STRIKES! Past and Present—And The Battles in Seattle

Margaret Levi and David Olson
Department of Political Science
University of Washington, Seattle
March 2000

Between November 30 and December 3, 1999, demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) precipitated a four-day closure of the retail core of Seattle. Militant non-violent protesters attempted to block the access of delegates to the meeting, while upwards of 40,000 workers, students, environmental activists, and concerned citizens marched through the streets of downtown in a peaceful and legal march organized by the AFL-CIO. At the end of a long day, November 30, the first official day of the WTO Ministerial meetings, small roving bands of black masked, black clothed, self-proclaimed anarchists—linked by walkie-talkies and cell phones—began smashing windows while the peaceful and non-violent protestors begged them to stop. The government’s response to the anarchists turned Seattle into a police state, marked by battles in the streets of downtown and nearby neighborhoods. The Seattle police in full riot regalia, looking more like mockups of Darth Vader than Officer Friendly, used tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and percussion grenades to break up the growing crowds that turned out in defiance of city officials, the police and the WTO Ministerial. The Seattle 580 became the nom de guerre of the protesters arrested in these actions.

Most of the media, even the local news, emphasized the anomaly of such events in mellow, upmarket Seattle, a disproportionately white and middle-class city best known for Starbucks, Eddie Bauer, Nordstrom, Boeing, Amazon.com, and Microsoft millionaires. But the media, yet again, shows its lack of schooling in history and protest. Seattle is a city with a long past of militant labor and anarchist actions. The 1919 Seattle General Strike shut down the city for 5 days. In 1934 maritime workers shut down the West Coast ports, including Seattle and Tacoma, for nearly three months and triggered a three day general strike in San Francisco. Nor are these unique events for the region. The Pacific Northwest was a center for the Wobblies, and it was the locus of the Everett and Centralia Massacres in 1916 and 1919. More recent decades have witnessed several effective strikes by the Boeing Machinists, health care workers, and musicians opposed to the hiring and pay policies of Disney and other big corporations that produce extravaganza musical road shows around the world. In 1997 Seattle became the first of the AFL-CIO’s “union cities.” Significant new organizing drives reflect the industries and services the Seattle economy now generates—among the high tech “permatemps” hired by Microsoft and other software companies, among childcare workers, and among immigrant gypsy truck drivers on the docks. The largest and longest U.S. strike by white
collar professionals occurred in early 2000 when between 15,000 and 18,000 Seattle Boeing workers, organized as the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), struck for forty days to secure nearly all their demands.

In commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Seattle General Strike, of the 65th of the Great Maritime Strikes, and of the rich labor tradition of labor militance in the region, the University of Washington Center for Labor Studies held a conference, STRIKES!, in March 1999. The aim was to reconsider the history and the future of large-scale collective actions by labor worldwide as a means of achieving social change and social justice. The papers that follow were either given at or inspired by that conference. In retrospect, much of the discussion now seems a rehearsal for the strategic and tactical questions revealed in the 1999 “Battle in Seattle.” Due to the events surrounding the WTO Ministerial, Seattle has once again become emblematic of militance. Moreover, the recent events in Seattle have compelled the AFL-CIO, the internationals that compose the AFL-CIO, and nearly the entire membership of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) (which held its convention in Seattle in the days preceding the Ministerial) to rethink their programs and strategies.

This essay and the others in this special issue address two major themes. The first is the role of workers, especially waterfront workers, in the struggle for global economic justice, both in the past and today. The second is labor’s changing strategies of militance. To borrow the language used by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward in their article in this issue, what is and should be the repertoire of action that labor calls upon? The papers also provide insights into the coalitions among different kinds of workers and between organized labor and other groups concerned with economic, social, and environmental justice.

The leitmotif that runs through these essays is how to read and use history, how to interpret the past in a way that best informs present and future actions. We bring to the questions of past, present, and future militance the relative objectivity afforded to those of us whose trade is scholarship. Thus, we hope to offer the kind of tough love that organized labor needs at this crucial moment in its efforts to halt its decline and in its crusade to transform itself into a vibrant social movement attractive to the young as well as the middle-aged, to women as well as men, to the unskilled and skilled, to white collar workers as well as blue, and to people of color as well as to those who are white.

Attention to the history of major strikes is instructive for future labor actions. The papers in this issue do not consider the timing and frequency of strikes, the puzzles posed by much of the literature. Rather they address the qualitative dimensions of major strikes and labor actions: how they accomplish and maintain solidarity—and with whom; the nature of the demands expressed; and criteria for success. These are questions posed by Jeremy Brecher, Dana Frank, and David Montgomery, all participants in the March 1999 conference.

This introduction provides background to the historical events the March 1999 conference commemorated and considers the role large-scale labor actions may play more generally in regulating the global economy.
region in the United States, let alone the world, that has a history of militant labor. Nor is it the only city or region that has neglected its history as it seeks to make a place for itself in the new world economy. In this essay Seattle is emblematic of what is happening worldwide in the advanced industrial economies.

