

CHAPTER III

Storm Birds

(1900-1915)

As the new century began, the Sailors' Union of the Pacific found itself in a contradictory position. A historian of San Francisco Bay Area labor relations in the period, Robert Knight, has noted that "the Sailors' Union was unusually influential in the San Francisco labor movement. The *Coast Seamens Journal* (was) the only union paper existing in San Francisco. The Sailors' Union donated large sums to support strikes by other unions, and by 1900 many of its members had been active in organizing onshore workers and in serving as outstanding leaders of various San Francisco unions and labor councils."

However, Pete Gill, just then beginning his long tenure as agent for the Union in the Port of Seattle, has described the threatening aspect of the time in eloquent terms: "Employers nationally were organizing both industrially in the first huge monopolies and trusts, and defensively against labor in national trade associations. Labor and capital were consolidating for battle. Shorn of revolutionary phrases, it was nevertheless a very real and bitter class struggle that was born out of the old century."

The end of the nineties had seen a massive increase in labor organization. The weakened economy of the 19th century's final decade gave way, at last, to the recovery that made the improvement of labor's fortunes possible. The stronger labor movement generated yet stronger militancy and was answered by the employers with one of the most serious attempts at destruction of labor's rights ever seen in the U.S. In San Francisco, the battle between the unions and business culminated in the dramatic, bloody 1901 transportation strike.

City Front Federation

The most significant public action by the Union in the period leading up to the 1901 strike was the founding, in January of that year, of the City Front Federation, linking the Sailors with the longshoremen, teamsters, mates, engineers, marine firemen, freight-handlers, and lumbermen. Altogether, 44 federation delegates represented nine unions. John Kean, Chris Jortall, and F. Johnson were elected from the S.U.P. In May, a new member of the maritime labor family was born: the Marine Cooks and Stewards established their first stable organization.

The clash between the employers and the mighty ranks of San Francisco labor began in earnest in July when a group of teamsters were locked out for refusing to haul non-union-unloaded baggage. At mid-month the Employers' Association, acting through its constituent draymen's group, informed the teamsters that they must all leave the unions or quit their jobs; 6,400 teamsters walked out.

The City Front Federation, led by Furuseth, attempted to arbitrate the growing crisis, but learned that the employers' side was definitively controlled by the secret Michael group, which refused even to meet with union representatives. The San Francisco Labor Council described the secret group as a "menace to the peace and prosperity of the community," while the Sailors' Union referred to the employers' group as an "order of industrial assassins." The Association war on the unions was supported by the courts, the police, and the city administration. Against a backdrop of national labor unrest, the San Francisco workers found themselves in a genuine life-and-death struggle for their rights. A similar determination to wipe out unionism was also becoming visible in other major cities around the world.

At the end of July the City Front Federation in protest against the terroristic secrecy of the Employers' Association, unanimously affirmed their willingness to fight back. The *Coast Seamen's Journal* declared that "San Francisco has now entered upon the greatest epoch in her career, and the issue will decide, for a long time at least, whether she will continue to grow as a free, sovereign commonwealth, peopled by free and self-respecting manhood and womanhood, or fall into a state of rot and decay, breeding nothing but industrial parasites and the stuff they prey on." The *Journal* went on to assert that "the City Front Federation of San Francisco now holds in its hands the fortunes of the entire labor movement on the Pacific Coast and, to a considerable extent, of the labor movement throughout the country. The result of the present struggle in San Francisco will either strengthen or weaken the forces of labor now aligned to meet the onslaught of concentrated capital against the liberties and the common manhood of the American people. The result lies with ourselves. The workers, united and firm in the demand for decent conditions of employment, are supreme and invincible. ... no employers' association or other array of opposing forces can subjugate them." In an accompanying statement over the signature of acting President John Kean, the City Front Federation warned that "we are satisfied that we have done everything we could to avert this crisis, but arrogant and designing capital will it otherwise. Those individuals in society who would use their industrial power to rob us of our right of organization granted to us by society as a whole must bear responsibility for whatever may now take place."

