forming Ship Committees,” *Marine Worker*, May 1 1924, IWW, box 70 folder 28.

In 1936 MTW seamen struck against the shipping of 34 tons of dynamite to Franco's army, holding up the ship for several hours until the ISU imported scabs from New York City (none could be found in Philadelphia). The MTW put up handbills in several ports calling on maritime workers to refuse to ship or handle cargo to ports where the fascists held power, and published lists of ships that should not be worked. *The Marine Worker* boasted that the MTW was the only maritime union that opposed fascism: "Joseph P. Ryan, President of the ILA, stated officially to the press that his union will not object to handling war cargo as long as his men are paid for it. Silas Black Axtel, speaking officially for the ISU, said the same thing. In contrast the MTW at its last convention at New Orleans adopted a resolution to boycott the handling of cargo destined for imperialist war and fascism." That same issue derided an ISU caravan to Washington DC to protest the hiring of non-US seamen as "downright jingoism." The next year Wobblies vigorously denounced the communist-dominated NMU's demand that seamen be paid a bonus for shipping cargo to the fascists: "The Commies willingly and voluntarily transport the instruments of death to be used against some of their own comrades in Spain—if only they are given an extra bonus for their perfidy."²⁹

The IWW was recognized as a force on the waterfront, and was invited to join the West and Gulf Coast federations of maritime workers. When the Congress passed legislation requiring seamen to carry a Continuous Discharge Book (a record of each job worked and the terms under which the seamen left, essentially a traveling blacklist which the seamen were obliged to maintain), the Marine Transport Workers joined with the Sailors Union of the Pacific (at that time independent of the ISU, which ordered its members to comply with the fink books), the Firemen's Union of the Pacific Coast (MFOW) and a dissident NMU caucus (the NMU officially opposed the fink book, but directed its members to cross picket lines) to organize picketing against the US Maritime Commission Hall which required the Fink Book. Several shipping lines were persuaded to abandon the fink books, especially in the SUP's Pacific Coast stronghold.³⁰

The IWW was also a vital force for solidarity on the waterfront. When Houston and Galveston ILA longshore workers struck in 1935, the Houston MTW branch phoned other cities, foiling two efforts to import scabs to replace seamen who had struck in solidarity (a scab crew was eventually brought in at gunpoint). Meanwhile, ILA crews on the Atlantic generally worked scab ships without a whimper of protest—except in Boston, and the ILA yanked their local's charter in retaliation after they refused to work a "hot" ship.³¹

A Swarm of Termites

As longshoreman Gilbert Mers notes, the AFL-CIO is more like a swarm of termites than a house of labor. AFL and CIO unions eagerly cooperated with the bosses in signing no-strike pacts,

²⁹ "Only One Union in the Marine Industry is Against War and Fascism," *The Marine Worker*, May 1, 1936, p. 4, IWW Archives box 70 folder 35. "I.W.W. Ties Up Fascists' T.N.T.," *Industrial Worker*, Sept. 19 1936; "New York Union Scabs Used to Man San Jose Fascist T.N.T. Ship," *Industrial Worker*, Sept. 26 1936. "On the Waterfront," *Industrial Worker* July 31, 1937, p. 4; "Strike All Ships Carrying Fascist Cargo, Says MTW," *Industrial Worker*, Sept. 24, 1938. MTW member Louis Rosenberg was killed June 16 fighting on the Aragon front. *Industrial Worker*, August 28, 1937.

³⁰ "Seamen Attack Maritime Commission Fink Halls," *Industrial Worker*, July 22, 1938; "Joint Picket Line Takes Round in Fink Hall Fight," *Industrial Worker*, July 30 1938; "Strong Picket Line Stops Shipping By Maritime Commission Fink Halls," *Industrial Worker* August 6, 1938.