INTERESTS, SOLIDARITY, AND THE LABOR PROGRAM

It is now a given among students of labor—and of social movements more generally—that recognition of a common enemy and shared anger and frustration are necessary but not sufficient conditions for generating strikes or other collective actions. It is also a given that strikes and other protests do not always succeed in securing the outcomes desired by the workers and their allies; indeed, their actions may even provoke countermeasures. Unless those briefly united in the streets also unite in other and more binding ways, their victories may be short-lived. To achieve long-term effectiveness, strikers must not only share common interests but also a common program, and both are difficult to achieve. As importantly, unions and their coalitional partners must be able to develop sufficient collective power to defeat sources of opposition, and over time they must instantiate in law their demands for rights and protections. We concentrate here on the problems of constructing common interests and translating them into a common program within unions, across unions locally, nationally, and internationally, and with non-union allies. We explore the implications of these problems for solidarity and for effectiveness. However, we do not offer a road map to success. Our aim is more modest: to emphasize the necessity of asking certain questions about labor movement strikes and other actions and to raise an agenda for future research.

There are three kinds of interests that we shall address in what follows. The first is job-based. The second is based on common membership in an industry or organization or on geography: all steelworkers across the U.S. and Canada, all those whose unions are part of the AFL-CIO, all workers in Seattle. The third is a more universal interest that may encompass even those who do not, at first glance at least, seem to share in a community of fate: longshoremen and migrant field workers, American students and Guatemalan sweatshop workers, Teamsters and environmentalists. Achievement and maintenance of universalistic interests are not easy. As coalitions represent a greater diversity of people and groups, the universalistic interests that bind their members together conflict with a greater range of particularistic claims.

Lenin long ago worried about the tendency of workers to become economistic, that is to focus only on relatively narrow and specific job related interests. He argued that local solidarity does not produce a movement based on a coalition of diverse groups or with a major program of social and economic change. When relatively narrow and economistic interests alone define action, the result is likely to be a program concerned only with the relatively immediate needs of those who easily form a group. For example, in the United States, organizing by job-based interests leads to a protectionist program, whose members worry only about keeping their jobs and protecting their paychecks, without regard to the effects on workers in other countries. Even non-economistic but narrow interests can have a similar constraining effect. The environmentalists have given deep thought to the trees or owls they are attempting to save but generally do not consider how to compensate the workers whose jobs will be negatively affected by stricter
regulations. Basing organization on interests so specific to the individuals of that group makes it hard for social movements to transcend the particularistic.

Once an organization moves beyond the confines of a particular group of workers whose solidarity and willingness to trust and respect each other is based on a common work and class experience, it also moves beyond the easy reach of selective incentives and social pressure, the factors Mancur Olson rightly identified as crucial to sustaining participation. Once it moves beyond demands based in a particular work place, it moves away from union and employer rules, such as seniority, that may facilitate militance. Coalitions of different unions are raked with difficulties, and these tensions intensify when internationalism replaces nationalism in labor’s program. The history of the Internationals and of the AFL-CIO offer rich evidence of these problems. Coalitions of unions, environmentalists, and trade activists are likely to be even more fragile, despite the best will and the most dedicated efforts of the participants. Explanations derived from the aggregated rational choices of individual decision-makers go far in accounting for the rise and decline of unions and the probability of strikes with job-based interests. However, as many of their proponents admit, these kinds of rational choice models are limited in what they explain about many large-scale coalitions and social movements.

Solidarity depends on a complex and long-term understanding of interests in which members of one union come to believe in the link between their situation and that of others. “An injury to one is an injury to all,” the slogan of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), epitomizes such a belief. But how is that “one” defined? Possible sources of solidarity include ideology, a web of social networks, and vigorous leadership. Scholars are exploring all of these, and we acknowledge some role for each of these factors. However, our emphasis is on related but different variables in accounting for the emergence of general interests and an internationalist program. The first is hard evidence, accompanied by framing that persuades the rank and file that what happens to one set of actors affects another. The second is democratic rank-and-file unionism, which often facilitates the recognition of a general interest.

Shared, non-economic interests depend on rational beliefs, i.e. well-grounded expectations, that harm to another is harm to one’s self. One source of such recognition is documentation of an actual community of fate. Such evidence is easy to come by when a co-worker is fired, underpaid, or overworked, but it becomes harder to document when the harm is to an unknown person. Documenting a shared fate is the challenge the contemporary labor movement faces in organizing across unions and countries and in organizing with various coalitional partners. It is key to mobilizing large-scale labor actions. Thus, it is hardly surprising that union militants must persuade others that each strike or action is a finger in the dike, that allowing management victories in one place will only reduce the capacity for defense.

Rational beliefs concerning mutuality of interests can have their basis in morality or ideology as much or more than in material interests. If one set of actors cares sufficiently about another set to encapsulate their interests and act accordingly, the two parties do in fact share a community of fate. Democratic rank-and-file unionism is one means to develop this ethic and the solidarity that follows, for it entails discussion as well as informed and full participation in the decisions affecting strikes, protests, and programs.
as well as in the selection of leadership. The experience of the longshore in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere (see, e.g. Johnson, Turnbull and McConville, this issue) illustrates the role of democratic, rank-and-file unionism in enhancing obligations of members to each other and to unknown workers around the world.