The ranks of the strikers rose by 20,000 with the walkout of the City Front Federation. The open-shop forces also swelled, with the importation of strike-breakers. By all indications, neither of the two classes was prepared to surrender. Strikers were assaulted by police as well as strikebreakers, nearly all of whom were armed. Special detective services provided "guards" to protect scab deliveries. The Sailors' Union patrolled the waterfront, issuing passes to union men. The pro-employer San Francisco *Argonaut* slashed at the Union for this practice, slandering Furuseth as "this Scandinavian dictator of ours (who) wants his Scandinavian scum to be permitted to beat American citizens into a bloody pulp." Along with the Teamsters' Michael Casey, the seamen's champion became one of the main labor spokesmen during the dramatic contest, thanks to his skill as a speaker and the determination of the Sailors' Union membership.

The strike continued at a virtual stalemate, with days and weeks turning into months. Finally, on October 2, California state governor Henry T. Gage announced a settlement consisting of nothing more than a declaration that the transport strikes and lock-outs then in effect were ended. No details of any agreement were ever revealed, and the Battle of 1901 was widely conceded to have ended in a draw - except that the unions had clearly won recognition. Strikers were to be rehired without discrimination. The secret Michael group had failed in its bid to extirpate unionism, and the Employers' Association returned to obscurity. According to Robert Knight, "in the crucial struggle of 1901, only the alliance forged by the members of the City Front Federation enabled San Francisco labor to halt the open-shop drive." Gill described the conflict as "the most remarkable (strike) in the history of the city," and reported that during the two-month period, 5 men were killed with 336 recorded assaults, 250 requiring medical attention. Although the journals of the time credited Governor Gage with settlement of the great strike, it has been suggested that the state's chief executive was himself acting along lines proposed by Father Yorke.

Aftermath of 1901

Soon after the conclusion of the strike, the Sailors' Union won a new victory when federal judge Edward J. Bradford held that the provisions of the White Act barring the payment of advances applied to foreign seamen when in American ports. The union also scored an important point in the aftermath of the 1901 strike by securing a written contract with the West Coast shipowners. As indicated by historian Paul Taylor, the contract signed in 1902 marked the first full recognition won by the Sailors, after 17 years of struggle. The agreement was set for six months' duration with extensions subject to 30 days' notice of cancellation by either party. In some of its points, unfortunately, the 1902 agreement represented a questionable success. The Union declared itself opposed to sympathetic strikes, and the shipowners set up a shipping office in San Francisco, barring the use of crimps. On the other hand, a 9-hour day (except in San Francisco) and overtime were recognized. The agreement was duly renewed in 1903. Although in 1904 the question of the Union hiring hall re-emerged within the organization, it was set aside for a year. The Union expanded its agitation for improved conditions, concentrating on the bad fore-castles for which the coastwise steam-schooners were notorious. In addition, steam-schooner messroom space was utilized for cargo and passengers, forcing the crew to eat on the deck or even on the lumber load. This was, of course, especially resented in winter-time.

The 1901 strike illustrated a potential for class war on a broad scale in the U.S. Although the brunt of the workers' defense against abuses of the employing class had come to be carried by the mainstream Union movement, more radical voices were again heard in Labor as the new century opened. A dissatisfaction with the slow rate of progress struck roots. After attempting to organize industry wide through the American Railway Union of the early 1890's, rail-road labor leader Eugene Victor Debs turned to a political socialism strongly influenced by Western European models. Daniel De Leon, a more rigorous socialist thinker, warned the working class that false "labor leaders" could betray the ranks and end up as allies of the exploiters, if not exploiters themselves.

