

CHAPTER IV

Twilight of Freedom

(1916-1933)

Even with passage of the Seaman's Act, the S.U.P. found itself on a battle course, fighting for full enforcement of the law. It was quickly apparent that the continuing struggle would require even greater vigilance and sacrifice on the part of the seafaring workers. The period just before U.S. entry into the First World War saw a rising trend toward violence in industrial conflicts. The Sailors' Union greeted the arrival of New Year 1916 by supporting a call for congressional action to stop the interstate shipment of "strike-breakers, armed guards, and machine guns" for use by employers. Arguing for such a ban, President John White of the United Mine Workers cited the most infamous example of industrial repression in 20th century U.S. history: the killing of 13 women and children and 6 men, with the wounding of many more, by the gunmen of the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, at Ludlow, during the 1913-14 Colorado coal strike.

U.S. Involvement

U.S. involvement in the world war decisively altered the character of the U.S. maritime industry. The war reorganized economy required a tremendous expansion of the U.S. steamship fleet. Almost overnight, sail shipping fell to a small minority of bottoms. Above all, the sailors' craft, and, therefore, the sailors' conditions of existence and of self-perception, was transformed. The old-style wind ship seaman who knew a special and difficult system of work techniques was replaced by a crew member whose work seemed to demand much less. The sailing and cargo skills that had allowed for some advantages in wages on the Pacific coast were subject to an elimination that drove pay standards downward, pushing the sailor, on the social scale, virtually into the gutter. Respect for the windship craft of the traditional seaman had been a cardinal principle for Furuseth and his colleagues in S.U.P. leadership, much to their credit.

At first, the effects of the war on the seamen were not clearly perceptible. The full significance of the change, and its disastrous impact, would not be felt until 1921, three years after the war's end. During the war the government and the employers, spurred by the colossal needs of the war machine, sought industrial peace by securing an agreement that effectively legitimized the unions. In May, 1917, the I.S.U. joined the U.S. Shipping Board, a federal agency, and the Committee on Shipping of the Council of National Defense, in signing an Atlantic War Agreement calling for payment of union wages, war bonuses, liberal manning, and recognition of the union as the workers' representative. At the end of the year the I.S.U. national convention issued Furuseth's *A Message To Seamen: A Call To The Sea And To Seamanship*, beginning: "Men of the Sea: The nation that proclaimed your freedom now needs your services. America is at war. Our troops are being transported over the seas. Munitions and supplies are being shipped in ever increasing quantities to our armies in Europe. Thousands of skilled seamen, seafaring men of all capacities who left the sea in years gone by as a protest against serfdom from which no flag then offered relief, have now an opportunity to return to their former calling, sail as free men and serve our country."

Although Furuseth and the I.S.U. leaders, once the U.S. joined in the war, sought to maintain an image of patriotism and reliability, powerful voices within the government opposed the wartime agreement with the unions, and demanded that the merchant marine be brought under Navy control. This attempt at full militarization of the seamen was unsuccessful.

One area in which the seamen clearly failed to gain formal benefits from the war situation was that of union control of hiring, for the government quickly moved to establish Sea Service Bureaus or government hiring halls, to regulate employment. Under the Atlantic agreement, preference on 60 percent of jobs was provided to the union, with the Sea Service Bureaus required to call the union first for the remainder, before taking on men obtained through a federal recruitment service. At first seemingly innocuous, the Sea Service Bureau would, in the post-war years, acquire a specially evil repute as the government "fink hall."

U.S. entry into the war brought other events destined to have a major impact on the West Coast sailors. With the commencement of U.S. involvement, the most prominent leaders of the I.W.W. were arrested and convicted for espionage, on the claim of the authorities that the militant movement was actually a secret agency of the Imperial German government, used to undermine the U.S. war effort. The persecution of Wobblies, as the I.W.W. members were known, over opposition to the war created an exceptional climate of hatred and revenge in the West Coast areas where the radical and syndicalist tendencies were strongest. But the attacks on the I.W.W., in which Furuseth was to join, at first did little to balk the radical upsurge. For some five years, between 1917 and 1923, the I.W.W. greatly expanded its influence among the "wage slaves" of the West, particularly the maritime and lumber workers.

