

# Black longshoremen and the fight for equality in an 'anti-racist' union

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*Abstract:* This paper uncovers the contradictions between official 'anti-racist' union principles and local practice by exploring the ways that racism shaped a racially progressive union's politics. Using interview material, it centres on the past and present experiences of African American union members working as longshoremen in southern California. Contrary to accounts that locate racism and the racial division of workers solely as a practice utilised by capital, the author argues that it was the labour union local itself, *not* capital, that readily relied on racism to undermine Black workers, thereby recreating the very same destructive forces that the International Longshore and Warehouse Union's principles purported to oppose.

*Keywords:* Bates discrimination case, Black workers, International Longshore and Warehouse Union, labour, racial discrimination, trade unions

Trade unions have a vexed racial history in the US and throughout much of Europe and Australia, since organised labour has been both active in supporting white supremacy and racist exclusion, while also serving as a democratic catalyst for multiracial unity and radical social justice, epitomised by the once

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*Race & Class*

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10.1177/0306396811433114 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

powerful anarcho-syndicalist ‘Wobblies’ of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>1</sup> Today, however, very few unions remain that were founded on militant, radical, ‘anti-racist’ principles. By all accounts, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) is one example of a union that has survived into the modern era and continues to be an important force in the contemporary labour movement. While imperfect, the ILWU remains one of the *best* current examples of a modern, relevant union that continues to uphold principles opposing not only the dehumanising and exploitative forces of capitalism, but also the destructiveness of a racially divided workforce. I chose to study the ILWU precisely because of its progressive history as an ‘anti-racist’ union, one that sought to enact a radical vision of class consciousness, along with direct workers’ control over the workplace. Many in the labour movement continue to uphold the ILWU as the flagship for a modern union that has built its strong foundation under the banner of a multiracial political model of inclusion and equality. Understanding how racial inequality unfolds within progressive unions like the ILWU serves as an important warning to the broader labour movement in confronting the skeletons of inequality lurking within today’s labour unions. This paper uncovers the contradictions between ‘anti-racist’ union theory and practice by exploring the ways in which racism shaped a racially progressive union’s politics. It centres on the experiences of African American union members working in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California.

The central questions of my research are *how* and *why* did racism flourish in a progressive, left-leaning, militant, ‘anti-racist’ union? Was the union’s declaration that ‘Discrimination is a weapon of the boss’ actually true? Finally, what can the broader international labour movement learn from the perspectives of African American longshoremen who struggled for racial justice in an ‘anti-racist’ union?

### **Theoretical context**

Part of the impetus for ‘anti-racist unionism’ was developed in response to the common practice utilised by employers of pitting white workers and workers of colour against one another. W. E. B. Du Bois was the first American theorist to critically engage with the ways in which the interests of capital are enhanced by the racial division of workers, along with capital’s subsequent utilisation of racialised labour.<sup>2</sup> Du Bois’ analysis of race and class dynamics foresaw the formation of the split labour theory, which later explained the class-based dimensions of racialised labour systems. This paper draws upon the foundational scholarship of Du Bois and, more recently, the work of Edna Bonacich,<sup>3</sup> who theorised how capital structures the racial division of workers and exacerbates racial tensions among the working class through the practice of pitting white workers and Black workers against one another. I extend this theoretical framing of race and class by applying my analysis to the site of ‘progressive’ trade unionism. However, unlike Du Bois and Bonacich, who both concentrate

on the role of capital in creating such dynamics (in line with the ILWU's principle of 'Discrimination is a weapon of the boss'), this research focuses on the realm of labour and how worker-enacted discrimination operates at the union local or branch level. My central argument is that the labour union local itself, *not* capital, readily relied on racism to undermine Black workers, thereby recreating the very same destructive forces that the ILWU's principles purported to oppose. Thus, in light of the experiences of Black longshoremen in Local 13, 'Discrimination was a weapon of the union, not the boss'. The racial dynamics in the local recreated a longstanding racial caste system throughout the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, effectively positioning white workers at the core of the local's political structure, while simultaneously pushing Black workers to the margins of the union and the waterfront.