In the inland U.S., unions like the Western Federation of Miners found themselves in a far more difficult situation than the Sailors' Union of the Pacific: in the metal mines of Idaho, Colorado, and Montana the W.F.M. established itself after 1893 through its members' marksmanship against company police and pro-employer local authorities. Some leaders of the W.F.M., which received considerable moral support from the S.U.P., went on to attack the American Federation of Labor as, in effect, an employers' agency working to suppress the proletarian revolt. Finally the W.F.M. dropped out of the A.F.L.

Within the A.F.L., some other unions were clearly as radical in their thinking and methods as the WEM. The United Brewery Workmen had long acted as a militantly revolutionary body within the national labor organization. Mostly German-speaking and faithfully reproducing the socialist culture they had left behind in "the old country," the Brewery Workmen had inscribed "Workingmen of All Countries, Unite," on their union label, and had fought tenaciously for industry-wide organization, in opposition to the craft organization conception of A.F.L. head Samuel Gompers. The Brewery union was also strongly supported by the S.U.P. along the Pacific Coast, where leadership in the Brewery organization had been taken by Alfred Fuhrman, a socialist and former member of the Coast Seamen's Union. By 1904, the Brewery Workmen were, like the W.F.M., considering an exit from the A.F.L.

In June, 1905, an event in Chicago marked a new stage in the development of the labor movement, and foretold a long, momentous, and complicated set of changes within the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, the traces of which may still be found at the time of this writing, some eighty years afterward. This was the foundation meeting of the Industrial Workers of the World, a revolutionary labor organization that was to begin its work by declaring that "the working class and the employing class have nothing in common." This was, at minimum, a direct challenge to the increasing trend on the part of some union leaders to

collaborate with the employers in such groups as the National Civic Federation, which numbered the S.U.P.'s Furuseth and Macarthur among its leading figures. At maximum, it was a cry of defiance to a whole society.

The participants in the earliest organizational steps of the I. W. W. included William Dudley Haywood, a hero of the W.F.M., William Trautmann, former editor of the Brewery Workers' journal, the *Brauer-Zeitung*, deposed from his editorship for endorsing the meeting, and representatives of Debs' and De Leon's socialist groups. The "Preamble" issued at the founding meeting, insisted that "instead of the conservative motto, A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work, we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the Wage System." In this, the I.W.W. echoed the words of the same Marx whose related thoughts had percolated through the Coast Seamen's Union in the late 1880's.

1906: San Francisco Earthquake and Fire

The following year saw San Francisco rocked by the disastrous April 18, 1906 earthquake and fire. With the city in ruins, the Union's headquarters in the Audiffred Building at the southwest corner of Mission and East Streets (Embarcadero 100 was among the few surviving structures, and remained the organization's central office.) The *Coast Seamen's Journal* was transferred out of town, temporarily, but managed to publish its regular issue on April 25, although with only four pages in place of the usual sixteen. The paper reported that some Union members had been careless in their attitudes toward the soldiers and Navy personnel imported into the quake-struck city to enforce martial law, and had been shot, although none were apparently killed. In the following weeks the Union actively joined in the work of rebuilding the great city. The reconstruction boom led to increased lumber traffic and a rapid recovery in shipping. However, the improved economic situation stirred the Pacific Coast maritime employers to yet another attack on the Union. In June, 1906, steamschooner operators locked out longshoremen on certain docks, along with sailors, firemen, and cooks. The steamships were diverted to Oakland strikebreakers.

