

Communist Tactics in the Trade Unions

Class Struggle on the Waterfront

On July 19 we interviewed Howard Keylor, a long-time trade-union militant on the waterfront in San Francisco. Brother Keylor is on the Executive Board of International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union Local 10 (longshore division) and is the editor of *Militant Longshoreman*. Keylor's record of over three decades in the ILWU and his break from Stalinism to Trotskyism give him a unique perspective on the fight for a class-struggle leadership in the American labor movement.

In the 1970's, as a supporter of the then-revolutionary Spartacist League, Keylor played an important role in organizing several small but successful actions on the waterfront in defense of the victims of South African apartheid and the Chilean junta. In the last several years, in addition to playing a leading role in several waterfront strikes, Keylor initiated two larger and more important actions in solidarity with heroic black workers battling the racist Botha regime. These actions provided a concrete alternative to the liberal moralism prevalent in the campus-based anti-apartheid movement and provide a model of how a communist opposition in the unions should act as the tribune of the oppressed.

1917: Let's start with your history in the ILWU. How did you come into the union?

Keylor: The hard way. I started in 1953 as a casual. That means just picking up extra work by standing around in the dispatch office. It means no stable, registered or even recognized status. I was lucky enough to know a couple of older activists in the union—one of whom belonged to the CP, another was an old Wobblie—who were friends of mine and used a bit of influence and got me on a casual list. It wasn't until 1959 that I got recognized status in the ILWU.

1917: But you were a member of other unions before?

Keylor: Yes, as a matter of fact in 1953 I had been fired from the job I worked for two years in a paper mill. I belonged to the papermakers' local union. I was active in that union in a limited way.

1917: You were a supporter of the Stalinist Communist Party for over 25 years. How were you won to Trotskyism?

Keylor: I had always been something of a secret dissident, I guess you could have called me a left-Stalinist. I was quite unhappy most of the time during the McCarthy period with the Communist Party trying to hide what seemed its own limited, but at least formally revolutionary ideology. I was never too happy with the policy of primarily trying to form alliances with bourgeois or petty-bourgeois formations. I guess I was an unreconstructed Third Period Stalinist.

I had my own somewhat secret, actually very secret, theory about the Soviet Union as a workers state in which the bureaucracy had seized power from the work-

ing class and suppressed working class dissidents. I knew that was the case, but I'd never been able to generalize my political differences.

1917: So how did you come to Trotskyism? Did you read a book by Trotsky or did you meet people that called themselves Trotskyists?

Keylor: I never read anything by Trotsky or any of the main writings about Trotskyism or met a Trotskyist until the 1971-72 longshore strike when I came in contact with Asher Harer, a member of the union who was a well-known supporter of the Socialist Workers Party and is today with Socialist Action. I collaborated with him in writing a leaflet during the 143-day strike in 1971-72 and I wasn't too happy with the collaboration because, while some of what we were asking for programmatically seemed to make sense, he was very adamant on not criticizing the international union bureaucracy and their conduct in the strike. He was the only ostensible Trotskyist I had ever had any contact with.

It wasn't until about August 1974 that I ran into an old tattered copy of Deutscher's *The Prophet Armed* [the first volume of a three-part political biography of Trotsky]. I took it home; stayed up all night reading it and then went to a library the next day and got the rest of the trilogy, read it and walked around in a daze for a couple of weeks. It wasn't until I came in contact with the Spartacist League in the fall of 1974 that I began doing some consistent reading on Trotskyism and was won over painfully.

1917: You eventually became a supporter of the Spartacist League?

Keylor: Yes, I became a supporter of the Spartacist League, which as you know, at that time had a serious orientation to trade-union work—something which is no longer the case. Actually, initially I became a member of the SL-supported Longshore/Warehouse Militant Caucus, and in April of 1975 became an organized supporter of the Spartacist League.

1917: This is the thirteenth consecutive year you have been elected to the Executive Board of ILWU Local 10 on an openly socialist program. How have you managed to win a base for your politics in the union?

