“They can’t come in through the front door because you guys won’t let them”

An Oral History of the Struggle to Admit African Americans into ILWU Local 8

OREGON VOICES

by Sandy Polishuk

A system of White supremacy has many spinning wheels, all interactive and interdependent. Perhaps the most important level of every White supremacy system is the ground floor, the everyday normal people, who through their daily and routine decisions, behaviors, and attitudes allow the system to operate. This level makes a system of White supremacy so entrenched, so enduring, so powerful. It is also this level that makes it vulnerable, that makes evolution, correction, possible. To be permanent, White supremacy must be unanimous. But it never has been. Most people want to do the right thing. When the actions of those few who do resist make it apparent that continuing to support White supremacy is not that right thing, then comes change.

THE INTERNATIONAL Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU, now “International Longshore and Warehouse Union), the union of West Coast longshoremen, adopted a new constitution “that specifically exempts race, religion, creed, color, nationality, or ‘political affiliation,’” at its fourth annual convention in 1941. Because the union also had a long tradition of and commitment to democracy and local autonomy, that clause resulted in contradiction when a local asserted autonomy in its decision to exclude Black workers. In 1968, this contradiction took center stage when twenty-six Black longshoremen filed suit against ILWU Local 8 and the Pacific Maritime Association, the organization of the employers, asserting they had been allowed to work but had wrongly been denied promotion and membership in the union. The result, by year’s end, was a consent agreement with Local 8 that would eventually change the face of the union in Portland.

Under the leadership of the ILWU’s founding president and master negotiator, Harry Bridges, longshoring had become a well-compensated and desirable profession, so it is not surprising that membership in the union was — and is — something to fight about. Bridges was a rank-and-file longshoreman who rose to leadership in the union during labor struggles culminating in the San Francisco 1934 General Strike. At that time, the union was the International Longshore Association (ILA). The ILA headquarters were on the East Coast and its more conservative president, Joseph Ryan, tolerated Bridges only because of his power in the union’s West Coast branch. When Ryan finally cut off Bridges’s salary in 1937, Bridges took all but three of the West Coast locals with him and formed the ILWU.

The ILWU became an affiliate of the CIO, which, “at its founding convention in 1938 . . . declared its ‘uncompromising opposition to any form of discrimination, whether politi-
Portland’s population — slightly over live up to those anti-racist ideals. In 1945, for example, the Stockton local charter was suspended after members refused to work alongside a Japanese American worker recently released from wartime incarceration, and in the early 1970s, Black longshoremen sued Local 13, Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach, California, under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, seeking equal treatment in promotion and other effects of racism. Portland’s Local 8 was an especially flagrant offender.3

Unlike most other ILWU city ports, the Portland waterfront had been lily-white through much of the twentieth century. The City of Portland itself was very ‘white’; before the influx of shipyard workers during World War II, Blacks comprised only 0.6 percent of Portland’s population — slightly over 2,500 people. By 1960, Portland was home to over sixteen thousand African Americans, an eight-fold increase but still only 2.1 percent of the population.4

There had been pressure on Local 8 from above, from both Bridges and the international union, as well as from within by progressive longshoremen who wanted to see change, but those Local 8 members were very much in the minority. Some Black men had tried to make their way on the Portland waterfront, but had hit a wall and given up. As an oral historian in the region, I had interviewed a number of retired members of Local 8 and had heard about two Black men who made the attempt during World War II when work was plentiful: Harry Mills and Theophilus Jermaine.5 During the 1960s, African Americans’ hopes for fair labor practices were raised by the civil rights movement and the resulting 1964 Civil Rights Act. The act did not end discrimination in private employment or grant the Justice Department power to initiate desegregation or job discrimination lawsuits, but it did create an atmosphere and expectation that discrimination would no longer be tolerated — as well as grounds on which to sue. The docks were hiring in 1963, and both civil rights groups and the international pressured Local 8 to include some Blacks. For the first time, forty-six Black men were hired as Class B longshoremen.6

