

# *For International Labor Solidarity!* **Smash Apartheid!**

The spirit of the 11-day 1984 San Francisco longshore boycott against South African cargo (in solidarity with the struggles of black workers and youth in Botha's racist hell-hole) was continued on Monday, March 10, when twenty-five longshoremen refused to cross a militant picket line set up at Pier 80 in San Francisco. The Campaign Against Apartheid (CAA), a Berkeley-based student group, called for this blockade to prevent the unloading of the *Nedlloyd Kembla's* South African cargo. The CAA timed the action at Pier 80 to coincide with a week of international labor protest against apartheid called by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and endorsed by the trade-union movement in British Columbia.

The Bolshevik Tendency (BT) helped the CAA organize the San Francisco action from the beginning as a principled united front. Members of at least 14 different unions, along with members and supporters of half a dozen left groups and a variety of community organizations were among those who helped seal off the entrance to the pier. A BT leaflet explained:

"The united front at Pier 80, called by the Campaign Against Apartheid, is to stop the discharging of the *Nedlloyd Kembla* in solidarity with [the labor actions anticipated in British Columbia.]

"A court injunction issued during the 1984 longshore boycott is still in effect and is being used by the longshore union bureaucracy as an excuse not to reinstitute the boycott.

"We call on all longshoremen to refuse to unload this ship!"

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*The following is an interview with a BT supporter who was a participant.*

**Q:** *How many people were involved in the action on Monday?*

**A:** All told there were about 150. We set up a militant picket line, blockaded the pier entrance and actually managed to fight off the cops. Two pickets were injured and two arrested. The bourgeois press reported two cops also got hurt.

**Q:** *How did CAA anticipate the longshoremen would respond to the picket?*

**A:** That depended on the forces that could be mobilized. The CAA agreed that a picket line would only be set up if the crowd was sufficiently large and militant. CAA members spent a good couple of weeks organizing phone trees, making picket signs (which they nailed to two-by-fours), and getting the bodies down to Pier 80 to stop the cargo.

They knew that a section in the waterfront workers' contract allows longshoremen to honor picket lines if they can claim possible danger to their "health and safety." And of course [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union—ILWU] Local 10 is still under the federal injunction [against boycotting South

African cargo] which was used to break the 1984 cargo boycott—the longest political cargo stoppage in West Coast history.

So they [CAA] recognized that Local 10 longshoremen were under the kind of extreme injunctive penalties that made a resumption of the boycott unlikely. But by initiating the action at Pier 80, the CAA at least gave them a chance to express their frustration over handling South African cargo under the threat of jail and millions of dollars in fines. I think that CAA understood that no longshoremen would walk through a picket that effectively shut down the pier.

**Q:** *But a couple of supervisors did try to get across?*

**A:** Yes, at 7:00 a.m., just as the line was being consolidated, a company superintendent drove his pickup truck through. This made the pickets angry and they were determined not to allow any more through the line.

When a second CS&B [California Stevedore and Ballast Company] superintendent in a company truck tried to drive through the line, pickets blocked him, covered his windshield and rocked the truck from side to side. He sat nervously inside as the chant "Don't cross the line" and the pounding on the cab became louder, and then he got out of there.

By this time there was a double line of semis all the way up to Army and Third Streets [a quarter mile], preventing the pick-up or delivery of cargo for other shipping lines at the pier. You could see the yellow-striped smokestack of the *Nedlloyd Kembla* from outside the gate, but the [ship's] cranes weren't moving. The big rigs were backed up and the longshoremen were just bunched on the sidewalk in front of the gate.

**Q:** *And then the cops turned up?*

**A:** Right. At about 8:30 a.m., the San Francisco cops began to arrive. They told us to get out of the way but when we refused, they called out the whole Potrero Division. When they tried to break up the line, they were surprised by what you might call "active physical resistance." Pickets surrounded, circled, blocked and outflanked the cops who beat fallen pickets, punched young girls in the face and arrested two pickets on misdemeanor charges of malicious mischief, assaulting a policeman, urging riot and resisting arrest. But they still weren't able to break the picket line, and so the top cop called out the Tac Squad [San Francisco's notorious anti-labor riot squad].