Keylor: There are really two separate questions. Getting elected to the Executive Board was initially rather difficult. There was a lot of competition for Executive Board posts in the earlier period. Having transferred from the small up-river port of Stockton to San Francisco in 1970, I was a relatively "new boy" on the block. Also, I was white and the San Francisco longshoremen were, and are still, about 70 percent black. Initially it was not easy to get elected and running on an explicitly socialist, transitional program made it even more difficult.

By December 1974, when I first ran on this program as a member of the Militant Caucus, socialists had

mostly been identified with the Communist Party in Local 10. The Communist Party had to a large extent been discredited because of their support to the international union's bureaucratic sellout of the workers interests. In the first period some of our support came from militants who thought we were uniquely honest in saying what we stood for, and because we were projecting a positive program and were not afraid to criticize all levels of the bureaucracy. That was rather unusual because almost all other figures, even minor ones in the Local at that time, were identified with either one of two main bureaucratic factions--the [ILWU President Harry] Bridges faction or the large, amorphous anti-Bridges faction.

We stood outside these formations and acted as a very small, hard left political pole, and nothing like that had been done for a long, long time. I particularly suffered some difficulty, because in moving toward an explicitly socialist program based on the Transitional Program, I had to break with the whole anti-Bridges bloc that I had worked with for almost four years—some of whom were my close friends.

1917: So in the union you ran on the Transitional Program. One of the criticisms which we often hear of this approach by groups like Workers Power in Britain is that raising a full socialist program amounts to “ultimatism.” Their idea is that demands like the call for workers defense guards or for a workers government are too advanced for the present consciousness of the class. How would you respond?

Keylor: I would respond that the failure to raise the whole Transitional Program as applied to the particular trade-union milieu or trade-union situation amounts to misleading the workers, because all points or aspects of that program sometime or other, sooner or later, relate to immediate questions facing the union. It is impossible to build a class-struggle opposition that can lead workers, even to defend themselves, without educating at least a section of the activist workers—the most advanced ones—about the social and political reality in which they are operating.

For example, in the mid to late fifties, the union started to get very deeply involved in Democratic Party politics in San Francisco. Actually earlier in Hawaii, the bulk of the union became intertwined with the Democratic Party to such an extent that the interests of the various coalitions they were backing ran directly counter to the interests of the workers. To oppose support to the Democrats you have to explain the class nature of the capitalist state, and that automatically raises the question of the workers government—just like any serious picket line situation poses in embryo the necessity for some kind of workers defense guards.

The bottom line is that you can't build a pro-socialist wing in the unions by hiding your politics—that's always a sign of adaptation to the present backwardness of the class. You've got to be upfront about what you stand for and try to apply your program in a creative way to address the concrete questions which arise. To pick out a few of the demands of the Transitional Program that might be more popular at a given moment,

and just run on them, in effect destroys the whole purpose of the program—which is to connect the immediate, felt needs of the workers to the necessity of a political struggle for power.

1917: From time to time there have been oppositional formations in the ILWU that ran on a program of “more militancy” and “more democracy,” similar to Ed Sadowski in steel or Arnold Miller in the coal miners union, or the Teamsters for a Democratic Union [TDU]. Many leftists see these campaigns as a step forward because they oppose the incumbent bureaucrats. How do you look at such a lesser-evil approach to union work?

Keylor: It's not very practical. Even when they succeed in throwing out the existing bureaucrats the results are usually disastrous. Even assuming you've got honest, well-meaning elements leading these oppositional groups—and not just another gang of would-be bureaucrats—when they get into power, they find themselves up against the same opposition from the government, the same legalistic restrictions and the same nasty, brutal repression from the employers. And lacking an understanding—a political class understanding—of how to break out of those restrictions, those leaders will end up acting like Miller, Nixon's candidate in the mineworkers. They will become brutal bureaucrats themselves and suppress the rank-and-file.

In longshore there was a big, broad oppositional grouping to the Bridges leadership in the late sixties, based in part on new people who had come into the union. When Bridges finally retired, various elements of this opposition came into power, especially in the major longshore locals. They didn't do any better in defending the interests of the workers than the Bridges machine. The only real alternative is to pose class-struggle oppositional formations, which stand as a political alternative to all varieties of business unionism.

