

African Americans and Unions in Los Angeles

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HIS 490-01

Abstract

This paper highlights the racism that permeated Labor Unions across Los Angeles while determining the methods that African American men and women employed in order to successfully lobby not only the unions themselves but the United States government in cases where the locals were unwilling to integrate. I came upon this topic after a story I had heard at family gatherings about an ancestor of mine, William Schneiderman, who was a union leader, outspoken communist, and whose similarities to Harry Bridges called my attention to Los Angeles unions in my new hometown of San Pedro. My focus on race relations within L.A. unions which eventually led me to focus on African Americans and Los Angeles organized labor given their more vocal activism in the city, more so than any other ethnic group. Black workers fought the unions they came to be a part of for their rights as union members and faced belligerent racism constantly. In the course of my research, I located archival records from numerous repositories across L.A., including the Los Angeles Times Historical Archive, the Long Beach Library Historical Archives, the Random Lengths News Archives, the National Archives and Records Administration's files, and the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union's Special Collections and Archives.

Introduction

Los Angeles unions have played a large role in the history of this city's race relations. From their creation, they were outwardly racist towards African Americans in particular, but over the decades they began to change, forced largely, because of the activism of the civil rights movement and the economic necessity of enlarging their own membership rolls. Union exclusion of black men and women was the early policy of almost every industrial union in Los Angeles, effectively blocking many from the added financial security of the generally better-paying union jobs and relegating them to low paying work with little job security. The 1934 General strike initiated one of the first efforts on the part of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to bring Black men into its rolls to remove potential strikebreakers. Social unrest and the threat of marches for war industry jobs on the part of African American activists amidst the Second World War forced President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning all forms of discrimination in war industries. The Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) was created as a result of the President's action. At first, it was swiftly defunded and became a political issue that threatened further marches nationally, only to have its funding restored and the committee's authority increased as a direct result of African American political activism. Several prominent unions were created with express non-discrimination clauses written into their charters though many of these seemingly pro-civil rights brotherhoods were just as discriminatory as other outspokenly racist unions and certainly relegated black men and women to the bottom tier of employment. Racial injustice in Los Angeles union employment practices has been a fact for as long as organized labor has existed and continues to be an issue even today. This paper seeks to highlight the nature of Los Angeles unions, in particular, their relationship with the Civil Rights Movement,

integration, and race relations in this city's industrial workplaces by telling the story of the tumultuous fight to bring African Americans into union ranks.

Historiography

The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania under the leadership of Herbert R. Northrup produced a series of outdated but groundbreaking studies under the banner of the school's industrial research unit detailing the "racial policies of American industry" over several decades during the pre-civil rights era. While these works are filled with outdated language, they serve as a foundation upon which many authors on the subject of African Americans in the labor market based their research even today and warrants note as the historiographic beginning of this field of study. Northrup and his colleagues spell out in fine detail the actual employment statistics of African American workers which detail the racial disparities pertaining to the more sought-after management positions and skilled labor within union factories and ports. The "hard" facts presented are used to describe the systemic racism in union labor during a period when union leadership claimed adherence to laws regarding racial barriers to advancement but did not follow these principles or simply only enacted affirmative action to the slightest degree possible.

Darnell Hunt and Anna-Christina's book *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* highlights the disparity between the types of employment black men and women had access to versus the well-paying and sought-after jobs that were then only available to whites. The fifteenth chapter entitled "A Common Project for a Just Society" expands on the black community's involvement in the labor movement even in the face of the racist denial of entry and constant mistreatment at the hands of employers and union leaders as well. After African

Americans were allowed to gain union membership, their ranks swelled and the rate of black union participation is recorded as growing to be higher than any other racial component, almost fifteen percent of black workers became union members. The writers also provide a thorough expose of the drive by black union members to unionize lower skilled trades, jobs that would typically be held by African American members.

