

Dockers Stop Arms to Pinochet

The West Coast Longshore Union's 1978 Refusal to Load U.S. Military Aid to Chile's Dictator, Augusto Pinochet

By Herb Mills

The prospects for organizing in the era of globalization and the future of the U.S. labor union movement are two areas of focus for Social Policy which come together in a number of articles in our current issue. In Herb Mills' piece below, we take a step back, to examine, in close-up detail, how global politics, strategic organizing, and labor militancy came together in particular time and place in the not too distant past. During May-June, 1978, a drama unfolded on the docks of San Francisco and then exploded into international news. Longshoremen, acting through their union, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), refused to load U.S. military aid for dictator Augusto Pinochet's Government of Chile. With U.S. support and encouragement, General Pinochet staged a violent coup on September 11, 1973 to overthrow and kill the nation's elected socialist President, Salvador Allende. Herb Mills was an officer of ILWU Local 10, the San Francisco longshoremen, at the time. He retired from longshoring in 1992. Social Policy Editor-at-Large Mike Miller asked him to turn previously internal reports into the piece of historical reportage we offer here.

The International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) has a long history of rank-and-file action in support of domestic and international issues of social justice. That history for its Local 10 of San Francisco dockers began in 1935 – less than a year after the monumental 1934 west coast maritime strike – when it refused to load nickel, brass and zinc destined for the Italian Fascist war machine then ravaging Abyssinia. Shortly thereafter, the members of 10 also refused to load scrap iron destined for a Japan bent upon ruling the nations of Asia. Such actions were in part underwritten by the still very powerful spirit of the 1934 struggle.

The central prize of the 1934 victory was the union's hiring hall with its rotational – and hence equalized – job dispatch. The hiring hall and the ongoing struggle to contractually determine the dockers' working conditions also helped to create for every longshore local a brotherhood of close and ongoing relationships. With the hall and that struggle there also came a habit and, indeed, a culture of serious conversation, the subjects of which

ran from the very personal to the stridently political on virtually every domestic and international issue. That habit and culture, as well as our hall and tradition, would also underwrite our subsequent refusal to discharge coffee from apartheid South Africa, as well as load government-purchased grapes when the striking United Farm Workers and Caesar Chavez called for their boycott.

Pointing to Chile's total suppression of civil and trade union rights, and the imprisonment, torture, murder and "disappearance" of many opposition leaders, activists and innocent civilians, the 1975 ILWU International Convention called for a boycott of all goods to and from Chile, which by subsequent action its locals clearly supported. As a result, when the prospect of loading hardware for Pinochet's arose, the officers of the union knew that, if such an action might persuade the government to cancel that aid, a "no" to its loading would have the informed and active support of the rank-and-file. They and their officers also knew that such union action would not persuade the government unless it was clearly supported by political forces with plenty of clout.



Photo courtesy of Papirphum Ltd.

Without such support, the union and its members could only expect to be very heavily penalized when the PMA, (Pacific Maritime Association, the employers' association of West Coast steamship lines and stevedore companies), as the government's rep in the matter, sought relief through our contract grievance machinery and, then, if necessary, in the courts of law.

Because of the political climate of the time, a guarded optimism was clearly justified – partly because a Democratic majority had been seeking to gain for Congress an oversight control of the CIA so as to prevent a repeat of what it had done in Chile. Many members of Congress in both the House and the Senate, as well as leadership within the Carter administration, were highly critical of

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Pinochet. President Carter himself expressed desire to make “human rights” a major component of American foreign policy. In this climate, the 1976 Arms Embargo Act had banned the shipment of such aid to the Chile,

though it exempted from that ban some \$100 million of aid already authorized. Thus the administration could quietly support Pinochet while, for domestic political reasons, it could continue to speak of a ban of the shipment of arms to him. Since

God or the devil is in the details, we now must focus on why the government choose not only to cancel the aid here in question, but also to recall its Chilean Ambassador for a lengthy consultation and to begin a full review of all of its Chile policies.