### *Methods*

Ethnographic data for this study were collected from 2006–2009 at the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles. In addition to my time spent on the waterfront, I conducted a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with longshoremen, most of whom were African American. A significant number of the longshoremen that I interviewed were presently, or previously, active leaders in the fight for racial justice and Black equality in the union.<sup>4</sup> Since my intention was to study issues of power and inequality within a progressive union, workers were asked to give their own reflections on race and unionism, longshore work, the culture of the waterfront, union politics and whether or not they experienced discrimination. I also attempted to interview representatives on both sides of discrimination lawsuits filed against the union and employers; that is, the plaintiffs who filed the lawsuits and those union members who represented the union local, including the landmark civil rights lawsuit in Local 13 that became known as the 'Bates case'. In effect, the case led to the establishment of affirmative action in the longshore local.

In addition to interviews and ethnographic observation and analysis of union documents (including grievances and internal memos), I analysed a number of oral histories of longshoremen as an additional primary method of acquiring data for this study.<sup>5</sup> Some longshoremen, especially those without a 'public' oral history, are identified here by pseudonyms.

### **Historical context: race, class and militant trade unionism**

Since the beginning, the ILWU has 'always been known as a "progressive" or "left-wing" union'.<sup>6</sup> The union has earned a strong reputation for a series of progressive political moves, including adopting an anti-fascist stance, favouring trade with communist China and opposing both the Korean and Vietnam wars. The ILWU's radical history can be traced back to its association with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Radical union organising in the US became a

powerful and strategic move by organised labour, led by the CIO, to confront the capitalist practice of racially dividing workers in order to more thoroughly exploit workers and undercut labour solidarity. Prior to the ILWU, capitalists readily promoted racial divisions among longshoremen. The longshore industry was saturated with local protectionism, corruption, racial strife and ethnic conflict. As a result, organised longshore labour was divided, disorganised and ultimately weak. During the early twentieth century, workers of colour were hired by employers as temporary workers, scabs and strike-breakers throughout a number of ports.

Since the mid-1930s and throughout the late 1940s, unions affiliated with the CIO represented a challenge to the often explicitly racist and politically right-wing craft unions associated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Fletcher and Gapasin note how the AFL, under the leadership of Gompers, lacked 'a larger conceptual framework that questioned the structure of existing social relationships, [and] resulted in capitulation to white supremacy and male supremacy'.<sup>7</sup> At its founding convention in 1938, the CIO set forth a declaration of its 'uncompromising opposition to any form of discrimination, whether political or economic, based on race, colour, creed, or nationality'.<sup>8</sup> CIO leaders were conscious that multiracial unionism was necessary for a strong working-class front. The ILWU, too, explicitly adopted this progressive 'anti-racist' position in its constitution in the hope of becoming a formidable challenge to the deeply embedded racial divisions structuring longshore work on the west coast.

Among the union's ten guiding principles, formally adopted in 1953, is the following statement:

Workers are indivisible. There can be no discrimination because of race, color, creed, national origin, religious or political belief. Any division among the workers can help no one but the employers. Discrimination of worker against worker is suicide. Discrimination is a weapon of the boss. Its entire history is proof that it has served no other purpose than to pit worker against worker to their own destruction.<sup>9</sup>

The ILWU's radical pedigree and organisational effectiveness had much to do with its early leadership and political goals as a union. Most notable was the influence of Harry Bridges, a white leftist former Australian seaman, who served as the ILWU's international president for forty years, from its founding in 1937 until his retirement in 1977 at the age of 75.<sup>10</sup> 'Red' Harry, as he was often referred to, believed in class struggle and in directly confronting capitalist exploitation. Bridges and his mostly white communist comrades opposed racial segregation on the docks and firmly believed in recruiting Black longshoremen into the union. A racially united waterfront, they believed, would give workers of all races the strength they needed to stand firm against capitalist exploitation. Eventually, 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 line. In his efforts to recruit Black workers, Bridges maintained that: 'Our union means a new deal for Negroes. Stick with us and we'll stand for your inclusion in [the] industry.'<sup>11</sup>

