

# CHAPTER IX

## *"The Fight Goes On"*

### (1950-1985)

The years from 1950 to the present, in the history of the S.U.P., are probably best symbolized by the classic headquarters building that stands on Rincon Hill in San Francisco. Within site of the bloody battle that raged in July '34, when the sailors joined the rest of the maritime labor movement to win back a measure of dignity, the tall stone building was opened for use in June, 1950.

The building's plans were drafted by William Gladstone Merchant, who also designed the theme building of the 1939-40 San Francisco international exposition, "Pacific House." It is considered a specially-fine example of the art deco "streamlined moderne" style, and on the basis of esthetic excellence alone, the choice of this particular architect does credit to the union.

#### **Lundeberg's Legacy**

The headquarters building project was a beloved one to Harry Lundeberg, and its construction reflected Lundeberg's own pride in the Union, its members, and its ideals. Even today, the structure is an impressive one, with a sense of grace both within and without. It is a good place to be, whether one is waiting for a job or handling official union business. It was built to last, as the union itself was created.

A 1984 study by the San Francisco Department of City Planning, commissioned to examine proposals for development of 12 blocks of Rincon Hill for high-rise apartments, recommended that the S.U.P. headquarters be preserved, along with the Union Oil building across the street, the Hills Brothers coffee plant structure at the end of Harrison Street (slated for conversion to offices, shops, and housing), the Klockars blacksmith shop, and the Apostleship-of-The-Sea. The city study pointed out that in addition to its architectural value, the S.U.P. building is "a most appropriate memorial to seamen and the maritime character of the neighborhood, and to a significant degree, the labor movement in San Francisco."

The decades of the 1950's through 1970's have been, to say the least, a great deal quieter in the maritime industry than the period preceding them. With the end of the post-World War II strike wave, and the marked decline of interest in political leftism in the labor movement, the rhetoric of the Communists and Trotskyists became irrelevant. The grievances that once had fuelled labor radicalism and driven millions of American working people to the left seemed to have been clearly done away with. The extreme abuses of the old "bucko" system at sea had been abolished; this great achievement may be credited directly to, and only to, the Sailors' Union. However, broader changes had come to America. Labor disputes no longer featured bloody confrontations between armed thugs and strikers; massive unemployment and poverty no longer struck far and wide, as during the 1930's depression.

In the struggles of three generations -the "classes" of 1885, 1921, and 1934 -the seafaring workers had gained most of what they had set out to win, when a relative handful of men first gathered on the Folsom Street Wharf in San Francisco. The seamen now enjoyed wages and benefits comparable or superior to those of nearly every shoreside wage worker. With economic improvement came greater social stability, and opportunities to raise families and function as normal members of society. The seamen no longer had to wait on the margins of civilized life for some slender bit of recognition. Dignity, self-respect, and acceptance as equals had finally come, thanks to the struggle we have recounted here.

With the end of the second world war, as in the aftermath of the first, the U.S. merchant fleet, which had been greatly enlarged to accommodate war needs, once again began shrinking. America has never been a maritime nation in the sense that Britain or the Scandinavian countries have; where Britain's internal market was tiny, and it traded mostly outside its own borders, America's gigantic internal market has traditionally dominated our commerce, with railroads therefore dominating the U.S. transportation industry.

For this reason, a large merchant fleet was seen as unnecessary, except in wartime. A related problem for the maritime industry, connected with the domination of American business by the internal market and the power of the railroads, became evident during the 1940's and 1950's, when the railroads, through manipulation of tariffs, forced the intercoastal ship traffic out of business. Yet another contributing factor in the post-1945 downturn in merchant shipping was the transfer of ship registry to "flags of convenience," through which a major share of American bottoms went from the national flag to such nations as Liberia, Panama or Honduras. During the 1970's, the "runaway shipping" nations grew to include a number of new, small nations in the underdeveloped world, such as the Bahamas.