Our focus is on the construction and maintenance of common interests, especially those that are more universalistic and that facilitate solidary action. However, solidarity ensures neither agreement on the best program to achieve shared ends nor effectiveness of strikes and protests. In terms of program, organizers face the Scylla of intractable differences and the Charybdis of the least common denominator. Either results in the discontent of certain constituencies who are then likely to splinter or desert. Education helps—as Lenin—argued; the more the participants are informed about and understand the complexity of issues and perspectives, the more they are likely to recognize and accept differences of opinion. The major problem, however, is to find a program that translates common interests into the needs of the variety of union members and coalitional partners. In part, this is an issue of framing, but it is equally a question of substance.

Proof of trustworthiness also helps; those who have faced the police together or gone to jail together or even simply marched together are likely to give each other some leeway—at least for a time. Here is where social networks can play a critical role.

However, for those groups that have long distrusted each other, e.g. labor unions and environmentalists, something more may be necessary. In the language of the new institutional economics, one side may have to precommit valuable resources that will be lost if they betray the trust they are requesting. The experience of building interracial solidarity among workers in the southern United States offers some guidelines. Relative success appears to have hinged on the institutionalization of racial inclusion by providing positions of authority to black workers. By whites giving up power to blacks, the whites gave up valuable resources and demonstrated their commitment to racial equity. Another example derives from recent coalitions between unions and community-based organizations. As unions decline in density, they need allies among community-based organizations for various city-based campaigns. But the experience of community groups, particularly those of color, is that unions neglect their interests. A history of racial exclusion and union support of large-scale construction projects that displace neighborhoods of color without compensation in jobs or neighborhood housing. In these cases, unions must deliver not just promises but money, staff, and votes for issues the communities want if the unions are to demonstrate their trustworthiness as allies.

If the problems of solidarity and program content are resolved, there is the further question of effectiveness. Organizers and activists must have a good grasp of actual political and economic circumstances so that they can identify the points of leverage, when it makes sense to push and when to concede. Changes in labor law and state policy influence the probability of repression or government resources and, therefore, affect this calculation. With a good understanding of their position, organizers can develop a short-term and a long-term strategy. Without some immediate gains, the movement is likely to fizzle, but incremental victories that do not build to a larger program are likely to sidetrack the movement itself. This is, of course, extremely difficult to accomplish; the danger is that the maintenance requirements of the organization and the ambitions of its
leaders will undermine the larger vision. Most important, labor success is not measurable by a single defeat or victory but by progress over time in winning rights, protections, and actual benefits. The history of labor, indeed of all social movements, is of waxing and waning, both in actions and in victories.

The history of strikes and protest also teaches that rank-and-file unionism and democratic procedures can be crucial for effective actions, sustained success, and perhaps even the construction of general interests among unionists and with other social movement activists. Rosa Luxemburg’s mass strikes seem to capture more of the reality of militant workers in advanced industrial democracy organizing than do Lenin’s cells. But democratic organization is extremely difficult to achieve and maintain. Michels warned us of “the tendency to oligarchy,” and the examples of democratic unionism that actually exist tend to prove, rather than belie, the rule. Even so, the deliberation and the ethic facilitated by democratic unionism—or, at the least, a politics of inclusion—may be a key component of the construction of general interests and sustained solidarity within and across groups. It is to this argument we now turn.

UNION SOLIDARITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE LONGSHORE

Arguably, the workers of the waterfront are the most militant workers on the West Coast and among the most militant in the world. For more than a century, the longshore and other maritime workers have waged an aggressive and, often, radical struggle aimed at regulating capitalist control not only of their industry but also of the economy and politics of their regions. Their jobs are dependent on international trade, and yet they are often at the forefront—as they were in Seattle during the WTO Ministerial—in the struggle to protect the rights and welfare of workers throughout the world. In part this reflects a sophisticated protection of their own economic interests; the events in Liverpool and the threat to the dockers of Australia (as Turnbull and McConville describe in their pieces for this issue) are engrained into the consciousness of waterfront workers everywhere. However, it is not simply self-interest that explains the closure of the Seattle port during the WTO Ministerial or recurring refusals by the ILWU (International Longshore and Warehouse Union) to move the goods of employers who resist union organizing. Nor does self-interest account for the longshore support, financially and with personnel, of the International Transport Federation (ITF). The ITF campaigns to end abuses against shipboard workers. Its weapons are its inspectors, who monitor and enforce labor standards for workers on foreign registered ships, and it employs a floating museum, the Global Mariner, to observe shipboard practices from port to port.

