
Finding Aid to the Riggers' and Stevedores' Union Records, 1906-1919

Prepared by Labor Archives and Research Center staff.

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Riggers' and Stevedores' Union records

Date (inclusive): 1906-1919

Creator: Riggers' and Stevedores' Union (San Francisco, Calif.)

Collection number: larc.ms.0097

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Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English.

Abstract: The Riggers' and Stevedores' Union Records include nine bound volumes of minutes from meetings from the years 1906-1919, and four folders of loose items from the years 1906-1918.

Location: Collection is available onsite.

Access

Collection is open for research.

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Processing Information

The collection was processed in the summer and fall of 2001 by Conor Casey.

Aquisition

These records were donated by Otilie Markholt, a maritime historian who used them in writing her book on waterfront unionism, *Maritime Solidarity: Pacific Coast Unionism 1929-1938*; accession number 1995/017.

History

The first evidence of labor action by longshoremen in San Francisco was recounted in the newspaper *Alta California* in May 1851, when dock workers struck for \$6.00 a day in a struggle to maintain their standard of living as prices rose precipitously due to the inflation typical of the early Gold Rush economy (Selvin, *A Terrible Anger*, 20).

In 1853, with the California economy recovering and growing, longshoremen struck for \$6.00 a day, a 9-hour day, and \$1.00 an hour overtime (Cross, 22). In the wake of this successful strike, the Riggers' and Stevedores' Association was organized from the ranks of skilled dockworkers on July 25, 1853. By 1854, the union had a membership of 350 (ILWU, 4). Newspaper reported strikes for increased wages in August of 1855 and July of 1856.

Throughout the 1860's, the Riggers' and Stevedores' attempted to maintain their wages in the rapidly developing economy of California. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 opened the West up to national and international markets and exposed California's economy to the cheaper labor and manufacturing costs of the East, Midwest, and abroad. An influx of foreign and domestic immigrants inflated the workforce, deflated wages, and made it hard to maintain closed shop conditions (Selvin, *A Terrible Anger*, 22).

Using a strategy that employed high initiation fees and the restriction of membership, the Riggers' and Stevedores' union tried to control and limit the longshore labor market in San Francisco. Part of this strategy was forming alliances with other labor organizations. The successful drive for an 8-hour day, which the Riggers' and Stevedores' won briefly in 1867, demonstrates the growing effort to forge alliances between Californian labor organizations, as "Eight Hour Leagues" pushed

to reduce the workday (ILWU, 6; Cross, 43, 52).

In the 1880's, in the midst of a growing trend toward longshore organization in San Francisco, membership in the Riggers' and Stevedores' was surpassed by other longshore unions due to its exclusion of unskilled longshoremen, its high \$100 initiation fee, and the union's less - than - zealous attempts to organize the unorganized. By 1886, the Riggers' were one of three waterfront unions in San Francisco (ILWU, 6).

The growing interest of the Riggers' in labor solidarity and alliances is evident in their role in the formation of The Federated Council of Wharf and Wave Unions in 1888 and the City Front Labor Council in 1891 (Cross, 198, 207). Both of these alliances were short-lived, but the support of the City Front helped the Riggers' in their successful strike for a wage increase in 1891 (ILWU, 6).

By the turn of the century, San Francisco's longshore unions were affiliated with the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA)- a member of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The Riggers' were among the unions who helped to form the City Front Federation, an alliance between teamsters, longshore, and seafaring unions that were established in 1901. After the Draymen's Association locked out 6,500 Teamsters who refused to drive non-union handled baggage, 13,000 members of the City Front Federation went out in a sympathy strike (Selvin, *A Terrible Anger*, 22). The employers, who had formed their own alliance to combat labor called the Employer's Association, decided to attempt to crush the young Teamster's Union in an effort to institute the open shop in San Francisco. When Governor George Gage forced both sides to end the strike after more than two months of bitter and violent conflict, the demands of the union remained unmet and the employers proved unable to crush the unions and institute open shop conditions. The fact that the unions survived such a long and bloody strike at all was seen as a victory for labor (Selvin, *Sky Full of Storm*, 21-26).