"Runaway" shipping is a simple game, and a profitable one, seemingly, for the less-scrupulous shipowner. By registering in a small nation one avoids the burden of U.S. or European standard wages and conditions, as well as taxes, and observance of maritime laws which in "runaway" nations may be either nonexistent or unenforced. Both the economically-based decline of shipping and the rise of "runaway" operations struck deeply at employment for U.S. seamen after 1945. Since the primary task of a union, aside from that

of preserving its members' existing rights and dignities, remains that of protecting jobs, the maritime unions, including the S.U.P., found the postwar period to be one of unmistakable crisis.

The S.U.P. responded to these challenges boldly and courageously, given the circumstances, by lobbying federal authorities for maximum support of the nation's merchant fleet, and by undertaking campaigns, both in the U.S. and through the International Transportworkers' Federation, to organize "f.o.c." seamen. But neither of these campaigns gained much success.

In 1950, the S.U.P. succeeded in permanently organizing a Panamanian-flag gypsum carrier, the *Pho Pho*, owned by Henry Kaiser, which, once it was organized was renamed the *Harry Lundeberg*. The *Pho Pho* organizing campaign represented a major step forward for the S.U.P. in that it was the first vessel to be entirely crewed, top-to-bottom, by the Union: S.U.P. members filled every job from master to messmen, at the then-highest scale of wages, although the ship remained under the Panamanian flag. (The first *Harry Lundeberg* was wrecked in 1954, but a second, new vessel with the same name was christened in 1957, and later renamed the *Mar de Cortez*. The S.U.P. later crewed two more Panamanian-flag gypsum ships for Kaiser, the *Ocean Carrier* and *Western Ocean*.)

The goal of "one union" on board ship had been implicit in S.U.P. organizing efforts beginning in the early 1940s, when the union first began signing up all three unlicensed departments on West Coast tankers (deck, engine, stewards) S.U.P. tanker contracts continue to reflect this comprehensive unlicensed representation policy. In the years following the second world war, the tankermen would become an increasingly more important element in the S.U.P. constituency, as conventional cargo ships became larger in size but smaller in manning scales and fewer in number thanks to containerization. The tankers, once considered the most union-resistant sector of West Coast shipping, proved an important resource for the Union, which had expended great energy in their organization.

1955 saw an appearance by Lundeberg at congressional hearings, before the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries of the House of Representatives. He reviewed the history of the S.U.P., highlighting the fight for passage of the Seamen's Act, but also outlining the degradations of the post-1921 period: \$25 per month on the "western ocean run" between Europe and New York, \$32 per month on intercoastal vessels, "no such thing as overtime, food pretty rotten and the quarters real bad," the blacklisting rule of the fink hall or slave market, under the stewardship of the ex-policeman, Captain Petersen, and the U.S. Shipping Board. The long climb upward was marked, he noted, by the years of the big strikes: 1934, 1936, 1946, 1952. An important subject at the hearings was the provision for the establishment of a federal board for automatic settlement of maritime strikes, which Lundeberg tenaciously opposed, identifying federal interference in the labor-management bargaining process as the beginning of a process comparable to Nazi and Communist totalitarianism. "The Government steps in and settles all disputes," he stated, "and records show that means the finish of independent labor organizations and their free collective bargaining rights."

The issue of "runaway" shipping was attacked once again late in 1956 when the Crown Zellerbach Corporation began operating a Japanese-built pulp carrier between Canada and Antioch, California. This vessel, the *Duncan Bay*, was manned by 28 Okinawan seamen, and flew the Liberian flag. By October, picketing by the S.U.P., with the support of construction workers at Crown Zee's unfinished Antioch facility, resulted in the transfer of the *Duncan Bay* to S.U.P. jurisdiction, still under Liberian registry.

The 1950s brought an important economic setback for the S.U.P. with the final disappearance of the steam schooner trade from the West Coast. As we have noted, the "steam schooner boxheads" (Scandinavians) had long served as the iron-strong backbone of the organization. The phasing-out of steam-schooner operations brought a sad feeling to many dry-land enthusiasts of the old vessels, who viewed them as a romantic remnant of an earlier technology, but the loss was worse for union members, who felt it in terms of income.