³¹ Gilbert Mers: *Working the Waterfront*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988, pp. 94–96.

discouraging solidarity and direct action, and blacklisting Wobblies and other militants. The MTW had established a reputation as a “small but combative” union that helped it maintain a foothold in the industry until the late 1950s, long after the last vestige of IWW job control had vanished. But as a minority union in an industry where most employers hired from the union hall, Wobblies were often obliged to carry two cards in order to find work. Where competing unions were closely balanced, the MTW could often carve out space for an independent existence. But as the business unions became more entrenched and effectively divided their spheres of influence, it became increasingly difficult to maintain an independent presence. Many Wobblies were, of necessity, two-carders. In Texas ports, for example, Wobblies were welcome in ILA locals as good unionists and often elected to contract committees, etc. Repelled by the Communist Party’s record of scabbery in the industry and its anti-labor policies (uncritical support of the Roosevelt administration, centralized, autocratic union structures, no-strike pledges, and gulags for rebel workers), MTWers were sometimes drawn into union factional struggles in an effort to keep their jobs from falling under CP domination.³²

Indeed, the problem of how to deal with competing unions was a recurring one. Not only were many Wobblies obliged to take out business union cards to hold their jobs, but the MTW also attracted many militants from the business unions who were growing increasingly disgusted with the results of class collaborationism, craft union divisions, and the general lack of solidarity. Even some local officials took out IWW red cards, which often placed the union in an awkward position. While these officials were no doubt sincere in joining the IWW, and often helped local Wobblies get jobs through their union halls, they also had a tendency to pull the IWW into intra- and inter-union factional disputes. Examples of this problem are replete in the IWW archives. In 1937 and 1938, while the Sailors Union of the Pacific was briefly independent (having been expelled from the ISU for being too militant), the IWW Seaman published several articles supporting SUP independence and the SUP’s declared (and short-lived) program of amalgamating maritime unions into a single, independent union. The newspaper even published an article by SUP head Harry Lundberg which praised the MTW and attacked the still-Communist dominated National Maritime Union. At times, the Seaman forgot that it was a MTW organ, rather than a caucus within the trade unions. “Save the SUP,” one article pleaded. “The reason the SUP has earned the admiration of the world is that aside of its undisputed militancy and creditably correct line, for a trade union, it persisted in remaining independent.” (In fairness, by the mid-1930s the SUP had moved from its history of organized scabbing, and remained a relatively democratic craft union through at least the late 1940s.)³³

Cooperation was particularly close in the Gulf ports, where both the NMU (CIO) and SIU (AFL) were weak, and the SIU actively courted the MTW. In Houston and Galveston, many SIU officials carried IWW cards, and the SIU at one point was considering renting space for its offices in the MTW’s large (capable of seating 250 people) Houston hall. In 1946, an IWW member wrote the *Industrial Worker* a report on “inter-union squabbling on the letterhead of the New York branch of the Seafarers International Union (the reorganized ISU, after the SUP was persuaded to rejoin the AFL).³⁴ Sometimes these officers used the IWW threat to hold their internationals at bay, as

³² Gilbert Mers, pp. 227, 247.

³³ IWW Seaman, Nov. 20 1937-May 23, 1938 (the latter includes “Save the SUP”), IWW Archives, box 70 folders 36–39.

³⁴ Robert McVey (Galveston MTW) to Fred Thompson, June 12, 1946, IWW Archives box 74 folder 23; Fred Hansen (Houston) to W. Westman, Dec. 25 1944, Feb. 4 1945, May 11 1946, IWW Archives, box 75, folders 7, 9

in an October 1945 Houston strike where two small ILA longshore locals refused to go along with a lousy contract agreed to by the ILA. Although only 500 workers were on strike, 3,000 others who had settled their contracts honored the picket lines after the striking locals warned that they would leave the ILA for the IWW if their picket lines were not honored.³⁵