### **Black workers on southern California's waterfront**

In the ports of southern California, prior to the second world war, there was only one Black longshoreman working on the docks and there were no Black members in the local.<sup>12</sup> During this time, white workers made up the vast majority of workers, along with a small number of Chicano workers.<sup>13</sup> Black workers first entered the ports during the early 1940s, as many white longshoremen left the docks to fight in the war, creating a labour shortage. At last, this shortage opened up the union local to Black workers, but the struggle for racial equality on the waterfront was far from over. By the mid-1940s, approximately 500 Black workers had made their way into Local 13, which numbered about 2,500 members in total. When white longshoremen returned to the southern Californian ports following the end of the war, many were shocked and angered upon seeing Black workers on the waterfront.<sup>14</sup> Corky Wilson, a white longshoreman who left the waterfront for a period of time with the merchant marines, recalled coming back to the docks in 1944: 'I walked in [to the hiring hall] and I didn't see a white guy anywhere - all niggers, all niggers ... We had never had a colored guy up until then, and ... the place was packed with colored guys.'<sup>15</sup> Wilson's oral history not only illustrates the racist climate of a postwar waterfront, but also underscores the embedded culture of whiteness and racism that dominated the industry and union. Shortly after the white longshoremen returned to the docks, southern California's Local 13 deregistered approximately 500 workers, the vast majority of whom were Black. For Black workers, this marked the first major battle over racial discrimination in the union local. According to the local, the workers were laid off because of their 'lack of seniority' and because there was not enough work to go round. The mostly Black workers who were officially deregistered from the union henceforth became known collectively as the 'unemployed 500'.

Walter Williams, who started working on the docks in the early 1940s, was the first Black leader on the southern California waterfront.<sup>16</sup> Many current African American longshoremen view Williams as a trailblazer for Black equality in the union. The unemployed 500 generation of Black workers, led by Williams, represented the first group of Black longshoremen to confront the blatant white supremacist practices permeating the southern California docks. Williams and other Black longshoremen brought an appeal to the union local, but their appeal was denied.

Keith Mayweather, a second-generation African American longshoreman in his mid-50s, currently works at the port of Long Beach and reflects on the numerous stories he heard, while growing up, from his father, who worked on the docks

from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s. Mayweather describes his father's experience as a 'living hell'. 'My dad was also a longshoreman. He worked here for years, and then the war came.' Mayweather pauses, 'They promised him that when he came back from the war he would get his job back, but he didn't get his job back when he returned.'<sup>17</sup> I asked Mayweather if he could share some of the things his father told him about working on the docks in the 1940s and 1950s. He responded:

Violence was definitely common. 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. He said it was real bad out here. Things were real bad. 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. If they didn't want you in the hatch, you couldn't go and work on the ship. It was hard to get any of the decent work.<sup>18</sup>

Craig Bagdasar is a white longshoreman with over three decades of work experience. Bagdasar also points to the intense racial violence on the waterfront during the early years. According to Bagdasar:

My mother first got married to a longshoreman down here named Curly Shoeman, and he hated Blacks. At the time, there was only one Black man working the docks in 1937. His name was Governor Davis, and he was the first Black longshoreman. Curly wanted to kill this guy. One day, he got a gun and headed to the docks to shoot this guy. My mother stopped him and he beat her up.<sup>19</sup>