Furuseth in Europe

The belligerent nations' diplomatic representatives had begun conferring in Paris as the war ended and 1918 came to a close, and Andrew Furuseth departed the U.S. in an effort to participate in what was universally viewed as the reorganization of "the world order." He sought the extension of the Seamen's Act, which was undergoing emasculation through U.S. congressional action, to the entire globe, through action by the Peace Conference.

The Paris Peace Conference forged numerous international accords, laying the basis for such institutions as an International Commission on Labor Legislation, the International Labor Organization, and the League of Nations. Furuseth viewed the latter structure with great suspicion and feared that "the world order" would be used to undermine the status of the expanded U.S. fleet created by the war, and to destroy the Seamen's Act even as it existed in the U.S.

"Criminal Syndicalism"

Back on the Pacific Coast, radical workers faced a new problem in the form of legislation against what was called "criminal syndicalism." Laws against "criminal syndicalism," which was defined with exceeding vagueness, had been passed in 1917 in Idaho and Minnesota, and in 1919, California followed suit. The Golden State was not, then, a haven of liberalism; agricultural interests sought to keep the state locked into a kind of feudal Midwestern conservatism, and Los Angeles was considered the national center of anti-union "open shop" activities, as much as San Francisco was the cynosure of labor radicalism. The I.W.W. had to fight for free speech by organizing mass civil disobedience in San Diego, Fresno, and other California cities. The California "criminal syndicalism" law was a constitutional horror, for it judged as unlawful a "doctrine," which was left undefined, rather than a specific action. Any overt acts committed in the furtherance of revolutionary goals or during an industrial conflict would fall under existing criminal law; the C.S. law was aimed at an intellectual trend, rather than specific crimes. It banned the production, possession, or circulation of printed matter supporting "criminal syndicalism," in a clear violation of the First Amendment guarantee of press freedom. The S.U.P.'s Scharrenberg strongly opposed the California C.S. law.

Furuseth Returns From Europe

Furuseth returned from Europe to argue before the national convention of the A.E.L. in June, 1919, against participation in the League of Nations and International Labor Office. He pointed out that Britain, through its colonies and dominions, controlled an oversized number of votes in the I.L.O., and that within the national delegations union representatives were outnumbered by those of the employers and governments. The European shipping powers had expressed their frank hostility to the provisions of the Seaman's Act, which had been considered even by the leadership of the Socialist German seamen's union to be outlandishly extreme and "anarchistic." Should the U.S. recognize the legal authority of the new international organizations, the Act was doomed, Furuseth argued. Although the A.F.L. endorsed the I.L.O. and the League, Furuseth's opposition was supported by a considerable number of delegates, including many who allied with him because they saw a British-dominated League as a barrier to the independence of Ireland.

Furuseth that year published a *Second Message to Seamen*, in which he deplored the deterioration of craft standards in the maritime industry, while reviewing the past abuses of "sea-slavery" and the crimping system. He went on to express profound suspicion, if not contempt, for the longshore workers and their organizations, and to assail attempts at amalgamation of the seafaring and dock workers into a single union. Unfortunately, Furuseth's energy was being increasingly dissipated by secondary issues, for in the aftermath of the war the deadly threat to the union was represented by neither the longshoremen nor the League of Nations, but by the U.S. Shipping Board and the shipowners, who were preparing a plan to smash

THE NATIONAL SAILORS' & FIREMEN'S UNION

OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.



Reilslered Office

MARITIME HALL, WEST INDIA DOCK ROAD,



Affiliated with the National and International Transport Workers' Federations.

Furuseth forged aboard with England's maritime union leader J Havelock Wilson

(s.u.P Archive)

the sailors' movement thoroughly and definitively. In 1920 Furuseth made a further attempt at a worldwide Seamen's Act, leading a delegation to a maritime law conference, again in Europe, supported by the International Seafarers' Federation. The I.S.F. had originally been set up within the ranks of the International Transport Workers' Federation, which was dominated by in the continental European railroad, barge, and dock unions. But resentment of the I.T.F. leadership at the seafarers' desire for autonomy apparently led the I.S.F. to break away. Furuseth participated in the I.S.F. along with Havelock Wilson's British union; but Wilson "honored" past promises by refusing, even within the I.S.F., to support Furuseth's project. Wilson's forces declared at the 1920 conference that "the act had been beneficial to American seamen and foreign seamen visiting American ports, and should be maintained in its entire scope for the U.S., "but that extension of the Act at the present time to all countries may be detrimental to the best interests of the seamen of such countries (and) should be left to the judgment and efforts of the organized seamen of each respective country."