But not all Wobblies supported cooperating with the business unions. In 1939 the Buffalo Branch (the ISU's Great Lakes affiliate was notorious for being nothing better than a company union) wrote the MTW Convention calling for a stepped-up organizing campaign: "We are for a straight out and out Drive for the MTW IU 510 and to hell with all other so-called Unions." The Buffalo WIN urged a fight for the 4-watch system (the 6-hour day), a reaffirmation of MTW support for affiliation to the International Workers Association (AIT), a full-scale fight against the government-sponsored fink halls, and no support to the Seafarers International Union, "an AF of L strike-breaking agency." While delegates did not face the question of how to deal with the business unions head on, they did note that maritime workers' problems could not be solved through them:

"All delegates, members and secretaries are cautioned against taking the so-called moves for Unity that are prevalent at the moment between the various unions in this industry too seriously. The IWW is an Organization for the Working Class and not for the advancement of the Pie Cards who are attempting to solidify themselves in office at the expense of the workers."³⁶

An International Union

"The fellow who gets low wages is a menace to the one who commands better wages. Either you pull him up to your level, or he is going to pull you down to his..."³⁷

The MTW was also the IWW's only truly international industrial union. Spanish-speaking seamen carried the IWW message to Latin America, and were later reinforced by IWW members who had been deported from Australia. The MTW maintained halls in Bremerhaven, Hamburg and Stettin, Germany, Tampico, Mexico, Stockholm, Sweden, Adelaide and Sidney Australia, Vancouver and Port Arthur, Canada, and Iquique and Valparaiso, Chile for many years. When Puerto Rican dockworkers tired of working for 25 cents an hour under an ILA contract and noticed that the MTW was the only union to refuse to work ships headed to Puerto Rico during their strike, they formed a MTW branch in Puerta de Tierra. The MTW's Chilean section, founded in 1919, grew to include 9,000 members in seven maritime cities, before being suppressed by the military dictatorship in the late 1920s. In 1923, Chilean maritime workers struck under MTW leadership.

and 18; Letter signed by card number only, July 11, 1946, IWW Archives box 26 folder 14. When MTW member Nils Moller wrote *Industrial Worker* editor Fred Thompson to protest critical coverage of the SIU's attempt to break a strike by Canadian Great Lakes seamen, Thompson responded that breaking strikes (even strikes led by communists) and denying workers the right to control their organizations was bad unionism, and bad for all workers: "I'm sure of this, that although it may look the hard way,...the only way we can hope to build 510 [is] to keep on insisting on union principles...The SIU action...is not only a violation of principle, but an unworkable violation...I devoutly hope that MTW can find effective ways of getting SIU back on right track.." (emphasis added) Thompson, May 28 1949, IWW Archives box 76 folder 3.

³⁵ Fred Hansen to W. Westman, Oct. 29, 1945. IWW Archives, box 75 folder 14. "The MTW have complete control over these two locals, but we don't want to make any move to break away from the ILA. We'll let the rank and file membership make the move..."

³⁶ MTW Convention Minutes, Jan. 3-4, 1939. IWW Archives, box 71 folder 18.

³⁷ "Getting Ready Are You?" *The Marine Worker*, Dec. 15, 1922. IWW Archives, Box 70 folder 26.

They struck again March 1, 1924, demanding better pay and conditions and union recognition. The Chilean MTW wired the names of ships that left Chilean ports carrying scab crews to other MTW branches, urging that maritime workers boycott the ships and refuse to handle their cargo.

In 1936 the Chilean MTW was reorganizing, publishing *La Voz del Industrialismo* on a press donated by US Wobblies, and organizing short job actions that forced a Chilean steamship line to grant the IWW's demands. In Germany, MTW members published *Der Marine-Arbeiter* from 1925 through 1930 (at least, the IWW Archives do not contain later issues), and the MTW branch in Stettin joined a general strike of German maritime workers in 1924. German Wobblies played a major role in the anti-Nazi resistance until they were betrayed by the Communists.³⁸