The move to deregister Black workers, coupled with violence, death threats and overt racism on the docks, pushed the few Black workers who remained out of the port. The deregistration of the unemployed 500 was the local's first attempt to rid the waterfront of Black union members. Effectively, the local treated Black longshoremen as 'temporary' workers, maintaining the practice started by employers in the early part of the twentieth century. The racist logic of the local had made it impossible for Black workers to match the seniority of whites, since Black longshoremen had been completely shut out of the founding of the union local in 1937. Black workers' collective lack of seniority (an outcome of racist exclusion) was used as the main reason that the unemployed 500 were deregistered in 1945. But, finally, after a long and bitter struggle that included a lawsuit, Williams and the unemployed 500 won the first major legal battle against Local 13. Those members of the unemployed 500 who had stayed around the area were awarded a seniority date of March 1951 and were the last group of workers allowed to pass on their union books or sponsor new union members before this practice was outlawed. Despite winning their re-registration, the fight against racism was not over, and major battles continued to play out in other areas throughout the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

## On the job discrimination

Job promotions (or 'elevations', as they are called on the waterfront) represented another way to keep Black workers from gaining strength in the union local and from earning equal wages to their white counterparts. In many cases, Black longshoremen with several years of seniority were passed over for job promotions while less qualified white workers were promoted. Throughout the 1950s, the work gangs were segregated by race, with white gangs often leaving the hardest and most backbreaking jobs for the Black and Chicano work gangs. Again, Williams led another group of workers who were fed up with being passed up for elevations, and went to the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to file a complaint against the union local. The workers produced an exhaustive list detailing Local 13's wilful discrimination against Black union members. Williams submitted the evidence to the FEPC representative, and 'the rep[resentative] there claimed he couldn't understand how we could charge race discrimination when we had a "no discrimination" clause in the contract'.<sup>21</sup> Williams explained that the charges of discrimination were all clearly documented, yet the FEPC representative refused to look at the case on the grounds of the union's anti-discrimination clause. Ironically, the union's 'official' anti-discrimination clause undermined the efforts of Black workers seeking racial equality in the union local. Since the union was, on paper, opposed to racial discrimination, there 'could not be any racial discrimination', so the logic went. The disjuncture between a racially inclusive rhetoric versus reality is clear. Had, say, Black workers filed a similar complaint against a union without the anti-racist 'credentials' that the ILWU had adopted among its official guiding principles, the racial discrimination complaints might have been investigated earlier or taken more seriously. Williams, along with Black longshoremen across generations, holds little faith in the anti-discrimination clause and 'anti-racist' principles that the ILWU adopted. According to Williams:

when it came to a Black guy competing for a job, such as a foreman job, it didn't mean anything. You know, we had seniority language in the contract and we had a no discrimination clause in the contract, but it seemed neither the seniority clause or the no discrimination clause didn't mean anything.<sup>22</sup>

Not only were there persistent threats of violence, discrimination at the union hiring hall and segregated work crews, but the racist culture of the waterfront was another powerful force permeating the ports. Many older Black longshoremen recall the persistent use of racist language to describe equipment on the docks. For example, rigging equipment was often referred to as the 'nigger-head'. The rigging drum is black in colour, and a worker has to wrap a rope around the drum in order to operate the device; the symbolic reference to lynching is clear. Williams recalled an incident that occurred when a white work gang leader told a new worker to, 'take this fall [i.e. the hoisting cable or rope] and put it around

the nigger-head'.<sup>23</sup> Instead of placing the rope on the drum, 'He took the fall and walked up to a Black guy with it. He got knocked on his butt.'<sup>24</sup> The issue of the usage of racist terminology for rigging gear was brought to the executive board by Black workers in the hope that it would pass a resolution outlawing such terminology. However, the practice continued, especially among older white workers, for many years.

The stories of African American workers in the 1940s and 1950s denote the extent to which the union local was marred by white racism. This racism not only structured the way work was performed and the ways in which jobs were allocated, but also the day-to-day operations in the workplace. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of race relations in the longshore industry needs to locate both the structural and cultural manifestations of white supremacy. The combination of these racist practices made it nearly impossible for African American workers to attain equality within the union. When an African American worker faced daily harassment from rank-and-file longshoremen, he had few options for improving his situation. When Black workers went to the union local's executive board, or even outside agencies like the FEPC, their complaints were minimised, given the union's 'official' stance against discrimination.