1921 Battles: Crushing of I.S.U.

Of course, the "democratic" capitalists of the U.S. were, in the end, unwilling to tolerate the solidarity of seafarers. The U.S. shipowners were backed up by the threat of weapons, in the hands of strike-breakers and police as well as soldiers. The first sign of the coming clash came in January 1921, when the I.S.U. received communications asking for a reduction in wages from the U.S. Shipping Board, under Admiral William S. Benson, and the American Steamship Owners' Association.

At a meeting in April, the union representatives were presented with proposals including a new, lowered wage scale, abolition of the three-watch system, (i.e. the 8-hour day), and an open shop. In response, the I.S.U. put forward a short list of demands, emphasizing enforcement of the Seamen's Act but also including shutting down of the government Sea Service Bureaus or "fink halls," establishment of a union shop, and union determination of individuals' seamanship qualifications and efficiency. Admiral Benson answered that the U.S. Shipping Board was willing to help enforce the law, but that the fink halls would remain in operation, and that the seamen must accept a 15 percent wage cut, along with a complete elimination of all overtime, replacement of three watches (the 8-hour day) with two (a compulsory 12-hour day), and removal of union officials' right to visit ships.

Furuseth appealed to the shipowners to allow wages and conditions to remain in force pending arbitration by President Warren G. Harding, but this was turned down. On April 30, the union learned that the Shipping Board had ordered the imposition of new wages, conditions, and open shop rules on board all vessels operating in the Atlantic trades: the Shipping Board and the Steamship Owners' Association had locked out the I.S.U., from coast to coast. Within days, John Vance Thompson was editorializing in the union's newspaper, now called simply *The Seamen's Journal*, on "Need for Resistance." Admiral Benson himself clearly indicated the intentions of his Board by a statement averring that "it will be unfortunate if the personnel of the merchant marine persists in refusing to do their part in the labor liquidation of the marine industry while still benefiting from the labor liquidation in other industrial fields;" this was his way of driving into the line those employers who did not show sufficient speed in slashing wages by the prescribed 15 percent.

During the war, the U.S. government and employers had needed the workers to keep the war industries going, and were willing to pay high wages; further, they needed the unions to assure orderly bargaining. Taking from a model originally developed by the Imperial German government, the U.S. had set up a kind of temporary "military socialism" or state capitalism. With the war over, the government and employers were unwilling to continue appeasing the workers and unions; more, they were eager to deliver a crushing blow, such as would not only return the industrial scene to prewar standards of exploitation, but would also dispel the threat of "Bolshevik" contagion. The postwar offensive of the privileged class and its political servitors was felt throughout U.S. society. Racism exploded and the limited rights won by Blacks after the civil war were largely done away with; foreign-born workers and "radicals" of whatever citizenship were subject to deportation, imprisonment, and murder; and, most importantly, labor was, on many fronts, smashed. The outlook of the seamen's employers was eloquently expressed by a writer for the *Marine Register*, a San Francisco periodical, who asked the question "What chance has an American boy in the forecandle?" He answered, "Nil. From the frozen North, whence most of our Pacific Coast sailors come, there is brought an innate mental Bolshevism, -an essence of 'I don't wash, it is true, but I am just as good as anybody on the bridge,' that disrupts ship discipline."

The only response to the Shipping Board available to the Union was that of the strike. With imposition of the wage cut, where they were not already locked out men walked off ships. Furuseth appealed to continue negotiations, but Benson refused. Shipowners began the massive recruitment of strikebreakers, and efforts in this direction, which were fairly successful, on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, provoked a protest by the Union. In mid-June an injunction against all picketing was issued against the Union. The Marine Engineers Beneficial Association abandoned the strike at this point, dealing a major blow to those who remained on the picket line. The I.W.W. and other industrial unionists, active in the battle, pointed bitterly to the M.E.B.A. action as a "craft" betrayal. Under pressure from their enemies, the Sailors began reaching out to other natural allies, particularly the West Coast longshoremen, who recently had again sought to form a Federation of Marine Transport Workers, over Furuseth's objections. The San Francisco longshoremen had been locked out since 1919 by the stevedoring employers, who established a "blue book" company union on the docks. The government and shipowners were hoping to apply the same medicine to the sailors, and a common labor front was obviously on the agenda.