There is no simple explanation for the radicalism and solidarity among the waterfront workers. It is true that ports are among the least mobile forms of capital due to the requirement of the right kind of harbor, on the one hand, and access to the interior of a country, on the other. However, ships are quite mobile. Moreover, the amount and kind of labor required by a port authority and by employer groups varies considerably with both technology and union control over the labor market. These issues have been at the heart of the on-going struggle between the workers of the waterfront and their employers, as Turnbull (this issue) documents. It is also true, as Johnson argues in this issue, that the west coast waterfront workers have a political culture of “workplace collectivism,” which may distinguish them from other workers, on and off the waterfront,
and which certainly contributes to their solidarity. But forces now at work may undermine this collectivism. The rank and file activism of the past may be declining with the dwindling influence of the 1930’s militants and their immediate heirs. Will it revive in a new form, more appropriate to the contemporary era?

The 1919 Seattle General Strike and 1934 coastwide longshore strike were among two of the largest mass strikes in United States history. They reveal important lessons for the relationship between labor leaders and the rank and file, on the one hand, and between labor unions and employers, on the other. The strikes take place within a changing legal and economic context, which in turn affects both the demands and strategies of the strikers; in 1919 there was no legislation granting workers the right to organize and bargain and by 1934 there was. Equally interesting is the effect the strikes have on international trade. Indeed, one of the seeming ironies of the 1999 “Battle in Seattle” was the presence of the longshore, workers who thrive on international trade, at the forefront of actions directed at regulating international trade. A focus on the factors that produce, sustain, and reproduce the militance of this group of workers reveals much about the possibilities and limits of a labor movement committed to both improving its own working conditions and to winning social, environmental and economic justice for all.

The Development of Waterfront Workers’ Interests

Workers on the West Coast formed unions soon after 19th century coastal settlements emerged, and most of the unions were born of strike actions. Waterfront unions first appeared on the West Coast on July 25, 1853 with the founding of the Riggers and Stevedores’ Union in San Francisco “... for the regulation of wages and protection of each other.” As cargo and passengers moved up the coast, strike actions spread northward, particularly when seamen working the ships exchanged jobs with longshoremen working ship cargo. Hiring bosses introduced status distinctions between riggers (who set lines to handle cargo slings), stevedores (who stowed and broke out cargo from ship holds), and less skilled longshoremen (who hauled cargo to and from wharfs).

A short-lived Portland (Oregon) Longshoremen’s Protective Union emerged in 1868 and was succeeded in 1879 by the Portland Stevedores, Longshoremen and Riggers Union. The first waterfront workers’ union on Puget Sound appeared in Tacoma on March 22, 1886 with the founding of the Stevedores, Longshoremen and Riggers Union, following strike action by workers over issues of hiring preferences and a wage raise to forty cents an hour. That same year, on June 22, the Stevedores, Longshoremen and Riggers Union (SL&RU) incorporated in Seattle during a strike seeking forty cents an hour for day labor and fifty cents for night work. Beyond wage gains, this strike established the principle of work rotation: the union developed a Work Committee that sent men to work ships in alphabetical order, thus assuring relative equality of wages and wresting job control from hiring bosses. The union-controlled rotation system suspended employer job-site power, it abolished status distinctions between workers, and in so doing it engendered longshore occupational solidarity. Waterfront workers saw themselves as having interests beyond their particular jobs, and they began to think and act in concert
with other, similarly situated, workers within the Seattle harbor. Union control of the hiring process has remained a core union objective over the ensuing 100 plus years.

Control of the waterfront hiring process remained a hotly contested question between steamship employers and longshore workers, as did the issue of the wage scale. The employers prevailed on both in 1894. As consequences of the panic of 1893 and a failed four-week strike, the SL&RU experienced wage cuts, work conditions imposed by employers, and abandonment of union control over the hiring process. The failed strike also gave replacement workers first access to employment, while union supporters gained subsequent employment only individually and then when needed.

Feelings of worker solidarity and conceptions of unified interests across the Seattle harbor became difficult to sustain under the new power balance between employees and their bosses. There followed a period of two decades of worker resistance to employer imposed wage rates, conditions of work, status distinctions among workers, and control of the hiring process by employers. Most of the union demands failed. Solidarity among workers ebbed, and scattered strike actions settled on terms favorable to employers. Still, the seeds planted in the outcome of the 1886 strike would germinate in the future. The outcome of numerous scattered, ill-organized strike actions--though failures only when immediate gains for workers are measured against their demands--kept alive issues of wages, work conditions, and control of job assignments.

It was not until 1916 that workers mobilized again in sufficient numbers to mount a serious challenge to the steamship lines, who now organized themselves as a consortium of waterfront employers. Workers too reorganized, now as the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA). Ownership and operation of the harbor also changed with the creation in 1911 of the Port of Seattle, a public port authority. Publicly elected port commissioners responded to labor constituencies by adopting hiring preferences for local ILA workers. Preceding the 1916 strike, waterfront unions experienced a mixture of gains and losses. Wages still stood, after three decades, at fifty cents an hour, and the steady gang mode of work assignment prevailed instead of the union’s cherished system of job rotation.