Josh Sides' *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles From the Great Depression to the Present* tells the story of the black community in Los Angeles from the turn of the century to the later years of the 1990s. For this paper's particular research purposes, the chapter "The Window of Opportunity: Black work in industrial Los Angeles, 1941-1964" highlights the issue of race in union membership in the city and the many struggles that black men and women persevered through in order to gain better employment. Sides devotes considerable time to the plight of many black workers who could not find meaningful employment during the 1930s when unions enacted strict racist policies in order to exclude African Americans from gaining membership. World War II changes all that in a short amount of time as blacks are brought into the industrial sector of Los Angeles to work in war industries. Even so, African Americans continuously and actively fought segregation in the workplace and exclusion from unions. Sides also includes some interesting information about black entry into formerly exclusionary unions that informs the reader about the hurdles that many black men and women faced during this period when attempting to find better employment.

Seed Time for the Modern Civil Rights Movement by Merl E. Reed describes the numerous actions on the part of turn of the century activists in the fight for civil rights while detailing Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) and the numerous investigations and cases it undertook on behalf of

African Americans during the Second World War. The chapters focusing on the regional offices showcase actions in Los Angeles as well as the chapter focusing on the boilermakers FEPC challenge on the west coast. Protests and litigation represent the primary concern of the writings and allow the reader to fully grasp the scale of racist union policies as Los Angeles becomes an intricate part of a national conversation on race and work. The author's analysis of the decisions of the courts and the reactions of the unions under their jurisdiction are of primary concern as they detail the reciprocal struggle over civil rights during wartime that signaled the fight that was to come in the following decades.

Paul D. Moreno's writings in *Black Americans and Organized Labor* detail the numerous legal challenges that African Americans working in various unions attempted in order to force the unions to integrate during the early years of the twentieth century through to the New Deal and beyond. The author describes the nature of union attempts to "stonewall" any entrance into union rolls on the part of Black workers and shows the union's disinterest in abiding by laws enacted for the sole purpose of integrating union jobs during the Second World War. Black workers in Los Angeles were constantly used as strikebreakers and acted as scabs, which Moreno shows to have been a major union weakness throughout the decades before the civil rights movement.

Jake Alimahomed-Wilson's article "Black Longshoremen and the fight for equality in an 'anti-racist' union" uncovers the many ways that African Americans encountered racism and racist tactics in an overtly progressive union, the ILWU. Alimahomed-Wilson's research uses interviews with black and white longshoremen to reveal instances of not only systemic racism but also individual racist outbursts and vitriol, exhibiting the inherent hypocrisy of unions whose charters explicitly state their nondiscrimination stance. The author focuses on a fa-

mous civil rights case known as the Bates discrimination case that marked the first time a progressive union was shown to be just as biased against African Americans as the more overtly racist groups. In the end, the defendant, the ILWU local 13, lost the case on appeal and was forced by federal mandate to enact certain affirmative action policies in their hiring procedure in order to correct the wrongs that had been practiced for several decades.

Unions have a sordid history relating to race, as they have excluded African Americans from their inception and utilized all their resources fighting integration until forced to do so by the U.S. government. The primary source collections I have chosen to work with are the Los Angeles Times Historical Collection and the Long Beach Public Library's archives which contains a vast array of photographs and records on the many unions that operate within the city. These collections also have numerous accounts of strikes that in some cases were violently defeated in the early twentieth century. Of particular interest to my research are archival records of black scab workers being brought in to replace striking workers. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, I accessed the International Longshore and Warehouse Union's archival records which include union meeting minutes and member rolls. The public was allowed to voice complaints during these meetings, of which many involved racial discrimination in hiring practices.

The West Coast Waterfront Strike of 1934

The West Coast Waterfront strike is a primary example of how labor discrimination is as old as capitalism itself and has been a part of labor unions since their formation. A leading sociologist at Howard University during the early twentieth century, Kelly Miller, noted:

Employer discrimination as a function of their worker’s prejudices. If a capitalist shows race prejudice in his operations, it is merely the re flected attitude of the white workman... in all the leading lines of industry the white workmen organize and either shut out the Negro or shunt him aside in separate lines with a lower level of dignity and compensation. When unions did include blacks, it was because employers forced them to do so.¹