In July, Senator La Follette called for a congressional investigation of the Shipping Board lockout, but his appeal was unsuccessful. That month also saw actions by the Pacific Coast shipowners to reintroduce a non-government, employer-operated fink hall, along with the so-called continuous discharge book (fink book), the latest incarnation of the grade book of the past. At the end of the month, Furuseth admitted defeat, calling on the men to return to work. In a message printed in the *Journal* for August 3, he declared "The battle is fought and lost. We have lost many battles before and this is only one more battle lost. To the real fighter for ideals a battle lost means nothing," he asserted. Furuseth went on to say, "you will not be able to make any money to speak of,

Marine Transport Workers Organize into ONE BIG UNION

AND BRING THE BOSS~ TO THEIR KNEES!

Addressed to all marine transport workers on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, the Gulf ports and the Great Lakes; to men and deckhands; firemen, oilers, water- tenders, coal passers, and wipers; marine stewards, cooks, hakers, butchers, messboys and waiters; engineers, pilots, mates and masters; checkers and longshoremen.

You have been on strike since May 1, 1921. On that day the U. S. Shipping Board and the American Steamship Owners' Association locked out all men carrying membership cards in the three unions that make up the International Seamen's Union of America, refusing to have anything more to do with your unions.

And you lost the strike. You are beaten to a standstill. Your unions are as dead as a doornail.

Why?
Because you lacked solidarity in your ranks. The ship- owners are united in ONE Organization- they know the value of scientific efficiency--while you are split up in a half dozen organizations: Eastern and Gulf Sailors' Association, Marine Firemen, Oilers & Watertenders.. Union, Marine Cooks and Stewards' Association, Sailors' Union of the Pacific, National Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association, International Longshoremen's Association. Craft unionism was allright in its day, but it is now unable to...

I. W. W. literature during the 1921 strike (S.U.P. Archive)

but you never did except for a short time, and only a few of you," adding, "let us accept the real situation as men, who have higher thoughts than a few cents, more wages and a few minutes' less work per day. He that would earn money shall lose it; but he that is willing to lose money for principle's sake shall gain it--after awhile. Not now."

In the *Journal* for August 17,1921, Charles Lesse, S.U.P. member number 1837, replied by saying, "The battle is fought and lost. The hired brains of the shipping trust have been successful. ..They are marshalling all their forces to put the union out of business. They are fighting us with scabs, police, injunctions, courts and press, with other institutions held in reserve." Lesse concluded with a phrase that reflected the conviction of many members, calling for unification of "*all industrial unions into One Big Labor Alliance the world over*" (italics in original) The hour had struck for the I.W.W. and other radicals.

S.U.P. vs. I. W. W.

The I.W.W. ranks began to swell as sailors poured into Marine Transport Workers No. 510. In August, an I. WW. periodical published in New York, the *Marine Worker*, saw "Pacific Coast Seamen Moving Toward O.B.U.," the latter initials a reference to the One Big Union, a euphemism for the I.W.W. that was also used by an organization of radical former A.F.L. unionists in Canada, distinct from but strongly influenced by the I.W.W., and to which the Pacific Coast longshoremen had affiliated in 1920. The *Marine Worker* noted with approval that the Pacific seamen had come out for unity with the longshoremen, and that militant action on the coast was "largely influenced by former I.W.W. members," the "two-card men," in the S.U.P. The paper declared that "sentiment for the I. W. W. among the seamen was never better than at the present time." For his part, shocked at the intransigence of the government and employers, Furuseth had come back to them with a proposal that the I.S.U. do Benson & Co. the favor of denouncing, blacklisting, and otherwise eliminating I.W.W. members from ships, in return for restoration of the wartime agreement.