Then, as now, there are three classifications of workers on the waterfront. Class A longshoremen are fully registered and are the only ones eligible for union membership. Class B are called to work after all the class As have been placed in a job that day. Casuals, holders of “white cards,” with no official standing, are technically issued to anyone asking for a single day when there are no available A- or B-men and more workers are needed. These titles were adapted to an already existing system in 1959, in response to the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, better known as the Taft-Hartley Act. Class B workers were to be allowed into the union and could be promoted to Class A after a probationary period.7

A longshoreman’s workplace differs from most unionized workplaces, because the invitation (or requirement) to join the union when one is hired, or shortly thereafter, does not come automatically or quickly but only after a trial period and a vote of the local membership. Together, the Coast Labor Relations Committee (CLRC) in San Francisco, consisting of representatives of the international union, and the employers’ organization, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), serving the ports in the Northwest, approves the addition of names to the B list. But the local union and the local PMA, as the “joint committee,” ran the Portland hiring hall.8

In 1968, forty-six Black men were working on the Portland waterfront, and twenty-six of them filed suit, alleging they were not being advanced from Class B to Class A.9 Julia Ruutttila alerted me to this struggle when I was interviewing her for an oral history of her life and work. This story was beyond the scope of the biography of Ruutttila I was writing, but knowing the progressive reputation of the ILWU, my curiosity got the better of me. In 1994, three years after Ruutttila’s death, I interviewed a number of the players in the conflict. Excerpts from those interviews, as well as some earlier ones, are reproduced here. Participants on both sides of the case predictably had memories and ideas influenced by their differing roles and points of view, sometimes contradicting each other: “We were doing it” vs. “We had to sue to get it.” It is a story of what happened when an autonomous local’s membership was sufficiently racist to successfully resist opening its membership to African Americans and of the African Americans who fought back.

Linell Hill’s name was on the case as lead plaintiff. He had been allowed to work as a B-man under pressure from the international and the federal government to admit Blacks workers. Hill rose to work as a crane operator and a foreman. He later served as vice president of Local 8 and 92, the walking boss or foreman’s local.10 I interviewed two other Black workers, Bob Fambro and Theophilus Jermany. Fambro had previously worked on the waterfront in Philadelphia, where the union was the ILA. He was the only African American working on the Portland waterfront when he started there as a casual in

548 OHQ vol. 120, no. 4

Polishuk, “They can’t come in through the front door because you guys won’t let them” 549
By the time I talked to him in the mid 1990s, not only was he in the union, but so was his son, Bob Fambro, Jr. His wife, Clara Fambro, was President of the ILWU’s Federated Auxiliary. Bob Jr. and Clara were present for the interview. Fambro Sr. did not join the suit and, in fact, was proud that he had gotten into the union the “regular” way. Jermany had tried to work on the waterfront much earlier, during World War II, but grew discouraged and gave up.11

I also interviewed the lawyers on both sides, one a Jewish American and the other an Italian American. Not surprisingly, their points of view (and their clients’ interests) differed, and therefore their accounts of the case are quite different as well. Portland attorney Paul Meyer represented the Blacks who filed the complaint against Local 8 and the PMA. Meyer was one of the lawyers who had restarted a defunct Portland American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) affiliate in 1955. The union was represented by Frank Pozzi, who was still their attorney when we spoke in 1994. His first experience on the waterfront was as a working longshoreman.

Here, the ILWU’s attorney gives some historical background and recounts how one African American worker, Harry Mills, was working as a longshoreman on the Portland docks but was refused admittance to the union:

FRANK POZZI: It all started . . . [because] the employers didn’t want blacks. This was the truth . . . . Then at the beginning of World War II or during, there was a fellow named [Harry] Mills. Mills came to Portland. Some guys got him in. Jimmy Fantz did a lot to get him in, [to] help. And they just turned him down, the local. And they did it really because, one, they didn’t know any better, but number two, it wasn’t because he was black, it was because everybody thought Harry [Bridges] had put the whole deal together and this is typical of the local saying to Harry, “Go to hell Harry.” But Harry would always come out on top before it was all over.

Sefton recalled an African American worker’s efforts to make it as a longshoreman during World War II. Jermany had supporters among the union membership, but it was not sufficient.