In Los Angeles one of the most prominent r st cases of union integration occurred during the 1934 West Coast waterfront strike; a walkout where employers sent in African American scab workers who were physically attacked by the strikers. The Longshoremen’s strike leader, Harry Bridges, noted in the aftermath of the walkout that “by keeping the unions lily-white, there would be a steady reservoir of black potential strikebreakers whenever strikes were called, which would weaken the unions when negotiations broke down.”² Jake Alimahomed-Wilson notes in his article “Black longshoremen and the ght for equality in an ‘anti-racist’ union” how “Bridges actively reached out to the African American community, where he would speak at churches and social gatherings during the ‘big strike’ of 1934, making pleas for them to join him on the picket lines.”³



Figure 1: Labor Leader Harry Bridges giving a speech to a non-segregated crowd during the 1934 strike taken from the Center for Labor Education & Research University of Hawai’i, accessed (11/18/2018). <https://www.hawaii.edu/uhow/clear/home/LaborBios.html>.

While Bridges did admit black men into the union after the strike was won, the union's nondiscriminatory decree was not proven by the rolls of the union,⁴ the equality that was promised only materialized for the few African Americans who got jobs.⁵ The promise of integration was not fully realized, but the union and its leader were celebrated in newspapers across the country. Bridges did in fact support and advocate for civil rights as the President of the ILWU as a whole, but he was only in direct control of its San Francisco chapter which is known in union jargon as a "local." Locals such as local 13 in San Pedro and many others were adamant opponents of integration. Bridges, however, as the public figurehead of the ILWU, made the entire union seem a pro-civil rights union.

Union Compliance to Executive Order 8802 and FEPC Mandates

The Second World War brought about a new struggle to eliminate union discrimination in the form of the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Black men and women were at the conflict's onset, completely excluded from war factories and the unions that represented their workers. Only when African Americans actively fought their exclusion from wartime factories, and only after threats of social unrest at home did President Roosevelt sign Executive Order 8802 "banning discriminatory employment practices by Federal agencies and all unions and companies engaged in war-related work."⁶

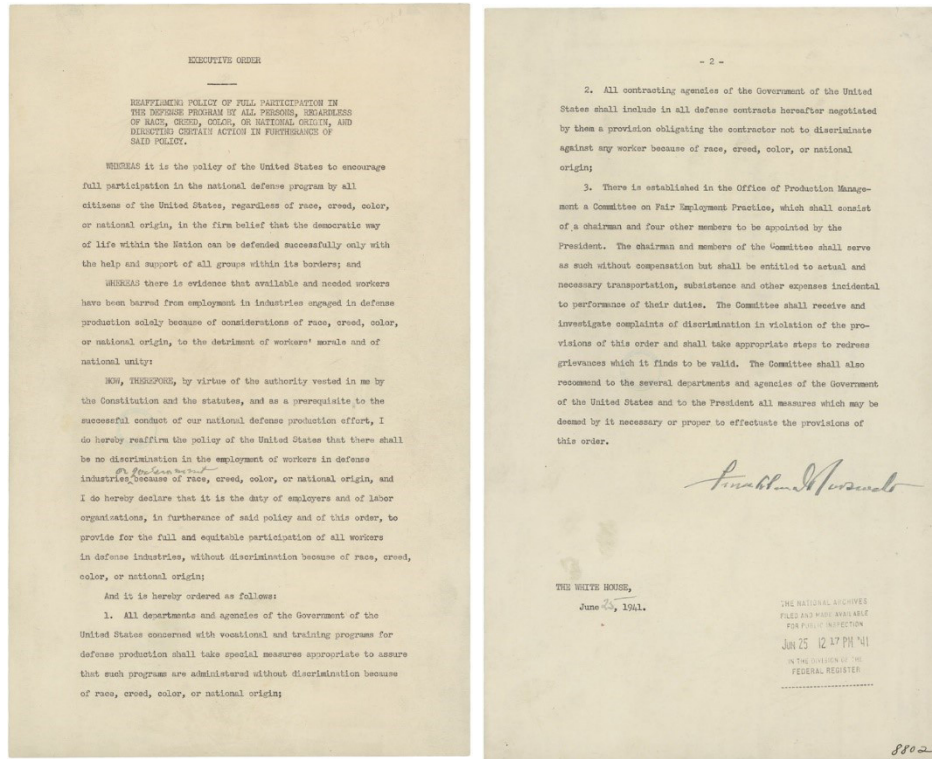


Figure 2 and 3: Executive Order 8802 dated June 25, 1941, taken from General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives. arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ExternalIdSearch?id=300005