In November, Furuseth won out in the S.U.P., securing the expulsion of Thompson and 18 others. Selim Silver took over as *Journal* editor. Two members resigned, two more were expelled, and in December, 11 more were expelled, totaling 33 expelled or resigned

for supposed I. W.W. membership, including second patrolman A.C. Wamser. 6 more were expelled in 1922. The *Journal* carried an article by Furuseth, accompanied by a reprint of the California state criminal syndicalism law, warning the members of the legal sanctions involved in I.W.W activity.

Furuseth had, apparently, "cleaned house" with respect to the I. W. W. But, curiously, the shipowners did not seem to fully appreciate the great favor he had done them. Walter J. Petersen, the chief scab-herder on the West Coast as head of the Marine Service Bureau of San Pedro, in a mid-1920s apologia entitled *Marine Labor Union Leadership*, would indicate that the shipowners considered the old Scandinavian and his organization, as dangerous labor radicals indistinguishable from the I. W.W. Furuseth perhaps believed that he could somehow drive a wedge between the government and the shipowners while splitting off his members from the I.W.W and other rebels. The pro-shipowner government saw much more clearly: it was a matter of class against class. The ruling powers were prepared to stand united against *all* labor organizations. But, Furuseth was unwilling to unite with the radical wing of labor.

In summing up the 1921 defeat of the I.S.U., we may say that the determination of Admiral Benson to decimate the unions was clearly revealed by the attacks of the Shipping Board on those shipowners who demonstrated reluctance to either cut wages or lock out union members; the ruthlessness of the pro-employer forces had also been made manifest in the press and by actions of the police. In the Pacific Northwest, newspapers agitated the public over the supposed threat to Alaska, which depended on marine commerce for its basic necessities, posed by the refusal of the sailors to accept the wage cut and the open shop. Violent incidents took place throughout the nation. In Portland, virtual open warfare between strikers, scabs, and police marred the last two weeks of May. Pete Gill wrote bitterly that Admiral Benson advertised for scabs throughout the country, making a patriotic appeal for strikebreaking. The Shipping Board hired thugs to beat pickets and threaten women in their homes." In San Francisco and San Pedro, police work shifts were reportedly extended to 12 hours, and in the Golden Gate city a hotel was emptied of residents for the use of gunmen. In June, Portland saw a second battle between strikers and scabs, in which striker Nestor Dario was killed. At the end of the month, in Seattle, a union seaman, Clarence Kane, was killed by a scab.

In truth, the Sailors' Union of the Pacific came out of 1921 temporarily ruined. The sailors were locked out, blacklisted, and forced to come to the fink hall, fink book in hand, to beg for work. The union had been well and truly broken, not least because its leaders were more concerned with hunting heretics than with girding for war. It was the beginning of a dark time for the seamen, in which the S.U.P. and the I.S.U. would remain reduced to almost nothing, keeping only those West Coast deepwater ships that called at Australia, the most-unionized country in the world, where the dockers would not work scab shipping. The Olsen Steamship Company (coast-wise), Alaska operators, and many boatswains and mates on the steam- schooners remembered past lessons and continued hiring union members for the dangerous skilled work needed to keep their vessels afloat. But as an effective union organization, the S.U.P. was wrecked.

Communist "Seamen's Clubs"

In 1923 the I. W.W. seamen struck the Pacific Coast. Moscow greeted the action with a solidarity telegram, and the international press controlled by the Kremlin began to pay considerable attention to the problems of marine workers.





In July, 1923, the Soviet International announced to its acolytes the organizational form that would be used to steer the marine workers into the Kremlin camp: the "seamen's club." The seamen's club was to combine two institutions that had hitherto been held in disdain by radical sailors, at least in the U.S.: the church mission and the fink hall. The church mission, exemplified by the Seamen's Friend Societies and the Seamen's Institutes, was a charitable institution that had existed since the early nineteenth century, through which religious denominations organized volunteers to work in missions in which seamen on the beach could obtain a meal and bed. However, while the price of the meal was usually only a lengthy prayer session, and that of the bed was normally fairly low, the missions were widely criticized as centers of corruption, intimidation, and blacklisting of union men. Many missions functioned as crimping establishments. The S.U.P. had fought the missions on the West Coast, but the contempt in which most seafarers held them was weapon enough that the union, historically, paid relatively little attention to the phenomenon. Unfortunately, after 1921, with the seamen pushed down the social ladder, missions and "coffee joints" began to play a greater role in the men's lives, since they often had nowhere else to go for shelter. Similar considerations might lead some seamen to the Communist brand of the "good news." The "seamen's clubs" were also designed to function as "fink halls" for the Russian shipowners, to help in securing enthusiastic men, willing to work at a double pace for the greater glory of the Bolshevik "experiment," whenever Russian shipping might need to charter foreign-registered ships. This practice was widespread in Germany, although not completely unknown among U.S. seamen. The "socialist" Bolshevik government was a participant, both as a regular ship operator and as a charterer, in the Baltic and White Sea Maritime Conference, soon to be known as the Baltic and International Maritime Conference (BIMCO) the Kobenhavn-based chartering cartel that is among the most powerful maritime business institutions in the world.

