

Longshore/Warehouse Militant Caucus: a Great Tradition

Origin of ILWU's Political Action



1917 PHOTO

December 1984: Howard Keylor addresses Berkeley students on anti-apartheid boycott

The idea of mobilizing the power of the organized working class for Mumia's freedom did not arise spontaneously in the Bay Area or Brazil. Many of the militants associated with the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal (LAC), as well as some of the key initiators of the Oakland school teach-ins, were involved in the trade-union work of the then-revolutionary Spartacist League (SL) of the 1970s. Some also participated in the more modest activities of the forerunners of the International Bolshevik Tendency. In Rio de Janeiro, the teachers' action has been spearheaded by militants associated with the Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil, which is linked to the Internationalist Group in the U.S., itself a recent split from the SL.

The LAC referred to the historical precedents for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union's 24 April action in an 8 April press release:

"This groundbreaking call for a work action in defense of a political prisoner comes out of a long history of ILWU solidarity with numerous struggles, including shipping boycotts to protest the right-wing coup of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973, and against apartheid in South Africa in 1984, which received recognition from Nelson Mandela."

The 1984 action, which lasted 11 days and took place in defiance of several back-to-work orders, was led by longshore militant and IBT supporter, Howard Keylor. Keylor pointed out that many leftists are unaware of the background to the longshore stop-work actions and strikes of the 1970s and 1980s, which in turn laid the basis for the ILWU's current defense of Mumia:

"In the period between 1974 and the early 1980s (by which time the Spartacist League had wrecked the work

and driven the best trade-union political militants out of politics and, in many cases, out of their unions), the ILWU Longshore/Warehouse Militant Caucus posed a clear class-struggle pole to the class-collaborationist policies that had become so deeply engrained in the union. Perhaps the greatest success we had in trying to deepen workers' class consciousness was in demystifying the sanctity of the capitalist laws which forbid workers' political or solidarity strikes, as well as job actions in their own defense. By 1984, the San Francisco longshoremen were able to carry out a successful 11-day illegal political strike refusing to work South African cargo without suffering state or employer reprisals. The West Coast longshore union went on to wage port, regional, and coastwise strikes in violation of the contract and of federal law in their own defense, as well as in support of other workers such as the Liverpool dockers and Australian wharfies."

We uphold the perspective of building programmatically-defined class-struggle caucuses in the unions. None of the labor actions carried out in support of Mumia were initiated or actively supported by the Spartacist League. In recent years, the SL has done some valuable work in Mumia's defense, but these days it generally avoids participating in united fronts with other leftists.

Any initiative that points in the direction of class-struggle unionism is welcome, but even the skillful application of united-front tactics by individual labor militants cannot substitute for organized nuclei of class-conscious militants within the unions struggling to win the membership to a perspective of powerful, united class struggle. This ultimately requires the creation of a political organization linking the struggles of every sector of the exploited and oppressed—a mass revolutionary workers' party. ■