MTW papers carried detailed reports on the struggles and conditions of maritime workers around the world. The MTW also organized many solidarity actions with maritime workers from around the globe. In September 1925, the MTW called a strike in solidarity with striking British seamen, tying up dozens of ships in Baltimore, Mobile, New York and Philadelphia despite ISU scabbing. The Baltimore MTW forwarded the names of scabs who shipped out to Latin America to the MTW affiliates there, so they could be greeted appropriately. A few lines settled on the IWW's terms, agreeing to hire from the MTW hall, shorter hours, and wages \$15 /month above the Shipping Board/ ISU scale. On Sept. 25 the strike was transferred to the job, as the MTW was too weak to shut down shipping without support from seamen in other unions. But, "the seamen who went out on Strike can be proud of their action... The ship-owners certainly felt the effect of this Strike... It was a complete surprise to them and an invaluable aid to our fellow workers striking in England, Australia, South Africa, Denmark and China. These seamen will not forget our display of Solidarity, nor will they fail to remember the traitorous action of certain "International" unions whose officials did all in their power to break the Strike." The MTW reminded maritime workers that the British seamen were still on strike, and that they should pull crews off British ships as they arrived in port. "To the Ships!," the final MTW Strike Bulletin concluded; "Prepare and Organize for the next strike!"³⁹

Making Waves

The Marine Transport Workers had a predilection for strikes, not only honoring all picket lines except where the demands were specifically targeted against the IWW, but also calling general strikes and solidarity strikes without regard for whether the union had the strength to actually win them. In 1923, MTW called two General Strikes to demand the release of class war prisoners. While the April-May strike did tie up several ports, the December 1923 strike was called off at the last minute on the grounds that the government was releasing prisoners.⁴⁰ On September

³⁸ *Marine Worker*, May 1, 1924. IWW Archives, box 70 folder 28; "Marine Transport Workers of Porto Rico join the IWW," *Industrial Solidarity*, June 24, 1925; Patrick Renshaw: *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1967, p. 291; Schwartz, p. 72; "Chilean IWW Rebuilds Strength Rapidly After Ibanez Suppression," *Industrial Worker*, Aug. 1, 1936; "IWW on Strike in Germany," *Industrial Solidarity*, April 19, 1924.

³⁹ MTW Strike Bulletin, September 1925. (Quote from Sept. 25, 1925) IWW Archives, Box 70 folder 11. "American Seamen Strike to Back British," *Industrial Solidarity*, Sept. 16, 1925; "French & Danish Steamer Co. Surrenders to MTW Strikers," *Industrial Solidarity*, Sept. 23 1925; "Strike Creating International Organization," *Industrial Solidarity*, Sept. 30, 1925.

⁴⁰ The strike deadline was Dec. 25. "Although some of our own doubted the wisdom of this step the Bosses deemed it wiser to bring pressure to bear on the White House with the result that the fellow workers were released."

17, 1923, the MTW's New Orleans branch joined a walkout by an independent longshore union, largely in sympathy with the demand for a pay hike but also demanding the release of class war prisoners. The MTW spread word of the strike to other Gulf Coast ports to prevent struck work from being unloaded, and successfully pulled 200 tugboatmen off the job.⁴¹

The MTW constantly worked to develop broader solidarity, calling strikes in support of other unions even where these were determined to destroy the IWW maritime presence. In 1936, MTW pickets pulled crews off ships in Albany, Baltimore and Bayonne NJ in support of a strike by the Sailors Union of the Pacific despite attempts by ISU officers (the SUP was still an ISU affiliate) to persuade the crews to scab. During that strike a shipboard meeting of SUP members approved resolutions in favor of breaking ties with the ISU, industrial unionism and political independence, and hiring through MTW halls when on the East Coast "instead of running around the docks or through the Communist-controlled Rank and file halls." They also voted to bar communist literature from the ships and voted confidence in SUP leader Harry Lundberg.⁴²