1917: What would distinguish such caucuses from formations like the TDU?

Keylor: They are distinguished primarily by their program. When they get elected in a given section of a union they are predictable in terms of what they will do. When oppositional groupings that are not programmatically based win leadership in a union, they usually don't remain intact. The only glue that holds them together is the fight for power. Once they get in, they quite frequently split or dissolve into their components, fighting over crumbs; or they become cynically co-opted into the bureaucratic system. The very best of such formations will simply degenerate into nickel-and-dime economism or social-democratic maneuverism. An opposition based on a coherent program of class struggle can win workers to a political understanding and the necessity to fight for it. In learning to apply that program to all aspects of the union's life, as well as in the whole of society, they become committed to that program.

Individuals can betray or fall away but the betrayal will be quite conspicuous. One of the virtues of running on a clear class-struggle program is that the workers know where you stand on all major issues or can figure out which side you are going to come down on regarding

the issues facing the union.

1917: When is it correct for Trotskyists in the unions to support other groups or individuals for union office? What should be the conditions of that support?

Keylor: Given the extremely degenerate condition of the American trade-union leadership, one has to be extremely careful about offering even critical support to individuals or groupings running for office. Even the smallest committee in the union will be dealing with questions that have to do with the power of the employers over the workers or questions of class-collaboration. So the criteria that one has to apply must be based on program.

While it will vary from time to time in practice, there are certain minimum positions we would generally want to see publicly taken by individuals running for office before we would think of voting for them. There are three interconnected questions that I can think of. One is no support for the top trade-union bureaucracy. There isn't a single major union in this country in which all the components at the top have not been at least complicit in major betrayals of the workers interests. Only people that are prepared to openly break with all sections of the trade-union bureaucracy, and criticize it, can have sufficient independence to merit support.

Another absolutely minimal programmatic aspect is the defense of the independence of the workers movement, especially the unions, from the capitalist state. This usually comes up over the question of lawsuits against the unions or government intervention into the internal affairs of the unions.

1917: Or defying injunctions?

Keylor: Yes, that is another aspect of the same thing. Anyone who runs for office in a union and will not take a position on the necessity to defy injunctions or court orders emanating from the capitalist state, is simply not able to defend workers interests.

And then there is the question of a break with the Democratic and Republican parties, the twin bourgeois parties. While we always call for a break with the Democrats and Republicans and for a workers government that will expropriate industry without compensation, in some cases we have given critical support to candidates for office who simply called for breaking with the Democrats and Republicans and forming a workers party.

In general though, "critical support" in union elections is an application of the united front. Lenin compared it to that which a rope gives a hanged man. What he meant was that an important aspect of critical support is exposure, in practice, of the inadequacies and contradictions of a reformist program. You cannot expose a reformist unless he or she runs on a platform that in some fashion represents a real break from class-collaborationism. Every out-bureaucrat will promise "more militancy" and "more democracy"—it's cheap. If you vote for somebody on that basis you are really just voting for one reformist because he's more popular than the other.

It's always a concrete question, but if a reformist oppositionist is running at the head of a real rank-and-file movement, and is seriously committed in the eyes of

his base to fight for some programmatic plank which is really opposed to pro-capitalist business unionism, then class-struggle elements could consider offering him critical support, despite the reformist limitations of the rest of his platform. At the same time, it is necessary to warn those who follow such a candidate that his platform as a whole contradicts this particular demand. That way, if and when he betrays this demand, those who supported him because of it will begin to understand that only the consistent class-struggle elements in the union are capable of really fighting for their interests.

1917: In 1984 you initiated a united front for the political strike which boycotted the South African cargo on the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* in San Francisco. A lot of the workers involved in that action had very different politics than yours, right?

Keylor: That is correct. The initiating committee and the committee that implemented the boycott after it was approved, was composed of individuals who had not only widely different political views, but who had often been in very sharp, antagonistic disputes in the union and even outside the union.

