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**Union democracy reexamined**

Author(s): Levi, Margaret;Agnone, Jon-Jason M.;Kelly, Devin;Olson, David M.

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## UNION DEMOCRACY REEXAMINED

Margaret Levi, David Olson, Jon Agnone, and Devin Kelly

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Margaret Levi is Jere L. Bacharach Professor of International Studies at the Department of Political Science, University of Washington. David Olson is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Washington. Jon Agnone and Devin Kelly are graduate students at the Department of Sociology, University of Washington.

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1. Luis Ortiz, *Not the Right Job, but a Secure One: Over-Education and Temporary Employment in France, Italy and Spain*, (2008/235)

## 1. Union Democracy Reexamined\*

...the trade union seeks to combine within itself two extremely divergent types of social structure, that of an army and that of a democratic town meeting... the members constitute an army but an army that elects its own generals... (and) votes on the declaration of war and on the terms of armistice and peace... Imagine the conflict in the soul of a union official who must have the attitude and discharge the functions at one and the same time of both a general and a chairman of a debating society.<sup>1</sup>

A.J. Muste made this observation in 1928. He further notes how a union must, in addition, become an effective business enterprise. The result is a nearly insoluble problem for union leadership. If union members care about having a say, they will demand results while also requiring consultation, something rarely expected of generals, particularly in the heat of battle, or of CEOs, particularly those in the midst of a major negotiation.

It is rare for a union or its leadership to realize a good balance of these conflicting demands. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and its leaders have. The ILWU possesses a strong and long-standing rank-and-file democracy and a demonstrated capacity for winning good contracts while also ensuring the competitiveness of the ports at which it operates. How and why it can be a town hall, an army, and a business simultaneously makes it an interesting case for understanding why other unions are only one or the other or none.

Analyzing the ILWU also provides insights into the relationship between the nature of governance of a voluntary organization and its capacities to act effectively to achieve its

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<sup>1</sup> Muste (1928, 332-334). This quote is attributed to various people, including J. B. S. Hardman (1928), in whose book Muste's piece appears. Mills (1948) makes a similar statement; indeed, he paraphrases Muste, crediting him in a footnote.

ends. Oliver Williamson's (1975) seminal work has made issues of governance increasingly important for firms, and there is now beginning to be applications to a range of voluntary organizations (Prakash and Potoski 2008). In terms of democratic practice, there is evidence from local schools and some voluntary organizations that participatory democracy may help the organization's management achieve its multiple aims. For example, Archon Fung (2006) finds that "empowered participation" is likely to enhance the accountability of decision makers and their fairness. He also finds that participatory democratic practices enhance agency and programmatic effectiveness.

American labor organizations are an excellent focus for analyzing the relationship between form of governance and outcome. American unions remain one of the most significant of voluntary organizations in the contemporary United States. Even today, with union density at its lowest level since its peak of 35 percent in 1955, U.S. unions have more than 15 million members and represent an additional 1.5 million non-members (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>). American scholarship has emphasized the importance of unions for democracy generally. Lipset (1963) argues that even though they are often internally undemocratic (by his standards), unions contribute to democracy by providing workers with influence in both their industries and the polity. The importance of unions in promoting workers' collective voice is one of the primary contributions of unionism Freeman and Medoff identify in *What Do Unions Do?* (1984). These claims recall the arguments of John Commons and other industrial economists of the 1940s and 1950s (Kaufman 2005). They also fit with the long-standing focus on associations as important sources of citizen voice and countervailing power (see, e.g., Cohen and Rogers 1983).

Discussion of union governance has been dominated by the effort to prove or disprove Michel's claim of a tendency to oligarchy (Michels 1962). Union democracy is considered the exception that proves the rule (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956) or the product of a particular era and style of radical, particularly communist, leadership (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2002). For others, it is largely irrelevant; the issue is breaking up bureaucratic rigidities that inhibit mobilization rather than instantiating democratic practice (Piven and Cloward 1977; Sherman and Voss 2001; Voss and Sherman 2000). There is a presumption that unions are non-democratic. There is the further presumption, among at least some, of a

trade-off between being democratic and being an effective fighting organization (Estreicher 2000).

Following a review of case studies, interview and survey data, Freeman and Medoff (1984: 213) attempt to dispel the notion that U.S. labor unions are corrupt and undemocratic and find that “democracy is alive and well in the U.S. labor movement.” Their conclusion depends, of course, on what is meant by democratic unionism. Fair and free elections are widespread, mandated by federal law and enforced by government monitors. However, there is less evidence of other aspects of democracy. The question of the relationship between union democracy and the capacity of the union to win its campaigns has received relatively little recent attention, at least in regards to American unions.

## **2. Competing Views of Union Democracy**

Unlike European scholarship (Baccaro, Hamann, and Turner 2003; Baccaro 2001, 2002; Heery and Kelly 1994), which focuses on deliberation and membership involvement, the U.S. literature tends to stress procedural democracy based on a model of the federal government’s electoral institutions. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956), for example, emphasize contested elections with formalized parties as the *sine qua non* of union democracy. Ours is an alternative perspective, one that requires procedural democracy but insists on rank-and-file participation and non-electoral, as well as electoral, means for ensuring leadership accountability to members. Procedures are necessary, particularly those designed to give members the franchise and means to eject leaders from office, but also important are opportunities for serious debate and contestation about policy and candidates. The institutions and practices of union democracy are sometimes, but not always, similar to those that characterize American democracy.

## **2.1. Procedural Democracy**

The criteria for assessing the quality of a union's procedural democracy is the extent to which it is a *polyarchy*, the model of democracy theorized by Robert Dahl (1956). His list of necessary elements includes a high level of enfranchisement; one-person, one vote; and contested elections for the legislature and important executive offices.

Those scholars who evaluate union governance by procedural criteria generally find that oligarchy tends to arise and persist despite procedural commitments to democracy (e.g., Edelstein and Warner 1976; Estreicher 2000; Herberg 1943; Seidman 1953). Edelstein and Warner (1976) find that incumbents rarely lose elections in U.S. and British unions and that very few unions resemble the ITU; for them this is evidence of the tendency to oligarchy. Stratton (1989) re-analyze the ITU nearly thirty years later and finding it, too, had drifted towards oligarchy. He argues that Michelsian oligarchic tendencies eventually prevail, even in unions once considered highly democratic.