The 1936 strike gradually spread to include a handful of smaller maritime craft unions, and to encompass the entire Atlantic and Gulf ports. While the MTW was not strong enough to completely close the ports, seamen and longshoremen tied up scores of ships, and delayed others. ISU officers, meanwhile, were issuing free membership cards to scabs in a desperate attempt to break the growing strike, and sending out thugs to kidnap pickets. MTW member Eli Haiman was shot and wounded while picketing in Philadelphia (as was an ISU member picketing in defiance of his "union's" orders), while MTW member John Kane was killed in Houston when he and other strikers attempted to prevent an ISU official from absconding with union records. Six hundred workers joined Kane's funeral parade. By January 1937, the ISU "rank and file committees" (which soon became Curran's NMU) were encouraging longshoremen to scab on the strike and trying to suppress rank-and-file strike literature from circulating. In New York City, the Rank committee barred distribution of the West Coast maritime unions' Voice of the Federation and tried to 'prevent the Spanish Strike Committee from issuing its daily Spanish-language strike bulletin because it was issued from the MTW hall. The strike eventually collapsed from union scabbing and political intrigue, but the MTW's efforts to build the strike against overwhelming odds won respect (and many new members) from militant maritime workers, and an agreement by the SUP to honor MTW-IWW cards.⁴³

"Marine Transport Workers in New York Celebrate Release of Class War Prisoners," *Industrial Solidarity*, Jan. 5, 1924, p. 3. Page 2 of the same issue has an editorial responding to AFL criticism of Portland MTWs as "open shoppers." It noted that the MTW had struck in solidarity with the longshoremen even though their demands for a closed shop on certain docks undermined the IWW's position, and returned to work only after the ILA negotiated a partial settlement which provided jobs to nearly all its members, while leaving IWW longshoremen in the lurch.

⁴¹ IWW strike in Port of New Orleans. *Industrial Solidarity*, Sept. 29, 1923; "Scabs Are Scarce in New Orleans," *Industrial Solidarity*, October 6, 1923; "Orleans Strike Wins Pay Raise," *Industrial Solidarity*, November 3, 1923.

⁴² "East Coast Solidarity" and "Signs of the Times," *Industrial Worker* Nov. 7, 1936.

⁴³ "United Fruit Vessel Tied Up By MTW in Port of Boston," *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 21, 1936; "ISU 'Union' Cards Issued Free to Scabs," "If Maritime Workers Stick, They'll Win," "Burns Thug Shoots Eli Holman, Ernest Orr, in Foiled Kidnap," *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 28, 1936; "More Unions Join Maritime Strike," *Industrial Worker*, Dec. 5, 1936; "Another IWW Seaman Gives Life to Stop Official Scabbery," *Industrial Worker*, Dec. 12, 1936 (see Dec. 26 for report of his funeral); "Politicians Wrecking Strike: Sent Stooges to Sea to Scab," *Industrial Worker*, Jan. 9, 1937; "MTW Repudiates Skagman's Lie of IWW Faction in East Coast Maritime Strike," *Industrial Worker*, Jan. 16, 1937.

Decline

The MTW, Fred Thompson writes, reached its peak of influence in 1923.

“In such a field organization can grow to a sizable minority on the conviction that there should be the better unionism that it offers; after a certain point it must forge ahead to replace the unionism it has criticized, or its new adherents lose hope and drop out. The MTW could not cross the gap; it was left once more a small minority championing the cause of direct action and industrial solidarity...”

As Thompson notes, the IWW continued to be active in maritime, and led some major strikes in the 1930s. But by the end of the decade, the MTW was surrounded by “union” contracts that cemented business unionism in place.⁴⁴

MTW mounted its last organizing campaign in 1945 through 1947, lining up several Houston tugboat workers in early 1945. The Galveston & Houston Towing Co. defeated the MTW in a NLRB election through a combination of firings of union activists, a promised cash bonus if the company union won the election, and the reluctance of many MTW members to stay on the job through the months of NLRB delays when much better-paying jobs were available. Despite the loss, MTW activists tried (with some success) to pull the tugboat crews in fall 1946, when a wave of strikes swept the maritime industry, and the MTW won two NLRB elections among towing and ferry workers in 1947, though no permanent union presence was established. Those strikes were undercut by jockeying and scabbery between competing maritime unions, but the Marine Transport Workers popularized the slogan “Cross No Picket Line” and helped put that policy across. (There were exceptions on the Great Lakes, as a result of CIO orders to affiliated unions to unload scab cargo during a strike by the CIO-affiliated National Maritime Union, which prompted AFL unions to do the same.) In a retrospective on the struggles, the *Industrial Worker* noted that the modest pay hikes (and the 8-hour day on Canadian Great Lakes shipping) that were won took far more striking (some of it purely jurisdictional warfare between the CIO and AFL maritime unions) than it should have because there were “too many unions and not enough unionism.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Thompson & Murfin, pp. 142, 163–65.