Upon gaining entry into wartime factories in Los Angeles, many African Americans were admitted into major unions like the AFL but quickly relegated to the most basic jobs.⁷ The Fair Employment Practice Committee was established to enforce Executive Order 8802 that saw a marked increase in African American employment as the war heated up and forcefully integrated some industries in Los Angeles. After the Committee was stripped of funding, black activist groups threatened strikes. The U.S. government relented to fund the FEPC and granted it

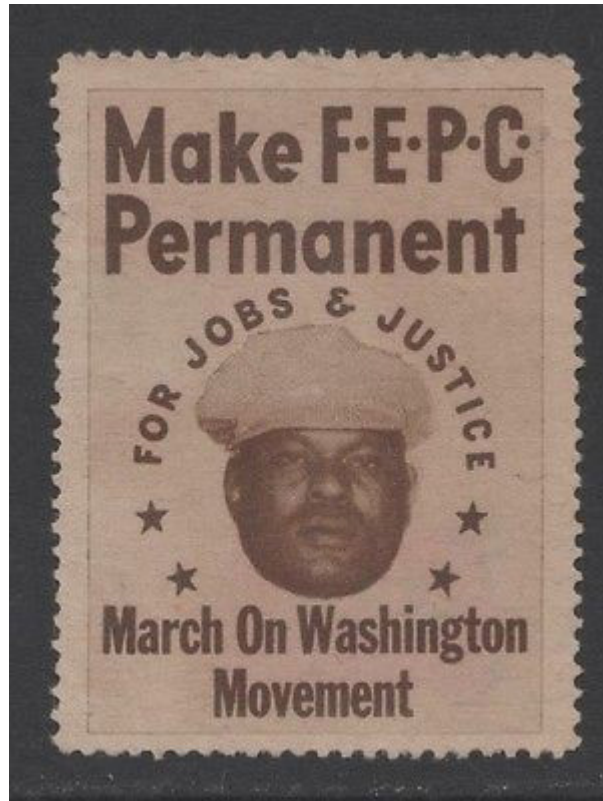


Figure 4: Make FEPC Permanent stamp, taken from <https://www.antiquesnavigator.com/d-1673416/make-fepc-permanent--1940s-march-on-washington-movement--poster-stamp-mng.html>,

FEPC actions following its restoration initiated a profound rate of entry into industrial sector unions for black Americans.⁸

One of the most common forms of discrimination within L.A unions was the creation of helper unions exclusively for African Americans where the members were forced to pay dues but granted no voting privileges or other union rights.⁹ Merl E. Reed describes in his book *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement* how local unions like the American Federation of Laborers and the subsidiary the Boilermakers union “excluded African Americans from membership or shunted them into powerless auxiliary unions.”¹⁰ African American union members placed in these secondary chapters began to develop their groups which sought to protest and their relegated status in court. Reed explains that “in Los Angeles the Shipyard

Workers Committee for Equal Participation, became active, picketing Auxiliary 32 of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Local 92 and refusing to pay dues. They also complained to the War Labor Board and President Roosevelt.”¹¹ After their employer, the California Shipping Corporation, began protesting workers, the group switched tactics by abandoning their dues abatement and began lodging formal written claims to the United States government.