A related negative effect at this time was the ending of operations by Coastwise Line, which had hauled paper products. Harry Lundeberg in 1956 authored a short essay on the history of the union that may stand as his testament. This text began with the proud words, "the foundation of all the gains that have been made by the American seamen and European seamen today was laid down by the early American trade unionists in the seamen's field, ... who established the unions and fought for and changed the legal status of seamen from slaves on ships to free men." Lundeberg went on to point out that the S.U.P. had "at all times been the leader in the fight for better economic and legislative conditions for the American seamen." Lundeberg granted credit to Furuseth, as well as to the earlier and lesser-known, such as Ed Crangle, the union's first waterfront dispatcher in the hiring hall set up in San Francisco in June 1886. After reviewing the legal and other controversies waged by the S.U.P. and the I.S.U. in the period before 1934, Lundeberg went on to underscore the Union's resistance to the Communist threat, but also heaped derision on the shipowners who, he claimed, advanced the fortunes of the Communists by their mistreatment of the seamen; "the seamen had to battle the Communist leeches on the waterfronts as much as they battled the shipowners," he averred. After hammering repeatedly at the leftists, Lundeberg enumerated the positive achievements of the union at the time of his writing:

The S.U.P. had preserved a clean hiring hall, without employer interference-

The S.U.P. had established the first welfare plan and the first pension plan for seamen.

Wages and conditions had improved far beyond the dreams of the men who had struck in '34.

The union had established congressional lobbying and related activities to monitor actions by the federal authorities, with the efficiency needed to keep the membership aware.

"Fidelity, determined resistance to subversive influence and faithful observance of contracts, ratified and agreed to by the membership, (have) been the cornerstone of success," Lundeberg concluded.

On January 28, 1957, Lundeberg died, mourned by thousands of seamen around the world. The helm of the organization passed to Morris Weisberger, an associate of Lundeberg in the S.U.P. leadership since the late 1930s. Weisberger had first shipped out as an ordinary seaman in 1926. In 1936, he became front office clerk of the S.U.P. He served as Secretary - Treasurer for the Union from March 1957 to March 1978, when he was forced to relinquish the post by bad health (in 1976, the top executive's title was changed from "Secretary-Treasurer" to "President/Secretary - Treasurer" by vote of the membership. )

### **Morris Weisberger**

Although not as contentious as his predecessors Furuseth and Lundeberg, Weisberger proved an active leader for the union, serving in many labor and governmental capacities. He has said that he had no desire for office, and has expressed regrets that he came into the union's top position at a bad time for the industry. The operators had become dependent on federal subsidies to an unheralded degree; ships showed a poorer rate of return on profit than a regular bank account. In addition to the impossibility of securing new West Coast jobs, Weisberger felt the S.U.P. was handicapped by its traditional reliance on the deck department as the center of organization. But, above all, he notes, the operators showed a tragic lack of vision. Perhaps the single most eloquent bit of evidence in this regard is the collapse of the West Coast passenger-liner trade during the 1970s. A decade which began with the *President Wilson* and *President Cleveland* operating under the banner of American President Lines, with the *Mariposa* and *Monterey* sailing for Matson, then Pacific Far East Line, and with a number of other passenger-carrying vessels under S.U.P. contract, ended with *no* passenger ships on the West Coast, closing off an important job resource for the union.

Perhaps the most important action taken by the S.U.P. during the 1960s came under the presidency of Weisberger, when the union, along with the Marine Firemen and the Cooks and Stewards, struck Pacific Maritime Association employers in 1962. The work stoppage began in March of that year after seven months of negotiations had produced an employer offer of wage improvements of less than 1 percent. Within a week, 45 vessels were shut down in S.U.P.- covered ports.