What had most changed in Seattle between the turn of century labor skirmishes that waxed and waned between union success and failure and the 1916 strike was the way waterfront workers thought about themselves and acted with each other. The rise of militancy in workers and solidarity across work sectors is in part attributable to the pervasive influence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW found more fertile soil for its ideas about “one big union”, worker militancy, and cross-sector solidarity among workers in the Pacific Northwest than elsewhere. As Johnson notes in her article, the IWW was extremely strong in the Pacific Northwest. The occupational location of workers in the Pacific Northwest economy suggests why the IWW message of militancy and solidarity took root. Two primary sectors were, first, extraction and exploitation of natural resources (timber, mining, fishing, agriculture); and, second, transportation (rail and ship). These occupations are marked by workplace isolation, where workers live far from other communities, yet their jobs bring them into close social contact with each other. These insular occupational types tend worldwide to be the most militant. With the western frontier closed and nowhere for discontented workers to migrate, working for low wages, and long hours (10 or more a day), in hazardous
conditions, the IWW’s promise of “one big union” secured through militant tactics and solidarity across workers was attractive. Dual unionism became popular among waterfront workers, who held both ILA and IWW membership cards.

The 1916 longshore strike began on June 1, when not a single union worker appeared to work the docks. The strike lasted 127 days and was the most important strike action foreshadowing both the 1919 and 1934 strikes. The ILA strike was reinforced by Teamster pledges not to scab on longshore work and joint picketing by fishermen, steamboaters, and cargo checkers. The ILA demands included a closed shop, wage increases, nine hour work days, and the core union demand for control of a rotating dispatch system. The union also demanded a coastwide contract, unifying dockworkers under a single master contract from Bellingham to San Diego. The employers resisted all demands, hiring Pinkerton agents to enforce their will and recruiting farmworkers, racial minorities, and university students as replacement workers. The union also demanded a coastwide contract, unifying dockworkers under a single master contract from Bellingham to San Diego. The employers resisted all demands, hiring Pinkerton agents to enforce their will and recruiting farmworkers, racial minorities, and university students as replacement workers. The prolonged strike featured numerous fist fights, fires, bombings, gunfire and murders. Throughout the 1916 strike, national and state governments remained aloof, while local public officials intervened to restore order. After four bitter, violent months of conflict, the strike ended with the union failing to obtain any of its goals. Instead, work conditions deteriorated, speedup systems were imposed, wages stagnated, the open shop and steady gang work assignments remained in place, and coastwide bargaining remained for another day. The companies blacklisted from future dock work members of the ILA and workers otherwise involved in the strike.

Viewed narrowly, comparing demands against immediate gains, the 1916 ILA strike failed. Yet it set the context for future waterfront strike activity by moving beyond particular job-related demands for improved wages and conditions of work to advance claims over who controls relations of production and the geographic scale on which waterfront workers would be organized. Armed with this agenda, longshore workers who were members of both the ILA and IWW gained control of the local Seattle ILA union. Their agenda now broadened the conception of workers’ interests and foreshadowed the central features of the 1919 and 1934 strikes.

1919 Seattle General Strike: Local Solidarity

World War I benefited Seattle’s economy, and nowhere did the economic stimulus surpass the shipbuilding industry. The U.S. government’s Emergency Fleet Corporation combined with shipyard owners to provide rapid employment gains and increased wages to ensure a steady supply of productive workers. With the Armistice, military demobilization called for massive layoffs of metal workers and downscaling their wages. The Metal Trades Council called a strike for January 21, 1919, when 35,000 workers walked off the job. Soon other waterfront workers, although not as immediately threatened, called for a sympathy strike to show solidarity with metal workers against the combined forces of employers and the national government.

The call for solidarity drew quick union support from boilermakers, ironworkers, carpenters, electrical workers, engineers and longshoremen, even though the latter union was threatened by its International President with suspension of its charter for approving the sympathy strike. The longshore workers rejected threats from their leadership and affirmed solidarity with other workers beyond their own immediate job location. Calls for
sympathy strikes escalated when the Metal Trades Council appealed for support from the Seattle Central Labor Council. There the shipyard unions petitioned all unions to sample their members on calling a general strike, which passed with only token opposition. Majorities in 99 out of 101 unions voted approval of the general strike call, with only gas workers and the federal employees dissenting. Waterfront workers were now joined in solidarity with nearly every union in Seattle, by rank and file vote. The call for a general strike united worker interests across job types and across craft and industrial sectors. The unfamiliar territory of engaging a general strike left unanswered questions of how to organize mass strike action.

The organizational focus for conducting the general strike was the Seattle Central Labor Council which created a General Strike Committee composed of three delegates drawn from each local on strike and chosen by their respective ranks in file. The Committee called the strike for February 6 and over five days acted with powers usually associated with a general purpose government. It created a Committee of Fifteen that operated as an executive committee in giving direction to the strike, including ensuring civil order and declaring exemptions from the strike: it exempted the municipal electric utility, selected garbage operations, delivery of drugs to hospitals, and it set up food stations and delivered milk to children. Except for those exempted, workers stayed at home and the city effectively stopped its normal activities. For five heady days in February, the 1919 Seattle General Strike was enormously successful. Labor exercised effective rule over city life.