THE MARINE WORKER

" AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL "

CHAPTER V

Twilight of Freedom

Part II

As the Nineteen- Twenties wore on, the condition of the West Coast sailors worsened. For example, on June 17, 1924, O. Manning, master of the steamship *West Mahwah*, posted a notice to his crew warning that "any member of the crew that does not do a fair day's work during the eight hours in anyone day, will be ordered to work nine hours a day. And failing to perform a fair day's work during the nine hours in each day, then, a reduction from A.B. to O.S. or workaway will follow, whatever the case may warrant." Once a sailor signed aboard a ship, he was again the captive of officers against whom there was almost no provision for recourse, and whose words were law. Following Admiral Benson's first wage cut, wages continued to fall drastically, and conditions declined accordingly. Seamen were shoved back into the "glory hole" fo'c's'le, with bunks crammed together, no space for gear, insufficient room for freedom of movement if more than one of the gang came below, inadequate sanitation, and wretched food. But the worst inequity was, by far, the "slave market" fink hall and its fink book. A sailor could fight demoralization, although not the health problems, caused by bad food and quarters, by keeping up the hope that the next ship would be better. But from the humiliation involved in crawling into the fink hall, book in hand, there was little immediate relief; and, in addition, the unity of the shipowners implied by the fink hall and the fink book stood as a warning that the bad treatment offered on the worst ships could easily become standard, should the shipowners wish it.

Fink Hall and Fink Book

The Sailors had built their Union, sacrificing lives, talent, and energy, for an ideal of dignity and self- respect. The fink hall and the fink book were the inarguable repudiation of that ideal. To the committed unionists among the men the fink hall was an institution so degrading, so despicable, that should they be given the chance to destroy it, no power on Earth would be able to save it. They got their chance, and they smashed the fink halls, but not until years had passed.

In speaking of the fink hall and fink book, Harry Lundeberg, a young Norwegian-born sailor who had joined the Seamen's Union of Australia in 1917 and transferred into the S.U.P. in 1923, described "a dirty, filthy hall, with a big loudspeaker going. The fink hall was filled with all kinds of stiffes, hop heads, dope peddlers, floaters and these were in the majority. Sure you got a ship if you patronized the blind pig run by the clerks employed in the fink halls and how many of you had to PAY for the chance to go to sea-and many bonafide seamen stayed ashore anywhere from three to six months on the beach -and when you finally landed a rotten job after the half way decent ones had been SOLD, in order to take said job you had to pack a FINK BOOK."

The S.U.P. during the 1920s carried out an extensive legal campaign for abolition of the fink halls, but without immediate success. During court hearings on the issue, Union member Lloyd (Sam) Usinger stated that in his experience, no work was available off the dock, by visiting vessels and inquiring for work. The answer was always the same: "We get our men out of Fink Hall." And because even the fink jobs were scarce, according to Usinger, the sailors were forced to engage in schemes to obtain multiple fink-hall registry cards, in the hope of juggling ships and using a bad job as a stepping stone to a better one. In the hearings, a shipowner representative declared that when enough were not available from the main fink hall in San Francisco, the so-called Marine Service Bureau, he would obtain them from the missions such as the Seamen's Church Institute or from the Scandinavian Sailors' Home. The usage of this latter organization as a fink hall was a source of special anger among the Scandinavian-born unionists, as may well be imagined.