In the aftermath of the strike, the Union Labor Party was formed and San Francisco's first labor mayor - Eugene Schmitz, a union musician - was elected (Cross, 246). Labor used the unity forged in the strike to consolidate inter and intra-union bonds, and to organize the unorganized. The Riggers' and Stevedores', along with other San Francisco unions, experienced an upsurge in membership. The Riggers' were strong at this time, enjoying wages 30 to 40 percent higher than longshoremen in New York. For the next several years, San Francisco enjoyed a relatively favorable labor climate and became an almost completely closed-shop city (ILWU, 7-8).

During its history, the Riggers' and Stevedores' Union withdrew and then rejoined the ILA several times. This pattern illustrates the tension between the union's urge for industrial alliances and its inclination towards union independence and its desire to form an industry-wide federation of unions. Attempts at a coast wide alliance between maritime unions was discussed frequently in these years, but no serious attempt was made until 1914, when the Riggers' were involved in creating a local Waterfront Worker's Federation. In the same year, they also re-affiliated with the District 38 of the ILA. By the beginning of 1916, the Riggers' had withdrawn from the ILA again, preferring to spend the cost of affiliation on organizing and creating their own federation. This effort was unsuccessful because they encountered opposition in their plans to form "one big union" from members of the San Francisco Labor Council and the Waterfront Worker's Federation. At the ILA District 38 convention in May of 1916, longshoremen discussed unsatisfactory negotiations with employers relating to the closed shop, coastwide standard wages and practices, and a lockout in Vancouver. They felt that the increase in profits the shipping companies were reaping from the war in Europe and the opening of the Panama Canal to commercial traffic during August 1915 should be passed on to the workers in the form of higher wages. The union locals also demanded a coastwide closed shop. The convention voted to go out on strike on June 1, 1916 if their demands were not negotiated, giving the employers a month's notice. (Note: For an excellent and comprehensive examination of the decline of the Riggers' and Stevedore's Union and in the conditions underlying the strikes, see Mary Renfro, "The Decline and Fall of the San Francisco Riggers' and Stevedores' Union: A History of the years 1916 to 1919." (Senior Thesis, San Francisco State, 1995), Labor Archives and Research Center. Renfro's discussion of the causes of the strike and the reaction of the labor community help explain why the strikes failed.)

Employers in San Francisco claimed they had only been given two weeks notice and called it a violation of their contract with the unions, which demanded two months notice before a strike. The Waterfront Workers Federation used this contractual violation to back away from the Riggers', which more conservative members thought was becoming too radical in its attempts to form an amalgamated maritime union. To some observers at the time, the Riggers' seemed to be influenced by the ideas of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a union that advocated radical social change. On June 1, 1916, 10,000 longshore workers went out in the first coastwide strike of longshoremen in the West. The Riggers' and Stevedores' went out on strike with the ILA unions. The employers agreed to negotiate, and the strikers went back to work on June 9 with the assurance that strikebreakers would be dismissed if they did so. When the employers refused to dismiss the strikebreakers despite the adamant protests of the unions, the longshoremen walked out again on June 22. The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, which until this time had claimed neutrality in labor disputes, announced it would try to maintain the open shop on the waterfront and to defeat the closed shop in San Francisco (Cross, 249). A "Law & Order Committee" was created that promptly raised a fund of a million dollars to aid the employer's cause. After another violent

period of strike, the Riggers' agreed to the employer's offer of a return to work under pre-strike conditions and returned on July 17, 1916. When they returned to work, San Francisco's longshoremen broke the coastwide solidarity of the other ILA unions still on strike. The 1916 strike proved to be a defeat for the unions (ILWU, 7-8).

