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Informal Workers' Control:  
The West Coast Longshoremen

By STANLEY L. WEIR //

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## INFORMAL WORKERS' CONTROL: THE WEST COAST LONGSHOREMEN\*

by

Stanley L. Weir\*\*

### The Hiring Hall

There can be no understanding of the dynamics of the new era which began for West Coast longshoremen in 1934, or comprehension of the low-man-out system--the democratic method of equalizing work opportunities for all registered longshoremen in ports of the West Coast--without an examination of the history and function of hiring halls. A central hiring hall can be established in a port without either any degree of union control or the institution of a low-man-out system within in, tub work opportunity equalization systems cannot exist without a central hiring hall over which the workers involved exert decisive control, formal or informal.

After the 1934 strike in San Francisco, decasualization or the establishment of a regular and registered list of longshoremen was established. From that point on the registered men were given absolute preference of job opportunity over casuals or the non-registered. The assignment of a registration number constituted a hiring and made the number holder eligible to receive a share of the available work. Casuals continued to be hired by the day. The registered men went to the "hall" for dispatch to jobs by democratic turn. When in conversation with non-longshoremen they might use the term "hiring hall" or "union hiring hall," but never "the dispatch hall," for among longshoremen it has an alien ring.

From this point onward I will use the term designated by West Coast longshore culture and custom: hiring hall. For almost twenty years the employers' Pacific Maritime Association (PMA) has dropped the use of the term "hiring hall" and has used "dispatch hall." It is probable that they do this in order to remind longshoremen that they were hired by the PMA and not by union dispatchers and that the hall is a location over which the employers legally exercise joint control.

In legal language the employers have enjoyed this right since the "1934 award" or the award made by the National Longshoremen's Board which ended the 1934 maritime strike. However, because of the election of job dispatchers by longshoremen, physical occupation of the halls by longshoremen and job actions or "quickie" strikes to back their demands, the control powers of the union were far greater than those effected by the employers. This fact was acknowledged in an unpublished statement to the annual meeting of the Waterfront Employers Association (forerunner of the PMA) by its president of that time, T.G. Plant, on February 14, 1940, entitled "1934-1939 Pacific Coast Longshore History." Plant claimed that, "joint control of the hiring hall and hiring policies has been converted into 100 percent union control. The union likewise controls work distribution" via the low-man-out system.

But this control eroded as the years passed. Due in part to the many reactionary pressures during the (Joseph) "McCarthy Period" and during the period of the expulsion of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) from the

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|| \* This article has been excerpted from a forthcoming book on the work culture of San Francisco longshoremen. Copyright c 1975 by Stanley L. Weir. #

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CIO, union officials collaborated with management to remove workforce disciplinary and recruitment powers from the local unions. Those powers were then centralized in the hands of the Joint Coast Labor Relations Committee. Correspondingly, the local or rank-and-file union control over the hiring halls diminished. They no longer had full control over selection of who would be hired and registered. Those who seriously differed with the international union's policies could be victimized by disciplinary measures including alleged misuses of hiring hall procedures.

Since 1959, control of the hall has indeed been a much more joint process. Due to the conflict between the international and local union levels of the union, the employers have regained much of the lost power complained of by T. G. Plant. In effect, at least in the ILWU and PMA headquarters port of San Francisco, the hiring hall has become a "dispatch hall" for most longshoremen.

Attendance at local membership meetings has fallen to a point where in the last few years already considerably reduced quorums are too often not obtained. The large octagonal hall on Northpoint Street, a block from Fisherman's Wharf, was not designed for nor subsequently adapted to socializing by longshoremen. It is primarily a place where they get job dispatches, pay fines and assessments, check their time records and sometimes consult union representatives about grievances. The real sense of belonging and control of the premises was far more pronounced when the local leased space from the old Alaska Fishermen's Union Building on Clay Street.

Degeneration of union control of the hiring hall aside, in the language of the San Francisco dockers the full and correct term for "the hall" is still "the hiring hall." Insistence, both conscious and subconscious, on the continued use of the term is not simply a carry-over or anachronistic. It has its base in a tradition of struggle and pride. A look further back into history is needed to gain some understanding of the forces which demanded the transition from the shape up or early methods of hiring casual longshoremen to the establishment of hiring halls and then the institution of union control within them.

All of us humans have deep-seated aspirations for improvement in the quality of our lives. We too seldom talk to others of them, but they are there unless pressures, deadening routines, or tragic entrapments--often unrecognized till too late--drain vitality from the vision. Almost two centuries after humans had begun to experience industrial civilization and along with it the establishment of the occupation of longshoring, longshoremen along the Pacific Coast of the United States (and Canada) brought a qualitative improvement to the industry. They took a right that the employers had attempted to sanctify in the name of "management rights"--control over the hiring process. The motivation that drove them to the 1934 strike did not arise only out of economic need. They made a successful bid for dignity. They had the rare luck to be born in the early 1900's and to be wage earners in the accelerated social change period of the 1930's. Hundreds of thousands like them around the world had made the same bid and had been broken. Their success came not only out of their courage and intelligence. It came because history and technology had supplied them with context and conditions for winning. Regularized maritime shipping with concentrated docking facilities in the large ports had brought fundamental definition to their occupation. By the end of World War I, it had developed natural boundaries which clearly separated it from other related occupations like waterfront trucking and warehousing. It was possible for longshoremen to have jurisdiction over a definite area of work with minimum fear of conflict from unions in other occupations. By the 1920's, the longshoremen could fully sense the credibility problem any other occupation would have if it claimed rights to "our work." Occupational divisions on and around the waterfront were so set that in 1921, the employers in Seattle were able to take an invention of the longshoremen and expand it to erect the nation's first central longshore hiring hall. From it they filled their labor needs at all piers in the port. By itself, the act stands as evidence of uniformity and pattern within the occupation.

The use of the "shape-up" was found in San Francisco right up to 1934, but the longshoremen there were aware of the significance of the Seattle hiring hall and those built shortly after it in San Pedro (Los Angeles) and Portland. Many had seen them and even worked out of them. The function and technology of the halls was common knowledge. The halls enabled the formulation of a demand that became the "common denominator" among the men up and down the coast. The central hiring hall concept had become an undeniable material reality. It was now possible to try to take the halls from the

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employers in those ports where they existed, and build them where the shape-ups still existed. It was possible for them to agree on a common set of major demands from San Diego to the lumber ports at the Canadian border. A strike or job action in one port could not so easily be broken by the standard tactic of re-routing ships away from a "troubled" port to the nearest "quiet" one. In the common demands there was coastwide mutual support or "solidarity." Out of it a union was born, along with Eric Hobsbawm's hypothesis that the prerequisite for the formation of a national or multi-port longshoremen's union is occupational definition and common demands (Hobsbawm, 1964: 241-271). We are all monument builders, but most of us are made to feel that ours is so small as to be without consequence. The 1934 victory meant that for a time, the West Coast longshoremen were saved from that sense of defeat.