Figure 5: African American delegation of Local 92, Workers Committee for Equal Participation, taken from Labor Commission on

When the continued, but workers were not allowed to strike under wartime legislation, the FEPC was warned of an impending race riot but was instead sent a delegation from the WCEP to Washington to address their grievances directly. After numerous court battles “the IBB, through the policies and practices imposed on the auxiliaries by the supervising white locals, was guilty of discrimination, for the status forced on blacks constituted a denial of union membership.”¹²

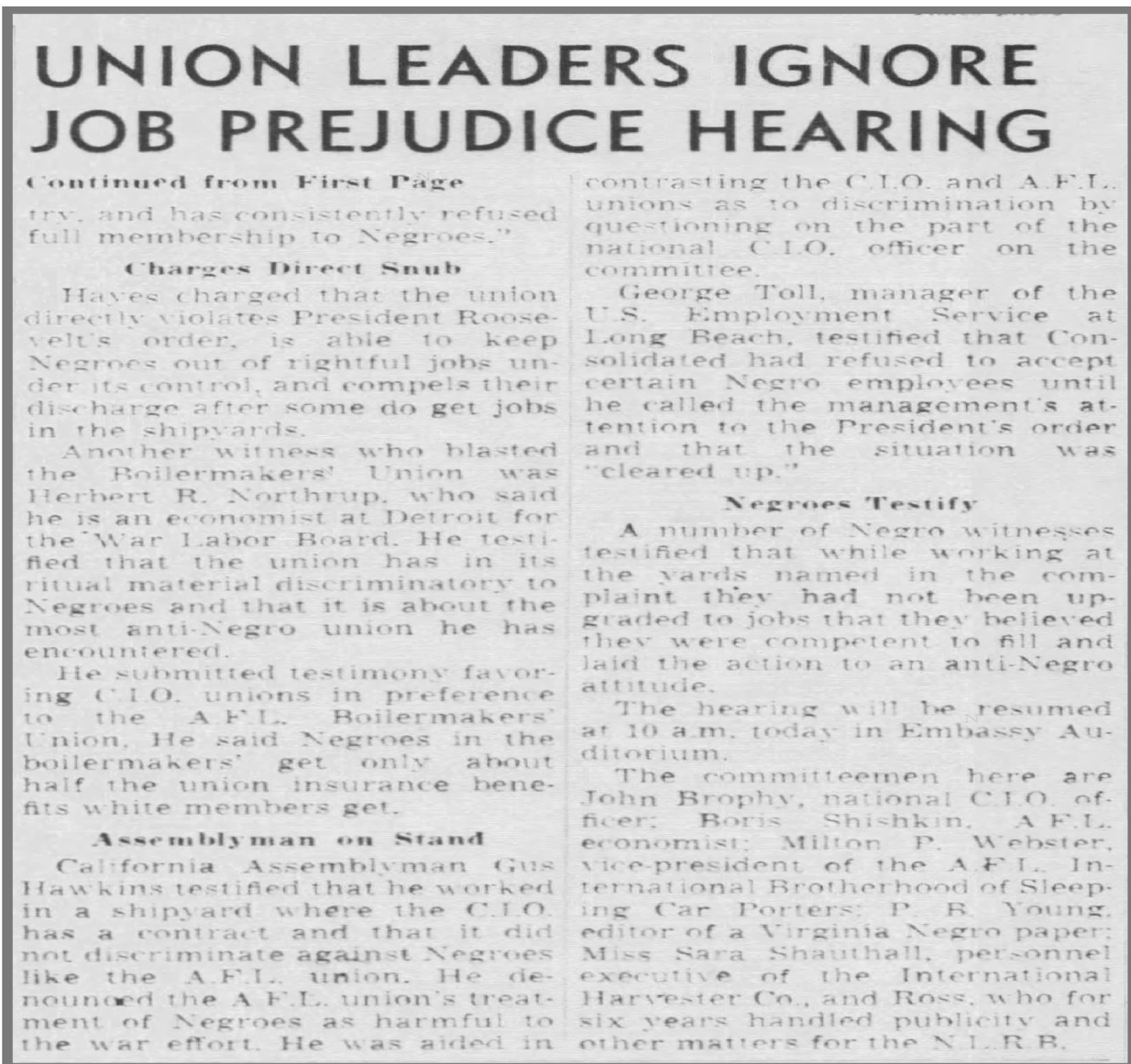


Figure 6: LA Times article from November 20, 1943, detailing Unions avoidance of FEPC hearing taken from LA Times Historical Archive, accessed (12/4/2018). <https://www.newspapers.com/image/380722836/?terms=union%2Bnegro#>.