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Tuesday, May 23, 1978

At 7:50 in the morning, the phone rang in my office at Local 10; I was an elected Business Agent; a buddy told me that on San Francisco’s Pier 32 he had just spotted a shipment of bomb fins destined for the Chilean air force. At 8:45 I got to the pier. By 10:00 I had copies of the cargo booking paperwork and had taken some snaps of the cargo – twenty-two crates of “bomb fin tail assemblies” which were visible through the slats of their crating – to be loaded to the SS. Seajet due at Pier 32 at 0600 on June 2. At 11:45, with copies of my snaps and the paperwork in hand, I arrived at the offices of the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), the employers’ association of West Coast steamship lines and stevedore company where the union’s International officers and the top elected reps of its Longshore Division, who are also our members of the ILWU – PMA Coast Labor Relations Committee, had, once again, assembled to negotiate our then up-coming coastwide contract.

Newly-elected ILWU President Jimmy Herman, successor to the legendary Harry Bridges, put me on the agenda for a lunchtime report. The officers and our “coast committee” reps agreed to first find out if the Northern California Democratic members of the House of Representatives would publicly support the union if it said “no” to the fins, if they would seek the support of others in Congress and if they would keep what was being discussed out of the media so as not to alert anyone on “the other side.” They also decided that, if by the Monday of May 29, we would have a “pretty fair level” of such support, I would advise the ship owner, the stevedore and the PMA that we would refuse to load the fins. We had nine full days to get further support and gave the government three full days to cancel the shipment before the Seajet arrived. It was also agreed that, so he could start a draft of a “scoop,” I would brief Jim

Wood, a good friend of mine and veteran reporter for the *SF Examiner* about our effort – of course with this understanding: he would sit on the story until I told him the union wanted him to announce its “no.”