Before going further it must be made clear that 1934 was not the initial battle of West Coast longshoremen to obtain control of hiring. As will be seen later, less concerted attempts had preceded it by as much as forty-five years. Neither was 1934 a struggle whose character and history were peculiar to America. According to the study of longshore decasualization in San Francisco done for a Works Project Administration (WPA) research project in 1939 by Marvel Keller, "...as early as 1843 there is record of a scheme which was projected for coalwhippers in the port of London...In 1892) in part as a result of the great dockers' strike of 1889...the London and India Dock Company, which employed about one-fifth of the dock labor in London, adopted a registration system. Permanent workers (at particular docks), and 'A' workers (those who were shifted from dock to dock as required) were guaranteed a weekly wage, while first and second preference casuals were given a standard hourly wage" (Keller, 1939: 2-3).

"The first efforts to control the size of the labor force on a port-wide basis were made in 1906 in the ports of Hamburg, Germany and Marseille, France" (Keller, 1939: 3). The Hamburg scheme, according to Lascelles and Bullock (1924: 76-77) was designed more for "strike breaking" purposes than for decasualization of the type which seeks simply to rationalize labor supply methods.

A port-wide decasualization system was attempted in Liverpool in 1912, under a joint employer-employee committee. In the same period Australia and two Norwegian ports experienced hiring controls. In the years following close after World War I, decasualization schemes were set up in the following European ports or countries: Rotterdam and Amsterdam (1919); Italy (1925); Greece and Antwerp, Belgium (1928); Rumania (1932); Poland (1933); and Estonia and Chile (1934). By 1937, all ports in Great Britain but Aberdeen, Glasgow, Tyne and Wear had adopted decasualization systems. In Italy, Greece, Rumania, Poland, Estonia and Chile the schemes were set up by government act or decree. The Antwerp system was operated jointly by union and employer with government participation. The Rotterdam system began (1919) under joint operation but the national repressions against unions continued and the union was eliminated from participation in the system two years later (Keller, 1939: 7-10).

In three of the ports or countries mentioned above, the varying degrees of decasualization or controls on hiring were initiated entirely by the unions involved. The others were introduced to avoid increased workers' control. None of these systems have been sustained with continuity into the present. Some lasted no more than months after inauguration, and others have changed over the years under the pressure of political and even military events both national and international--which in turn provided some of the employers with opportunity to regain full control. My intent has been to show that American efforts at decasualization prior to World War II were not isolated or peculiar to this country, but part of an international development. Not only the longshoremen, but their employers as well, by the very nature of the industry have an international outlook, at least within the context of their industry.

By the 1930's there was a development of stevedoring technology and social consciousness which the longshoremen used to make a successful thrust for hiring and job controls. But what forces were at work upon them which made them perceive that the controls were a necessity of work life? What was it that caused the American longshoremen of the Pacific Coast to embark on this, the most radical, large-scale and

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long-term experiment with workers' control ever conducted within the longshore industry anywhere in the world? Certainly, at the center of their motivation was the desire to escape further victimization with both the shape-up and employer-controlled decasualization schemes, whether they involved simple registration systems or the more complex systems involving employer or "fink" hiring halls.

### The Shape-Up

"Shape-up" is the term used to describe the most common method of hiring on a casual basis. A ship comes to a pier and a boss is sent out to the pier entrance to hire from among whoever is present. To facilitate the bosses' job the men have been forced to form a "shape" or semi-circle. The tightly gathered shape of men also increased the competition for jobs. Hired in that atmosphere and condition it was easier to conduct speedups among them. The fastest and most servile workers got picked again at the next shape-up. I have observed many of the twice daily shape-ups as they occurred in the port of New York before the establishment of city-operated hiring halls in the early 1950's and the elimination of 75 percent of hiring by the old shape-up (Russell, 1966: 1).\* I had the opportunity to see the old New York shape-up during the time that I sailed as a deck hand on merchant ships. I was able to watch the victims at work and talked to several of them at some length. By my observation and their angry admission, the forming of the shape meant they were expected to display great eagerness and physical readiness for work, proclaiming what good workers they were by posture and by facial expression. In short, it was a time for each to show that he was in the best shape--both physically and attitudinally. Some would pay the boss money for having been hired--"kicking back" part of their wages. Others would perform other favors of many kinds. There were stories of individuals who performed unthinkable services. All those chosen were expected to vote "right" in the next union election. The hiring bosses were union men and not direct employer agents.

Actually, I saw some of the consequences of the shape-up before I saw the process itself. In 1943, I was hired as a replacement on a ship that had just arrived from the West Coast. It was tied up in Brooklyn. At the time that I boarded it the longshoremen were busy stowing cargo deep in the holds. But then came the time when the holds were filled and covered. That morning longshoremen were hired to give us a deckload. A variety of trucks, airplanes, and two small locomotives were brought aboard and landed in place. Dozens of men were assigned the task of shoring up and lashing the objects to the deck. They were working in our (the deck crew's) work domain instead of down below. Most of them argued violently with each other the entire day. For a number of our crew it was the first time into New York as seamen. On the West Coast the longshoremen did a lot of yelling, but it was mainly about how to get the work done, never conflict rising out of competition for jobs. We were stunned.

I remember some of those longshoremen to this day, particularly a near hysterical middle-aged man threatening another with a hammer and yelling, "I'll be here when you're in a county home. Call me a kiss ass, shit! I came down here to work, not

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\*The rank-and-file revolt in the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) which culminated in 1951 strike uncovered the corruption created in the union by the shape-up. Under that pressure the AFL threatened the ILA with expulsion unless it eliminated the shape-up. The threat was made good. However, the Port Authority of the City of New York grasped the opportunity. It set up hiring halls run by an appointed waterfront commission and staffed by civil servants.

I have been told, by New York longshoremen, that the corruption persists inside the halls. The job dispatchers are not elected and not answerable to the longshoremen. Corruption comes easily. There is much disgust with the Commission's halls. Favoritism continues. Speak up on the job as a union militant and you suddenly have trouble getting other than "crap" jobs out of the hall.

Then too, it is obvious that the halls around the port do not equalize the work opportunity on a port-wide basis. Many of those who could not get on any of the preferred registration lists in the halls continue to make the shape. Insecurity and suspicion abound.

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screw around. Who the fuck are you to act so goddamned holy. I've got pride too but I keep it inside. You won't last down here." There were other "conversations" of the same sort, but I wrote this one down. In my naivete I spoke to another longshoreman standing nearby in about the following way: "For Christ sake, why do these guys want to fight among themselves? What they need is a union." He smiled at me tolerantly from his vantage point as an older man. My criticism was out of context with the reality of longshore life in New York. He answered, more ready to educate than to reject the intruder: "You're right, we do need a union. We got a union. But this isn't the West Coast. Some of us will be hired at lunch time to come back this afternoon and finish this ship up. Why don't you come out to the gate and see how it's done? And keep in mind that in this port there are about 20,000 of us. At these piers we're all Italian. At others they're all Coloreds, or Irish, and so on." He smiled back at me as he walked forward up the deck to his work.