The conclusion of this literature is that even procedural democracy is difficult to attain. Where democracy is also participatory, its maintenance seems to require sociological factors as complements to procedures.

## **2.2. Participatory Democracy**

Participatory democracy emphasizes active membership use of those procedures and involvement in the organization. Crucial to a democratic union, in this view, is a well-specified constitution (also, see Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1996, 8) that provides not only for voting rights and periodic, open elections. It also must provide additional mechanisms of rank-and-file control to ensure leadership accountability and empowered participation, including: one-person, one-vote for contracts as well as officers; low thresholds for recall referenda; clear communication channels among members and with leaders. For these procedures to work, they must be supported by a union culture that emphasizes rank-and-file

voice and rights. Procedures are not sufficient; union members must know how to use them to make their officers accountable and responsive.

Many scholars emphasize that having a culture of membership activism and criticism is a viable democratic alternative to procedural democracy (Jarley 2000; Morris and Frosh 2000). Some also consider how a democratic union is one that encourages marginalized members such as women and sexual minorities to exercise more political voice (Chaison 1989).

We can now outline the general characteristics of a rank-and-file union democracy (see Table 1 below). First, there is a set of procedures that characterize any democracy; the list here derives from Dahl's definition of polyarchy (1956, 84). A rank and file democracy requires three other sets of characteristics. The first are additional procedures that facilitate participation and voice by members and the accountability of leaders to the membership. There are many unions, which do not permit direct membership vote on contracts, are rigidly hierarchical and centralized, and raise (rather than lower) the bar for ridding the union of problematic leaders. These unions may be constitutionally democratic, but they are not rank-and-file democracies. The relative autonomy of locals vis-à-vis the international is an institution that many unions possess, but it is a necessary condition of rank-and-file democracies. Local autonomy creates a forum for encouraging and educating members to take advantage of the procedures of democracy. The fact that locals are often more democratic than the international (Freeman and Medoff 1984) can be an impetus for imposing constraints on national leadership and making them accountable.



*Table 1. Procedural Requirements and Social Supports for Rank-and-File Democracy*

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**General Procedural Requirements for Polyarchy in a Union**

1. Voting for officials
  - a. Every member of the organization votes among publicized alternatives, and each vote is weighted equally
  - b. The winning alternative is the one with the greatest number of votes
2. Pre-voting
  - a. Members can propose additional alternatives prior to voting
  - b. All voters have access to the same information
  - c. After voting: winner displaces loser
3. Between elections
  - a. Members are expected to comply with the determinations of those who are elected and the policies chosen
  - b. There exist constitutional constraints on elected officials
4. Conventions
  - a. The representatives are elected by a mechanism that ensures one person, one vote
  - b. The convention acts as a legislator to determine policy and rules for the union
  - c. There are regular, scheduled meetings

**Additional Requirements for Participatory Democracy in a Union**

5. Procedural Requirements
    - a. Direct voting on contracts and strikes
    - b. Low threshold for recall of elected leaders
    - c. Relative autonomy of locals vis-à-vis the international
  6. Evidence of a Participatory Organizational Culture
    - a. Rank and file participation through voting, involvement in policy debates and meetings
    - b. Organizational commitments to equity, fairness, and meaningful participation
    - c. Leadership defeat on policy issues by members
    - d. Institutional arrangements that ensure access to information and leaders
  7. Social Supports
    - a. Occupational community that builds solidarity among workers
    - b. Community and historically-based social pressures for sustaining rank-and-file democracy
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*Note:* 1-4 are modified from Dahl's definitional characteristics of polyarchy (1956, 84); we've redefined conventions as legislative bodies.

The next group of characteristics refers to the existence of a participatory organizational culture and the principles and practices it encourages among members. Our interest is in participatory democracy (Bachrach and Botwinick 1992; Cohen and Rogers 1983; Fung 2006; Mutz 2006) and not just procedural democracy. Polyarchy is not enough. The hallmark of participatory democracy in any governance system is a high degree of constituent participation in voting, meetings, and policy debates. For this participation to be truly meaningful, it must be informed. There must be knowledge of past policies and decisions and access to the information essential for contributing to the debate on new policies and decisions. Participation is further encouraged and the nature of the debate influenced by a series of normative commitments to equity and participation that extend throughout the organization. Each union is also likely to have a set of specific institutional arrangements that further ease information exchange, deliberation, and participation.

Finally, there are features largely exogenous to union rules; they are the occupational, community, and historical circumstances that support rank-and-file democracy. Some procedural democratic theorists, e.g., Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, also emphasize the importance of occupational community that builds solidarity. Other social structural supports are a history of collective struggle and a community-based network. These produce social pressures from the bottom up for sustaining and reproducing rank-and-file democracy. The existence of a dedicated activist core may also be important (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1996, 2002; Strauss 1991).

The specific attributes of organizational culture and the particular forms of social supports are likely to vary among democratic unions, but their existence is necessary for our conception of union democracy to be realized.

### **3. Rank-and-File Democracy in Practice**

Just as Michels uses the single case of the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Lipset, Trow and Coleman the single case of the International Typographical Union (ITU) to make larger points about the conditions for democracy in voluntary organizations, we, too, rely on a single case, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). Howard Kimeldorf (1992) uses the ILWU as a deviant case among left-wing unions; it was one of the few able to survive World War II with its leadership principles and membership commitments in tact. We are following his lead here and using it as a deviant case among American unions. How the ILWU combines democratic practice and effectiveness may highlight what other unions lack and why. To make our argument, we rely on extensive secondary data and an unprecedented level of primary data, including archival material never before made available for scholarly use. The story is in the details of ILWU institutions, occupational community, and organizational culture. It is by means of specific features of the union, we argue, that the ILWU has been able to remain a rank and file democracy as well as an effective union for so long. It is also because of these very specific attributes that the

ILWU has been able to evade the consequences of the macro pressures from changes in the polity, economy, and society to which other unions have succumbed.