LARRY SEFTON: A decision was made during the Second World War. Theophilus Jermany was working as a casual, had applied and had been passed by the [union] committee. The man that was business agent at the time moved regarding the application of Jermany that for the good of the local his application be denied.12
There were eight of us that voted no. Only eight of out more than a thousand. It was cut and dried. I am positive that this was the first time that a recorded position [on Blacks] was taken.

Sefton did more than just vote no. He was one of the longshoremen who, hoping to break the color barrier, had actively recruited Jermany. Here, Jermany explains how, despite literally having a “plug” that would allow him to be selected, White union members effectively excluded him from access to daily jobs.

THEOPHILUS JERMANY: Some of the Longshoremen would meet me in Vancouver at the restaurant and talk to me about taking the job. That’s how secretive they were about it, you know, they wanted to talk to me over there. . . . then I went in and signed up.

I never had any idea about any promotion. I know that they quit signing me out. Larry [Sefton] made me a plug with my number on it and I would go down to put the plug in early in the morning and then everybody that worked there knew my plug so when jobs would come up in the morning, they’d just pass the plug on and put it in the bottom and just never get signed on some days. In other words, I was just frozen out and people I’d wanted to be a partner, they never would sign us out together.

Jimmy Fantz was another White longshoreman who supported the integration of the workforce but struggled to effectively change the local’s practice.

JIMMY FANTZ: Well, nobody got mistreated during the war because we were following a strictly pro-war program and we needed lots of casuals during the war. Blacks were needed. One of them [Harry Mills] stuck around. . . . Come time to take him in the union, we had a procedure. . . . There was some people that objected so they voted down his acceptance.

I talked to [Mills]. I did the best I could, you know, to convince him it was for the benefit of his race as well as himself to try to get past this stumbling block. He said, “I don’t have to put up with this.” That had been a stick in my craw and I was determined to try to change that and it was a lot of years there that I was trying to do whatever I could. I even joined the NAACP and told them what my objective was, that it was the right thing to do, to change [the union’s policy of excluding Blacks].

When I was president in 1937, of the local, by that time quite a few of these blacks had decided that they were going to take advantage of the privileges we had in our industry to go to any local and present our book and work for awhile and see what’s going on.13 [Bob] Robertson, who was international vice-president, and this guy from Seattle, they had made a tour of the Gulf coast to see how things were going down there and invited them to come out on the West Coast and see what the union had done for the West Coast, you know, and to work for awhile. So some of them did that.

Well eventually one of [the Black workers] that was from the gulf’d been a longshoreman for years came to Portland and the dispatcher said, “You have to go before the executive board and request a work permit here.”

A longshoreman on the executive board stood up and he started saying, “Well, you know, we’ve never really had any of you fellows here and, you know, it might be better if you go to some local where it’s not any problem,” and he reached in his pocket and got some money and he said, “I’m willing to give you so much,” and everybody on the darn executive board I think, except me, was willing to put out five or ten dollars and he could go on to Seattle.

I even hate to admit that happened here, but that’s the problem that we faced. They said, “Well, we’re a democratic meeting and we don’t want him here.”

Another Black man, Bob Fambro, had a very different experience when he first came to the docks after relocating to Portland in 1962.

ROBERT “BOB” FAMBRO: [I] went by the Longshoremen’s hall and everybody was pretty courteous to me cause I still had those [ILA] buttons that I had on the east coast on my hat. I went in and I was told, “You come back in a few days and we’ll put you on.” So
a morning came where it was a lot of snow on the ground and I said, “This is a good chance.”

A few guys didn’t like the idea of me being there but they didn’t say nothing. . . . Every once in awhile you’d come around . . . where a group of guys is standing there and they would hush up real quick, change their conversation right quick.

After I figured out who to talk to, it was not bad. I went around and made friends with a few guys, a few of the old-time longshoremen. They might have said a good word for me. They gave me a little protection. If somebody was gonna do something they’d tell them to lay off.

They had the gang system, certain gangs I tried to keep from going in cause they was so racist and sometimes those guys would be getting the long jobs and it’d be sometime I would be without work for a long while and not being able to go in on those gangs. I didn’t want to go in on them because I didn’t want to get into trouble. I mean I would have to carry a firearm with me all the time.