⁴⁵ Thompson & Murfin, p. 184; Fred Thompson, “The Waterfront in 1946,” *Industrial Worker*, Jan. 41947, pp. 1, 5. In addition to his blow-by-blow account of several independently waged strikes, Thompson notes that a typical west coast passenger ship would divide its 50 or so workers into six different AFL and CIO craft unions, though some AFL-crewed cargo ships were organized on an industrial basis. The CIO’s Committee of Maritime Unity included six CIO maritime unions (and one independent), demonstrating that the CIO was far from an industrial organization. For the 1945 organizing campaign see IWW Archives, box 75 folders 10–14. The Houston MTW Branch Minutes (Sept. 13 1946, folder 15) report the union’s decision to honor the NMU strike and to refuse to work cargo during it.

While the MTW was urging workers to honor NMU picket lines, NMU officials continued their campaign to “liquidate” the IWW and accused the union of being run by Trotskyists.

“Maritime Unions Respect Pickets,” *Industrial Worker*, June 8, 1946, p. 1. The article quotes a Seafarers International Union statement that they will sail contracted ships “provided members do not have to cross picket lines to do so.” The SIU, however, had a vested interest in encouraging the NMU strike as NMU-CIO crews were undercutting SIU-AFL wage scales. An SIU strike strategy meeting held in New York called for a series of short on-ship strikes to win demands, and sent a telegram to President Truman warning that if he carried out his threats to crew ships with military scabs the SIU would consider it a lockout of the entire industry. X202071, “New York Stoppage,” *Industrial Worker*, June 15, 1946, p. 1. The MTW’s annual convention, held as the strike wave was drawing to a close, was marked by greetings from both CIO and AFL maritime unions thanking the MTW for its co-operation in winning the strikes. “510 Building Maritime Solidarity,” *Industrial Worker*, Sept. 28 1946, p. 1.

Like the rest of the IWW, the Marine Transport Workers quickly collapsed under the combined pressure of the Taft-Hartley Act and the increasingly entrenched business unions. MTW reports in the late 1940s and 1950s refer to empty halls, the impossibility of finding maritime workers to staff them, and the ever-present danger that the halls would be over-run by drunks who threatened to transform the halls into dingy flophouses where no self-respecting seaman would set foot. The Baltimore hall was closed in 1954, partly because the port was doing less business but primarily because no one could be found to keep the hall open. The New Orleans hall closed in 1953, again for lack of a delegate to keep it open. By the early 1960s, there were only about a dozen (mostly retired) members of the Houston MTW branch, and the hall was falling apart around their ears (it was finally sold and bulldozed in 1967).⁴⁶

But while the MTW had increasing difficulty maintaining its institutional presence, its influence continued to be felt. In the 1940s, when Stan Weir entered the industry, he found that his fellow workers “were involved, day to day, in establishing dignity for themselves and thousands of others, and policing all the things that they had done to obtain that dignity.” They refused to work under the bosses’ eye, and refused to sail if the food or living conditions weren’t up to standard. The SUP and SIU were as corrupt and worthless as ever, but they had been unable to erase the IWW’s legacy of class struggle and solidarity.⁴⁷

The legacy of the Marine Transport Workers lies, in part, in that tradition of solidarity and resistance. But the MTW experience also demonstrates the possibility of maintaining a meaningful union presence—one capable not only of struggling, but of winning significant victories—over several decades, even where it is not possible to secure a majority of the workforce or union recognition. Indeed, in some ways the MTW operated under handicaps that do not confront most workers. While longshore and tugboat workers usually live close to their work, and so can carry out union activities in their off-work hours, seamen often spent weeks or months at sea. As a result, the MTW was forced to maintain an extensive network of halls and to hire people to keep them open. It was often impossible for maritime workers to attend regular union meetings or to staff their halls themselves, given the nature of their work. These conditions made it difficult for maritime workers to meet (outside the confines of their particular ship), and imposed a substantial economic and organizational burden on the MTW that did not confront organizers in factories or offices.