I went to the pier gate at noon. In accordance with regular practice, all those who had worked that morning had been laid off at noon and were beginning to shape with those who had not been chosen to work that morning--and who had waited the morning for another chance at four hours of employment. What I saw at first filled me with irritation. Why didn't they refuse to submit to the treatment? When the hiring bosses appeared the focus of my anger switched to those who ran the system. But the longshoreman who two hours earlier had momentarily been my mentor had humbled me; there were as many longshoremen in New York as on the entire Pacific Coast. The system was entrenched at all the piers, in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island and New Jersey. Any rebellion against it would be crushed immediately unless it involved a large portion of those in the port. Split up as they were by urban geography, pier, race, ethnic groupings, and local unions, who was to risk being the first to dissent? The revolt would come one day and when it did, many would get hurt. The decisions and the timing would have to be theirs. In the meantime, on-lookers with critical attitudes, even though basically sympathetic to the longshoremen, could easily bring further damage to their self-images, prolonging the coming of the time when the shape-up would be challenged.

I was not the first outsider to be shocked by the 19th century scenes on the New York waterfront. Writing in 1931, Boris Stern said that the shape-up in the port of New York, "is not much different from the London shape of seventy years ago," as described by Henry Mayhew in London Labour and the Poor. It is my suspicion that the character of all the shape-ups is much the same regardless of time or place. There is still a shape-up in New York today. All that is different from the years before 1951, is the substantially diminished scale. And it is probable that the only major difference in the New York shape-up between 1931 and 1950, was that after World War II the hiring foreman was "almost always a union man" (Business Week, 1949: 110).

My observation of the shape-up fascinated me. From that point on when sailing off the East Coast I watched the process at every opportunity. At first my main purpose was simply to try to understand how humans could allow themselves to undergo such indignities. Only later did I become primarily concerned with understanding how the system came into existence, how it was maintained despite the disgust with it, and by what means it would one day be eliminated.

### Non-Union Hiring Halls

The Waterfront Commission of the City of New York operates hiring halls, but within them has the shape-up continued? That was the earlier experience in maritime when the halls were not under the control of the workers, but instead operated by the employers or a governmental agency like the U.S. Shipping Board. The longshoremen called the employer-operated halls put into use in the ports of Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland in the early 1920's "roofs over the shape-up" or "fink halls." It is also my belief that any hiring system not controlled directly by those hired will degenerate. Writing in 1915 about the shape-up in New York, Charles B. Barnes stated that the longshoremen in earlier years did not shape at the pier, but across the street. "It was a point greatly insisted upon by the men that they should force the foremen to come there, because thereby they gained a certain prestige in the hiring... Since 1887, the prestige so insisted upon has been lost" (Barnes, 1915: 59). In some

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period of lean employment no doubt, first one and then a handful and then more crossed the street to the pier to gain advantage. Those longshoremen who sought to discipline them were thereafter overlooked by the hiring bosses. Finally, all had to cross the street in order to survive.

People who are selected for work like cattle cannot be happy. It will affect the entirety of their daily lives. Work is a decisive factor in self image. Even those favorites in the "top six" of the hiring foremen will ache with indignity, at the very same time that they are supporting and "benefiting" economically from the system. Those who are seen to be "making it" in situations where total conformity is the only way to achieve and sustain a livelihood are people in crisis.

To know you are beating someone else out of something, even though you compete in order to survive, is to be torn. Institutions that build-in competition for the right to eat, create guilt in those who inhabit them. There is a feeling that the cry of "traitor" has been made and hangs high in the room, as yet inaudible, ready to fall in and expose "all of us who are just trying to get by in this world we never made."

In my experience the most deeply felt worker grievances in the work force are those in which the person or persons perceive that they have been unjustly passed over in favor of others. The deepest wound, however, is frequently experienced by the favorites. What if a system were created which could be used only by the favorites? There is some evidence to show that the Seattle, San Pedro (Los Angeles) and Portland employer-central hiring halls began just that way.

In his book, Shape-Up and Hiring Hall (1955), Charles Larrowe summarizes pre-1934 longshore history in Seattle. The Stevedores, Longshoremen and Riggers Union of Seattle made an attempt to control longshore hiring in 1889. The struggle continued over the years and in 1916, Local 38-12 of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) conducted a 74 day strike to establish a union hiring hall. The longshoremen failed to attain their demand, but were not thoroughly defeated. The employers set up their own hiring halls or "employment offices" around the port after the strike and issued "rustling" or registration cards to all but certain militant unionists. In spite of the blacklistings the unrest would not be put down. The federal government entered the growing dispute and set up a National Adjustment Commission including members from both the union and management with the government as the third party.

In December, 1917, the Commission handed down an award which outlawed the use of "rustling" cards and the blacklist, and put the employers' halls under the jurisdiction of the infamous (among seamen) U.S. Shipping Board. After July 1, 1918, the halls were to be closed and the men hired on the docks. The longshoremen found more dignity and job security in the unorganized free market of the shape-up on the dock than in the decasualized employer-run system.

A year later the ILA signed a regional contract covering all ports in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. It contained a 10 cent wage increase and preference in hiring was given to ILA members. For those "wins" they agreed to give union membership to the scabs of the 1916 strike. The bargain may not have been a bad one. In a defined contractual situation of this sort, a union minority poses little threat. In fact, that minority can only diminish over time.

The longshoremen were active participants in the Seattle General Strike of 1919 (February 6-11), the nation's first, and the accompanying Workmen's, Soldiers, and Sailors Councils--also a first for the nation. When later that year they refused to load munitions bound for the American troops that had invaded Russia at Murmansk, the employers threatened to cancel the preferential hiring clause. The munitions ship, the S.S. Delight, got loaded by supervisory personnel and sailed. The threat was dropped.

Shipping fell off in the post-war recession. In 1920, the union in Seattle demanded job rotation or the sharing of available work to avoid layoffs. The employers refused. The union struck. Its subsequent defeat was so resounding that it took thirteen years for a revival of mass unionism. It was this victory that enabled the employers to create a central hiring hall in Seattle under the direction of Frank Foisie. Larrowe claims they took the step because there was still widespread



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dissatisfaction with the shape-up and "some acceptable alternative had to be found" (Larrowe, 1955: 92). In passing I must add that I seriously doubt his undocumented assertion. The first act of the employers in the creation of a hiring hall was to form a committee of four employers and four longshoremen. The committee cut the list of registered longshoremen, name by name, from 1,400 to 612 (Larrowe, 1955: 92). Would not the 788 majority have preferred shape-up to no jobs at all? Is it what the 612 really wanted? They had all struck for the right to divide the work. Just as curious as Larrowe's failure to mention the role of longshoremen in Seattle's workers' councils of 1919, is his failure to mention the role of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and its Marine Transport Workers International Union. Seattle was an important area of IWW strength almost from the time of its origin in 1905. Due to the repression against it during World War I, by 1919 most of its members carried two union cards when necessary, the "Red Card" and the AFL card (Gambs, 1932: 138; see also Thompson, 1955: 128). Nevertheless it remained a force that was "able to line both sides of five city blocks" in a silent protest against federal jailings of their members as President Woodrow Wilson passed in parade (Gambs, 1932: 135).