The shadow comparison in this paper is the International Typographical Union (ITU). In *Union Democracy*, Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1956) examine the ITU and find its flourishing two-party democracy and freedom of expression to be the exception that proved Michels' rule. Its institutions of democracy are, they argue, largely absent in other unions. They are particularly skeptical of some of the left-wing dominated unions Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2002) later define as democracies. In trying to understand this seemingly deviant case, they identify factors that facilitated ITU membership commitment to democracy: the highly skilled and educated work force; the autonomy of union locals and the consequent decentralization of institutionalized power; an "occupational community" resulting from interaction on the job and socializing outside work, engendering greater commitment to the union culture and values; and the relatively flat income distribution, including a negligible pay gap between elected union officials and the rank and file. For them, democracy is defined by its procedures, but its existence and reproduction depend on sociological factors that produced a democratic organizational culture.

The ITU practiced a procedural democracy, but it also possessed significant participatory elements. Members expressed their preferences not only through voting for officers, but also through debates by representatives in convention participation. They gained information through union newspapers and various forms of interaction with each other and leadership. What distinguishes it from the ILWU are two important factors: 1) the existence of on-going oppositional parties, the characteristic that Lipset, Trow, and Coleman consider the defining attribute of a union democracy; and 2) its deterioration over time as both a union and as a democratic union. Even before the industry itself disappeared, the ITU seems to have lost its democratic fervor. The ILWU remains democratic even after experiencing major technological change (containerization) that reduced its membership and transformed the work process.

The maintenance of democratic practice still leaves unresolved Muste's dilemma of multiple and, often, contradictory roles union leaders must perform. Here again, the ILWU

provides an interesting positive case of a union whose leaders could run a town hall meeting and also negotiate strong contracts. A union that can solve this dilemma may provide guidance not just for other unions but for a variety of social movement organizations (see, e.g., Levi and Murphy 2006) struggling with a similar problem.

### **3.1. A Short History of the ILWU**

The ILWU originated in the International Longshore Association (ILA)'s Pacific Coast District, founded in 1902. Its formative event was the 1934 "Big Strike;" all twenty West Coast ILA locals struck together on May 9, 1934, rejecting the efforts of the International to prevent a strike. West Coast longshoremen protested unsafe working conditions, poor pay, and the shape-up system in which workers pleaded for jobs and were forced to undercut one-another or bribe those doing the hiring. Longshore workers also sought coastwise union bargaining recognition. Employers refused to negotiate, insisting that bargaining occur port-by-port. On July 5—"Bloody Thursday"—two strikers were killed in San Francisco, leading to a general strike. The California governor sent in the National Guard, but public opinion swung behind the strikers. Coastwide, six strikers were killed and hundreds injured.

As chief negotiator for the longshore workers, Harry Bridges secured strikers' demands for recognition of the coastwise bargaining unit of the ILA, a substantial wage increase, and union control of the hiring hall. The first coastwise contract ensured all organized West Coast longshoremen had the same benefit plans, and it helped them maintain their solidarity in contract negotiations and strikes.

The importance of the union-controlled hiring hall to the ILWU cannot be overstated. Wellman (1995, 60) reports, "longshoremen on the West Coast came to say of the union, 'the ILWU is the hiring hall.'" The primary function of the hiring hall was to ensure an equitable distribution of work and pay by regulating hours through the union controlled job dispatch, effectively eliminating the usurious "shape up" system by which employers picked workers each day, often accepting bribes and blacklisting union sympathizers. A secondary function of the hiring hall was to facilitate rank and file unity by bringing members together on a daily

basis to prepare for shifts, socialize, and talk politics. As the center of union business, the hiring hall played a decisive role in educating and acclimating new workers to ILWU politics and culture. Union headquarters and the organization of the workplace into “the chapel” had the same role in the ITU.<sup>2</sup>

Both longshore workers and printers had a relatively flat income distribution, but the longshore were neither highly educated nor considered high skilled—at least not in the 1930s. Nonetheless, the hard manual labor of loading and unloading cargo required not only coordination and cooperation but also the capacity to engage in a variety of highly technical tasks involved in tying and moving bulk cargo. The job was intense, difficult and dangerous. Workers had to depend on each other if they were to be both productive and safe. “An injury to one is an injury to all,” the slogan of the ILWU, was both practical and symbolic. Probably the best description of the factors contributing to the longshore subculture comes from an observer of the Australian waterfront, which had virtually the same conditions prior to containerization (Sheridan 1994, 259): the casual nature of employment; the exceptional arduousness, danger and variability of the work; the lack of an occupationally stratified hierarchy; lack of regular association with one employer; continuous contact with foreign goods, seamen and ideas; the necessity of living near the docks; and the belief shared by longshoremen that others in the society consider them a lower status group. This clear sense of an occupational community was enhanced by the importance of family and neighborhood connections among workers, common social activities, debate and discussion in the hiring hall, and union meetings and communications.

In 1937, most of the locals in the unit voted to disaffiliate with the ILA and with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and to affiliate with the recently created Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The ILWU was born, and Bridges became its first international president. He and other leaders then formalized the new union’s constitution,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Off-duty printers often congregated at union headquarters (p. 128) and lively debates within the chapel (or shop) politicized workers (pp. 144-97).

<sup>3</sup> The new ILWU constitution was drawn from the ILA’s existing Pacific Coast District constitution, which Bridges and others had crafted following the 1934 strike.

including clauses that express strong commitments to racial equality and social justice.<sup>4</sup> The autonomy of locals was preserved. In 1942, the new leadership created the ILWU's official newspaper, *The Dispatcher*, as a means of communication with and education of ILWU members and the larger labor movement.<sup>5</sup>

The ILWU has a long history of membership involvement in social and political issues that have little bearing on their immediate economic interests. In 1938, rank-and-file ILWU members refused to load American shipments of scrap iron to Japan until forced to load by federal injunctions. They wished to prevent the use of the iron by an enemy power in the coming war. In the late 1940s, the ILWU rank and file voted to resist federal government attempts to use the Taft-Hartley Act to impose waterfront worker screening in West Coast ports in order to purge Communists. The union leadership had to go to court about this in 1951, but Federal Judges ultimately found the screenings unconstitutional.