The 1962 strike went on for a month, and was suspended after President John F. Kennedy imposed an 80-day truce on the union and the shipowners, under the Taft-Hartley Act. The 80-day period saw continuation of a close, tense standoff between the contending parties. The S.U.P., M.F.O.W, and M.C.S. arrived at 8 points considered essential:

- Improvement in vacation allowances.
- Pension improvements, with reduction of the retirement age to 62.
- Wage and overtime boosts.
- Guaranteed benefit payments.
- A work stabilization fund.
- A joint maritime industry committee fund.
- Work rule adjustments.
- Guaranteed unemployment benefits.

Although by June the unions were again legally permitted to strike, an agreement was reached with PMA, and was duly ratified by the membership, in which all of the basic demands were achieved.

An important aspect of the Lundeberg legacy, carried on by Weisberger consisted of the role of the S.U.P. in the activity of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Maritime Trades Department, grouping all affiliated unions with members in the industry. In a sense, the creation of the M.T.D. finally fulfilled the hopes of Lundeberg's youthful associates in the I.WW, who sought "one big union."

### **Paul Dempster**

In 1978, Weisberger, was succeeded as chief executive by Paul Dempster. Dempster had joined the S.U.P. in 1948, becoming tanker business agent in February 1966. In President Dempster's first year in office he faced what proved to be some of the most difficult problems in the history of the union, for 1978 saw the loss of three major West Coast shipping contracts, Pacific East Line, Prudential-Grace Lines, and States Line.

In the cases of both PFEL and States, the employer companies went into bankruptcy leaving the union virtually bereft of any serious means to defend the interest of the members. In the Prudential case, which turned into a notable controversy, the union fought through the year to protect its jurisdiction, for rather than bankruptcy and the complete lay-up of the vessels concerned, Prudential had sold its ships to Delta Line, which transferred them to East Coast jurisdiction. The S.U.P. first reacted to the proposed sale of Prudential ships to Delta by filing an unfair practices suit aimed at protecting the pension fund.

Once the vessels were actually operating under the Delta house flag, the S.U.P. followed through by picketing Delta for refusing to take employment applications from former Prudential employees. Picketing was stopped by a court order, but the S.U.P. in the meantime had filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board, in response to Delta's manifest refusal to bargain in good faith. Finally, the federal authorities supported Delta's decision to replace the S.U.P. with East Coast personnel.

The following year again saw troubled waters for the union when the integrated tug-barge *Valerie F.*, formerly under West Coast contract. was turned over by her owners. Intercoastal Bulk Carriers. to the Rice Growers Association. following Intercoastal's

bankruptcy proceedings. The Rice Growers signed a new hiring agreement with the Masters', Mates', and Pilots' organization to cover licensed officers, but hired unlicensed crew through newspaper advertisements in Florida.

The *Valerie F* arrived in the Bay Area and was met by West Coast union pickets. The company first argued that the conflict was strictly jurisdictional, but a court decision rejected that argument and held the picket lines to be legitimate. The employer then announced that it was prepared to offer top-to-bottom jurisdiction to the MM.P. A 48-day picketing action by the S.U.P. and its allies included extensive water-borne action involving the picket boat *Malabar*. The West Coast unions won the "beef," forcing the *Valerie F*'s operators to discharge the MM.P. "replacement workers" and return the original crew members to their jobs.

A similar fight, beginning the same year, involved a new participant in West Coast shipping, the American Pacific Container Company. AMPAC, which had formulated pre-hiring agreements with the MM.P. and the N.M.U., found its attempt to get around West Coast unlicensed jurisdiction severely complicated by the protests of a coalition of labor and political figures organized by the S.U.P.

On November 16, 1979, the West Coast unions commenced picketing of two vessels acquired by AMPAC from Farrell Lines. AMPAC filed in court against the West Coast unions, and the unions responded by charging, in their own suit, that AMPAC, Farrell, the MMP, and the N.M.U. had conspired to exclude West Coast union workers from legitimate employment.