A case brought against the IBB boilermakers union eventually made its way to the California Supreme Court after FEPC attempts to enforce nondiscrimination compliance were largely ignored. Figure 6 details the case against boilermakers and how the affected African American worker’s lawyers were able to prosecute the case by publicizing the union’s defiance of the Executive Order through witnesses that corroborated their clients’ claims. The courts ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered the boilermakers union to strip discriminatory language from its charter as well as disband with its auxiliary union system. As the judge found in *James vs. Marinship*, the secondary status of the union violated African Americans rights even though the president’s Executive Order was not referenced.



Figure 7: June 23, 1944, LA Times article detailing the African American rights group’s victory in court against union taken from LA Times Historical Archive. Accessed (11/28/2018). <https://www.newspapers.com/image/380851077/?terms=union%2Bnegro%2BBates%2Bcase#>.

Though the union did eventually disband its black union and comply with the court order, it began rejecting new black applicants as this was not covered under the judge's ruling, and so the racist antics of the union continued even after they were soundly defeated in court. However, this case only applied to the individual Bay area local, but the Big-3 Los Angeles shipbuilding companies took notice and formally announced a change in their policy of firing black workers for protesting via nonpayment of dues.¹³

Litigation became the most effective tool of African American union members due to the stalwartness of the racism that they faced throughout the early years prior to the civil rights movement. In very few circumstances did unions voluntarily bow to societal pressures and hire on black workers. Unions utilized every means and resources at their disposal to inhibit the integration of their rolls, sometimes emptying union treasuries to the point that they were forced to give up their numerous legal fights when they were unable to pay their legal fees, as was the case with ILWU local 13. Only through continuously challenging prejudicial hiring practices in federal court over decades were African Americans able to compel unions to hire black workers, who were then entreated with fresh obstacles in the form of their often vehemently racist white coworkers and bosses.

Racism Among Union Members

Racism at a personal level, from worker to worker, was also the norm of those early years in L.A. unions and certainly down at the docks, where black workers could only get jobs if they were liked by one of the white foremen. When they were hired, black workers were subjected to constant daily taunts and racist jeers from all of their fellow white workmen. Alimahomed-Wilson describes these verbal and physical attacks in his article by noting one man's experience of how "they would make a black man jump in the water if he worked nights. If they caught him by himself he would get thrown in... The white guys would pick who they wanted to work with. If they didn't want to work with you, you were out of luck."¹⁴ White union members also created hostile terms for everyday tasks meant to degrade African Americans such as how Alimahomed-Wilson describes that the "rigging equipment was often referred to as the 'nigger-head.' The rigging drum is the color black, and a worker has to wrap a rope around the drum in order to operate the device; the symbolic reference to lynching is clear."¹⁵