One time they dropped paper on me in the hold. . . . I jumped . . . but a whole bolt of paper was sliding back and forth and it hit me just as I went to get up under the coal bin. I knew it wasn’t an accident. One of the guys even admitted it later on, did it on purpose, but he could always say the winches was bad.

Periodically, the international would intervene.

G. “Johnny” Parks, a White longshoreman, resisted allowing Blacks in the union.

G. “JOHNNY” PARKS: I started out on the waterfront in 1947. There were no blacks there. The old-time longshoremen were very set in their ways and they didn’t care if the world knew it. Some of the old timers that were here from the 1934 days and so forth, resented not only blacks, they resented my being on the waterfront and that’s where I got the name Johnny. They called me a Johnny-come-lately and they wouldn’t even talk to me.

When the controversy came up about blacks, I took offense at that. I don’t want the international union or the courts saying “You’ve got to take so many because you don’t have any.” I opposed that theory. I was even called a racist at times.

I said to myself, “There aren’t any blacks here, but if blacks want a job here let ’em get a job the same way the Swedes and the Norwegians and the Irishmen and these other ethnic groups get it. Let ’em come in through the front door.” And a lot of my black friends, especially in San Francisco, who were officials of the union, agreed with me and said, “Johnny, we understand that. Only thing is it can’t happen that way because they can’t come in through the front door because you guys won’t let ’em in.”

But anyway it worked out. We took in those black people and had some
pretty good restrictions too. They couldn’t have a police record, felonies that is, and they had to be registered voters because the committee felt that a person that was a registered voter was a little more responsive to civic duties and not an irresponsible person. And so the black people that came into Local 8 in the main were good people.

**JULIA RUUTTILA:** When they finally did take those forty [sic] “B” men in, it was still difficult for the blacks because there was a ruling on the waterfront if you were in a fight — you know it’s so dangerous working on the waterfront — that the people in the fight would both be fired; but in those early days, the only ones that got fired were the blacks. Some of the real racists down there would provoke fights and they got rid of a great many of them, but Robert Fambro, he stood up to all of it. He was one of three or four or five, maybe, that survived.

**BOB FAMBRO:** A lot of pressure came from Bridges. This local here had always been a headache of his. He dried up this port once for ten or twelve months when they refused to do something. He had all the ships pull out of here. He had a lot of power. Those shippers would listen to him pretty close.

**LINELL HILL** poses for a photograph published in the *Dispatcher* on November 5, 1976, in an article about his efforts to save the life of a Portland police officer. Hill received an award from then mayor, Neil Goldschmidt, for stopping an assailant from firing a gun and killing the officer. In the photograph, Hill demonstrates how he used his hand to block the gun’s hammer from hitting the pin. After stopping the gun from firing, according to a November 25 account in the Oregonian, Hill held down the suspect while the officer placed him in handcuffs.

**LINELL HILL:** When they finally did take those forty [sic] “B” men in, it was still difficult for the blacks because there was a ruling on the waterfront if you were in a fight — you know it’s so dangerous working on the waterfront — that the people in the fight would both be fired; but in those early days, the only ones that got fired were the blacks. Some of the real racists down there would provoke fights and they got rid of a great many of them, but Robert Fambro, he stood up to all of it. He was one of three or four or five, maybe, that survived.

**African American Longshoreman Linell Hill owed his hiring to the compromise.**

**LINELL HILL:** We were originally hired in 1964 as “B” men. We were what they call “off-street” hires. It was a lot of institutional racism, subtle racism, outward racism, outward animosity, not only towards the black longshoremen, but to the white longshoremen who were considered “off the street.” In other words, you had registered longshoremen who felt as though their child should have had this job.

Oh yeah, I was concerned with my safety. You had winch drivers, you had hold men, you had a lot of people that did try to put you in what we call the bite, put you in a precarious position to get hurt. I mean, I took all precautionary measures, you know. But there’s a lot of other ways to get to you as opposed to just hurting you. Work practice, you know. There was work practice that make you do the majority of the work, you know, put you in the position to work the hardest. Not being told how to do the work, where they would tell the white longshoremen. You know, you can do a whole lot of work and then the boss’d come back and tell you to tear it down. “Why did you do it like this? Why’d you do it like that?”