Except for its five days of rule, the 1919 Seattle General Strike was largely a failure. Instead of seeing it as a means to an end, the General Strike became an end unto itself. The strike did assert coordinated control by labor over short term authority relations in Seattle, but after five days the strike collapsed without realizing tangible short or long term gains for workers, in large part because it lacked a program or generalized strategy for realizing workers' interests beyond the General Strike itself. It did not end the metal workers strike, nor even bring the government and the shipyard owners to the bargaining table. It did not yield benefits to any of the unions in the grand coalition, and some suffered cancellation of local charters by their internationals because of strike participation. Workers gained nothing materially from the strike. The long-term consequences of the strike were to undermine the place of the IWW in the labor movement, to dash the hopes of shipyard workers and Seattle unions more generally, and to mark the Left as a spent force in Seattle affairs for decades to come. It correspondingly legitimated the rise of conservative business unionism, best personified in Dave Beck, a Seattle labor leader who became President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. As one writer notes, “Beck thought the strike had been wrong, criminally wrong; it had been impetuous, it had been pointless; it brought disrepute to labor and had won nothing.” Subsequently, Beck bargained for salaries, work conditions, benefits and nothing more; he kept the political and economic spheres separate.

How can we reconcile the remarkable successes of the Seattle General Strike in the short term (the five days) with its failure in the long term? Going into the five days in February, strike leaders lacked an identifiable objective, let alone an articulate program of action, except for the actual conduct of the strike itself. Questions about the purpose of the strike abounded before, during and afterward. Anna Louise Strong, a leading figure in
the Committee of Fifteen, and writing in *The Seattle Union Record* two days before the strike, addressed the planned directions as: “We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country, a move which will lead—NO ONE KNOWS WHERE.” Some strike leaders argued for a set time limit, others for an end to the strike when shipyard owners and the government agreed to confer with the Metal Trades Council. Both were rejected. Lacking a program, a strategy, and even any objective, the strike saw union defections from the General Strike Committee of 300 rank and file representatives, and finally declared the strike over on February 11. Despite the remarkable worker militancy and cross-union solidarity that made the 1919 Seattle General Strike possible, the action lacked planned objectives and capable leadership. Finally, the 1919 Seattle General Strike occurred during a period of economic dislocation prompted by defense demobilization, and at a time in which the state (the Emergency Fleet Corporation of the national government) was aligned with employer groups aimed at reducing the size, compensation and power of workers.

**1934 Longshore Strike: Job Control and Coastwide Solidarity**

No such lack of intelligent leadership or absence of planned objectives and programs marked the 1934 Longshore strike on the West Coast. Nor was the state an active opponent of the demands of labor. The hundreds of articles and scores of books on the 1934 longshore strike, and Johnson’s article (this volume), agree that this strike combined a coherent program with the militancy and solidarity among workers to bring it about.

Two longstanding and overarching issues agitated longshore workers leading up to 1934. The first was the “shape up” system of employment, where workers appeared at dockside hoping to be selected by bosses for work. They were required to carry blue registration books, in a scheme created by employer-supported unions, whereby all workers could be monitored, blacklisted if they made trouble, or deregistered if they were would-be organizers. The shape up also allowed employers’ agents to extract kickbacks from workers’ wages as a condition of gaining employment. As early as the 1886 strike in Seattle, longshore workers had fought for union control of the hiring hall, and they continued to view control over hiring practices as tantamount to control over who ran the waterfront.

The second major issue was the “speed up.” Employers controlled all working conditions, including the pace of work, by setting the size of the sling load, and by determining the number of men handling it. The rule on the waterfront was for workers to “meet the hook,” and longshoremen had to work as quickly as the winch operators. Any improvement in technology of winches sped up work. Longshoremen had long sought a reduction in the size of the sling load and an increase in the size of the work gangs from twelve to sixteen men. By controlling these two work conditions the workers could control the production process.

Although 1933-34 had been a profitable year for ship owners, they cut longshore wages and sped up their work. These employer moves inflamed worker militancy. It, combined with the shape up, propelled the rank and file to call a West Coast convention of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) in February, 1934. ILA officers were deselected as delegates, and Convention insurgents adopted a program that
incumbent ILA officers strongly opposed. The Convention demanded a coastwide contract specifying a 30-hour work week, a union controlled hiring hall, and improved wages and benefits. The Convention called for a strike if these demands failed to be met. To enforce their demands, and using rank-and-file election procedures, Convention delegates elected a fifty-member strike committee, chaired by Harry Bridges. These actions articulated a clearly specified program of action and created a leadership group based on rank-and-file members’ preferences.