### **Elbert Kelley Jr and the 'Bates' discrimination case**

During the 1960s and throughout the early 1970s, white control over the workplace manifested itself in numerous ways, including access to operating equipment and opportunities to work skilled jobs. During the period, a new generation of Black longshoremen emerged, led by Elbert Kelley Jr, the son of the first Black foreman Elbert Kelley Sr, in southern California. Like Kelley Jr, most of the young Black longshoremen in the 1960s were sons of unemployed 500-generation workers. The Bates case was a landmark civil rights lawsuit, a class action filed in the early 1970s against the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), the ILWU and Local 13, alleging racial discrimination in the hiring of longshoremen in the Los Angeles/Long Beach harbours 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 harbours equalled the proportion of qualified Black applicants in the labour pool. This case was one among many others filed by Black longshoremen against Local 13 over racial discrimination. For Kelley and his 1960s Black counterparts, the then newly established civil rights legislation made the union's discriminatory practices open to challenge at the institutional level. This generation of Black longshoremen won a number of important decisions over the years, including affirmative action in hiring, equal access to steady work and greater access to a wider range of job assignments.

Before the Bates case went to court, Kelley and another Bates case co-plaintiff decided they should notify Harry Bridges and the ILWU International. I asked Kelley to elaborate on his interaction with Bridges:

One of us felt we should notify the International. We kept calling the International and no response. One morning, Clemens and I drove to San Francisco. We got there, and asked to speak to Bridges. We had a meeting with Bridges. By that time he knew who we were and what we wanted. Face-to-face in his office. I have to admit I really admired the man. I admired him before meeting him, and even more after the meeting. Bridges was sympathetic with us and made it clear he couldn't do anything. He didn't want to destroy the union. He asked us to take it to the International Board but there was probably not a lot he could do. He treated us very well. He brought Bill Chester in, who also spoke with us because you have these Black guys up here, and you need to talk to these Black guys. That part I didn't really care for. Here you had Bill Chester who was the vice-president who was Black, who was told to talk with us. Chester approached us wrong. He was my dad's age and at the time I didn't really understand where he was coming from, but now I can. He had a judge Thomas type of attitude, I don't need you grinning in my face about my problem down in the waterfront. Don't grin at me, give me a solution. I could appreciate Bridges when he said there was not a lot he could do. Meeting with Harry was one of the highlights of my life. We came on back, and the suit was on. Nobody could stop us.<sup>25</sup>

Access to operating cranes, the highest paying job on the waterfront, was a major site of conflict and serves as an important illustration of the union's continued unequal treatment of African American union members throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The key question remains: was the resistance to incorporating Black crane operators a form of discrimination primarily structured by the employers or was it the union local itself? Kelley explains his perspective on the matter:

They would not consider me as a crane operator. At this point in time, they were not considering any African American straight out to be crane operators. You know, that's the way it was ... yeah, just the typical Local 13 waterfront discrimination. I really wouldn't place the blame on PMA [Pacific Maritime Association - an umbrella organisation representing the employers at the ports] directly. Of course, PMA indirectly because they could have stopped it. But PMA usually does what they have to do to get along with the workforce. And since Local 13 was saying, 'hey, we don't want African Americans ... to have a shot or an opportunity to drive these cranes', the PMA went along with it, see. And there was some of us that were interested in doing this and had the skills to do it ... but to be put on the crane list, it was clearly not for Black people straight out.<sup>26</sup>

Kelley and many other Black longshoremen believe that while the employers were complicit in racial discrimination, they were not the primary group responsible for denying African Americans access to crane-operating jobs. Union local

leadership was responsible. Regardless of whether or not the employers played a direct role in structuring the racial divisions on the waterfront, it is clear that the employers benefited from the racial divisions and conflict that were enacted by white members in the local. Racial conflict over systematic job discrimination continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s and remains an obstacle to African American longshoremen. For many African American workers, the privileges that white workers enjoyed by having unimpeded access to more lucrative jobs often resulted in more frequent breaks on the job, less physically taxing job assignments, unimpeded opportunities for job promotions and, most importantly, greater access to higher paying jobs and steady (regular) work.