A lot of the guys that they didn’t harass out of here, black and white, they worked ‘em out of there. I mean it was hard work, real hard work then. Everything was hand mucking. Most of the black longshoremen that were hired at that time come from very menial jobs: bellhops, busboys, worked in hospitals. You did jobs that didn’t require any physical. The intent was to hire people that wouldn’t last. Maybe six or seven guys got run off.

**The Black workers filed their 1968 complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) against Local 8 and the PMA, under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In June, the EEOC “found that reasonable cause existed to believe defendants . . . were in violation of Title VII,” the section making discrimination in employment illegal. When conciliation efforts to achieve voluntary compliance proved unsuccessful, Paul Meyer filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court. In December, representatives of all the parties met in Judge Gus Solomon’s chambers to work out a settlement. The representatives of the Joint Port Registration Committee agreed to begin admitting the Blacks to “A” status and to move them for union membership by August, but they refused to allow continuing oversight of new applications by the state Bureau of Labor.**

**PAUL MEYER** Attorney for the plaintiffs. Prior to ’64 they had a thousand fifty “A’s” and a hundred and fifty “B,” none of whom were black, nor were any black men admitted to membership in Local 8, for which you needed to be for “A” registration. And the 300 men then holding casual, or white cards, only eleven were black.

Registration then opened for approximately 300 “B” longshoremen and the joint committee established criteria. One hundred would come from the best qualified applicants among the then casual, 200 from other applicants. The civil rights organizations made efforts and so 46 of the 299 “B” were black, as registered in February of ’64. That was about the first time blacks had been permitted to work except for a few casual workers. . . .

We alleged that they [the joint committee] intentionally engaged in unlawful practices, in violation of Title
LINELL HILL: The lead plaintiff: The '68 suit was to eliminate the practices within Local 8. The officers and the rank and file of Local 8 had come up with a thing called the point system where we had to have 70 points to move into the class ‘A,’ status. You could lose points but you couldn’t gain points. You had no knowledge of who had filed charges against you. A gang boss, any registered longshoreman, whatever they perceived to be “bad work practice,” you got to work late or whatever, and they would write you up and they would turn it into the hall. Everyone started with 100 points. Only thing you could do was maintain or lose.

I had 100 points so to me it was saying it was a stronger case when a person with 100 points complained. It didn’t bother me because I knew that I had the backing of the Pacific Coast Longshore Contract Document.

We had run our gauntlet with the grievance procedure, that much of the grievance procedure that we could eke out of our offices. And we had the backing from the coast committee, also Harry Bridges. Matter of fact, the International was a friends of court in the law suit.

A lot of them [black workers] didn’t sign [onto the lawsuit] because the officers of Local 8 told a lot of guys, if you don’t sign we’ll see to it that you get registration. And they did. The guys that didn’t sign, they weren’t held back.

A lot of the guys just come right out front and told us, said, “Man I’m afraid I’m gonna lose my job. I been through this before and when they get through shaking out the sheets and iron the laundry, I was left holding the bag.”

PAUL MEYER: [Judge] Gus Solomon, was a very dedicated civil libertarian. He wanted to make some progress. Frank Pozzi, who in his public persona purported to be a liberal and a Democrat and all the good things that liberals are supposed to be, but in this case, to me, he was supporting the union and their bigotry, unashamedly and with passion. I was not afraid of going to court because I think it would have been devastatingly difficult for the union. I think we would have exploded them.

FRANK POZZI Attorney for the union: Gus [Solomon] got us in there and Gus said what are you doing? Say “We’re doing it.” We were. At the time, we were doing it, you see. We were taking ‘em in. Well a couple of guys tried to stall it, but it was coming and so we told Gus what we were gonna do and he in effect okayed it.

Right then the only thing that the local was concerned with, the local president, as I recall, was just insisting on doing it in order, the way we had agreed upon, his union. That’s all. And that’s all the hell Gus did. It was all overgrown. It was gonna happen. It had to happen. Everybody agreed it would happen. Even the one or two in the diehards. And it did happen . . . [The law suit] didn’t make any difference. [Did it speed it up?] six months, a year, maybe. No I don’t think that really did it.