The City Front Federation attempted to settle the dispute, which ostensibly centered on wages but which fundamentally reflected the desire of the steamschooner employers to dispense with labor representation. Employer intransigence spurred the Federation to strike Pacific Coast Steamship Company, a leading scabherder. Striking sailor Andrew Kellner was killed in an incident on June 17, allegedly by a gunman who was later tried but found not guilty. The sailors, firemen, and cooks withdrew from the Federation in an attempt to end the lockout of the longshoremen. The longshoremen returned to work but the sailors continued striking. The local press called for military action, and, ever generous to the Sailors in matters of libel, attacked "czar" Furuseth, accusing him of professing peace in San Francisco and murder in other ports. The strike wore on, and ended in November with the employers' surrender. Although the Sailors did not reaffiliate with the City Front Federation until 1913, they considered the outcome a major victory won thanks to a combination of intelligent tactics and the favorable situation in shipping. From the end of the 1906 strike until 1921, the Union engaged in no further industrial action of this type. In this regard, it is clear that Furuseth gave ammunition to dissidents who now began accusing the S.U.P. leadership of excessive diplomacy toward the employers, and who found the radical perspectives of the I. W. W. more appealing. The discontent of militants with an increasingly conservative "standard trade unionism" was spreading.

Legal Improvements

The year 1913 saw the resignation of Walter Macarthur from the editorship of the *Journal* and his replacement by Paul Scharrenberg, who had been the paper's manager. Macarthur accepted a position as U.S. Shipping Commissioner, which he fulfilled until his retirement in 1932. He authored a number of important works on maritime law and was also a talented painter. Scharrenberg, born in Germany in 1877, had joined the S.U.P. in 1899. The first decade of the century showed some improvement in the legal position of the seafarer. Through court action to enforce the Maguire and White acts, the sailors largely wiped out the abuses of the allotment system, crimping, shanghaiing, and buckoism. A Supreme Court decision in the *Osceola* case established the principle that vessel operators must provide for maintenance and cure of sick seamen, including full payment of wages for the duration of a voyage, and further made the shipowners liable for injuries caused by unseaworthy or otherwise defective equipment. Other legal petitions secured the requirement that a ship put into the nearest port for aid to injured crew members. One of the most important legal victories came with a Supreme Court decision holding that foreign seamen on foreign vessels in American harbors were subject to U.S. laws, although later action provided foreign consular officials with legal support in their enforcement of their own countries' laws on "desertion."

Furuseth's leadership program was based on the belief that improvement of legal status was the key to seamen's welfare but, as Pete Gill, responsible for the Union's affairs in the Seattle area, pointed out: "if conditions had been improved somewhat in matters affected by seamen's legislation, they had become infinitely worse in all things left to the discretion of the shipowners. The most glaring example of this was the disregard for safety." Ships and lives were lost in an increasingly terrible hecatomb; by 1916, life insurers stated that the accident rate among seamen stood at 17 percent, compared with 10.5 percent for the general population. Government safety inspectors seemed to play the role of happy courtesan to the shipowners. In 1914, the *Coast Seamen's Journal* published figures showing that lives lost at sea worldwide had risen dramatically over the previous half-century from 1,018 between 1860-64 to 5,445 in the 4 years and 5 months covered between 1909 and 1914.

The legal improvements so far obtained by Furuseth, on close examination, were therefore relatively limited. The White Act had abolished penalties for "desertion" in domestic ports, but in the states of California, Washington, Oregon, and Massachusetts

maintained imprisonment through fugitive sailor laws. In 1904, the Massachusetts law was used for strike-breaking purposes. The year before, the S.U.P. had sought repeal of the California law but a partial reform was achieved only in 1907, when regulations against "harboring deserted seamen" were abolished, but penalties for "enticing seamen to desert" were allowed to remain in force. The latter rule was strongly attacked by the S.U.P. as a shield for scabherding. The activities of the Union in patrolling the waters around struck ships in its own launch had been halted by this law. Finally, in 1911, California governor Hiram Johnson, then an authentic progressive and an opponent of the giant railroad and other "interests" in the state, signed a bill completely eliminating fugitive sailor legislation. Repeal of the Washington state equivalent had come in 1909, with the Massachusetts law stricken from the books in 1910.