### **Contemporary racism on the waterfront**

Local 94 is the foremen's local in the ILWU in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Foremen (or walking bosses) are union members who supervise longshoremen in the loading and discharging of ships. They play a key role in maintaining union power on the waterfront and represent a group of workers with a significant degree of power over the workplace and daily operations at the ports. The salary for Local 94 members is also among the most lucrative of blue-collar jobs in the world (approximately \$177,000 per annum, on average).

A number of African American longshoremen whom I interviewed expressed frustration over a host of issues concerning contemporary forms of racial discrimination in the union, including issues playing out in the foremen's Local 94. Jerome Johnson is an African American longshoreman in his late 60s, who is currently fighting racial and age discrimination within Local 94. Johnson believes the hiring system in Local 94 puts older Black workers at a structural disadvantage. I asked Johnson to explain his perspective on the major issues with the current Local 94 hiring system and the racial demographics of the local.<sup>27</sup> He responded:

To start off with, there is a big disparity in race among the walking bosses in Local 94. Most of the Blacks they have are over 50. There are only a couple of Black guys who are barely under 50! The last two times they did the hiring, they picked all these young whites ... these guys are young, in their 30s, but there are no young Blacks, not one. So these younger guys will be in the job forever. All the Blacks are older and will eventually be phased out ... so there is a big disparity down here with Blacks not getting in Local 94.<sup>28</sup>

Johnson points to a host of problems with the current system in Local 94, especially along the intersections of age and race discrimination. The seniority system that has been established within the union has always served as a major source of tension for Black workers in southern California, especially since affirmative action was largely eroded in the union throughout the 1990s. If white workers are able to secure the higher paying walking-boss jobs, this gives them approximately twenty

more years of earning top pay levels compared to Black workers. In addition, this will also lead to a steady decrease in the numbers of Black foremen. Since African American foremen are disproportionately older, and most are past the age of retirement, they will be leaving Local 94 at the highest rate, which will eventually, once again, lead to an underrepresentation of Black workers. Past gains won by Black workers, such as affirmative action in hiring, are also a fundamental issue that needs to be brought to the forefront in the union.

Adrian Watkins, an African American foreman now in his early 60s, further elucidates on the issue. I asked Watkins how he thought discrimination operates today on the waterfront:

In hiring. I did a presentation earlier this year about the number of Blacks in Local 94. Out of 400-plus guys in Local 94, I think there are around thirty-nine Black workers, which is less than 10 per cent Black. I mean the racism in Local 94 comes in subtle ways in that the few Blacks who are hired are generally older compared to others in the Local. So there is an age thing here, with race. At the time I did the report, there were only four Blacks who were under the age of 50, two of which were Black women. 70 or 80 per cent of the Black foremen were already past the age of retirement. I just went down the list of guys, and the ages. The average age was well over 65 for Black bosses. And the percentage is dropping! We already lost five Black foremen this year alone. Four have died and maybe one retired. It is an amazing thing. When I sat there and told this information to the union's executive board, their mouths fell open. Because on the executive board there is only one Black on it.

[*Interviewer:* So in ten or fifteen years, all of the Black foremen will be gone?]