The AMPAC battle temporarily took a more dramatic turn in 1980, after the federal government had ruled against the West Coast unions and in favor of the N.M.U. Legal representatives for the West Coast organizations introduced clear evidence of a pre-hiring agreement between the N.M.U. and AMPAC, but the courts continued to support AMPAC, while the opposing unions continued to picket. Late in 1980, after almost a year of picketing, AMPAC went into bankruptcy.

Among the many changes rung in the maritime industry over the most recent decades, we must cite the close relationship that has developed, in the heat of the struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, between the S.U.P. and a union that was once its chief adversary, the I.L.W.U. Today, under the leadership of International President James R. Herman, the West Coast longshoremen's organization works in close partnership with the S.U.P. and President Dempster. This reconciliation between the often-brawling waterfront brothers is a key element of labor's overall strategic strength in the region and the nation. President Dempster and other S.U.P. representatives have affirmed their trust and affection for International President Herman and his membership on many occasions. The unity that has appeared anew is an extremely positive harbinger for the future, and today's S.U.P. stands ready to "turn to" whenever needed to maintain it. A similarly close friendship joins the sailors' organization with the Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association and its leader, Jesse R. Calhoon.

Like Morris Weisberger, Paul Dempster has sought to pursue a more "low-key" approach to the affairs of the organization than Furuseth or Lundeborg, but, also like Weisberger, Dempster has been prominent in labor and political affairs. At the time of this writing, S.U.P. President Dempster stands among the most respected labor activists on the West Coast, thanks to his active involvement in the defense of labor's rights during the series of conflicts that has shaken the region since 1980: in the Qantas lockout in which San Francisco Airport employees saw their union rights grossly denied, in the dramatic Greyhound strike of 1983, and elsewhere. Dempster has been on the front line whenever needed by the labor movement.

"Out in front" has always been the attitude of the S.U.P., fulfilling its 1885 promise as the "lookout of the labor movement." As these words are being written, the U.S. faces uncertainty in the labor field, perhaps as great as at any time before. Union membership has suffered a decline throughout the nation; many employers have come to the conclusion that unions no longer merit a share in the affairs of the workplace. The next few years will show whether or not the ideals and the sacrifices of the pioneers of American unionism will have been sown on ground turned, with time, to sterility. No modern society can survive without guarantees for labor's rights, embodied in the unions. We may well see, once again great and terrible conflicts in the economic field; on the other hand, new and more sophisticated strategies and tactics may emerge, on the side of labor as well that of the employer.

Already, sinister warning signs may be detected. In mid-1984, maneuver by a group of tanker companies led by Trinidad Corporation, an East Coast-based company to break the Masters', Mates', and Pilots' union, and union licensed officers arrested and removed from vessels. This case, reminiscent of both the infamy the *Arago* incident, and of the outrages of the 1892 strike, unarguably shows that many shipowners are fully prepared to provoke a battle aiming at the removal of all union representation from the industry. Truly, as S.U.P. President Dempster has affirmed, the union must remain strong, vigilant, and prepared for action no less than in the past hundred years. "The fight goes on," says President Dempster, "and the end is not yet in sight."

The history of union organization in the U.S. and around the world is a complicated one. Building on the social traditions of the guilds, in which skilled craftsmen protected their share of the market through collective action, the unions were forced by the situation of workers in the industrial age to go beyond simple economic self-help. The unions became fighting organizations in what most participants and observers saw as a war of the classes, a war far more socially destructive and divisive than the past competitive conflicts of guilds. More than an apparatus for securing a high price for their labor, the unions came to embody the deepest aspirations of working people on a whole range of social issues. The unions became the main directing force in the historic movement, the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, toward a better, more just, more equal society.