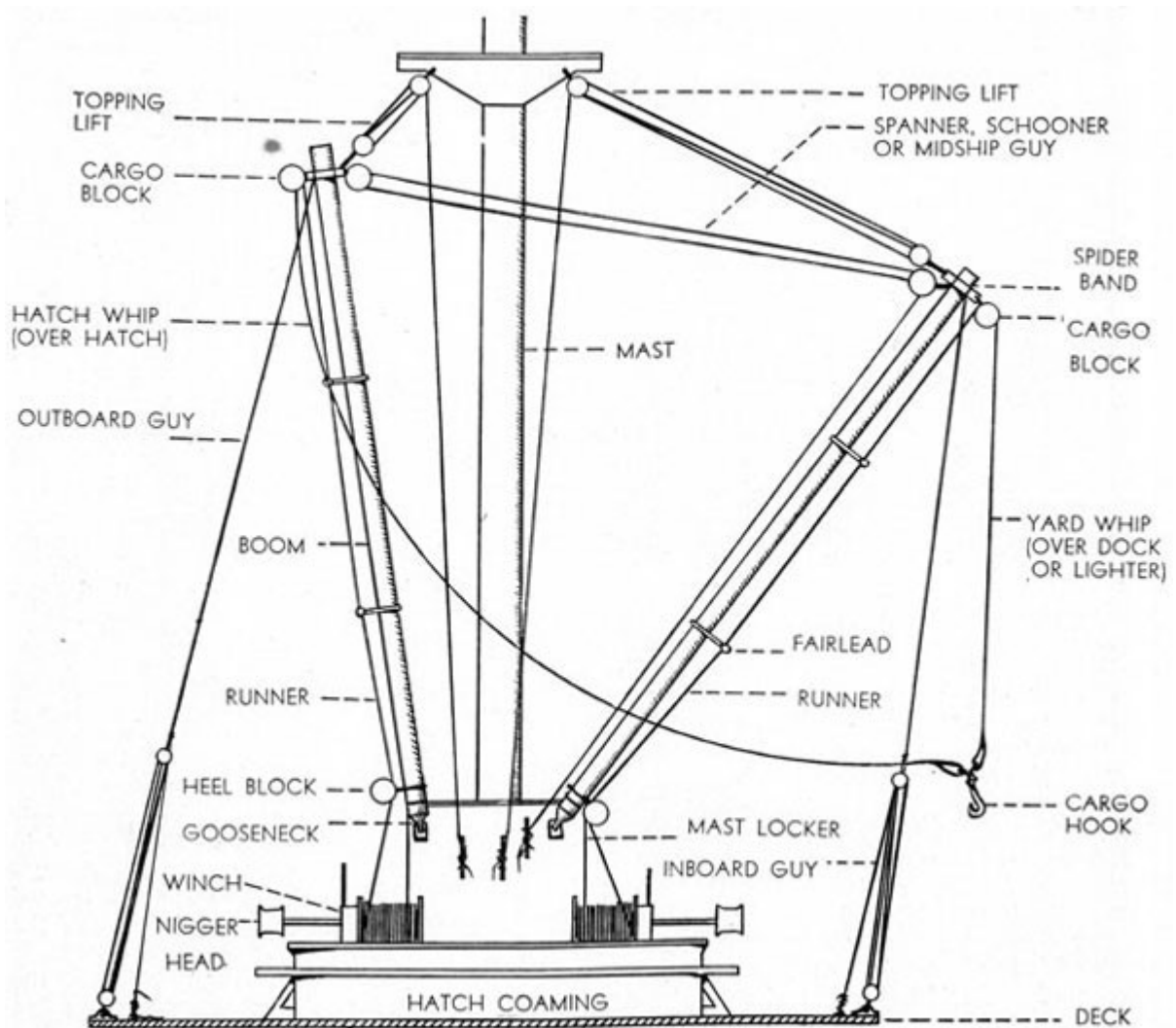


Figure 8: Diagram detailing racist rigging terminology taken from San Francisco Maritime National Park Association, accessed (12/10/2018). <https://maritime.org/doc/merchant/deck/part2.htm>.

In one particularly disturbing account detailed by Alimohamed-Wilson, the author describes how “a white work gang leader told a new worker to, ‘take this fall and put it around the nigger-head.’ Instead of placing it around the drum, ‘He took the fall and walked up to a black guy with it. He got knocked on his butt.’”¹⁶ African American union members would eventually present the vile racist practices of the union as a whole to the FEPC and fought to have the practices outlawed as a part of their litigation which forced the unions to hire a proportion of African Americans that was equivalent to the level of black workers in the labor pool at the time of the court

case.¹⁷ Regardless of this court battle, these practices of abominable degradation continued for many years and for certain were sustained by the older generation of white union members whose conduct was necessarily dictated by court order but who were working side by side with African Americans for decades after the issue was first raised.¹⁸ The continual use of racial vitriol well past the civil rights era and its incessant employment as a tool of workplace subjugation underscores the breadth of racism present in the union workforces and the organizations as a whole, most notably within those unions like the ILWU that labeled themselves ‘anti-racist’ by way of their union charters.