A bomb exploded on July 22, 1916 at the corner of Steuart and Market Streets during a World War I "Preparedness Day" Parade organized by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce. The explosion killed 10 and injured 40 people, and labor was blamed for being responsible for the bombing. The flames of public opinion against unions were fanned by the employers and the Law and Order Committee. Within a short time, a group of people including two labor leaders, Tom Mooney and Warren Billings, was charged with the bombing. In the anti-labor backlash that followed, an ordinance was passed that made picketing illegal in San Francisco. The tide was turning against the labor-friendly climate on the waterfront and of the dominance of the closed shop in San Francisco (Selvin, *Sky Full of Storm*, 37-41).

The Riggers' attempted another strike in 1919. They demanded higher wages to keep pace with a rising cost of living. To combat the increasing pace of work resulting from mechanization of longshore equipment, they demanded improved safety conditions, an increase in the number of men on work gangs, and limits on loads longshoremen had to handle (ILWU, 9). Among the more radical demands of the Riggers' and Stevedores' Union were for 25% stock ownership in each steamship company, and seats on the board of directors - but the strike was essentially a protest against the increase of the speed and amount of work for longshoremen, and the unsafe conditions that resulted. On September 15, the longshoremen walked out, having failed to reach an agreement with employers. The Waterfront Employer's Union refused to negotiate and began a public campaign against the longshoremen's "radical" union leadership (ILWU, 9). Thirteen hundred strikebreakers were brought into San Francisco to work the docks, and seafaring and teamster unions continued to haul and ship cargo for the employers (ILWU, 9; Cross 251; Cross gives the number of strikebreakers as 1,000). By December, the Longshoremen's Association of San Francisco and the Bay District was formed by gang bosses who split with the Riggers' and Stevedores' Union. The new union was without any of the radical ideology of the Riggers' and Stevedores' Union (ILWU, 11). In a short time, 1,000 longshoremen enrolled in the new union: 25% of the waterfront workforce (Markholt, 30). The employers quickly signed a five-year contract with the new union and refused to recognize or deal with any other unions. Individual longshoremen were forced to carry the blue due books of the Longshoremen's Association of San Francisco and the Bay District - the so-called "Blue Book" union - to gain employment on the waterfront.

Though not technically a "company union", the Blue Book was dominated by the employers and showed no signs of independence- refusing to enforce its own rules pertaining to the rights of employees. In this way, what appeared to be a bona fide trade union on paper in reality did little to protect its members. In an attempt to regroup after the failed strike, the Riggers' once again re-affiliated with the ILA in December as Local 38-33, but within months, their power and membership had faded. By 1923, the ILA had canceled the Riggers' charter for nonpayment (Markholt, 32).

The Riggers' and Stevedores' struggled to reorganize throughout of the 1920's. In 1923, Lee Holman, later a president of the San Francisco ILA local, attempted to organize again and was blacklisted from the Blue Book. In 1924, 400 longshoremen marched up Market Street under the banner of the Riggers' and Stevedores' Union - most of them were blacklisted by employers who didn't like the idea of a truly independent union or competition to the Blue Book's monopoly on the waterfront. In 1925, Holman successfully reorganized the Riggers' as Local 38-69. In 1927, the Riggers' local joined the San Francisco Labor Council to block the Blue Book union's bid for membership. Nevertheless, in 1929, the Riggers' and Stevedores' - one of San Francisco's oldest and continually existing unions - were unseated from San Francisco Labor Council and the Blue Book was admitted in its stead (Markholt, 32).

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Scope and Contents

The Riggers' and Stevedores' Union Records include nine bound volumes of minutes from meetings from the years 1906-1919, and four folders of loose items from the years 1906-1918. Listed below are the sections contained in a typical entry, and the information that is usually contained in each type of entry. Please note that the order of the sections varies

with time. The type of information contained within each section also varies slightly over time:

- A passage stating whether this was a regular or special meeting of the union and the date and location of the meeting.
- Password taken up
- Roll call of officers and absentees noted.
- Minutes of previous meeting read.
- Communications Read: contains information on contemporary events, the contact between unions, correspondence from employers, and the ILA, the San Francisco Labor Council and the Waterfront Worker's Federation.
- Bills to be Paid: bills, expenses, salary of union officers, affiliation fees to different associations to which the Riggers' belonged (ILA, Waterfront Workers Federation, the Japanese Exclusion League, etc.).
- Applications for Membership: Names of applicants and names of their sponsors within the union.
- Initiated: Applicants who were approved and initiated into the union.
- Report of Committees: Information on the progress of different committees in the union.
- Unfinished Business: Motions and issues carried over from another meeting. Mainly relates to motions or proposals, but sometimes also relates to disputes between union members.
- New Business: Motions and legislation pertaining to work rules, union rules, and other issues are usually raised here. Often full of motions, amendments, and counter motions as well as records of how the members voted on specific motions.
- Business Agent's Report: In this section, work grievances, job conditions, job actions taken by the union or individual longshoremen, and negotiations with employers are frequently discussed. This section often mentions working conditions, work-related deaths and injuries, and the amount of work the Riggers' were getting on the waterfront.
- Financial Secretary's Report: Contains information on the amount of money the union had, what banks it was in, and the total wealth of the union at that time.

Elections were generally held quarterly and the Financial Secretary's Report was recorded quarterly. The Financial Secretary's Report contains information on the wealth of the union and on the membership of the union in some cases. Election results are also often reported within the minutes every three months. Typically, they show the names of the candidates for office, the number of votes they received, and who won. Also listed are the results of propositions on the ballots relating to union actions or policies.

Indexing Terms

Labor unions--Longshoremen--United States.

Labor unions--Organizing--United States.

Labor unions--United States--History--20th century.

Stevedores--California--San Francisco.

Stevedores--Labor unions--United States.

Stevedores.

Strikes and lockouts--California--San Francisco.