Both the original function of unions as a means to compete adequately in the labor market, over wage, and their later role as a promoter of genuine social progress have forced the unions to accept great responsibilities, to their members and to the public a

whole. In the wake of the second world war, with virtual reorganization of the Western industrial nations on a more extensive social-welfare basis the had even been envisioned during the Roosevelt New Deal, unions found themselves entwined with governments in a new kind of relationship. Where previous the political state structure stood, largely, on the side of employers against the unions, government authorities now endeavored seriously to reconcile the interests of capital and labor through action of political state as an arbiter between the classes. As have noted, the dangers in this phenomenon we indicated with particular acuity by Lundeberg. Which unlike the totalitarian regimes of Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler, the postwar democracies did not impose government-controlled unions on the workers, union *supported and monitored* by government have tended to find their autonomy and militancy limited by the government-capital-labor "alliance." In this context, discussion of the potential need for a revitalized, more-independent unionism, a "new labor spirit," will probably become increasingly significant.

The S.U.P. has had special experience with the consequences of government oversight over unions in the 1982-84 period. A series of lawsuits pursued by dissident members through the federal Labor Department has resulted in large costs for the organization, but without improving the situations of the dissidents, whose motives may be questionable, or of the membership at large. The S.U.P., like every other organization created by the collective will of human beings, is imperfect; labor unions are especially liable to criticism for their shortcomings, since they must somehow satisfy the needs of virtually every individual member while still contending with a constantly shifting labor market and institutional environment. Dissident activities forced the union to undergo an expensive "rerun" of the 1981 balloting for executive offices, without a change in the outcome. In these affairs, the Labor Department has been provided with an opportunity, thanks to the dissenters' campaigns, to set a bad precedent by dictating election procedures to the union. Constitutional limitations on the flexibility of the S.U.P.'s internal political process continue to be a major source of debate in the organization. Many of the pensioners have not shipped actively since the 1940s or 1950s, but because they retain their full "book") membership in the union, they effectively set the course for the organization. Finally, the need for a two-thirds majority vote to approve alterations in the constitution has obstructed changes that could well be beneficial.

The Sailors' Union has come a very long way in its first hundred years. Its recent leaders have often pointed out the progress achieved in the few years since the second world war: the seagoing workers went from steel bunks bolted to the deck, to built-in bunks, and eventually to current accommodations, including individual sleeping rooms, swimming pools, and video players aboard ship. However, improvements for the shipowner have, it seems, largely surpassed those for the sailor. In 1984, the Sailors' Union began crewing two vessels with a new model for manning, the *President Eisenhower* and *President Roosevelt*, operated by American President Lines. These two *Presidents* require nothing more than a 21-man crew from top-to-bottom, with 6 sailors on deck, 3 members of the engine department (represented by the Pacific Coast Marine Firemen's Union) 3 stewards, and one less mate. The scheduling for the new *Presidents* is extremely tight, with a turn-around in port so fast that sailors may enjoy no more than 10 hours off after 42 days at sea. The strain is, obviously, extreme.

In our review of the S.U.P.'s history, we have touched on many features that merit a much more extensive discussion. The union has proved to be an especially durable and perhaps unique product of the combative outlook identified with the so-called "Chicago idea" in the 1880s -a labor organization wary of governmental interference, responsive to the needs of its members, and prepared for hard struggle based on militant action. If we ascribe this special and admirable attitude to particular sources, the most appropriate are regional as well as ethnic and vocational. The organization was stiffened by the experience of its members in the lumber and steamschooner fleets and in the tough school of the Alaskan trade, where sailing time between the many Alaskan ports (almost a hundred) was short, longshoremen were non-existent, and the sailors therefore worked long and difficult hours, with little time to sleep or even to eat. Most of the sailors who passed through this experience were Scandinavians, prepared for it, as we have emphasized, by the tradition of working-class resistance they brought with them from Europe.

However the history of the S.U.P. may be debated, of one thing we may be sure: the union has stood out, historically, from others in the U.S. labor movement, for its dedication to principle and its courage. When men and women take up the labor banner in defense of their rights, whether today, tomorrow, or in a much more distant future, they will find in the history of the S.U.P. an exceptionally important and necessary example of the best traditions in unionism. In this respect, the spirit of the men on the Folsom Street Wharf, of Furuseth in his best years, of Lundeberg, of the seamen who manned the ships from 1885 to the present, will never perish.