Post War Realities: African American Firings

Toward the conclusion of the Second World War, many unions that had recruited black workers as a means of increasing production during the wartime labor shortage began eliminating their jobs as production slowed and temporary factories were closed up. Black union members were the first to be let go as they lacked seniority, a reality that the unions had created purposefully in order not to be subject to the FEPC’s jurisdiction and in order to not appear discriminatory towards African Americans. In Los Angeles, the ILWU deregistered 500 workers, almost all of them black, at the conclusion of the war to make room for returning white union workers claiming that the fired employees had been temporary hires. These African Americans became known as the ‘unemployed 500’ of local 13 in San Pedro, whose men and their leader Walter Williams appealed the firing to the union which promptly denied their request. Formal protests similar to that of the ‘unemployed 500’ are noted within the union’s meeting logs as well as records of litigation that in many cases followed.¹⁹ This practice of deregistering black workers who were treated as temporary in the face of labor shortages was not new, as this had been going on for several decades and was common practice when unions faced labor shortages. The ‘unemployed 500’ sued and eventually won their seniority in court thanks in part to the nondiscrimination clause in the presidential mandate on wartime industries. Ultimately, these men were awarded a seniority date of 1951.²⁰ African Americans who were able to get union jobs during wartime were always the first to be let go. The unions claimed the firings were solely based on seniority, but this was a calculated move as no black men or women were union members at the founding of any particular union due to the exclusionary practice of older labor groups.

With the advent of the civil rights movement, occurrences of discrimination in labor union hiring and firing practices were opened up to litigation at the institutional level, allowing African American men and wom-

en to force changes upon the unions they sought employment from. However, “the National Labor Relations board did not hold discrimination to be an unfair labor practice until 1962, so aggrieved union members had to proceed through the courts, at their own expense.”²¹ Numerous black Americans did sue their respective labor unions which in time weakened the unions as they wasted millions of dollars defending their racist hiring and promotional practices in court, money that could have been spent further strengthening the unions themselves. A primary example of these pieces of successful litigation is the Bates discrimination case, which targeted “the ILWU and Local 13, alleging racial discrimination in the hiring of longshoremen in the Los Angeles/Long Beach harbors and resulted in a requirement that four in every ten new longshoremen hired should be black, until the proportion of black longshoremen employed in the harbors equaled the proportion of qualified black applicants in the labor pool.”²² Persistent discrimination in labor unions brought about the practice that would later be coined ‘affirmative action’ which helped alleviate the decades of total exclusion that African Americans faced when trying to seek employment within organized labor. Civil rights groups like the NAACP’s Los Angeles chapter became highly active in labor disputes revolving around the reinstatement of black workers’ seniority as “blacks who had accumulated seniority in one department would have to start at the bottom of the line in newly opened jobs.”²³ Union leaders fought affirmative action in court as well. While affirmative action became a controversial topic, it did restore many African Americans to positions within unions that they had rightfully worked for but were let go unceremoniously in favor of white workers.

Conclusion

Labor unions discriminated against minorities inside and outside their ranks since the beginning of the unionization movement by not hiring African Americans and even when they eventually did, relegating them to the most menial jobs with the least pay and no room for advancement. Racism persisted at an institutional level for generations because the prejudices of the majority of white union members were reflected in the unions’ outward stances toward society. The 1934 general strike became one of the first small steps in the desegregation of labor unions in California, though individual unions like Local 13 in San Pedro forcefully resisted integration to the fullest extent of its capability. The Second World War provided an enormous opportunity for black Americans to acquire gainful employment with good pay in organized labor, but they were kept in separate powerless auxiliary unions and forced to pay dues for no other purpose than to be allowed to say they were a union member. African

Americans strove to challenge this narrative in court after FDR's executive order banning discrimination and were largely successful, though these men and women would have to wait for their victory's true realization with the passage of civil rights legislation. Even unions that proudly called themselves anti-racist such as the ILWU were in some cases like its Los Angeles chapter, merely putting forth an untrue statement as a matter of public relations. Though much has been achieved in terms of labor justice since WWII and the Civil Rights Movement, much remains to be done, as unequal and deeply unjust racial realities still exist in unions today.

Endnotes

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- 10 Merl Elwyn Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement the Presidents Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 268.
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- 12 Reed, 284.
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