Union leadership and the rank and file did not always agree, however. Bridges lobbied the union to oppose the Korean War. The membership refused, but they supported him as their president, even when (or, perhaps, especially when) his personal views led to his arrest for sedition. Bridges supported containerization in the West Coast ports, realizing it was an inevitable development. The union signed "mechanization and modernization" agreements in 1960 and again in 1966, but in 1971 the rank and file rejected the employer's plan and voted to go on strike against Bridges' counsel. Still, he supported the workers in their democratic decision. The strike lasted 134 days but failed to achieve contract provisions the rank and file desired.

The Mechanization and Modernization (M&M) agreements ushered in technological transformation on the docks while fundamentally altering the nature of the work. From the employers' perspective, the M&M agreements offered increased productivity and declining labor costs (Finlay 1988, 60-61). Dock work became more like routinized factory work

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<sup>4</sup> In 1953 these commitments were codified in the union's "Ten Guiding Principles." <http://www.ilwu.org/about/principles/ten-principles.cfm> Accessed 11/22/06.

<sup>5</sup> In "On the Beam," his column in *The Dispatcher*, Bridges regularly discussed issues of workplace radicalism, union democracy and racial equality.

(Wellman 1995, 127). The transformation from manually handling cargo via gang work in a ship's hold to containers and crane operators drastically altered the social relations. With fewer opportunities for social cohesion on the job, the hiring hall took on a more central role in the acculturation of new workers to the ILWU.

The ILWU, under Bridges' presidency, expanded during the 1930s through the 1960s by organizing warehouse, inland boatmen (tug, barge, ferry workers), and cannery workers along the West Coast, and, in Hawaii, sugar, pineapple and "general trades" workers as well as those in the warehouses and on the docks. The union later organized hospitality and tourism workers across the islands. Consequently, the ILWU became a major force in Hawaii politics and a leader in the movement for Hawaiian statehood. Local 142, based in Hawaii, is by far the largest in the union and the strongest non-longshore-dominated power broker in ILWU politics.

The ILWU still actively engages in national and international political and social conflicts. Some of those are on behalf of other workers, as in the refusal to load grapes that did not bear the United Farm Workers' seal, and the 1997 worldwide boycott of the non-union loaded Neptune Jade ship and other solidarity actions for laid-off Liverpool dockworkers. However, it also closed ports on May 1, 1999 to protest the death sentence for Mumia Abu-Jamal and on November 30, 1999 during the demonstrations against the WTO Ministerial in Seattle. Most recently, the ILWU International has passed resolutions condemning the war in Iraq and calling for immediate troop withdrawal.

In 2002, the union once again revealed its militant commitments to maintaining the hiring hall and other union prerogatives, with the Longshore Caucus granting strike authorization over health care if contract negotiations failed.<sup>6</sup> Although striking was not seriously considered as a tactic by the ILWU leadership, the possibility prompted employer action nonetheless. Fearing a prolonged conflict, employers locked out union members before

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<sup>6</sup> Even though authorization was granted, the rank-and-file would have voted on the issue prior to striking. Personal communication (12/1/06) with former Coast Committeeman, and member of the 2002 contract bargaining team, Joe Wenzl.

they could take action, and the Bush administration used a Taft-Hartley injunction to force them back to work—the first time a President has done so in the case of an employer lockout.

#### **4. The features of ILWU Democracy**

The key elements of ILWU union democracy were institutionalized in its 1937 constitution, which guaranteed the autonomy of locals, rank-and-file participation in local and international elections, one person-one vote in all contract and strike negotiations via a secret ballot, and a 15 percent threshold for recall referenda on elected officers. The constitution also ensures that international union officials receive pay in line with the members. Consequently, the officers maintain an economic status similar to those they serve, and it is customary for those defeated for office to return to the docks as rank-and-file workers.<sup>7</sup>

The ILWU guarantees its membership multiple opportunities for participating electorally in its affairs. Members are periodically asked to vote on referenda over policy issues. Contract approval and strike authorization are conducted through elections. The selection of officers of the locals, their policies and practices are subject to membership vote. The ILWU stands in sharp contrast to most American unions whose convention delegates select leadership; in the ILWU members directly elect the union's international officers through one person, one vote. However, the ILWU retains something of a craft union structure: workers first obtain status as identified casuals, eventually graduate to the B-list, and ultimately join the A-list and become full members, with rights to the pick of jobs and the full franchise. Those on the B-list can vote on the contract but not in elections for officers, and casuals cannot vote at all.

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<sup>7</sup> Two recent examples are former International President, Brian McWilliams, who was defeated for re-election in 2000, and former Coast Committeeman, Joe Wenzl, who returned from the international office in San Francisco to the Seattle docks in 2006.



The ILWU is composed of several divisions in its internal organization, including the longshore, the warehouse, and the inlandboatmen's divisions. All divisions in the ILWU are eligible to participate in the election of international officers, and all voting is—and always has been--conducted by secret ballot. Through debates and rule changes at its international conventions, the ILWU continues to evolve a system of elections aimed at promoting maximal participation. In 1994 it adopted the mail ballot and has used it since.

Locals have always possessed autonomy. In the ILWU, as it did in the ITU, this provides leadership and power bases independent of the International. Autonomy also leads to variation in term limits for officers, meeting attendance requirements, and even political orientations. On occasion, autonomy permits policies contrary to the prevalent norms and rules of the union. For example, term limits differ across locals for union officers and job dispatchers. Local 19 in Seattle lacks term limits for its local officials, while local 10 in San Francisco has term limits of two years on and one year off for all full-time elected positions.

## **5. Electoral Participation**

In what follows we report on voting tendencies and patterns in the selection of ILWU International President over six decades. Election of union officers, in particular the President, is one form of democratic participation. This focus allows us to observe participation trends over time and to identify particularly intense participation periods and their causes.<sup>8</sup>

We collected data on every election of international officers of the ILWU from 1945 to 2000.<sup>9</sup> Analysis of this data suggests differential participation by the longshore vs. non-

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<sup>8</sup> To date we only have data on presidential election returns. Complete data on all international titled officers over this time period is currently underway and nearly completed.