On May 9th, 12,500 West Coast longshoremen, including 2000 from the Pacific Northwest, walked off the job in a show of solidarity with the Convention’s program and its leadership. The Waterfront Employers Association imported 1700 strikebreakers, but the newly constituted ILA successfully shut down maritime commerce coastwide. The traditional ILA leadership had been replaced by militant leadership based upon mass democratic participation by the rank-and-file who aggressively employed militant tactics to secure program objectives. On May 21, 4,500 sailors, marine firemen, water tenders, cooks, and stewards joined the strike, thus extending the coalition across allies in different occupations working on the waterfront. Longshore workers were now organized coastwide and in coalition with other kinds of waterfront workers. The Joint Marine Strike Committee was formed, with Bridges as Chair. A three-month walkout ensued. When on July 5, “Bloody Thursday,” police attacked strikers in San Francisco, killing two, the Joint Marine Strike Committee called a general strike.

The longshore strike ended when issues in dispute were submitted to a federal arbitration board. None of the major issues in dispute was settled definitively, but longshoremen had discovered their power. In the bloody moments of the 1934 strike, nine marine workers lost their lives on the West Coast, but the violence drew longshore together. Radical insurgents replaced conservative ILA incumbents and elected Bridges the San Francisco local president by a 3-1 margin. Between July 1 and October 12 (74 days) there were twenty-nine separate job actions, or “quickie strikes,” reflecting the changed balance of power on the docks. The strikers drove scabs from the dock, revised pre-strike work rules to their liking, and settled for a contract providing wages of 90 cents an hour, $1.20 for overtime, and a thirty-hour workweek.

The Roosevelt administration was deeply concerned about uninterrupted maritime trade, and at minimum was neutral in the conflict between steamship employers and waterfront workers. The federal arbitration award of October 12 contained two key provisions. First, workers had the right to “choose your job”, meaning workers could refuse a job when their turn at rotation at the hiring hall came up without fear of reprisal or blacklisting. Second, the hiring hall would be neutral, jointly funded and operated by union and employer representatives, but with job dispatches controlled by the union. The settlement, enforced by quickie strikes and tightly organized job stewards, enabled the longshore to take control of the waterfront. The agreement also recognized the union as bargaining agent for the entire West Coast.

After seizing control of the union, the insurgent leadership adopted internal procedures designed to ensure continued democratic control of the union by rank- and-file members. These included: one year terms of office for all local officers, with a prohibition against incumbents serving more than two consecutive terms; a recall provision simply requiring signatures from fifteen percent of the members; and a salary
cap on all union officers that could not exceed ten percent above the earnings of the highest paid workers.

The “wharf rats” had transformed themselves into the lords of the docks. The union had gained power to control the docks at the point of production, and they had established coastwide solidarity, both of which they continue to rely upon.

**The Worldwide Attack on Longshore: International Solidarity**

Longshore may have been the first, as Piven and Cloward claim (this volume) to achieve international labor solidarity with the worldwide closure of ports to support the striking Liverpool dockers. As exciting and as promising as such actions are, international solidarity is not likely to be effective when, as in Liverpool, it is a strategy of last defense (see Turnbull, this volume). But international solidarity helped the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which also had a national legal and rights strategy that evoked coalitional support from unions and citizens throughout Australia (see McConville this volume).

The MUA victory may be short-lived, however, given the immense power arrayed against the “wharfies” (as longshore are called in Australia). The containerization of the 1950s and 60s significantly cut labor costs, and the ports now are once again seeking to reduce those costs even further. In the exhibition, “Fish Story,” a photo documentary by Allan Sekula, one of the most disturbing photos was of the robotic port of Rotterdam, which appears to function without any human workers. Employers are also turning to the other classic staple, the recruitment of a competitive work force from countries whose workers receive lower wages and work in worse working conditions and who are subject to deportation if they are ”difficult”, meaning they attempt to unionize.

The international coalition among ship owners and ports globally has required the longshore to form an international strategy of solidarity of their own. The perception of a common threat has expedited a collective stance, but also crucial to the strategy, at least among the longshore of the West Coast of the U.S., has been a recognition of the need to support workers in other industries affected by international trade. A deeply held rank and file commitment to a radical and left wing analysis of the relationship between government and politics continues to instruct action—but for how long? The demise of a generation schooled in the tenets of socialism and experienced in rank and file unionism may spell the end of particular forms of internationalism and militance. Still, the inherited traditions of current ILWU members, the common experience of the dispatch system in the hiring hall, the critical coastwide organization, the consolidation by employers into global steamship alliances, and the daily commerce in trade spanning the globe offer reasons for confidence that internationalism and militance will continue.

**The Legacy of Waterfront Strikes**

The romanticization of waterfront strikes, especially 1919 and the recent Australian actions, offers the labor movement a history of militance to which organizers and radicals can point as a reality of the past and a possibility for the future. But there are larger lessons offered by these strikes. The consequences of the failure to base the 1919 strike on rank and file control and the absence of a strategic program ensured defeat and created the conditions for conservative trade unionism. The consequences of rank and
file control in 1934 and an articulate program of action ensured economic and political victory. The “34 Men” represented a distinct generation of workers who remained loyal to each other, to Bridges, and to a radical conception of union power. Their solidarity ensured the survival of left wing unionism through the red-baiting period of U.S. history as well as through the Cold War. The final lesson has to do with the role of the state. The overt hostility of the state toward workers prior to and during 1919 and, at a minimum, the neutrality of the state in arbitration awards in 1934 point to the continuing importance of state actions when workers and employers engage in intense conflict.