LINELL HILL: You could tell Pozzi had cut some deals with Judge Solomon. Judge Solomon’s consent decree stated that they weren’t supposed to discriminate against us on registration, but they did. We walked out of that God-damned room, nothing changed. We just had some shit on paper, but it was up to us to push it. A lot of things that I feel we achieved through the law suit, it was never put down on paper. We achieved “A” registration but we didn’t achieve Local 8 registration, see.

The coast registered us above the objections of Local 8. The local couldn’t stop us from working class “A” man, but by not giving you local registration, they could keep you out of the Local 8 membership meetings. I had all the benefits. I was dispatched as a class “A” longshoreman, but I paid “B” longshoreman dues because I was not a member.

So then time came to pass where the rank and file started waking up. “Here’s a guy working right next to me. He’s paying twenty dollars a month and I’m paying forty. He’s getting the same benefits I am and it’s costing me another twenty dollars a month to keep him out of the membership meeting?” So they say, “Shit, let’s get ‘em Local 8 registration.” We got coastwise registration in ‘68. [Local 8 registration came in August of 1969.]
PAUL MEYER: The major thing was that it got all of my people, as I recall, into “A” status and into the union. And there were some face-saving devices. To me it was a bunch of pettifoggery about we’ve got to save our faces so we’ll do it gradually as if we’re doing it out of the goodness of our hearts, not because we are required to by the law. And you know, Gus is sitting there as a judge looking at the long run and figuring probably that, you know, for people who have been discriminated against for 300 hundred years in this country, another year or six months isn’t gonna be the be-all end-all and it probably will quote “take better” if the union isn’t offended by the process or feel like they’ve been bloodied.

Longshoreman Parks, who advised Afri-
can Americans to come in through the (closed) front door gets the last word:

G. “JOHNNY” PARKS: I said, “Well, I’ll tell you something Judge, we must have something good going for us. It’s the only union in this country that people are suing to get into.”

NOTES

1. Foster Hailey, “Bridges Code Put Into Union’s Laws; Race, Creed, Color, or Politics Barred by Coast Dock Group as Membership Test,” New York Times, April 9, 1941, p 22. See also https://www.ilwu.org/about/ten-guiding-principles/.


8. Since the PMA’s founding in 1949, the principal business of the PMA is to negotiate and administer maritime labor agreements with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). This includes a coast-wide contract covering nearly 15,000 longshore, clerk, and foreman workers at twenty-nine ports along the West Coast, from southern California to the Pacific Northwest. See http://www.pmanet.org/overview.

9. See Polishuk, Sticking to the Union, 134.


11. One might get the impression that, due to the eventual success within the union of Hill and the Fambros, issues of racism and discrimination ceased to exist in the local. That is not the case; these problems persist in the local as they do elsewhere, and issues continue to arise with minority and female members sometimes organizing and/or calling out their concerns within the union and even in public. A recent example took place in 1993, as documented by Jim Hill, “Black Longshoremen Cite Bias,” Oregonian, April 10, 1993, p. E01: “The African American Longshore coalition said it had sent letters to Gov. Barbara Roberts, Mayor Vera Katz and Rep. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., asking them to help create ‘an open and fair workplace.’ The target of the coalition’s efforts is Local 8 of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union. ‘Racism is very rampant and alive on the waterfront,’ said Jerome Polik, a Portland longshoreman and coalition member.” The article was likely in response to a press release of the African American Longshore coalition, sent on April 9, 1993, and reading, in part: “Our employer, the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), and our union, Local 8, have failed to respond to our letters of inquiry [sent January 27, 1993] on the issue of African American Longshoremen being systematically phased out of the Longshore Industry in Portland.”

12. The business agent is an elected and paid union officer who represents the interests of the members of the local in disputes with the employer; in other unions, the position is often called a union representative or steward.

13. At this point in the interview, Jimmy’s wife Charlotte interrupted to say that she did not think he had been president that early.

14. Pre-mechanization, when the work was heavily physical, gangs of four to six men formed to unload and stow cargo.

15. The Modernization and Mechanization (M & M) agreement, negotiated by Harry Bridges in 1960, included a shifting to a more coastwide hiring strategy and to the international wielding authority over promotion of B-men to A.


Polishuk, “They can’t come in through the front door because you guys won’t let them”