1917: On the eleventh day of the cargo boycott, when a federal court injunction came down, the bloc split. What happened?

Keylor: When the federal injunction came down the local union leadership, which had been giving passive support, and in some cases rather active support to the boycott, called a special meeting of the local executive board. After extensive debate the board voted eleven to five to comply with the injunction. In the course of that debate the bloc split with most of the members, who were either one-time adherents or supporters of the Communist Party, various Maoist groupings or who could be characterized as something like black nationalists, went along with the union bureaucracy in advocating an end to the boycott and complying with the injunction.

The local executive board voted to end the boycott and voted down my proposal to call a mass, stop-work membership meeting at the pier to make the decision. I called for this because a meeting of a couple of thousand longshoremen at the pier would have amounted to a mass picket line and could well have led to successfully defying the injunction. At any rate, my proposal was voted down. So then, I, along with a number of other militants in the union and supporters from outside the union, attempted to put up a picket line and continue the boycott and defy the injunction. Initially we closed down the pier and stopped the trucks for an hour and the longshoremen did not work. But eventually the Stalinists, the adherents of the Communist Party, helped the cops to break the action by escorting the trucks through the picket line and creating fear among those participants who were not part of the union that they would go to jail for long periods of time for defying the injunction.

1917: Recently there has been an important strike on the waterfront by the Inland Boatman's Union [IBU], an affiliate of the ILWU. I understand you have been active

in promoting cooperation between the IBU and the longshore division to stop scabbing. Was there any defiance of injunctions in this strike?

Keylor: Not defiance of an injunction specifically, but there was an invasion of “private property” when the employers took three barges that had been stopped through joint IBU/ILWU action in Oakland to Redwood City and began unloading them with non-longshoremen. This was seen as a direct incursion of longshore jurisdiction, as well as an attempt to weaken and break the IBU strike. All the longshoremen, clerks and walking bosses in the Bay Area then left their jobs and traveled to the pier to protest the scabbing. This was an “illegal” action because, according to federal law, we were violating our contract. In fact, members of the longshore division and the striking boatmen went onto the pier and “illegally” chased off the scabs.

There have been many injunctions in the IBU strike which have largely strangled it, because they have been adhered to by the leadership of the IBU and the ILWU. The lesson that class-conscious militants in the unions have to constantly hammer home to the membership is that even a minimal defense of the union requires actions that are illegal under some section or sections of federal law. Whether defiance of an injunction, or even the most minimal stop-work action, the Taft-Hartley law makes it all illegal.

1917: Gompers-style “business unionists” argue that unions should concern themselves simply with the wages and working conditions of their members. In the long run the interests of the longshoremen are tied pretty closely to the interests of the class as a whole, including the unemployed. How can this connection be made?

Keylor: One of the problems we ran into in longshore is the parochialism, growing out of the fact that longshoremen, by the nature of their work, even though they are small in numbers, have an unusual economic power. Ports and port facilities can’t be moved easily. But the union could not have been formed in the first place or defended against employer attacks, especially in the early decades, without the support of other workers and especially other maritime workers. There is an unusually rich history of this in longshore which has almost been lost, but which the class-struggle militants went back to and used as illustrations.

For example, it is not well known, but in 1934 when scabs were loading ships in San Francisco harbor and some other west coast ports, the longshoremen in Chile, even though they were under a quite repressive government, refused to handle scab cargo. Longshoremen in Australia and some other countries did the same. That kind of international support was one of the factors that helped win the strike. Of course it was the massive San Francisco general strike and the threat of extending it to the rest of the west coast that finally won the establishment of the longshoremen’s union in 1934. Today we call for using the union’s full power to organize the unemployed in waterfront areas. That should make a lot of sense to any trade-unionist—it’s elementary self-defense.

As for the unemployed, rather than accept a shrinking

workforce in longshore, for example, we call for a shorter work shift with no loss in pay to the point where not only all present workers are kept working, but additional workers can be added. This is how the Transitional Program proposes to solve unemployment—by dividing the available work among the available workforce, at no loss in pay.