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- Carton 1, Folder 1 **Minute Book, 1906 January 22-1907 December 26**
Contents
Items of interest include: evidence that the Riggers' were members of the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League [pp 2,13, 33]; a February 5th, 1906 vote to rejoin the City Front Federation [p 8]; evidence that there were 1200 members of the union as of February 26, 1906 [p 17]; a quarterly financial report, including information on the total wealth of the union, the number of new members who had joined during the quarter, expenses, and income [pp 35-38]; mention of an effort to give financial aid to affiliated unions following the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake [p 50]; election results [pp 66, 172, 269]; 1907 quarterly financial statement [p 177]; evidence that the initiation fee in 1907 was more than \$25.00 [p 177]; mention a treasurer who disappeared with union funds [pp 257-262]; mention of an internal, secret "Black Hand" organization within the Riggers' that was accused of discriminating against other members of the union [pp 317-318, 321].
- Carton 1, Folder 2 **Minute Book, 1908 January 9-1909 July 27**
Contents
Items of interest include: election results [pp 3, 93, 195-196, 274]; evidence of a continuing pattern of the union aiding other unions strike [p 28]; report of the auditing committee [p 50]; mention of a "wildcat" strike- a strike unsanctioned by union leaders [p 72]; treasurer's report [pp 152-153, 159-160]; transcript of a letter from Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) [p 191]; transcript of a letter from John Mitchell, described as the second vice president of the AFL relating to a Supreme Court Case: Supreme Court of Columbia v. AFL [p 192]; a transcript of a letter from Frank Morrison, Secretary of the AFL, in which he mentions the Sherman Anti-Trust Law, and the Pearri Anti-Injunction Bill that pertained to freedom of speech and freedom of the press [pp 192-193].
- Carton 1, Folder 3 **Minute Book, 1909 August 2-1910 December 19**
Contents
Items of interest include: evidence that as of December 22, 1909, the Riggers' were not a part of the ILA [pp 82-83]; On January 10, 1910, the Riggers' voted to affiliate with the ILA [p 147]; this affiliation was defeated in a special meeting of the union, and there is some evidence about the conflict within the union about affiliating with the ILA [pp 82-83, 139, 147, 177]; evidence that by 1910, the initiation fee was \$13.00 [p 292]; as of December 29, 1908, the membership of the union was 2,044 [p 292]; election results [pp 186-187].
- Carton 1, Folder 4 **Minute Book, 1911 January 9-1912 June 24**
Contents
Of interest: election results [pp 4-5, 112, 271, 302]; information about wealth and membership of union as of January 9, 1911 [pp 8-13]; amalgamation with Longshore Lumbermen's Union discussed [pp 183, 202]; more discussion of amalgamation [p 206]; evidence that the Riggers' voted against amalgamation with the Alameda Lumber Clerks [p 157]; evidence that the union voted against a proposal that called for the exchange of minutes between longshore unions and system of initiative and referendum between unions, 356 to 388 [p 157]; defeat of a proposal to affiliate with the ILA, 333 to 231 [p 157]; the acceptance of a proposal to amalgamate the maritime unions of the West Coast, and to form "one big powerful union", 451 to 340 [p 158]; a vote for an eight hour day with overtime [p 158]; a vote to organize a maritime federation [p 158]; the passage of a motion to make the first and third meeting of every month "propaganda meetings" to promote the labor movement, including discussion sessions and speakers [p 190]; evidence that the Riggers' were still considered joining the ILA as of March 3, 1913 [pp 205, 208]; vote against joining the ILA [p 271]; mention of a jurisdictional conflict over organizing the lumberyards [p 275].
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- Carton 1, Folder 5 **Minute Book, 1912 July 1-1913 June 2**
Contents
Items of interest include: the results of an election held on July 8, 1912 [p 8]; a vote for amalgamation with the Longshore Lumberman's and Clerk's Association, 215 to 214 [p 9]; an example of the union's working rules in this period [pp 32-33]; evidence that the Riggers' passed a proposal to "try to amalgamate all our crafts on the Pacific Coast" and to attempt to amalgamate "all maritime transport workers" [p 77]; evidence of when the Riggers' withdrew from the Asiatic Exclusion League [p 78]; a passage that states "there is a decided aversion in this Union to Affiliate with the International Association of Longshoremen [p 109].
- Carton 1, Folder 6 **Minute Book, 1913 June 9-1914 July 13**
Contents
Items of interest include: the results of a quarterly elections [pp 30-31, 165, 167]; a vote to join the ILA on August 18, 1913 "with the understanding that dues shall not be raised for this purpose", 286 to 116 [p 63]; a mention on September 22, 1913 that the "Clerks" had amalgamated [p 84]; the wage scale that was to go into effect as of November 1, 1913 [p 96]; mention of a communication from the President of the Pacific Convention, presumably of the ILA, that forbade IWW delegates in the convention [p 228].
- Carton 1, Folder 7 **Minute Book, 1914 July 27-1915 September 27**
Contents
Points of interest in Book VII include: a mention of the "Ludlow Massacre" [p 23]; election results [p 131]; evidence that the "Crockett local" was amalgamated on July 9, 1915 [p 213]; an amendment to the union constitutions that limited membership to "white citizens of the United States"[p 297]; a record that the Riggers' Protective Union amalgamated on November 1, 1915 [p 297].
- Carton 1, Folder 8 **Minute Book, 1915 October 4-1916 December 18**
Contents
Points of interest include: quarterly election results [pp 76, 79]; evidence that as of January 16, 1916, the Riggers' had a \$30.00 initiation fee [p 79]; proposal that the Riggers' withdraw from the ILA and spend their money to amalgamate the Pacific Coast into "one big union" and that they present this resolution at the Pacific Coast District Convention of the ILA [p 79]; the Riggers' voted along with the San Francisco Labor Council against "militarism" [p 110]; a letter from T.V. O'Connor condemning the union's actions in trying to amalgamate other unions [p 124]; evidence of a special election that "rescinded" the proposal to amalgamate the Pacific coast, by a vote of 436 to 212 [p 79]; mention of a meeting on May 31, 1916 relating to a strike [p 178]; the unions voted to rescind their "resolution regarding prohibition" [p 236]; record of the vote on November 21, 1916 in which the Riggers' voted to end the strike and return to work [p 255].