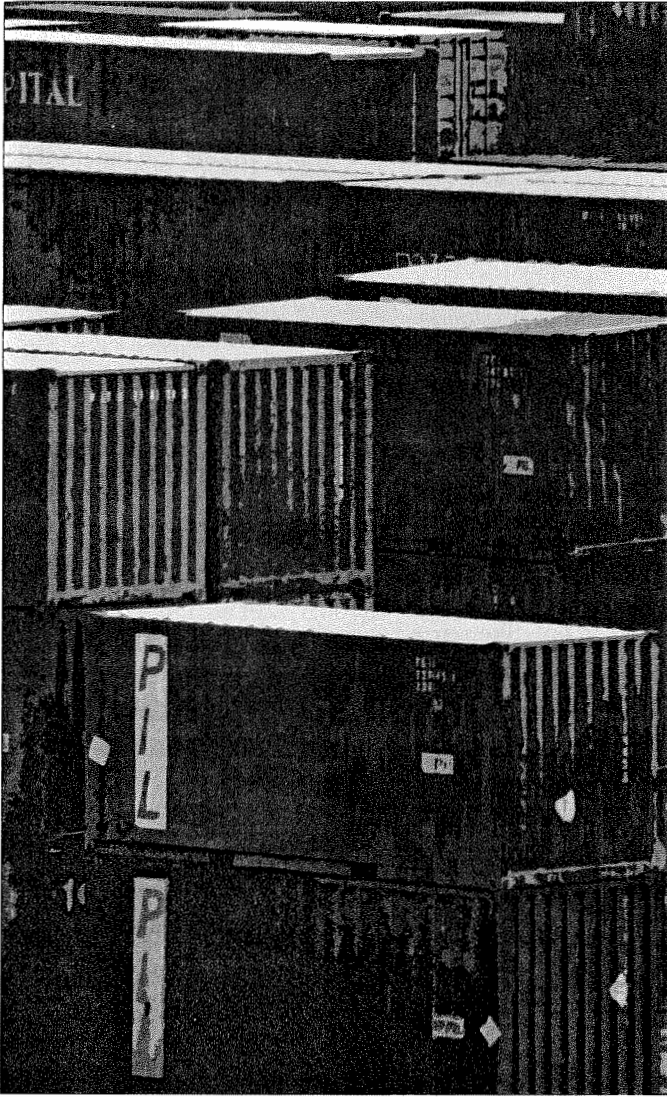
Wednesday-Thursday, May 24-25

By mid-afternoon on Wednesday, we had learned that we would have a very public support from the Bay Area’s Democratic congressmen: Ron Dellums, Phil and John Burton, Pete Stark and George Miller, each of whom had long enjoyed support by the ILWU, as Miller and Stark do to this day. And with this news, newsman Wood got an update on what from the start he had viewed as a good and dramatic story.

Friday-Saturday, May 26-27

Late Friday afternoon, I learned that the SS Seajet would be late by a full day in arriving at 32; I suggested to brother Herman that – with it now due on a Saturday – we delay by one day the timing of my possible calls to advise to “the other side” and through my *Examiner* friend, also aim for a front-page, headline story in the combined Sunday *SF Chronicle & SF Examiner*, by far the largest readership of Bay Area press. The following day, brother Herman and his fellow officers, and our coast committee, said they would wait until 11:00 a.m. on May 30 to tell me if I should make my “advisement calls.”

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I met the next day with Jim Wood to tell him we really needed a front page Sunday story beneath a dramatic headline since then it would certainly be picked up by the wire services of Associated Press, United Press, and Reuters and thus become international, as well as national news; his support was quick. But he also said that to get that ball rolling, he and I should try to meet that afternoon with his City Editor. His editor completely supported our idea and also understood the union's hope to have me make its "advisement calls" by 11:00 AM the next day. But he also said that for us to tack down such a Sunday printing, we would have meet with the publisher of the *Examiner*, William Hearst, Jr. – who, as I soon would learn, everyone called "the young Willie Hearst," partly since his politics were polls apart from his father's.

Monday-Tuesday, May 29-30

The three of us met with Hearst on Monday at two o'clock. He agreed that the story, was "dynamite" and that if it could be published, it would fully deserve a

Sunday headline; he also agreed with the union's hoped for timing. He said he would take "our package" to the Chronicle by ten the next day and have its response by ten-thirty. And he also said that, "barring an earthquake like in 1906," he was sure that the union would have the story it wanted and needed. I called brother Herman, again.

On schedule the next day, my *Examiner* friend called to say the Chronicle was aboard; I quickly informed our union leadership of this fact. At eleven-thirty, I got the go-ahead to make my calls to the Prudential Steamship Line, the Seajet's owner, to Crescent Wharf and Warehouse, the stevedore involved, and to the PMA.

Thursday, June 1

In mid- morning of June 1, I was informed by Prudential and shortly thereafter by Crescent and the PMA that the Seajet had been ordered north for shipyard work and would not arrive at Pier 32 until mid-June. I was also then thrice informed that the fins would be trucked from 32 to "points unknown."

Saturday-Sunday, June 10-11

The fins showed up at the Oakland Army Terminal on Saturday, June the first. And they showed up booked to a government chartered ship, the U.S. Lines' American Charger, which was due to arrive at the terminal on Saturday, June 24. We learned that having been loaded to her, the Charger would off-load the fins at a Canal Zone base to be shipped to Chile by a commercial carrier. With this development, Brother Herman and I agreed that we would aim to have our story in "the Chron/Exam" of Sunday, June 18. Jimmy Herman brought the latest report and our proposed timeline to his fellow officers and the Coast Committee; he soon called me back to say they agreed. He also asked me to fully brief Jim Wood on our most recent and pressing concerns. The government might order the fins to be loaded by Civil Service dockworkers employed by the Army terminal's neighbor – the Naval Supply Depot. Compared to Pier 32, the access of the media to the scene of our "no" could be – and would be – far more restricted by army guards. Wood said we should not worry: save for a quake like 1906, our story would be headline, front page news.