The beleaguered situation of the S.U.P. in this period has been vividly described by Emmett Hoskins, a 1920s sailor, in a series of oral interviews conducted by Karl Kortum, director of the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco, in 1980. Describing the voyage home aboard the vessel *Wheat and Montana* during the late '20s, Hoskins recalled:

"We tied up alongside in Seattle. It wasn't as smooth a job as I am accustomed to see. The doggone mate kept heaving on the bow line until I thought he was going to carry away the piling fenders. The Old Man, instead of shouting 'Vast heaving, God damn it' just let him keep doing it."

"There were a half dozen officials on the wharf ready to greet us, customs, immigration, Shipping Board people. In most ships we paid off in the captain's office; that may have been the case here. The shipping commissioner sits at the table. You were handed your discharge and your money at the same time. The captain, the commissioner, and yourself all sign the discharge--all three of you. The men are standing in line. It only takes a few minutes, because everything is arranged, the stacks of money, the pile of discharges. There is very little talking. Some of the men, waiting to get in line, are out on deck. The sailors were all together, as I remember, black gang came next, then the stewards, cooks and so on. After we had our money, those who were going to leave the ship (some were going to stay for another voyage) went aft to the fo'c's'le to pick up their suitcases and seabags. These would be in most cases already packed. The firemen had their fo'c's'le on the port side, the sailors to starboard. Every one had on their best shore-going togs.

“At this point the patrolman for the Sailors' Union (probably Pete Gill-SAS) came on board. He was a good-looking fellow, well-dressed. I had a few words with him; I told him I wanted reinstatement in the Sailors' Union. The voyage certainly needed improvement, bitter seamen, professionals, I told him. The fellows ignored him, paid him no attention whatsoever. So I paid him eighteen months back dues and an advance of a few months at a dollar a month. A sailor needs friends, and the union is where to get it ...so the mate won't use the deckhands as punching bags. The reason why I wasn't paid up was that in those years you couldn't ship from the union hall; the owners had practically busted the unions in the strike four years before.

“Some of the runners for the foreign ships were kind of comical; they used to ship some of their 'pier head jumps' out of the jail on Kearny Street in San Francisco. That's not American style. We needed the union, but it had fallen on hard times. It was almost broke. I was aboard a wooden steam schooner in the Southern Pacific slip in San Pedro during these years and the patrolman came aboard-he didn't collect a dime. It was a non-union crew, but more than that I was the only American in the fo'c's'le. The Sailors' Union patrolman came aboard regularly in San Francisco. On the East Coast you never saw a union patrolman. What they had back there were shipping masters. You had to hustle for a berth back there.”

Approach of Depression

1929 saw the first indication of the coming Great Depression, in the form of the massive collapse of stock trading. With the tremendous business downturn, millions of U.S. workers were to face unemployment and wage cuts, millions of farmers would suffer foreclosure, and the families of both would come to grips with terrible deprivations. The crisis would create a social climate favorable to anti-capitalist sentiments, in which the radicals would find their audience dramatically enlarged. Almost overnight, the programs of socialists, Wobblies, and Communists would face their major test. As the year drew to a close, the Kremlin followers increased their propaganda on the West Coast.

Early in 1930 the Communists began proclaiming the creation of the "Marine Workers Industrial Union." Naturally, the strong similarity between the Communist group's new title and that of the I.W.W. Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union was noticed, especially by the latter; more than 50 years later, during the writing of this book, I had occasion to discuss the issue with old Wobblies in the S.U.P., one of whom was still moved to rage by the memory of this Communist propaganda maneuver. In the March, 1930, Communist *Marine Workers Voice*, when the call for the "new industrial union" was made public, it included the statement that the I.W.W. leaders had come to "now openly advocate and practice fascist methods." The Communists asserted that the Wobbly organization was practically out of existence. All that remains are a few degenerate, spittoon philosophers." But, of course, the most violent rhetoric was still reserved for the I.S.U., labeled in the same text as members of a "united front of the Shipowners with the American Legion."