Probably within ten years, because most of them are past the retirement age. And what made me start thinking about it is that I was thinking about retiring myself. I was at the retirement age, that window of fifty-nine-and-a-half, and because my back was starting to bother me ... and when I start thinking about it, among Black foremen, they view me as relatively young! So that gives you a good idea about the state of affairs. I am viewed as relatively young and I just turned 60. But I have white foremen who come through our classes who are way younger. A good chunk of those guys coming in are between 40 and 45. So they are going to be in a high-salary job for a lot longer span of time compared to the Black guys who are just as qualified. So it is an interesting mixture of racism and ageism, I guess ... any Black worker down here will tell you the same, because they know it and they feel it.<sup>29</sup>

Watkins demonstrates the institutional character of racial inequality on the waterfront and in the union. While today's form of racial inequality might not be intentional or in your face like it was in the past, the fact remains that today's impediments for Black workers' collective access to union leadership positions

have similarly deleterious consequences to past, more 'open' and explicit forms of racism that dominated the union throughout the early years.

Finally, Kelley explains how racism in the union local must be linked to historical patterns of racial inequality. For many Black longshoremen, today's instances of racism are clearly connected to past forms of racial inequality. Here, Kelley summarises Local 13's anti-Black climate:

I think that Local 13 has only one interest ... and that is to protect the jobs and the opportunities for advancement on the waterfront for white and Hispanic workers, clearly. And I do believe whatever ... the union leadership could do to exclude African Americans or keep African Americans from ... being registered as longshoremen, to be elevated, to be trained or to receive a steady job, the union would work in concert with the employer to keep a Black from taking advantage of those opportunities. I believed that when I came in and I believe it [to] this day ... I never seen 'em [Local 13] flex their muscles like that to make it fair on the waterfront for African American workers, or anybody else that's being treated unfairly. And they could have.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The voices of Black longshoremen presented here illustrate how all trade unions, including those that uphold 'anti-racist' principles, can act as primary agents in promoting discrimination and the racial division of workers. While the union officially adopted 'anti-racist' principles in theory, it failed to fully implement these ideals in practice in Local 13, along with other locals on the west coast. The voices of Black longshoremen working in southern California's Local 13 over the past sixty years clearly demonstrate how a labour-based form of a 'split labour market' can emerge, even within a radical 'anti-racist' union. White workers collectively enforced a host of anti-Black discriminatory practices in order to defend exclusive white union member access and control of the following: the highest paying and most lucrative jobs on the waterfront, such as driving cranes, technical work and equipment operation; steady work; higher-paying leadership positions, such as foreman jobs; and, finally, easier, less physically taxing jobs. While this research differs from the work of Du Bois and Bonacich by locating anti-Black racism at the union local level, the consequences for a racially divided labour force were indeed similar to their findings. That is, the employers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach ultimately benefited from the continued division of workers along racial lines. Racial conflict between workers, lawsuits and worker-on-worker harassment not only eroded solidarity among workers, but implicitly deflected attention and energy away from the employers.

During the unemployed 500 era, African American workers were told that they did not have enough seniority to stay registered in the union once white workers returned home from the second world war. However, the fact that Black workers were denied entrance into the union prior to the war meant that it was

impossible for them to attain the very seniority that was in question. Yet this was not taken into account. When Black workers attempted to appeal to outside agencies, the union's anti-discrimination clause, in some cases, undermined the legitimacy of the workers' complaints. For decades, Black workers were viewed as less than equal members, since they were denied entrance as 'Charter members' during the late 1930s. Similarly, during the 1960s and 1970s, the second generation of Black longshoremen was excluded from informal job networks, skilled jobs and steady work. The struggle for Black equality continues today in Local 94, Local 13 and throughout the ILWU.

The institutionalised forms of racism present in the union local have had a number of deleterious consequences that the broader labour movement can learn from, including: 1) a proliferation of costly racial discrimination lawsuits within the union, which cost the union local (and numerous other locals along the west coast) millions of dollars in legal fees and financial settlements, thereby redistributing precious financial resources that could be spent on key activities related to making the union stronger; 2) an internal erosion of trust and solidarity among workers, along with the undermining of the democratic potential of unions; and, 3) the undermining of Black longshoremen as full and equal union members.