Monday-Friday, June 12-15

From the beginning, our allies in Congress had been building support among their colleagues. The union's DC lobbyist served as our point person there. Early in that effort, ILWU gained the support of Senator Ted Kennedy.

The union also learned that Kennedy was to make a Senate speech on Pinochet on Monday, June 19. He said that, with a green light from the union, he would gladly support and commend our saying a “no” to fins.

Friday-Saturday, June 16-17

At 3:00 p.m. on Friday, I went to the International to hear the final count of our support in the Congress and to confirm our final okay to leaking our news on the coming

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Sunday. In the House, a “solid” 143, a “likely” 126 and a “possible” 66 – and in the Senate, 38 solid, 14 likely and possible 10. Our supporters were also reported to feel that in both houses the Kennedy’s speech would push all of the “likely” and lots of the “possible” into our “solid” column.

Sunday, June 18

“DOCKERS HALT BOMBS TO CHILE,” the *SF Examiner/Chronicle* headline informed its Sunday readers. The story added that on the following day Sen. Kennedy would call the president to urge him to cancel the shipment. It was, indeed, “just dynamite” that happened that day.

Monday-Thursday, June 19-22

As anticipated and hoped, the story was on the wire of AP, UP and Reuters. As a result, it appeared on Monday either in or on all of the West Coast media and throughout the U.S.. It also appeared in many different languages throughout the Western World, the Soviet World, the Asian world, and the South and Central American world – with, of course, the exception of Chile.

Mid-week our International issued a press release. In part it said this: “Bay Area ILWU waterfront locals and the union’s International Officers restated their determination not to load 22,000 pounds of bomb fin assemblies bound for Chile.... We are refusing to work this cargo in order to demonstrate our unwillingness to be a party to the shipment of goods which will be used – directly or

indirectly – to strengthen a regime responsible for the imprisonment, death or disappearance of many thousands of its own citizens, including many workers and trade union officials.... We also want to show our support for the Chilean labor movement – once among the most vital and progressive in the world – which has been cut to shreds by the present government.”

Friday, June 23

At 8:00 a.m. one of our office staff told me the Department of State was calling to see if I would be available for a 9:00 a.m. call: “the person in charge of the Chile review” was very anxious to speak to me regarding an action just then being taken. At 9:05 I got a call from Ms. Patricia Derian, whose name I knew; she was Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights. She was often in the news in part because she really believed in what she was trying to do! She started with this: she had just announced to the press that the shipment of fins had been canceled pending a full and complete review; that the rest of the Pinochet “pipeline” was on indefinite hold; that George Landau, U.S. Ambassador to Chile, was being recalled to report and advise on all Chilean issues and matters, including Pinochet’s refusal to cooperate with the U.S. investigation of the September, 1976, Washington, DC car-bombing deaths of Orlando Letelier, Allende’s ambassador to the U.S., and Ronni Moffit, a staffer at the Institute for Policy Studies who had been working with him.

Having thanked her on behalf of the union for the good news, I called Brother Herman who answered with this: he and his crowd had got the news from our guy in Washington. They were anxious to share it up and down the coast. And I was anxious to call my brother, Jim Wood. But before I could even dial him, he was on the line: “The union has won!” That afternoon, the union had this headline above the lead story in the afternoon *Examiner*: “SF CHILE PROTEST WINS – ARMY HALTS BOMB PARTS TO CHILE.” It got another wire story too.

From activist in the Berkeley student movement and graduate study in Political Science at UC, Herb Mills went to work on the waterfront in 1963. He began his Local 10 work as a volunteer steward and in 1969 was elected by the Stewards Council to be its Secretary. He was thereafter frequently elected by the members of 10 to a business agent office, the secretary-treasurer office and to be a convention delegate. He has written and published a series of monographs detailing the consequences of containerization and related technological change on the work and life of the San Francisco dockers and the functioning of their union.