Getting smarter, moving together—ILWU charts new course

Story by Marcy Rein

Back in the day, locally owned coffee companies lined the streets facing San Francisco’s waterfront. Local 10 members literally rolled sacks of beans across the street for roasting and shipping by warehouse Local 6 members.

Now just one of those local coffee companies remains, and it has moved to Oakland. Manufacturing has gone the way of coffee and the Warehouse Division has hemorrhaged members over the last 20 years. Longshore work has changed as well, though membership has held steady.

“Conditions are stuffed and unstuffed overseas or off-dock and all the handling work we did is gone,” ILWU International Vice President Bob McEllrath said. “All we do is move boxes from ship to dock to rail.”

For the last 10 years the ILWU has been engaged with organizing, trying to balance the loss of work and members. The union took another step in deepening that commitment Dec. 8, when the first meeting of the Elected Leaders Organizing Task Force brought most of the mainland IBE members together with officers from warehouse locals and ILWU organizing staff. Top organizers from the national AFL-CIO flew in to huddle with the Task Force and plan for those times that make organizing more urgent and more challenging than ever.

“We were pleased to have the AFL-CIO’s national Organizing Dept. come in and help set a course and pinpoint strategies that will strengthen the ILWU in our key industries,” McEllrath said.

This followed a workshop done by the AFL-CIO for Local 142 in June, International Vice President Wesley Furtado said. “We had 50 rank and file there along with 25 officers and the International organizers,” Furtado said. “We have already seen that training bear fruit.”

The ILWU’s International Convention in 1994 committed the union to an organizing policy, but did not budget for it. Later that year, the Titled Officers proposed that each mainland member put in $2 per month for two years to fund the new direction. The “2-4-24” assessment, as it was called, passed in a mail-ballot referendum. The 1997 Convention upped the ante, earmarking 30 percent of the International’s budget for organizing. The organizing program tried out different structures and took on a wide range of targets. Drawing on past experience, participants in the Dec. 8 meeting took a hard look at the present and future.

“We have three points to consider as we think about organizing today,” ILWU International Organizing Director Peter Ohnly said. “We have to do it now, we have to do it smart and we have to do it together. We have to do it now because the labor movement and the ILWU are both hitting their density decline. We have to do it smart, using leverage and selecting targets that fit with our strategic vision. We have to do it together, as we need the participation of elected leadership and membership.”

DO IT NOW

“We are in very real danger,” AFL-CIO Organizing Director Stewart Acuff told the Task Force. “Unless we get very drastic, very quickly, we could be the first generation to leave our children a lower standard of living and be the first generation to leave our country without the benefits of an organized labor movement. When did you go into bargaining thinking, ‘We’re going to make major gains?’ It’s very rare, because only 12.8 percent of all workers in this country belong to unions, 8.2 percent of workers in the private sector,” Acuff said. Union density, the percent of workers in an industry or an area who belong to unions, has everything to do with quality of life for workers, in or out of unions. Organizing to increase density benefits current members when they enter bargaining as much as it benefits new members getting their first contract. It creates what Acuff called a “virtuous circle.”

Before SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign took off, most janitors worked part-time for low or minimum wages and no benefits, according to Robert Masciola of the AFL-CIO’s Center for Strategic Research, who also attended the Dec. 8 meeting. Over 10 to 12 years, JforJ organized up to 90 percent of the cleaning companies in some cities. It pushed wages up to around $10 per hour, won benefits and spread from cities to surrounding suburbs.

“In 2003, where we had the most strength were the top family health care for our members,” Masciola said.

Truckers saw the opposite happen. In 1979, with union density at 50 percent, unionized truckers enjoyed average wages of $19.56 per hour. Density dropped by half over the next 27 years, and average union wages fell by almost $6 per hour, by AFL-CIO figures.

Warehouse workers still under contract need to watch out, warehouse Local 6 Secretary-Treasurer Fred Pecker said “We’re making close to $15 an hour under our master contract,” said Pecker. “Non-union warehouse workers make $8 to $15 an hour and their benefits aren’t near ours. But this is a big drag on us in negotiations and everywhere else. Our members need to see their families aren’t secure as long as these gaps exist. A rising tide lifts all boats, but a falling tide pulls everyone towards the drain.”

Many members in the ILWU’s Warehouse Division—like those from Max Factor and Rite-Aid, Folger’s and Colgate—know close up the story the statistics tell. Union density in West Coast warehousing plummeted from 31 percent in 1983 to 14 percent in 2003. But the Longshore Division’s share of the work is slipping too, according to research done for the ILWU by the Institute for Labor and Employment at the University of California.