**Q:** *At this point the company finally gave up on working that shift?*

**A:** Yeah, officials of CS&B, who had called the contract arbitrator to order the longshoremen to go to work, conceded at this point that a "health and safety" condition did in fact exist and sent the longshoremen home. CS&B could tell that this was not just another pious demonstration of moral indignation. This was a serious

call to dock workers for international labor protest against apartheid.

After four hours, and just as the Tac Squad was moving in tight formation to break up the picket line, a CAA member yelled to the cops, "We'll be back, motherfuckers!" and led the line out of Army Street.

The students had won the respect of longshoremen for their militant tactics—reminiscent of the early history of waterfront class struggles. And it showed the potential for a future student/labor alliance.

Q: *And then there was the evening shift?*

A: Yes. That evening when demonstrators returned to Pier 80 to stop CS&B from working the *Nedlloyd Kembla* on the night shift, all they saw was two cop cars and a locked gate. CS&B had cancelled the night shift! The demonstrators had a rally that lasted for about an hour.

On the way down the street to the pier a woman in CAA had been served with a Superior Court injunction which was supposed to begin on Wednesday [12 March] at 10:30 a.m. and which limited the number of pickets at Pier 80. They handled that about right—they ripped it up and tossed it on the ground. And then they all left, chanting, "We stopped the ship today, We'll do it again tomorrow!"

Q: *So who turned up Tuesday morning?*

A: There were about 200 in all. More elements of the left appeared [than on Monday]. Workers World, BAFSAM [Bay Area Free South Africa Movement—a liberal, pacifist, Communist Party-supported lash-up] hung their banners on the chain metal gate of Pier 80. It seemed they'd heard about the action on the [Monday] evening news. They joined a bunch of groups [Marxist-Leninist Party, Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, Revolutionary Workers League, Workers Socialist League] who'd been there Monday morning. And most of the students and unionists who had been out Monday were back, too.

Q: *But on Tuesday morning the police were ready?*

A: Yeah, the riot cops were lined in ranks all along Army Street and back behind the CS&B building. This time they moved in quickly, before the start of the work shift at eight o'clock, to break up the picket line. Cops circled the pickets and announced that everyone in the area was under arrest. A group of demonstrators got away and continued to demonstrate a couple of hundred feet off, in front of the trucks waiting to enter. But they grabbed 57 pickets (about a third of whom were unionists, by the way), and drove them to the San Francisco Hall of Justice and cited them for "obstructing a sidewalk." By 8:30 a.m. the area was pretty much clear of demonstrators and the pier was open for business again. Something that's also worth noting is that after the cops had broken the picket line and the longshoremen were ordered to go to work, there were four of them who refused to go in and work that cargo. So they got fired for showing their support for the action.

Q: *That's four out of how many?*

A: Oh, I'd say not more than 25.

Q: *The CAA action was quite a bit different from the BAFSAM pickets at Pier 80 in the last couple of years, wasn't it?*

A: It sure was. The BT worked with the students to initiate an action which, in the best case, could lead to re-institution of the 1984 longshore cargo boycott, with the ultimate goal of sparking significant labor strikes against the apartheid regime and its U.S. capitalist supporters. Over the last couple of years, BAFSAM has tried to exploit the 1984 boycott by "greeting" Nedlloyd line ships with "informational" pickets and appealing to the individual consciences of dock workers.

At best BAFSAM has been inept: putting up pickets when no South African cargo was in port and confronting Nedlloyd line ships already docked with a single rowboat called the "peace navy." At worst, BAFSAM has made a mockery of the picket line, the traditional labor weapon of class struggle.

Longshoremen coming to work at Pier 80 have often found token "picket lines" of a few BAFSAMers peacefully "witnessing" their opposition to apartheid by walking in a little circle in front of the gates. BAFSAM's token pickets trained longshoremen to go through—which made it that much harder to organize a real labor/community alliance against apartheid.