In the early 1920's the employers and the government were conducting a campaign against radical unionists and the Wobblies in particular. The Seattle local of the ILA contained more than a handful of men who also had cards in the IWW-affiliated Marine Transport Workers. The establishment of a centralized hiring hall and the paring of the registered list by almost two-thirds in 1921 may have brought rationalization to the hiring technology; it also provided excellent opportunity to rid the industry of "the trouble makers." By adding four poor "Judas goats" to the committee that "chopped heads," did the employers expect to create attitudes that would bring stability to labor relations or production? That committee was but the first step in the formation of a "company union" which used "employee representatives" on an entire series of committees. They had only advisory powers. The procedures set up by English stevedoring firms in London, Liverpool, and Bristol provided the model for the Seattle plan (Larrowe, 1955: 93).

Guided by Foisie, the West Coast waterfront employers established the central hiring halls in San Pedro (1922) and Portland (1923) with what I believe to be the same purposes as in Seattle. Portland was a smaller port; the longshoreman there were in large part men who had worked in the woods and had come under IWW influence. They had not participated in a general strike or workers' councils in their port, but they had sought union control of hiring.

An employers' central hiring hall was established in San Pedro in 1922. It became the only decasualization plan that applied to all longshoremen within a port (Stern, 1932: 98). Prior to that time the longshoremen had conducted many fights to attain union control of hiring. One of the unique characteristics of the port at that time was that the IWW's Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union (MTWIU) had more power relative to the ILA than in the other major ports on the coast.

When I sailed on the steam schooners of the coastal lumber trade in the early 1940's I got to know several longshoremen who were or had been Wobblies and who had worked in the port for over twenty-five years. They claimed that the IWW got its additional strength in San Pedro because it was a good town to lay over in during the winter. Many seamen headquartered there in boarding houses where they were well-known. Some had families housed there. The maritime industry was the only primary generator of economic activity. A man with skill as a rigger might sail, longshore, work in a ship yard, in the large commercial fishing boats, or in the nearby oil fields. If single and low on money, he could sleep outside in the winter and be cold, but not freeze.

The Wobblies were experts at utilizing the strength which lies in the informal organizations which form naturally among humans put in regular contact with one another. They would shape at a particular group of piers and become accepted into one or more of the cliques or primary groups that hung together during the long waits and sometimes even during the shape itself. By coordinating the power of several of the strongest cliques, the longshoremen gained some control over the hiring process. Through social pressures and then worse, anyone who worked carelessly, who would not

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do his share of the work, who could not "get along with others" and who "wasn't union" could be driven from the shape-up system at that pier or set of piers. Friendships created while moving cargo together can break down some of the isolation caused by the shape-up, just as relationships established during long waits can carry over onto the job. A hiring boss who watches the men carefully during the hours before the shape-up could recognize partner teams and groups and split them up if he felt their informal organization was keeping production down in any way. The Wobblies were expert analysts of boss psychology, however, and would put out "tip-offs" to partners that they should not do too much of their waiting together.

The deepest and potentially most dangerous relationships to the employers are those created on the job. Two longshoremen who had banged against one another in the scramble to get hired would find themselves working as partners. There were those instances where each learned the other had a work personality that made him a good partner. One was well coordinated, the other worked safely and in established rhythm, one knew a lot of stories and the other liked them, one noticed the other picked up his end of the load and the other was able to return the silent compliment. When two men like this were able to work together from time to time while maintaining overall membership in one of the large cliques of the pier, some hardly verbalized but clearly understood bargains got struck and the company in question had lost some control in the shape-up process.

Due to the unique nature of longshore work during the movement of break-bulk cargoes, it is difficult for bosses to stop the creation of deep-seated work relationships. Work eight to ten hours alongside another human lifting 135 to 160 pound coffee sacks, even heavier crates, or building interlocking tiers of canned goods cases, and in that coordinated motion of the two people an emotional bond is made. There is the joint pride that they can "put out a day's work" with some style, and the sense of being jointly exploited. In periods when resistance has arisen based on these relationships, the employers have done whatever they could to break them up. This is the reason why there has been a propensity for shape-up hirings to cover shorter and shorter periods. They have often started out with a procedure that allows those hired the day of the arrival of a ship to work that ship until it leaves the pier; then when conflict has ensued the time has been cut to a single day's work. (New York's twice a day shape-up represented an all-out fight of the employers against the informal organizations among the men. In an industry where production is entirely dependent upon men working as partners in gangs, organization comes naturally. The New York employers decided that the expense of a second shape-up during each ship working day was a good investment if it could continually atomize the organization that had occurred in the waterfront during the previous four hours.)

The San Pedro longshoremen of 1921 did not face employers as sophisticated as those of New York twenty and thirty years later. In addition, among the longshoremen were numbers of the most highly trained rank-and-file revolutionary agitators ever developed in this country. Not only were Wobblies experts on informal organization, they knew as well how to conduct slowdowns, strikes, and campaigns of minor but debilitating sabotage. Some of those that I met while working in San Pedro claimed the "fink hall" was built by the employers in preparation for a strike that began on April 25, 1923 and lasted for five days. Three thousand longshoremen struck in an attempt by the Marine Transport Workers to get a "general strike" of all workers in their chosen jurisdiction (Gambs, 1932: 169, 171). At the peak of the strike the Wobblies conducted one of their most sensational free speech fights. Five thousand gathered on Liberty Hill. The Los Angeles Harbor police filled the jails with free speech fighters but the meetings prevailed. Upton Sinclair was arrested for his participation and wrote of the experience in his play, Singing Jailbirds. The Marine Transport Workers, however, lost their strike. It was the last time that the IWW exercised mass leadership in maritime industry, and among the very last large strikes conducted by them. A period of reaction, frustration, and fear set in. San Pedro longshoremen had the distinction of being the last major Pacific Coast port in which the employers broke the union organizations created during the prosperity that came with World War I.

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From 1923 in San Pedro, and a year or two earlier in other ports, until 1934, the Pacific Coast longshoremen had an experience with degradation that called forth in them the conscious drive to design a set of institutions for the purpose of wiping out degradation. Most of the longshoremen kept membership in the ILA during the 1920's. In Seattle and Portland where the central hall decasualization schemes were organized over ILA opposition, there were some union men who refused to enter the halls and register. They picked up jobs at the remaining shape-ups or at the U.S. Shipping Board which was taking a neutral posture (Stern, 1932: 96).