<sup>9</sup> We determined total membership figures from per capita payments to the International and from Convention voting strength records, while voting participation figures are found in validated election outcomes as reported in the union newspaper, *The Dispatcher*.

longshore members, and intense participation during time periods when the union is challenged from without or experiencing internal leadership transitions, particularly over the past two decades.

The primary focus of our inquiry is the longshore division of the ILWU with its long history of militant and leftist leadership and strong forms of participation. The culture of solidarity arising from a shared struggle and a dangerous work environment lead us to expect high rates of electoral participation within the longshore division. This expectation is borne out in voting data for International union President over five decades as reported in Figure 1. Here we observe a baseline that settles on a plateau around 45 percent, a participation level that exceeds most state and local voting rates in the United States. Particularly striking are the four identified periods when participation spikes at between 55 and 80 percent. These spikes in participation occur when one of two conditions prevail:

External threats to the union. In particular, passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947; the expulsion of the ILWU from the CIO in 1950; screening longshore worker rolls during the “Red Scare” of the late 40s and early 50s; and the long strike in 1971.

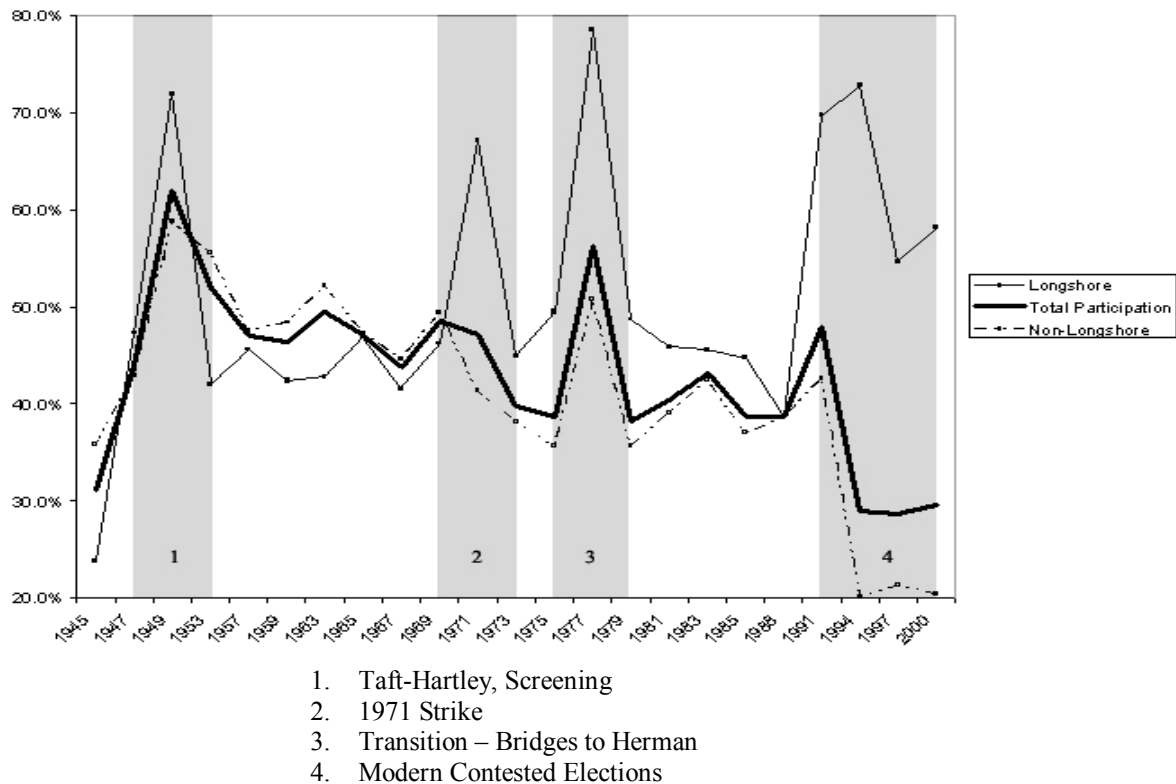
Leadership succession and competition. These include the 1977 transition from Bridges to Herman; and the contested elections of 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000.<sup>10</sup>

During these periods, rank-and-file participation far exceeds that found in most other organizations or in general U.S. elections, with a low of 54.7 percent in 1997, a high of 78.5 percent in 1977, and an average turnout of 67.6 percent across these years. In the less participatory periods, turnout ranges from a low of 23.9 percent in 1945 to 49.5 percent in 1975 with an average turnout of 43.5 percent in these non-spiked years.

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<sup>10</sup> Of Bridges’ nineteen presidential elections he was only contested in 1941 and 1949. Bridges decisively won both.

Figure 1. Presidential Election Turnout as Percentage of Possible Voters, 1945-2000



The non-longshore members of the ILWU represent a highly heterogeneous division in the union, whose occupational categories range from warehouse, boatmen, Hawaiian pineapple and sugar cane, hotel, Alaska cannery, to Powell's Bookstore workers. The variation in their work environments and their category-specific struggles reduces the probability of strong solidaristic ties among the diverse non-longshore members. Figure 1 also reports participation rates for non-longshore members over five decades. Immediately obvious is that participation in presidential elections by the non-longshore is never as high as the longshore. Yet, with the exception of the 1977 Bridges to Hermann transition and the post 1991 period, non-longshore voting turnout has mirrored the spiked electoral participation of their longshore division brothers and sisters.

An external threat also causes a spike in non-longshore participation, but it is not as pronounced as for the longshore division. This was the case in period one, during Taft-Hartley and the screening controversy, and in period three, during the transition of leadership. The spike does not occur during the 1971 strike, which only involved the longshore division.

Only the 1991 election elicits an increase in participation; in subsequent contested elections non-longshore participation drops to 20 percent.