Q: *What was BAFSAM's role on March 10?*

A: There were only a few BAFSAM supporters who participated. None of them actively stopped trucks or fought the cops. Four were arrested Tuesday morning. But by the 1:30 p.m. press conference held by CAA on the City Hall steps, [retired longshoreman, BAFSAM spokesman and Communist Party supporter] Archie Brown was claiming credit for the whole action!

Q: *What criticisms of the action have been raised by other groups?*

A: The IWP [International Workers' Party] and the SL [Spartacist League] criticized it on the grounds that it wasn't a purely labor action, which of course it wasn't. But what it was, was a labor-oriented attempt to revive, from the outside, the 1984 anti-apartheid strike on the docks when the longshoremen stopped the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* for 11 days and as such was completely supportable. The IWP, to give them their due, at least had the sense to recognize that the action was supportable.

Q: *What about the Spartacist League?*

A: The Spartacist League was nowhere to be seen. Even though in 1977 they had initiated two smaller, but politically identical, protest pickets against the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* in support of a similar call by the ICFTU for a labor boycott of South Africa.

[SL supporter] Stan Gow "disassociated" himself from the action at the Local 10 Exec Board meeting on March 13th. Gow argued that if the action had succeeded in spreading to other ports and other countries and eventually cut off all trade with South Africa, then black workers would lose their jobs and be sent to the Bantustans!

Q: *That seems pretty far-fetched.*

A: I'll say. In fact, just the day before at a U.C. [University of California at Berkeley] rally in support of Guillermo Bermudez [an SL supporter arrested on campus for protesting Marine recruitment], Stan Gow and SL supporters shared the platform with CAA members. When

a CAAer referred proudly to this student/labor solidarity action, Gow and the SL lacked the political guts to contradict him and face the students' contempt for their abstention. Later, in *Young Spartacus* [the SL's youth newspaper], they came out with a public denunciation of it as "an objectively anti-working class stunt." What they *really* didn't like about it was that they couldn't claim the credit, and what was "worse," the BT and various other former SLers were among the participants. It was a classic sectarian reflex.

*Q: What about the CAA? Firstly, what kind of a formation is the CAA?*

A: Well, the CAA is more like the old New Left than anything else. It is pretty broad and non-exclusionist and plenty militant, especially on a tactical level. But like the New Left, it lacks a coherent overall worldview, and a comprehensive program. Of course that is just the flip side of non-exclusionism, but in the long run it's a real limitation.

The CAA contains within itself two ultimately counterposed political impulses: militant liberalism and class-struggle politics. So while they have a pretty good appreciation of the nature of the courts and the cops (especially after what happened on the pier and then what's being going on in Berkeley lately), they remain hooked on the demand for "divestment," you know, that our campus board of regents or whatever shouldn't invest in South Africa because it's not "moral." And the ultimate logic of that is to start working for some "lesser evil" Democrat.

*Q: What lessons do you think there are for the CAA in the March 10 action?*

A: The March 10 action was pretty gutsy, and we were proud to have been a part of it along with the CAA. But it is important to recognize that it was only possible because of an unusual configuration of forces and as such is *not* generalizable as a mode for leading the working class in struggle against the capitalists.

This understanding wasn't reflected in a statement the CAA released after the action which only drew the lesson that, "the March 10 blockade...demonstrat[ed] that a small but committed group of people could temporarily halt trade with South Africa, but that such a victory could only be held by a showing of massive community support down at the docks." Now it's true that a larger mobilization of support on the second day might well have prolonged the action. It might also have sparked an upsurge among longshoremen and other unionists which could have revived the 1984 boycott on a larger scale.

But the *critical* point here is that it's the determination of the ILWU members to defy the apartheid injunction, and the willingness of the rest of organized labor to back them up, which is key. And the struggle to mobilize the power of labor is primarily a political struggle that must go on *within* the union movement itself. In general it is not something that can be achieved by students and community members turning up outside the docks and the factories and calling for the workers to join in. It can only be done by groupings of class-conscious militants in the unions fighting to win support for a program which starts from the immediate felt needs of the workers and ties them, through a series of transitional demands, to the long-term objective necessity for socialist revolution. ■