San Francisco did not have an experience with decasualization until and as a result of the resurgence of unionism in 1934. There was no central employer hiring hall. The employers had an agreement with the ILA which gave preference to its members. Five thousand were registered with the union and about 3,000 paid regular dues. Some, both in gangs and as individuals, were permanently employed by individual companies. Others were "compelled to look for work along the entire waterfront" (Stern, 1932: 96).

The militancy among the longshoremen broke out into the open once more in 1932 as the economy started to move out of the trough of the Great Depression and shipping activity began to resume. Confidence and conflict escalated until the 1934 strike became an inevitability. The new mood among the longshoremen became publicly apparent at the first of two winter conventions of the Pacific District of the ILA in 1933. Delegates from all ports were eager to confront the employers. Some accommodations were made to the ranks and a second convention was held within weeks of the first in order to coordinate attack plans. The two main goals were a coastwide contract and union hiring halls. A coastwide strike referendum was taken on the following March 23. The employers were unmoved and the strike began on May 9. The seamen's unions all supported them with identical major demands under the slogan: "No Fink Halls and No Fink Book" (or, "an end to U.S. Shipping Board hiring halls and their continuous books each of us is forced to carry which become a black ball the first time a captain does not write a good report in it at voyage end").

At the beginning of the strike's third month the ship owners, operators, and stevedoring employers could sense they had lost. The vast majority of the 34 ports on the coast were determined to hang on even though tired. The longshoremen had rebuffed Joseph Ryan, International President of the ILA, headquartered in New York, in several attempts to sign separate contracts in each port and to have joint union-employer hiring halls in which the bosses assigned the men to the jobs. In fact, Ryan had lost his usefulness to the employers. He was now known along the West Coast as "Finkey Joe" and threats had been made relating to his health.

Despite the strength of the union side, some weak spots had appeared. In a few ports there was uneasiness and all along the coast the strikers were "on the bum," dependent on donations from others in what was still "the Great Depression." Savings accounts and unemployment insurance were unheard of. The employers moved to salvage something for themselves by suggesting compromise: they would recognize the ILA as bargaining agent and arbitrate the outstanding issues. "Longshoremen in 17 coast ports voted 6,378 to 1,471 in favor of arbitration" on the seventy-third day of the strike (Larrowe, 1955: 103). They returned to work on the eighty-fourth day, July 29. The arbitration proceedings began in August and the decision was issued by the National Longshoremen's Board on October 12, 1934. It called for a coast-wide agreement and the establishment of jointly operated hiring halls where longshoremen were to be dispatched without discrimination because of membership or non-membership in the union. However, because the dispatchers were to be elected by the union the longshoremen de facto had a union hiring hall. The employers saved some face, and across the nation and beyond, the devious character of the award kept others from knowing the full size of the West Coast longshore victory.

It was some time after October 12 before the awards became realities of waterfront life. The employers would balk or renege and the longshoremen would prod and re-insist with job actions that were strike reminders. Up and down the coast the locals watched and waited on San Francisco. It was the headquarters port for both sides. It contained the largest local, the local that had started the nation's second

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(major-city) general strike and had pushed hardest for the coastwide strike. They had top prestige in the union, but what would they do with the award? The port had never experienced an employee-controlled longshore hiring hall.

For years, the longshoremen had all gathered daily at the Ferry Building where they shaped until all the gangs were filled. What kind of a hiring and job assignment system would they set up?

It was many months before some of the items in the award became institutionalized. The manning scales differed by port and it took a while before the 2,100 pound sling load limit was agreed to, over the San Francisco dockers' insistence on 1,800 pounds. The first task after Franklin Roosevelt's board handed down the decision was to decide who was to be allowed on the list of registered longshoremen who would use the hiring hall once it opened. The drive of the active strikers was to somehow penalize or even keep out longshoremen who had "free loaded" during the strike, that is, those who had failed to share the dangerous picket duty. Then, too, there was the question of what to do with those who might have scabbed. No recognized scab would come back to the front to work after the strike, unless he was insane. The longshoremen had the power advantage on all the joint committees set up to interpret and create machinery for the application of the award.

That democracy in hiring, and not money, was the primary issue in the 1934 strike can be seen first in what the joint committee on registrations did in the first months of the new era. In 1933 there were 3,000 regular longshoremen in San Francisco and 4,800 casuals. By 1937, there were 4,600 regulars and 3,800 casuals (Keller, 1939: 81). This was possible in part because there was an increase in sea trade during those years. But the improved economic situation aside, the San Francisco employers wanted to register only 2,500 (Keller, 1939: 26). The longshoremen wanted more for many reasons, none of them altruistic. They wanted to register and share the work among all the men who had actively fought for the union during the strike. They felt morally obligated to do that. Also, during the bad years many good men were blackballed for militancy, or for finally getting "a belly full" of the indignities and telling off a boss or worse. The victimizations had increased with the coming of the new agitation in 1932. The victims deserved a chance to get their jobs back.

According to the award a man had to have worked one year out of the three preceding the strike. The union had issued 450 work permits on its own right after the award was issued, and now some of these longshoremen could not qualify under the employers' standards. A compromise was worked out extending eligibility to anyone who had worked anytime between January 1, 1933, and the beginning of the strike. The permit men who could not meet that standard continued to work on temporary cards and were registered when a labor shortage developed in the fall of 1935 (Keller, 1939: 27).

The open warfare of 1934, between the longshoremen and the employers, did not end with the July agreement to arbitrate. Rather, it tapered off into active guerilla warfare on the job. Simultaneously, from the day the strike ended until the issuance of the award in October and until the opening of the San Francisco hiring hall the following March, the negotiators for both sides created a new system of hiring and job assignment. All the while they were under the pressure and direction of those doing battle during the hours of work up and down the coast. The opening of the San Francisco hall in March, 1935, revealed to the ranks what the negotiating and formal architects had accomplished. It was then possible to put the new system to practical test and take from it ideas for use in the other ports.

### **The Low-Man-Out Job Dispatching System**

The San Francisco central hiring hall opened for the dispatching of longshoremen to all jobs in the entire port on March 4, 1935, or almost five months after the issuance of the award. The original work-sharing, rotation, or "low-man-out" system underwent a number of changes during the first dozen years of its use. The system is described here as it has operated since World War II. The purpose of the low-man-out

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system is to equalize work opportunities. It would be unfair to attempt to equalize simply the work and resulting wages because it is improbable that even a small minority of workers would or could accept every work opportunity offered; that is the nature of the industry. Unlike the majority of work situations in which there is a standard five-day week, ships have to be worked on arrival if at all possible. Thus, the labor force, or portions of it, have to be available on a seven-day basis each and every week of the year. In the late 1950's, the San Francisco longshoremen averaged approximately four and one-half days a week on an annual basis. There were weeks in which some worked seven. Others, because of age, disabilities, and life style, chose to work less.