*Figure 2. Presidential Election Turnout in Thousands, 1945-2000<sup>11</sup>*

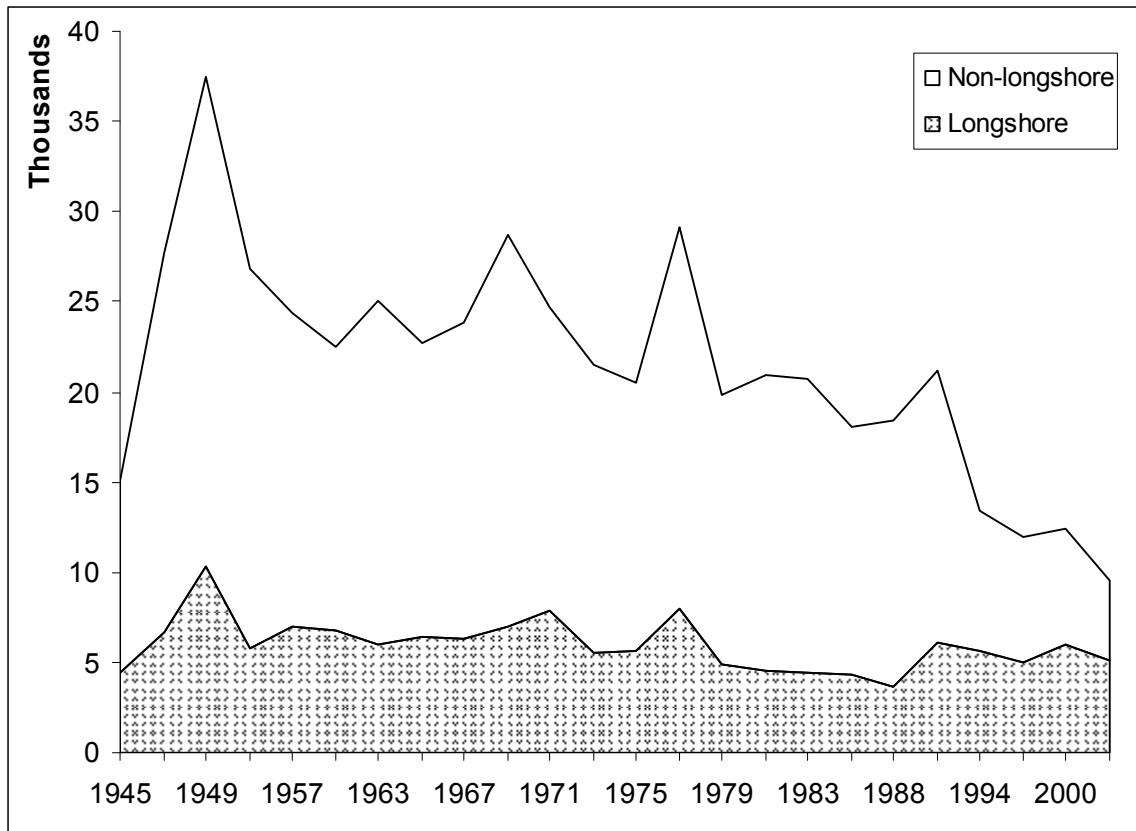


Figure 2 presents total presidential voting turnout by longshore and non-longshore divisions in thousands. Here we notice that the longshore division remains relatively constant while the non-longshore shows dramatic declines in participation. Why is this so? The non-longshore workers show patterns of participation reflecting wider social and political trends in the U.S., while the longshore division's participation remains robust.

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<sup>11</sup> The numbers of longshore workers decreased significantly during this period and have only recently begun to rise again.

What these divergent participation patterns suggest is that union democracy is much more central to the union culture of longshore workers. The higher turnout among longshore compared to non-longshore workers is undoubtedly due to the culture of solidarity engendered historically through gang work on the ships and docks, as well as through the hiring hall.

## **6. Key Issues and Debates Within the Union**

Electoral participation rates are indicative of strong rank and file democracy in the longshore division, but even stronger evidence lies in the non-electoral influence of the rank and file. Who participates and decides on key policy is also of consequence.<sup>12</sup> Our content analysis of all the Convention Proceedings of the ILWU from 1938-2000 reveals debate and contention within the membership and with leaders. By analyzing the summary of the Longshore Caucus Minutes on the same issues, we obtain additional information on leadership concerns, intra-leadership conflicts, and responses to membership initiatives. The Proceedings are public, but the summary of the Caucus Minutes required us to get extraordinary permissions from the officers of the longshore division. We also read all the materials available in union publications and newspapers as well as in the general press.

In selecting fifteen specific issues for in-depth analysis, we looked for arenas where rank and file conflicted with leadership or where leadership showed internal conflict.<sup>13</sup> We then traced the origins of the issue, who initiated action to resolve it, how the issue was resolved and the extent of leadership impact on the eventual outcome.

In what follows we discuss policy decisions that raise issues critical to the functioning of a well-ordered democracy. The first set of policies speaks to the identity of the union itself:

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<sup>12</sup> This takes us back to an older debate about the nature of democratic decision-making (See, e.g., Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Both Levi and Olson were once immersed in this debate. They sided with Bachrach and Baratz then—and still do.

<sup>13</sup> The full set of issues will eventually be available on our web site.

whether it is to be affiliated with the AFL or the CIO. We consider the extent of membership involvement in this issue and the sources of information available to them as they made their determination. The second issue reveals the way Bridges ensured that there would be no succession crisis as he prepared to leave office. Bridges was a strategic actor, eager to protect the longshore division's power within the union while also ensuring that rank-and-file democracy would thrive even in the absence of the "34 Men," the veterans of the "Big Strike."

### **6.1. Affiliations and Disaffiliations<sup>14</sup>**

Over the ILWU's history, decisions to affiliate and disaffiliate with national and international bodies have periodically occurred. We focus on several of these decisions to showcase rank-and-file power in union decision making between elections.