Du Bois' race and labour analysis is more relevant today than ever: divided workers only serve to benefit the capitalist class, not the workers themselves. Thus, divided workers are weak workers. This logic should also be applied to labour unions. While the broader labour movement in general, and the ILWU in particular, are certainly not responsible for creating existing forms of racial inequality that permeate society, they are responsible for *challenging* the ways in which racism manifests itself within union locals and workplaces. Unions are responsible for protecting all of their workers from internal forms of discrimination, harassment and violence. Not only has racial discrimination financially weakened trade unions, such as the ILWU, that are already vulnerable in today's anti-union climate, but, more importantly, racism continues to undermine the very fabric upon which unions were founded; that is, the ability to provide an organisational base whereupon unified workers can come together in order to protect themselves from capitalist exploitation, discrimination and degrading working conditions, while simultaneously pursuing dignity and justice in the workplace. Despite the long struggle that Black workers have faced in the ILWU, and in the US labour movement in general, all of the workers I interviewed firmly believed in the importance of trade unionism for all workers, and especially African American workers. Labour history demonstrates that unions have the capacity to act as a catalyst for economic justice and social change, but also have the capacity to reinforce social inequality. For many of today's unions, there is minimal discussion of past or present internal issues of racial inequality. For other unions, such as the ILWU, there is a need to renew dialogue on the destructiveness of racism and, more importantly, to take real, substantive *action* in combating racial discrimination in order to build a more just, united and strong labour movement.

## References

- 1 I would like to thank all of the longshoremen who were kind enough to give me a glimpse into their lives over the years, especially Craig Bagdasar, Elbert Kelley Jr, Tony Salcido, Clovi Jean Good and Adrian Watkins. I would also like to thank Sabrina Alimahomed-Wilson, Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval, Edna Bonacich and Stephanie Luce for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.
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- 4 I gained access to the waterfront via my association with a well-known and respected veteran longshoreman who has worked in the industry for over thirty years. This longshoreman was active in documenting the struggle for Black equality in the union. He accompanied me to some of the interviews, helped me arrange meetings with other longshoremen and showed me around the waterfront. With his gracious help and connections, I was introduced to a number of the leaders of Black workers who struggled over multiple generations for racial justice in the ports of southern California. Other contacts were made utilising a snowball method.
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- 12 The first Black longshoreman to work the southern Californian docks was Governor Davis, who began working on the waterfront in the late 1930s.
- 13 Chicano workers faced discrimination in the early years, but, unlike African Americans, were not fully excluded during the foundational years of Local 13.
- 14 See Nelson, op. cit., for an excellent body of work on the history of Local 13 and race relations in the longshore industry.
- 15 Nelson, op. cit., p. 165.
- 16 Walter Williams, now deceased, was married to the former head of the NAACP Myrlie Evers Williams, the widow of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers.
- 17 Keith Mayweather, interview conducted by author (13 January 2007).
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- 19 Craig Bagdasar, interview conducted by author (31 October 2007).
- 20 For a more in-depth analysis of Black resistance in Local 13 and the use of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by longshoremen against Local 13, see E. Bonacich and J. Alimahomed-Wilson, 'Headway for African American workers in south Los Angeles', in *Post-Ghetto: re-imagining south Los Angeles* (forthcoming, ed. Josh Sides).

- 21 Oral history of Walter Williams, interview conducted by Tony Salcido, Urban Archives of the ILWU, California State University, Northridge (10 November 1988), p. 12.
- 22 Ibid., p. 77.
- 23 Ibid., p. 73.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Elbert Kelley Jr, interview conducted by author (23 May 2007).
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- 27 In 2005, Local 94's racial breakdown was as follows: 11 per cent Black, 58 per cent white, 29 per cent Latino, 1.5 per cent Asian American and 0.5 per cent Native American.
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