Roosevelt Elected

The most important effect of the Depression on U.S. politics came in late 1932, the people elected Franklin D. Roosevelt as their president, on a program of relief and reform. In 1933, one of the first actions of the new chief executive, the National Industrial Recovery Act, opened fresh opportunities for unions, since section 7 A of the act called for the federal government to recognize and protect unions as employee representatives, once they were certified by the "Blue Eagle," symbol of the National Recovery Administration. In addition, the Act called for development of "industrial codes" for minimum wages and hours in each industry, to be produced by the joint efforts of unions and employers. Both the I.S.U. and the M.W.I.U. began work on submissions to the N.R.A. code hearings.

The I.S.U. came to the hearings in a condition of extreme weakness. In the four-year period beginning in 1930, the union's activities had been limited to the issuing of charters to small local organizations (such as the Tillamook County Fishermen's Union, in Bay City, Oregon, and the Franklin County Boatmen's Union of Apalachicola, Florida) the publication of a reduced-size monthly *Journal*, occasional meetings, and limited legislative efforts. Its membership and its financial receipts were tiny. The situation had not been very different for the national A.F.L., but a brief business upswing, and a rising demand for labor, in summer, 1933, combined with the apparent Presidential endorsement of unionism, stimulated a number of more militant unions, including the United Mine Workers under John L. Lewis and the International Ladies' Garment Workers, led by socialists, to launch major organizing campaigns.

Another aid to unionism was the Norris -LaGuardia anti-injunction law, passed in 1932. A national strike wave in 1933, included a successful walkout by 20,000 hosiery workers in July, which captured the formerly "open-shop" mills in Reading, Pennsylvania. The shirt industry in New York and Pennsylvania, famous for sweatshop conditions, was victoriously organized by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Some 11,000 silk dyers and printers in New York and New Jersey struck in September, demanding speedy action on an N.R.A. code. The silk employers' code proposals, featuring low wages and long hours, brought the expansion of the strike to include 50,000 employees. The most important single strike in 1933 shook the Pennsylvania soft coal industry, controlled by the steel companies through their "captive" mines, in which 30,000 workers stayed out for three months, ending in an election with a majority of votes for the United Mine Workers. In August, 60,000 New York dressmakers, of which only 20,000 were union members, struck. The "rag trade" employers gave up after two days. Between May and October, 1933, the membership of the I.L.G.W.U. rose from 40,000 to 160,000. Many other important strikes took place, in the shoe industry, in steel, and in the automobile plants of Detroit, Flint, and Pontiac, Michigan, where 9,000 toolmakers struck under the leadership of a radical union similar to the I.W.W., the Mechanics' Educational Society of America.

Unfortunately, as 1933 wore on it became apparent that the N.R.A. would not serve the workers without a prolonged legislative battle. Employer pressure had deformed the Act's codes in many industries. The strike wave had also provoked fear in the White House that working class anger might disrupt the Roosevelt recovery. The administration began to study possible modifications of the N.R.A., including the creation

of a National Labor Board to stop strikes in progress or, if possible, to prevent them altogether. The N.R.A. also came to grips with the problem of company unions, many of which sought "blue eagle" certification. And numerous employers simply ignored the new law.

On the West Coast, militancy was visibly growing, among the sailors as well as the longshoremen. Beginning with a wage cut by American-Hawaiian steamship Co. in 1931, wage rates had fallen, in two years, to 50 percent of 1921 levels, calling forth a bitter comment from the *Seamen's Journal* to the effect that "no other group of workers has been treated so shabbily and unfairly as the seamen." The organized longshoremen, the *Journal* averred, had suffered much less in terms of wage loss. President Roosevelt had held out the hope that after a decade the fink hall would finally come to an end; but then, it became apparent that any improvements would have to be fought for if they were to be made permanent. The stage was set for the "big strike" of 1934, the first clash in the greatest movement of workers in U.S. history, the Pacific Coast maritime movement. The workers were preparing for battle; the Communists were preparing to battle for control of the workers. Late in 1933, the M.W.I.U. had between 4 and 6 functionaries working full time on the San Francisco waterfront. Correspondence between Pete Gill, Seattle S.U.P. agent, and Union headquarters in San Francisco, for the last three months of 1933, includes continuing references to "marine industrial" agitation in the Northwest, although it is unclear whether this refers to the Communist M.W.I.U., which was insignificant in the area, or more likely, resurgent activism by the I.W.W Marine Transport Workers.



Aftermath of July 5th: A National Guard machine gun nest (SUP Archives)