Carton 1, Folder 9

Minute Book, 1917 January 8-1919 January 20**Contents**

Points of interest in Book IX include: election results [pp 3, 279]; the mention of the establishment of a maximum load amount [p 12]; a mention a letter from the San Francisco Labor Council requesting financial assistance, to which the Riggers' replied that they were "in no position to financially assist them"[p 25]; a reversal of the constitutional policy that only white citizens could join the union. Instead, all "men of good moral character...capable of performing the work of loading and unloading vessels" would be eligible for membership [p 34]; record that the meetings of the union were made bimonthly as opposed to weekly [p 35]; minutes from a special meeting of the union to address the issue of members refusing to work unless given an increase in wages [p 55]; a resolution calling for an 8 hour day, \$6.00 per day, 75 cents an hour straight time, \$1.25 overtime [p 55]; evidence of member of the Riggers independently quitting work and refusing to return to work [p 59]; a mention of a motion to refuse to handle non-union handled cargo that was rescinded "at the request of the Employer's Union and the Waterfront Workers Federation" [pp 59-60]; a vote not to amalgamate with the Riggers of Alameda [p 61]; a new wage scale proposed by the employer on June 1, 1917 [p 62]; an attempt by the Riggers' to institute a new wage scale of 65 cents per hour straight time and \$1.00 overtime [p 84]; evidence of very large amount of applicants for membership [pp 86-87, 92-95, 100-101,107-108]; mention of a meeting to organize the unorganized and to increase the wage scale [p 96].

Carton 1,
Folder 10**Items from Minute Books, 1906-1911****Contents**

Contents of this folder include: Printed materials relating to internal union business, typed minutes of a session of the City Front Federation, handwritten memos and notes, notes written on printed notices. Essentially, the contents are ephemera that reflect the day to day business of the union.

Carton 1,
Folder 11**Items from Minute Books, 1912 July 1-1912 December 31****Contents**

This folder consists of printed materials and handwritten notes relating to the business of the union. Of particular interest is a typewritten notice dated November 18, 1912 stating an aversion on the part of the Riggers' to affiliation with the ILA and the intent of the Riggers' to establish a "coastwide system of referendum and initiative" for longshoremen regarding wages, hours and working conditions. This folder also contains a note on the Riggers' letterhead that verifies that it was founded on July 25, 1853 (see note above in HISTORY section). The folder contains: a list of members of the Amalgamation Committee (June 10, 1912 July 8, 1912); proposed working rules for August 5, 1912. Many of the documents in this folder mention the Riggers' attempts to amalgamate the maritime unions of the Pacific Coast.

Carton 1,
Folder 12**Items from Minute Books, 1913-1915****Contents**

This folder contains handwritten notes and printed materials including: a printed card advertising the Third Grand Ball given by the "Moose Drum Corps"; handwritten notes relating to the resolutions and motions of the union as recorded in the minutes; a tally of the results of a special election on April 28, 1913 deciding the Riggers' affiliation with the ILA (192 against, 141 for affiliation); and an agreement between the Riggers' and the Sailor's Union of the Pacific settling jurisdictional disputes dated January 18, 1915.

Carton 1,
Folder 13

Items from Minute Books, 1916-1918

Contents

Contents of this folder include: a copy ballot and the results of a referendum on July 15, 1916 deciding if the Riggers' would go back to work or on July 17 or continue to strike (the vote was 1186 for to 549 against returning); a resolution stating the Riggers' opposition to the Chamber of Commerce's drive to change the office of police judge from an elected to an appointed office; a timeline on the negotiations of wages between unions and employers dated May 26, 1917; a letter from the International Workers' Defense Fund about the Mooney Billings case; a resolution from July 31, 1916 which endorsed the prohibition of consumption and manufacturing of alcohol. The Riggers' reasoned that since some of the members of the Chamber of Commerce made money from producing and selling alcoholic beverages, they would be hurt if prohibition was enacted. The Chamber of Commerce, which had announced its intentions to crush unions and institute the open shop in San Francisco, would theoretically suffer financially because of prohibition. Finally, the contents of this folder include a list of unions affiliated with the Waterfront Workers' Federation as of May 3, 1917.