Too often US revolutionary unionists accept the legally imposed definitions of unionism as inevitable, not recognizing that unionism is not about winning representation elections or signing contracts or gaining government certification. Unionism, rather, is about workers coming together to struggle to improve their situation by developing and exercising their industrial power. The MTW never forgot that basic fact, and so it was able to have an impact that reached far beyond its numbers. If we hope to build revolutionary unions today, there is much to be learned from the MTW’s experiences.

⁴⁶ Archie King (Houston) to W. Westman, Oct. 23, 1954, IWW Archives box 76 folder 23; R. Mackie Vaughan to W. Westman, Aug. 27, 1959, box 77 folder 4; W. Westman to Edward Pluto, Sept. 18, 1962, box 77 folder 11; Carl Keller to Arthur Mandell, Aug. 1 1967, box 77 folder 16; Bob Willock (MTW New York) to W. Westman, Feb. 26, 1954, box 78 folder 38; Walter Gunderman (New Orleans) to W Westman Aug. 15, 1951, box 79 folder 18; W. Patton (New Orleans) to W Westman, April 27, 1953, IWW Archives box 79 folder 19.

⁴⁷ Stan Weir, in Alice and Staughton Lynd: Rank & File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers. Boston Beacon, 1973, pp. 183–87.

Sidebar

Strike!

We Demand The release of all political and class-war prisoners.

We Demand \$20.00 increase on all United States Shipping Board ships (licensed and unlicensed).

We Demand That the American Steamship Owners' Association and private owners pay the same rate as U.S.S.B. ships...

We Demand American wage scale for all vessels of foreign registry signing on articles in American ports.

We Demand \$20.00 increase for all harbor workers getting less than \$100.00.

We Demand The eight-hour day as a maximum for the marine industry, with a 44-hour week in port.

We Demand That there be no overtime work without pay. Overtime pay to be at the rate of 60 cents an hour for all seagoing and coastwise vessels...

One Strike, All Strike.-

"If the workers take a notion, They can stop all speeding trains. Every ship upon the ocean, They can tie with mighty chains..."

Industrial Solidarity, May 5, 1923, p.1

Sidebar

Four Watches

Industrial Unionism is the weapon, boys. All the marine workers in one organization. No craft division such as is rampant in some parts of the world. The Marine Transport Workers in South America is an Industrial Union. Mates, engineers, seamen, stewards, firemen and all other grades must be in the one organization. If it's a fight, it's everybody's fight. The big union doesn't need to fight, because it has the power that convinces. The union must be built on solidarity, and solidarity can't be built by having four unions on one ship...

We can get four watches with One Big Union. We can get \$200 a month with One Big Union. In fact we can take the whole shooting match when we feel inclined to do so...

What can 3,000,000 marine transport workers do organized in One Big Union? A union with offices in Sydney, Singapore, Copenhagen, Stavanger, New York, Capetown, Port Said, Archangel, Odessa, Rio de Janeiro, Valparaiso and Hong Kong. That would be some union...

What tint pot politician could say "Nay" to such a force? What pot-bellied war profiteer could emulate Knut ordering the rising tide to retire? Why, you grimy sons of guns, you'd have the power in your hands. You, the jail-birds, the unkempt, the hardy, and the overworked and underpaid...

The Marine Worker, reprinted in *New Solidarity*, January 17, 1920, p. 3.

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Jon Bekken
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Direct Action Unionism
1995, Summer

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