To maintain registered status longshoremen must work 800 hours a year, spread over the year, or an average of approximately two days a week throughout the year. To qualify for vacations, health and welfare benefits, and pensions they must work almost 1,400 hours annually, or average a little over three days a week. If they become sick or disabled they are given hours of credit toward qualification on a prorated basis, but of course receive no wages for those hours.

Longshoremen who have joined gangs are referred to as "gang men" and the men who have not were known as "plug men."\*

On any longshore morning or afternoon, right up to the present, the gangs or plug men who have made themselves available for work on their shift get assigned to jobs on the basis of the number of hours accredited to them. The gang or plug man with the lowest hours is assigned first, then those with the next lowest number of hours are assigned, and then the next and so on. If the jobs run out before all those available have been assigned, the assignments start out the next day where assignments stopped on the previous day. Those who worked on that previous day and who return to the hall for assignment take their proper place behind those who were not called the day before. If the number of men available all take assignments and there are more jobs to be filled, casuals are obtained from outside sources.

I have stated above that longshoremen are assigned in rotation on the basis of the number of hours accredited to them. That is because few if any have worked all the hours accredited to them. If they have for any reason failed to make themselves available for dispatch less than five days in any week, or if they have failed to accept an assignment on any day they have committed themselves to work by signing in with the dispatchers as available for work, then by codified system they must add specified amounts of hours to those already worked or accredited to them. In a manner of speaking they have "moved toward the end of the line" of those available and waiting for work.

The system appears complex. It is, particularly to those who have not operated within it. There are few such democratic systems in use in our society, and thus little familiarity with them. So far, I have described the system only in barest outline. It cannot be understood fully or in context without the additional detail I am about to provide.

In 1958, San Francisco operated as a 206-gang port with 3,273 registered longshoremen. Approximately 35 percent of the work was done by night men and about that percentage of the total gangs and registered men were "on nights." One thousand seven hundred ninety-seven registered men were regular members of gangs; membership in day gangs averaged 7.5 men, and 11.0 men in night gangs. Registered men worked 6,373,000 hours for an average of 1,950 per man, and the 4,607 casuals worked 560,000 hours or an average of 122 per man. Of the total hours worked by registered men,

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\*The latter term remained in use for some years after the use of the plug board and plugs were dropped, but sometime in the late 1950's the term fell out of the vocabulary and the non-gang men became known as those who "work out of the hall." Because I am writing mainly about waterfront life as it was in the 1950's, however, and because the label is simpler to use, I shall here refer to the men who are not gang members as plug men.

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3,249,000 were worked by gang men and 3,124,000 by plug men; the average number of hours worked by gang men as individuals was 1,808 hours; the average day gang was dispatched to work 1,875 hours during the year, and night gangs, 1,878 hours. All gangs got within 50 hours of the annual average work opportunity. As can be seen, despite the magnitude of the task, the system kept work opportunity amazingly equal. The single and apparent exception lies in the fact that gang men as individuals averaged 131 hours more than the plug men's average of 1,677 (National Academy of Sciences, 1964: 16-46). However, broken down from hours into monetary terms, the average annual wage of the plug men was approximately \$5,300, compared to an approximate average of \$5,700 for gang men. It is highly improbable that this \$400 differential was great enough to pressure the plug men to give up the freedom of movement allowed by plug status for the more routine life of permanent membership in a gang.

The magnitude of the dispatching task and its complex technology is revealed as still greater when it is seen that the orders to be filled call for a number of different skill categories. Discharge gangs for break-bulk cargo jobs in San Francisco are composed of 12 men: 1 gang boss, 2 winch drivers, 1 jitney driver, 6 hold men and 2 sling or "hook-on" men on the dock. Loading gangs have 14 men because 2 men are added to the 6 in the hold. It was common, but not always the case in the 1950's and early 1960's, for a gang to have a steady core composed of a gang boss, 2 winch drivers, 2 hook-on men, a jitney driver and possibly a hold man. Among them and at different times, days off had to be taken when the rest of the gang was working, and so replacements had to be ordered from the hall. There were also the orders to be filled for extra dock men, line men, shovelers, sugar handlers, grain and lumber men.

Order is maintained in this massive system by an intricate record keeping system in which every longshoreman must participate. The gang bosses keep records of the number of hours worked by their gang, but each man in the gang keeps an individual record so that he can go to the hall and get into his proper place with the plug men if he decides to work on days when his gang is not working. Each plug man must keep a record of his own hours so that he can operate in the system knowledgeably at all times. The dispatchers make assignments of gangs and plug men on the basis of hours as reported to them by the gang bosses and individual plug men. The cumulated records of all gangs and plug men are also recorded daily in the Records Office next to the hiring hall and retained for at least a year.

At the end of each quarter of a calendar year, all hours of work opportunity accredited to both gangs and plug men go back to zero. On the first day of each new quarter the gangs and men in the hall are assigned in the order in which they signed in. As the quarter passes the hours accredited to each begin to pile up and variations begin to occur. Toward the end of the quarter the gang with the highest hours might have as many as fifty more than the lowest. A similar spread develops in the hours of the plug men. But the number of men (and gangs) at the extreme ends of the spread are few. Most are clustered in between with much smaller differences.

When a gang is assigned to a ship it has the right to work its shift on each day that it takes to complete the cargo handling job required by the ship. The gang also has the right to replace itself and take time-off before the ship finishes, but this is discouraged and is unusual. If the gang does not get a "call back" to the ship, then the gang boss must list the date when his gang intends to be available again for assignment. In addition, if the gang is not called back, but intends to be available for assignment the next day, the sheet must list how many men, of what skill categories, will be needed to bring the gang to full strength.

When a plug man is assigned to a gang he has the right to stay with it for the duration of the job on the particular ship. When the job is finished (or if he quits earlier and he chooses to make himself available for work the following day) he must go to the hiring hall and sign a "sign-in-sheet" for his skill category. On the sheet he writes his registration number and beside it his number of accumulated hours.

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From the sign-in sheets the dispatchers make a "master sheet" for each skill category: "Extra Bosses," "Winch Drivers," "Jitney Drivers," "Dock Men," "Hold Men," "Shovelers" and other special skills, plus a "Dock Exemption" sheet for men who are partially disabled and can take only lighter types of work. The latter excludes hold jobs altogether.

On each Master Sheet the registration numbers appear under the hours as reported on the sign-in sheets, by the half hour. The lowest heading will be at the top of the sheet. If for example it is 220 (hours), the next will be 220-1/2, the next 221, and so on down the sheet to the highest heading of hours. The hall opens every morning before dawn and the dispatchers are at work by six o'clock. The first half hour is spent handling special problems caused by mistakes in reporting by the working longshoremen, or by them (the dispatchers) in transcription. Then too, there is the need to sign in men who worked overtime to such a late hour on the previous evening that they could not get to the hall and sign in before seven p.m. when the dispatchers collect the sheets.