The number of registered longshore workers has held steady over the last 20 years, while overall employment in the cargo-handling industry has exploded. Highly unionized parts of the industry, like railroad and water transport, have been shrinking. Less-unionized sectors like warehouse have been growing rapidly.

DO IT SMART

Organizing can build density, but only if unions get smart about how and where they do it. Relying on elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board saddles them with skewed rules enforced by a Board stacked with Bush appointees. The U.S. ranks among the top four violators of workers’ rights to organize, right up there with Colombia and China,” Acuff said. Almost all workers face anti-union campaigns when they try to organize and some 20,000 get fired each year for their efforts. The firings are illegal, though the campaigns are not, and the law provides neither deadlines to encour-
for organizing

age timely justice nor strong penalties to discourage violations. One-third of all workplace deaths are due to employer related causes, which studies show occur in industries in rapid transition. Most of the companies in the Pacific Maritime Assn. used to organize workers in one industry and then leave it for another. (The PMA is the employer group of steam ship operators and stevedoring companies that negotiate with the Longshore Division.) Shippers carried goods across the ocean and dumped their risks on the workers. Now the economic and technological change have forced these companies to diversify if they want to remain competitive. Most now have spin-offs that operate distribution centers, handle paperwork and planning, operating trucking lines and airfreight services.

I knew our employers have been chronic about working out, and I don’t say that’s really the case now, I just mean they’re opening up their minds.

DO IT TOGETHER

“Plans are nothing, planning is everything,” Zinn said, quoting General Eisenhower. “The best plan Peter [Olney] can come up with will not be as good as what you can do as a group. Strategic organizing has to make use of the union’s biggest resource—its members,” he said.

Task Force participants quickly rattled off some of the contributions members make to organizing. They furnish the power for actions, energy to add to staff, experience in the industry, connections in the community and the most credible voice possible to speak for the union.

The ups and downs of the last several years have shown that day-to-day, effective collaboration will depend on the locals and the Organizing Dept. setting clear goals and assigned keeping communication open.

Making strategic organizing work will require a vision of the union’s future shared across all divisions.

PAYTON said the union needs to move on to a second phase of the program and figure out how to bring in more money for political action; how to look at what needs to be done for the mid-term elections in 2006; and how to get more members mobilizing from the current 300 experienced activists to 1,000.

“We need to develop our own momentum and our own organization. The next legislative session,” Peyton said. “We have to continue our political education of our membership through our District Councils.”

Secretary-Treasurer Adams pointed out that with the Republican majority in both houses of Congress, the ILWU legislative team will have to talk with Republicans and find some the union can work with.

“We will need more out of the box thinking,” Adams said.

Writer/actor Ian Ruskin, whose play about Harry Bridges and the ILWU “From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks” has been performed up and down the coast, addressed the board. He has filmed the play, but is short about $50,000 to complete it and make it available to the public. The board agreed to ask ILWU members to contribute to the project so this compelling story of Bridges and the ILWU can get out (see box for contribution details).

Northern California IEB representative and a supporter of 34 President Richard Cavelli introduced a Statement of Policy thanking Kaiser Permanente and other health care providers for their offer to continue coverage for San Francisco hotel workers locked out of their jobs (see below). The board passed it unanimously.

Contributions to “From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks” should be made out to: The Harry Bridges Project P.O. Box 662018 Los Angeles, CA 90066

For organizing

The ILWU Organizing Dept. Peter Olney (standing) presents the union’s strategic organizing perspective. Looking on (from left to right) clerks Local 34 Vice President Frank Reilly, warehouse Local 6 Secretary-Treasurer Fedder Pecker, CWA Local 15 President Robert MMascia and Ken Zinn of the AFL-CIO’s Center for Strategic Research.

General Eisenhower.

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he ILWU International Executive Council reviews its political action, prepares for more.

The board’s trustees reported that four locals have met their capital payments to the International, but that in all cases plans had been worked out with the locals to make up the difference in due time. The trustees reviewed the budget and actual expenses for the three months of 2004 and revised the 2005 budget, adjusting it for inflation.

The board also received a report on the union’s political action program over the last year with an emphasis on the upcoming year’s work. ILWU Legislative Director Lindsay McLaughlin focused on the work of his IEB reviews political action, prepares for more.

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Have a Happy and Safe New Year!