LaFollette

Projects for full emancipation of the sailor were introduced into the national Congress in the period from 1900 to 1911 but without much success. The Maguire Act had failed to provide seamen with the right to sue for return of clothing held unlawfully but a successful 1904 bill at least stiffened penalties for such seizure. A 1910 Seamen's Bill shepherded by U.S. Senator Robert M. LaFollette, a progressive from Wisconsin, included broad requirements on safety, manning, and other improvements, including abrogation of any foreign treaties calling for arrest of foreign 'deserters.' But the effort failed.

The fight was resumed in 1913, again under the stewardship of Senator La Follette. The shipowners arranged for the introduction of an alternate bill. The La Follette document passed the Senate but it, too, seemed destined for defeat in the other house by the shipowners' proposed bill. Congress delayed action on the competing measures until early 1915 but, on March 4 of that year, President Woodrow Wilson signed the La Follette Seamen's Act into law. The final incarnation of the bill was relatively weak on safety but was viewed by the Sailors as a major conquest.

The 1915 Seamen's Act established:

- .That masters must fill vacancies in a crew during a voyage with men of the same or higher rating. Previous law called for men of the same rating "if available."
- .Two watches on deck and three in the "black gang" at sea with a nine hour workday in port, and a ban on unnecessary Sunday and holiday work.
- .Two days' pay for each day's delay in paying off seamen, doubling the previous penalty.
- .A draw of half wages earned in any port of discharge with provision for full pay if the request for a draw was refused. Previously, the master enjoyed the option of abrogation of half-pay.
- The right of a majority of crew members to demand inspections for seaworthiness.
- 120 cubic feet and 16 square feet of fore-castle space per individual, bunks a maximum of two high, washrooms for sailors and firemen, a hospital aboard each vessel, fumigation and at least two exits in fore-castles.
- .Abolition of imprisonment for desertion in foreign ports.
- .Removal of U.S. consuls from the duty of arresting 'deserters.'
- .Equal liability for damages between masters and owners, thus providing means to eliminate corporal punishment, with the master liable for failure to surrender an officer charged with brutality.
- .A doubled butter allowance and 25 percent increase in water.
- .Prohibition of allotment except to dependent relatives.
- .Inclusion of fishermen in prohibition of garnishment of seamen's wages except for attachment by a court for support of a spouse or minor children.
- Except for inland waters, all vessels over 100 gross tons to carry 40 percent A.B. seamen in the first year, to be eventually raised to 65 percent, with 75 percent English-language requirement.
- .Efficiency standards for able seamen and lifeboatmen.
- .Yearly reports to Congress on men lost while working on barges.
- .Protection of foreign seamen's right to quit in U.S. ports.
- .The right of seamen to collect damages from officers' negligence.

Subversion of the LaFollette Act

The shipowners and their henchmen in government responded to the passage of the Act by attempting to subvert its enforcement. The Justice Department held that A.B. and lifeboat efficiency standards only applied on foreign ships when passengers were carried. The government also called for rigorous physical examinations for A.B.'s that resulted in an 11 percent failure rate on the Pacific Coast. The Commerce Department asserted that fore-castle requirements were restricted to vessels built after passage of the Act. Court tests found that seamen asking for half wages could be deemed deserters and their claims denied and also reestablished advance payments by masters of U.S. vessels in foreign ports. The latter was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The passage of the Seamen's Act propelled Furuseth into the national press limelight, making him an important public figure, a leading representative of labor's aspirations both throughout the U.S. and around the world. A major part of his and the Union's international impact was their participation in the International Transportworkers' Federation, in which the I.S.U. and the British

maritime unions sat along- side socialist union activists from Germany and French revolutionary syndicalists. (The Russian-Italian socialist leader Angelica Balabanova served as translator at the I.T.F.'s international meetings.) The activities of the I.T.F. form a fascinating chapter in world labor history that is worthy of study.

Furuseth and the Union also indicated their unease at the growth of the war menace in Europe. In 1914 the first of the world wars finally began. The U.S. did not become involved until 1917, but American entry would create, at first, some apparent benefits for the seamen, before bringing forth disaster.