#### *1937: CIO Vote*

The decision of most of the locals in District 38 of the ILA to affiliate with the CIO and break with the ILA illuminates the process of rank-and-file union control. In June 1937 the ILA council voted 222 to 114 against CIO affiliation, and the San Francisco Caucus filed a resolution asking for a referendum. This allowed ILA member locals to vote on the issue. Accordingly, the vote for CIO affiliation was simultaneously a referendum on continued affiliation with the ILA—pitting the AFL-style craft/business unionism of the ILA against CIO-style industrial/syndicalist unionism. However, due to a lack of specific information on the vote, many rank and file did not realize that a vote for CIO affiliation would equally entail a vote against the AFL and subsequent disaffiliation. The West Coast membership overwhelmingly voted to affiliate with the CIO; the only exceptions were several Washington State locals: Anacortes, Port Angeles, and Tacoma.<sup>15</sup> In August the ILWU received a CIO

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<sup>14</sup> This section draws heavily on a paper prepared by Nowell Bamberger.

<sup>15</sup> These locals later joined the ILWU, the last being Tacoma in 1958.

charter, and its members were expelled from the ILA. The ILWU was born through a rank-and-file referendum that established a coastwise, industrial, democratic and militant union.

*1945-50: Affiliation and Disaffiliation with the WFTU*

On October 3, 1945 the ILWU joined the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) by virtue of its affiliation with the CIO. Determined entirely at the supra-national level by national federations, neither rank-and-file members nor ILWU leadership had a decision-making role. In fact, little if any information was available to the rank and file on the issue, with many members not even aware of the decision. A few years later the CIO decided to withdraw from the WFTU because of its left-wing positions.

In 1950 the CIO expelled the ILWU, partly for failing to withdraw from the WFTU, partly due to Bridges' opposition to the Marshall Plan, but primarily for alleged communist leanings within the union. Following expulsion from the CIO, Bridges supported continued affiliation with the WFTU, but he soon confronted a groundswell of rank-and-file opposition. In August 1950 the elected representatives of the ILWU Caucus took up the issue in response to resolutions and letters emanating from the rank and file and local officers. The sentiment against maintaining WFTU affiliation became so heated that Local 10 in San Francisco demanded the resignation of Harry Bridges if he failed to withdraw from the WFTU. Bridges—a strong supporter of international organizations and the WFTU in particular—was, at the time, also an officer of Maritime Federation of the World, a WFTU subsidiary. Despite Bridges' pro-WFTU editorials in *The Dispatcher* between 1947 and 1950, membership remained firm in its opposition. On August 18, 1950 the ILWU Caucus voted 63 to 9 to sever relations with both the WFU and WFTU, laying a politically divisive issue to rest. Membership conflicted with leadership, and membership prevailed.

### *Compulsory retirement*

Since its inception, the ILWU lacked term limits or an official retirement age for Local or International elected officers. Many locals institutionalized their own term limits early on, and by the early 1970s several had implemented compulsory retirement, but the union never did so for the International Executive Board (IEB). Local elections were often close races, but few International elections were seriously contested. International officers therefore experienced less electoral replacement and no retirement, while local leaders experienced much more leadership turnover.

Harry Bridges became a vocal proponent of compulsory retirement, introducing retirement legislation at the 1971 International Convention.<sup>16</sup> Although unsuccessful, the idea developed some traction after the large and powerful Hawaii Local 142 passed a compulsory retirement amendment for its local leadership. Bridges worked with Hawaii 142 in 1975 to reintroduce and pass the legislation at that year's Convention. Bridges and ILWU Secretary Lou Goldblatt then joined other older leaders in voting themselves out of office, but only after engaging with rank-and-file convention delegates in hours of passionate debate over the issue.

The debate over the 1975 compulsory retirement amendment involved two factions. Bridges, the IEB and members of Hawaii Local 142 argued that compulsory retirement guaranteed International Officers would never become too old to effectively lead, allowed younger ILWU members to develop leadership skills, and standardized practices between the International union and ILWU locals. On the other hand, many delegates feared the loss of the older, activist cohort, believing the real motivation for the amendment was to improve the position of the longshore division and 142 for future elections by forcing the aging yet powerful leaders out peacefully and avoiding a political stalemate in the upcoming election.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The convention minutes suggest he had been considering the idea and developing a philosophy since as early as 1963 (ILWU 1971).

<sup>17</sup> See speeches by delegates Ruth and Perisho in *ILWU, Proceedings of the 21st Biennial Convention* (San Francisco, 1975: 55-59, 62-69).



There is no question that the amendment's supporters were strange bedfellows. Hawaii 142 was historically opposed to the IEB on many fronts, and its relationship with Bridges was strained, particularly on issues of Hawaiian autonomy from other locals and the ILWU International. Several sources confirm Bridges' conviction that the longshore division was the strongest, most influential and most politically conscious part of the union (Wellman 1995).<sup>18</sup> His speech at the 1971 convention reveals concern about non-longshore members taking key IEB positions; he feared the undermining of core ILWU values. He claimed that someone from pineapple in Hawaii would be incapable of leading the union to victory in a strike because they would lack the militancy of Longshore (ILWU 1971). He was not secretive or clandestine about this aim; he communicated his feelings vocally during the executive session at the 1971 convention and in front of the entire delegation in 1975.

Bridges' support of compulsory retirement was, from this perspective, a means to avoid a messy political battle, save personal face, maintain the public appearance of ILWU unity, and allow the longshore division enough time to prepare a strong replacement candidate and maintain its hold on ILWU leadership positions. At the same time, 142 was maneuvering to prepare its own potential candidates or allies for future elections and undermine longshore IEB dominance. Both groups were attempting to prevent a succession crisis and meet their short-run desires for power by limiting their ability to hold office indefinitely. Bridges' uneasy alliance with 142 also pitted him against a rank-and-file who were otherwise among his staunchest supporters, causing factionalism and vocal criticism of him in the process.

The compulsory retirement amendment gave Bridges, longshore and 142 enough time to effectively prepare and back their respective candidates and allies in the 1977 election. It also gave the longshore division enough time to re-assert the radical values of the union. In 1977 longshore candidate James Herman received approximately three quarters of the vote, in what could be called a mandate from the membership. Harry Bridges and Hawaii 142 had indeed limited their own power, but in doing so, they also enhanced the power of their factions over time.