### The Technology of Dispatching

At six-thirty the dispatching process begins. Each category is called to a different dispatch window. The accumulated hours are called over a public address system and flashed on a board in lights. The men with the number of hours called line up at the proper window and take their assignments. Another hour category is called as soon as they have been given jobs. When there are more men available and waiting, then as the last of the jobs are being assigned, the men are called individually by registration number rather than in gangs by hours. As the last job is assigned the dispatchers mark the point on the Master Sheet by the registration number called so that all will know at what hours the calls will begin on the following morning. Ideally, the dispatching process is done by half past seven. The day shift begins at eight and the piers are from one block to twenty-five miles away from the hall.

By the time that the morning dispatch begins the dispatchers have already decided on a strategy that will best get all the jobs filled. They have the orders for gangs that were placed the previous afternoon by the stevedoring companies; they have the reports from the gang bosses which tell them how many gangs are available to go to new jobs and how many men of what skill category will be needed to fill out the gangs; and they have the lists of plug men who signed in the previous evening. If the number of orders is particularly large and the dispatchers see that they will probably "clean the hall out" before filling all orders, they will then make a judgment as to which orders demand experienced hands, and which gangs they will have to supply with cadre of skilled hands so that the casuals will have skilled direction.

The dispatchers are prepared each morning with master orders they have made out for each gang. As the plug men come to the dispatch window, each in turn gives his registration number and it is written on the master order by the dispatcher. When the order obtains the proper number of registration numbers it is marked "filled" and will be sent to the records office later in the day.

### The Accommodation of the Dispatch Process to Longshore Partnerships

As each longshoreman gets his turn at the window he states his registration number and is given a dispatch ticket which lists that number, the name of the gang boss and the pier location of the ship. He then goes to the pier and before eight o'clock seeks out the waiting gang boss and turns in his ticket. If he is a dock or hold man and has a partner who was dispatched with him to the same job, he may turn in two tickets or one ticket listing numbers of both himself and his partner. If he is alone he may then try to learn who the other men are and at that point seek to make a partnership for that day or for the duration of that job.

✓ The importance of the low-man-out system's accommodation to partnerships cannot be underestimated. It reveals one of the system's basic humanist features. If two men find qualities in each other's personalities, skills and attitudes toward work

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that are complimentary, the work life is immeasurably enriched. However, the work puts the men into pairs at such close contact that even the smallest personal idiosyncrasy can be disruptive. Partnerships are formed and broken, temporarily or permanently, every day along the waterfront.

The most common pattern among plug men is that they develop a circle of friends among whom they naturally rotate as partners. A man works regularly with a partner for a period and then one or both of them gets bored or irritated. Or one may have to take time off and the other continues to work. In either case, at a later date they may again take up the partnership. A low-man-out system problem then arises: how are they to get dispatched together if they have different hour totals? This is solved by having the man with the lower hours sign in with the same number of hours as the higher man. One man takes a penalty in order to preserve the partnership. The other will reciprocate at a later date, if not with this partner, then with another. The longshoremen see it as a minor problem which equals out over time.

When plug men arrive at their turn before the dispatch window, they will in most cases give the dispatchers in question some indication of preference. "Have you got anything in the East Bay?" is commonly asked by the men who live there and do not want to face fighting the Oakland-Bay Bridge traffic after a day's work. Some men prefer to work particular piers because they live close enough to them to go home for lunch. Others indicate preference by cargo or when they see the rushed dispatcher about to assign them they ask "What is it?" The dispatcher knows the meaning of the question by the tone in which it was asked. The dispatcher will know if it's an objectionable cargo and whether or not he reveals the knowledge will depend upon how rushed he is and how difficult a time he is going to have filling the job. If the longshoreman finds or strongly suspects the assignment is for a gang working a cargo that is seriously objectionable to him and the dispatcher cannot or will not offer him anything better, he has the right to turn the job down and walk away from the window without fear of disciplinary retaliation. This is called "flopping."

A man who has flopped is not required to give any excuse or explanation; he simply moves away from the window. He may in fact do this for any reason. It may be that he simply dislikes the gang boss or members of the gang he was about to be assigned to, for personal reasons, previous on-the-job conflicts, or because of that gang's work style. If, however, he accepts the assignment and fails to show up on the job, he is subject to be called before the union's grievance committee and then the Joint Port Labor Relations Committee. The penalties can range from a few days loss of right to dispatch, to deregistration (termination) if the offense is repeated.

The term "flop" also describes what has happened when a longshoreman has signed in as being available for the day and fails for any reason to come to the dispatch window when his hours are called, be it absence, tardiness, or inattentiveness.

### **"Take Six" or "Take Average"**

The only penalty for taking a legitimate flop is that the flopped man must sign in again with a high probability that he will not get another chance at assignment on the day of the flop. After leaving the window, if he intends to try to get a job the following day, he signs in again. But, he cannot sign in again on the same hours at which he was just called to the dispatch window. On each day's Master Sheets the dispatchers calculate and list the average hours of all the men on the sheet. If the flopped worker was below the average of that day he signs in on the average hours of the following day. If at the time of the flop the man in question was above the average on the Master Sheet that day, he must sign in at his hours on that day plus six hours. In either case, whether he has "taken six" or "taken average" and signed in, his registration number will be on the Master Sheet of the following day under the proper hour's heading, provided neither he nor the dispatchers have made mistakes in calculation or transcription.

A man who flops has another chance at a job on the same day only if there is a lot of work and the hall is "cleaned" of all the men on the Master Sheet. In that



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eventuality, the man who has flopped can take any of the remaining jobs. The dispatchers have some autonomy here and if the flopped man is needed badly enough they may allow him to "wipe out" his flop in return for accepting an assignment that sorely needs to be filled. A gang cannot work if a single vacancy exists. The chances of wiping out the flop are even better if the assignment involves a late start or working on onerous cargo.

### The Question of Availability

From "the beginning" (1934), the major objection of the employers to the low-man-out system, after objections based on fear of workers' control, was that with the amount of freedom provided by the system, longshoremen would not make themselves available for work in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of the port. For some years employers have attempted to impose a requirement which would demand that every registered longshoreman be available in the hall for work 70 percent of the days in each calendar month. It was unenforceable and caused few serious availability crises over the years.

The normal desire among longshoremen to fulfill their material and work career needs, plus the already described penalty incentives built into the low-man-out dispatching system, have been sufficient to keep longshoremen available in ample amounts to satisfy the port's needs.

The 1958 gang shortage which allegedly added one percent to total stevedoring costs was caused because the employers and the union had for a dozen years failed to register new men to replace labor force losses due to regular attrition.\*

### Vacations as a Dispatching Problem lem

The variables that exist in the task of supplying skilled labor the year round are many and give further indication that dispatching is a skill in itself. In addition to the fact that the longshoremen can, within limits, choose the days they will take off during each week, and can choose to take time-off for personal reasons or because of disabilities and illness, there is also the problem of vacations. Although the summer months are those in which shipping activity is greatest, vacations are scheduled by the Joint Port Labor Relations Committee by fairly even distribution among the total registered labor force between May and October. During each week of this six month period in 1958, eight gangs and 60 plug men were scheduled to begin vacations that averaged three weeks duration. Thus, in each week during the May-October period, about 24 gangs were not available (National Academy of Sciences, 1964: 45-46).