It is also important to start organizing the unemployed directly by the unions, similar to what was done in the 1930’s especially in the mass organizing of auto workers. That’s part of the lost history of the labor movement. It would have been a lot harder to organize those auto plants if they hadn’t been organizing the unemployed along with them. A lot of the pickets that surrounded and sealed off the auto plants were composed of unemployed auto workers organized in unemployed leagues close to the union.

1917: Historically, the most important single obstacle to class consciousness among white workers in America has been the deeply embedded racism in this country. How can socialists in the unions take up this problem?

Keylor: Socialists first of all have to confront the problem where it exists. Even in the longshore union division racism existed in the form of restrictions against blacks coming into the union in a number of locals. The issue has to be confronted directly in terms of hiring, especially in hiring of blacks, Asians and other minority workers. In the longshore division that battle has been largely won for now. But the overall threat to the union by divisions among workers growing out of racism is a very real one.

Several years ago when a black longshoreman in my local moved into an area of the suburbs that was largely white, he was subject to direct threats and even attacks on his house by the Ku Klux Klan. At that time we Trotskyists fought for a defense guard composed largely of longshoremen to defend that worker’s home in conjunction with black community groups. We fought this issue out in the union. We lost the fight but in the process we made some gains in terms of educating workers in the necessity of not depending on the bourgeois state for defense against racist, fascist groups like the Klan.

1917: As I understand it, the union bureaucracy decided to hire private security guards instead.

Keylor: That is correct. The interesting thing is that we won the fight in the sense that the union bureaucrats had to concede that it was not realistic to simply rely on the police to defend this threatened worker. But their solution was to hire private security guards around the clock to protect his home.

1917: Finally, how do you see the possibilities for the creation of a class-struggle current in the unions in the coming period?

Keylor: The potential is great but the difficulty is that in the short run there are not sizeable political groupings in place that can initiate and give rise to indigenous class-struggle formations which can pose a quantitatively significant alternative on a national level. It is not going to happen spontaneously. It didn’t happen that way in the high points in North American trade-union

history in the past. The obstacles to an alternative class-struggle leadership being built are in some ways even greater today, so that the necessity to bring forward the hard-won lessons of working-class struggle in initiating and building such formations is even more critical.

Part of the reluctance of workers to struggle and to go on the offensive is a lack of confidence in their present leadership. In fact, I wouldn't say part of the reason, I'd say the overwhelming obstacle to a working-class offensive against Reagan is that the union ranks don't trust their leadership to lead them in struggle.

There is among American workers a very profoundly felt hunger and need for labor unity in struggle. This was clearly expressed around the PATCO strike. Many workers have told me, even the most conservative workers, that the only thing that could have saved that strike, and stopped Reagan's union-busting was a nation-wide general strike, or at least regional general strikes where the airports were. That was a very deep-felt need of workers at that time. Unfortunately there were not the political groupings in place within the unions with the will and the authority to have raised those demands in such a way as to force some action. So we saw a defeat.

The key is to build a revolutionary organization with a real, organic connection to the working class. That is why I am a supporter of the Bolshevik Tendency. Be-

cause I think the Bolshevik Tendency has learned these lessons best and can show the way to build such formations in the working class. At this point, the question is one of the struggle for political clarity in the construction of the nuclei of the future leadership of the class.

There is today a growing awareness on the part of the more advanced workers that their problems can't be solved on a national basis. I have been surprised at how aware workers are that capitalist interests can move their money around pretty freely from country to country. They recognize that it isn't possible even to wrest lasting gains in this country because the capitalists can always move their money to where the rate of exploitation is higher than it is here.

There is a really deep felt need for international solidarity among workers. We found this was true in longshore when we raised demands for the defense of workers in other countries: South Africa, Chile and others. And when there was a possibility of acting, even in a small and symbolic fashion, to build solidarity with workers internationally, I have found through my own experience on the waterfront that the workers are quite open. And that's why you can remain optimistic about the future. In the last analysis though, it all comes back to the question of available alternatives—the question of the crisis of working-class leadership. ■