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<sup>18</sup> Larowe (1972: 380) argues that the real motivation was to prevent Goldblatt, who was in the warehouse division, from succeeding him.

## **7. ILWU Democracy in Summary**

As with any organization striving to be democratic, there is evolution and change. The ILWU's strong and long-serving leadership cadre came dangerously close at times to the appearance—if not the reality—of oligarchy. What saved it were the features Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (1996, 8) identify: institutionalized mechanisms in its constitution guaranteeing participation for all and limiting leadership power; and its generation of “sporadic factions.” Harry Bridges and Louis Goldblatt were able to stay in power for so long because they were successful organizers, negotiators and strategists. They delivered improved wages, working conditions, and job security.

Other unions' leaders also deliver material benefits and are popular among many members, but most tend to rely on decidedly anti-democratic methods. What is remarkable about the leadership of the ILWU is that it wins the contingent consent (Levi 1997) of its members not only to leadership but more tellingly to a union culture that emphasizes active participation in the union and the union's involvement in the larger society. Bridges and Goldblatt built on contract success to construct a rank-and-file democracy whose members also were concerned with social justice issues that went beyond improving the work and pay conditions of West Coast dockworkers. They did this by developing a set of rules that limited their power while empowering the members (Levi 2005), in particular, the recall, direct elections of officers, and procedures by which members could voice their meaningful preferences about policy. What made these rules worth far more than the paper on which they were written were the combination of local autonomy, the hiring hall, and the substantive debates encouraged by the union's leadership through its newspapers, labor education, and open mikes at meetings. Bridges and Goldblatt established precedent and helped create the union culture by standing by the principles they proclaimed even when it cost them. They accepted jail sentences, derision from members, and defeat on certain policy issues as the price of instantiating rank-and-file democracy.

They and the leaders who followed them also worked to establish a democratic culture among the members. The hiring hall provides a locus for discussion and education as well as solidarity. Local meetings and conventions, with their open mikes and participatory norms,

facilitate heated contestation over important issues. Membership and leadership training enhance the capacity to raise issues and argue positions.

The potential for democratic reproduction is facilitated in the ILWU by the tradition of longshore work within families and neighborhoods. The extent to which intergenerational socialization relies more on intimate networks than on other forms of norm reproduction is the subject of future research. There is some reason to believe that the ILWU is currently experiencing a decline in participation in meetings. One cause is technological: With containerization there are fewer longshore workers and less teamwork. Another has to do with the high standard of living achieved for union members: With cars, cell phones and comfortable homes, there is less reliance on the union hall. A final cause is increased heterogeneity on the docks: With the opening of longshore work to women and individuals outside the ILWU network and with the more generalized randomization of the hiring process, the role of family tradition has declined. To some extent this is being offset by enhanced education of new members and leaders, but to what extent is still to be seen.

Although ILWU rank-and-file democracy has changed over time, it is nonetheless intact. Democratic procedures remain firmly in place, and participation is still relatively high compared to other unions if not to its own past. Debates at meetings and conventions remain spirited and consequential. Despite the lack of formalized parties, contested elections and policy conflicts remain common.

## **8. Learning from the ILWU**

For Lipset, Trow and Coleman, a union democracy can be said to exist only when there is evidence of institutionalized political parties. Unquestionably, contestation for office and over policy are important features of a democracy, but equally significant are the combination of protected rank-and file political rights and significant rank-and-file voice in and power over key union decisions. Like Strauss (1991, 5-7), we find that union democracy can take various forms, depending on the industrial context, political ideology and constitutional

makeup of the organization. This is no less true of social movement organizations—and countries.

The ILWU's rank-and-file democracy offers lessons for those organizations either to combine the town hall meeting with successful campaigns against powerful protagonists. It offers a model of how to resolve Muste's dilemma. The case of the ILWU reveals that participatory democracy is possible, even among American unions. While most unions may lack the historical, occupational and other sociological conditions that made ILWU union democracy develop and thrive, the ILWU experience does suggest that the procedural and participatory attributes of a democracy may both complement and mutually support each other. ILWU democracy was not imposed or enforced by a governmental agency. Its participatory mechanisms helped sustain operative procedures.

Moreover, the participatory elements appear to have enhanced both solidarity and militancy. Because members knew they could hold the leaders' feet to the fire should a contract negotiation or strike go badly, they were more willing to follow the leaders into battle. Because of the deliberative process that preceded negotiations, strike votes, and contract votes, the quality of the outcome seems to have been better. This fits with what Baccaro (2001) discovers in his Italian case research and Barry Eidlin (2006) in his research on the Minneapolis Teamsters in the 1930s.

We find that there are two "iron laws." The tendency to oligarchy involves hierarchy in governance that produces non-democratic practices but also, as Voss and Sherman (2000) so skillfully argue, bureaucratic sclerosis. They advocate the recruitment of militant organizers from outside the ranks of the union. The ILWU has certainly hired organizers and advisors from outside its rank and file, but unlike most of the more successful unions Voss and Sherman (2000) describe, its activists come up through membership. This, we suspect, adds to its strength and reinforces its organizational culture.

The Voss and Sherman strategy may be successful in overcoming bureaucratic conservatism and empowering workers to fight for their economic rights. It is not at all clear, however, that it is a strategy that empowers workers in their unions or gives them tools for

political voice in the larger society. They are concerned with creating a renewed emphasis on organizing and more militant confrontation of employers; democracy is secondary to those ends. Our paper shows it need not be. On the contrary, democracy may sustain and facilitate hard bargaining, as it most certainly does in the ILWU. It may even facilitate organizing; the ILWU was one of the very first unions to respond to the plea of John Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO, to commit twenty percent of its budget to organizing new members. At its 1997 Convention the ILWU committed thirty percent and has continued to commit that percentage at each subsequent convention.

The ILWU carries into the present day the lessons learned from the hard-won struggles of the 1930s and the 1950s, when employers and governments did all in their power to blunt union power. Democratic, militant, and proud, the ILWU confirms the possibility of combining democratic practice, militant actions in the economic and political spheres, and a commitment to organizing.

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