Formal leaves of absence can be obtained by appearance before the local union executive board and the Joint Port Labor Relations Committee, providing good cause is shown. If they are for periods of several months they can cause failure to qualify for health and welfare, vacation and pension benefits in the year of the leave.

Informal leaves of absence can be taken at any time without disciplinary penalties provided sufficient hours are worked in the year to maintain registration (800), or provided the hours worked are sufficient to sustain contractual "fringe benefits." Informal leaves are taken simply by not signing in for work. Upon return, the man on leave obtains eligibility for assignment once again simply by signing in "on average."

Once in each week a longshoreman is allowed to "square off," or take a day off without having to add penalty hours, six or average, to his accredited account of hours. To obtain this right he must sign-in on the regular "sign-in" sheet by

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\*In 1959, the Joint Port Labor Relations Committee of San Francisco registered over 750 new longshoremen (B-men) in June and August, a precipitous addition of approximately 25% to the registered workforce (Weir, 1964: 23; 1972: 80).

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listing his registration number and hours as usual, but then in addition he draws a "square" around those numbers. On the following day the Master Sheet will list his registration number and hours, again with a square drawn around them, and the next day the dispatchers automatically carry his registration number and some hours over onto the Master Sheet for that day without his having had to sign in again.

In periods of light labor demand, longshoremen who are signed in for Sunday work and who do not show to answer call for assignment are not flopped. They are carried over to the next day's Master Sheet without penalty as if they were squared off. This gives added work opportunity to those who do show for work in the hall.

### Abuses of the System

The elaborate rules of the low-man-out system were necessary first of all in order to democratize job opportunity while at the same time getting skilled labor to the job when and as needed in an efficient manner. More rules were then needed to give the longshoremen the ability to keep the system under some collective scrutiny in order to avoid individual abuses of it. Finally, more rules still were necessary in order to give longshoremen, as individuals, freedom within it. At one level, just lack of knowledge of the system's requirements can mean that a longshoreman fails for a time to qualify for pensions, vacations, or health plans. However, a longshoreman who violates the rules can lose his job.

### Chiseling

The various forms of cheating to get unfair advantage over others in the dispatching process are the one serious and conscious abuse of the low-man-out system by individual longshoremen. The most common methods of cheating are as follows:

1. Deliberately signing in on hours lower than those actually worked or accumulated so as to receive a dispatch before actually becoming the low man on the Master Sheet;
2. Knowingly going to the dispatch window for assignment before proper turn even though signed in correctly;
3. By-passing the hiring hall and/or dispatch process by taking a job directly from a gang boss when the hall is open or when the gang boss deliberately failed to order men in order to accomplish an illegal hire (this violation is almost unheard of);
4. Signing in with lower than actual accumulated hours by mistake, learning of the mistake and failing to correct it.

Chiseling is also committed for reasons other than to gain more than a fair share of job opportunity. Often it is committed to allow the violator to work with a partner without having to add hours, or to work in a gang, on a cargo or at a pier of his personal preference. In those cases where the violator goes to the window for assignment with other longshoremen who have fewer hours than he has (as listed in number 2 above), it is often the case that the man gets no better job and no more than his fair share of job opportunities. He may have seen that there were more than enough jobs for the men available on that day and so went up out of turn in order to work with friends or to be closer to home. But if this were to be allowed it would make it difficult if not impossible to catch the violators who take early dispatches to make "an extra buck."

Chiselers are sometimes caught by vigilant dispatchers or longshoremen when still in the hall or when they get to the job on the same day. In the main, however, they are found out as a result of periodic spot checks of records by union or management records checkers.

## INFORMAL WORKERS' CONTROL

### Unequal Application of the Rules and Frame-Ups

Because of the complexity of the rules and the detailed bookkeeping system in which the dispatchers and longshoremen are involved, it is easy to victimize anyone who has antagonized those with high official union power.\* Mistakes are bound to be made in the massive transcription of hours that occurs daily. There is time to spot-check the records of only a small percentage of the longshoremen. Those with top union offices are able, if they choose, to put the hours records of any who are considered "enemies" under constant surveillance. And the methods of keeping dispatch records are such that changes in the records can be made by those officials with open access to them. If the accusation of chiseling is made more than a day or two after the alleged offense, the sign-in sheets on which the offense supposedly occurred are already destroyed. A conviction can then take place without presentation of "direct fact." This was true, for example, when I was fired along with 81 other longshoremen. At one point I was accused of chiseling. There was no prima facie evidence to which I or others could get access in order to disprove the allegation. The officers of Local 10 investigated the accusation against me and reported to the membership that I was absolutely innocent. The international union's committee reported to the employers that I was guilty and together they acted upon the accusation as if it were fact.

It is logical that it is the victims of bureaucratic corruption who call for its reform. The ranks of the ILWU permit abuse of the low-man-out system, out of the failure of too many to examine it closely for fault and then make the needed corrections. Just above I have given examples of a critical fault by which criticism and dissent within the union can be splintered and silenced. Failure to make needed reforms in the dispatch system--which is the foundation of the union--threatens the basis of union strength and currently that can mean the virtual extinction of the longshore occupation. It is dialectical as well as ironic that the system which established the union's strength should also contain within it the basis for coercion on which a highly developed bureaucracy can grow.

The low-man-out system is the most precious of the union's institutions, but it is in need of still more rules. There are all kinds of penalties for rank-and-filers who abuse the system, but precious few, if any, for bureaucratic abuses of it. To my knowledge the ranks have never taken on a section of the top officialdom which was hounding a longshoreman inside the dispatch process.

Thus, one of the most prized results of the low-man-out system is being lost because the ranks at no time over the years have taken fuller control of the dispatch system and the record-keeping process. There is no reason why all longshoremen could not perform the dispatcher's job for brief periods by rotational turn, maintaining two regular dispatchers as cadre and instructors. But that is only one alternative plan and there are others, any of which might help to prevent bureaucratic abuse of the system. It is quite obvious that the ten dollars which each longshoreman pays each month as his pro-rata share for the upkeep and maintenance of the hall does not purchase each a complete enough citizenship in the system. It is improbable that the longshoremen entering the "dispatch hall" of today find the sense of security they found in it 35, 25, or even 15 years ago. Not only has rank-and-file power been weakened in the dispatch process, but the power by which the ranks once used to get what they wanted from both the employers and union officials--job action power--has been cut off by the employers and those officials with the aid of heavy legal penalties for any failure to use the arbitration process. In the last analysis, the job rather than the union hall is the basis of the longshoremen's strength.

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\* Local union officials cannot hold office for more than two consecutive one-year terms. After serving two years they must by constitutional order work again as longshoremen for at least a year before once again standing for office.

## MAXWELL REVIEW

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