COALITIONS: LONGSHORE, TEAMSTERS, AND TURTLES

The preceding history of West Coast longshore reads as if there is a relatively steady progression from local to national to international solidarity. Recent events in Seattle may even seem to suggest that, with time, the coalitions will solidify between unionized labor and others trying to exercise popular political and economic control over the global environment and economy. Nonetheless, with the globalization of capital, declining union density worldwide, and the fragility of coalitions, there is reason to be suspicious of the long-term maintenance of this solidarity. There is equal reason to be skeptical that a coherent and stable internationalist labor program will emerge.

The Protests against the WTO

Washington is the most trade dependent state in the continental U.S.; it is also one of the most unionized with approximately 25% of the non-agricultural work force in unions. Seattle, its commercial capital, has become a boom town, and it, too, has a strong labor presence, particularly among workers in the aircraft industry, government, the building trades, and transportation, including, of course, the port. The business and managerial elite want to make Seattle a world center, and they were eager to host the WTO Ministerial as part of this effort to achieve the status of an international city. They failed to recognize the growing division within the city between those who benefit from the immense wealth generated in Seattle in the past decades and those who see their beloved city transformed into an unrecognizably upscale and expensive playground for the newly rich.

The WTO Ministerial became the focus for a variety of grievances and discontents with the corporate elite of the Pacific Northwest as well as the opportunity for an expression of union and community power. The usual Seattle elements, present in 1919 and 1934, were present again in 1999: waterfront workers, teamsters, the skilled trades, and a wide variety of anarchists and leftists. But there were also new groups and voices that had been developing clout in the Pacific Northwest over the past few decades and were now joined, often for the first time, in a coalition with labor: students, environmentalists, academics, and faith-based groups. The protests against the WTO represent one of the new repertoires of action that Piven and Cloward (this volume) discuss. The protests also reflect a growing array of transnational networks, organizations, and actions combating marginalization.

What was missing was the clarity of a strike. There was a cacophony of voices and issues. John Sweeney and the other officers of the AFL-CIO were willing to engage with the WTO but demanded that it adopt and enforce standards for labor and environmental
rights. They and the leadership of the AFL-CIO in Washington State, Rick Bender, President of the Washington State Labor Council, and Ron Judd, Executive Secretary of the King County Labor Council, eschewed protectionism, and so did most of the international presidents who spoke at the major rally on November 30. But there were differences within the union movement and within the more encompassing coalition over preferred policies and strategies. There were those who wanted representation within the WTO and those who wanted it disbanded, those who preferred legal mobilization, those who advocated civil disobedience, and those who opted for property damage.

The protests against the WTO Ministerial in Seattle demonstrated to the delegates, government officials, and corporate managers that there is huge public concern about the governance of world trade, worker standards in developing countries, and global environmental degradation, and that business as usual will not be tolerated. The standard of governance itself came into question, where issues of democratic participation, national sovereignty, and transparency in WTO internal proceedings raised the ire of protestors. Two of the great forces of the modern era, the continuing globalization of capital with the WTO as its institution of governance versus the rapid progression of democratic decision making norms, seem to be inevitably, fundamentally in conflict. Prior actions in Geneva and subsequent actions in Mexico and elsewhere reinforce this message. The media, protestors, and government officials tout the “Battle in Seattle” as a turning point, but in what direction the movement is turning and who composes the movement coalition remain uncertain. The difficulties of sustaining such an extraordinary coalition, let alone developing a shared and coherent program, are daunting.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

The labor movement has a serious problem. Its worldwide decline in density makes its first order of business the recruitment of new members. This has directed the labor movement to workers distinct from those that have formed its traditional base: initially, white, male workers in crafts, manufacturing and heavy industry and, over the last few decades, government employees, including women and people of color. Now unions are turning to other white-collar occupations, the professions and to service work. To attract members has meant the development of new policies, on the one hand, and new alliances, on the other.

The age-old tensions within the labor movement persist, however, as the recent Teamster election attests. There are still considerable proportions of union members and leaders who believe the emphasis should remain on basic bread and butter issues. Many still advocate protectionist trade policies that make it difficult for a country’s jobs to move to other parts of the world. The rights and welfare of workers in developing nations barely affect the consciousness of some. And many still advocate and practice top-down and non-democratic unionism. These are the ingredients of an insular labor movement, not one based on wide-ranging coalitions and universalistic interests.

Lacking a common work, class, or cultural experience may make it extremely difficult to sustain a perception of a common enemy or an agreement on priorities. More narrow definitions of interest are likely to take precedence. By turning the focus to issues of income disparity and other forms of inequality and inequity, national labor leaders are
attempting to create a shared agenda among an extremely diverse membership. But they have yet to achieve consensus on a program; the addition of concerns about global inequality and exploitation makes this consensus even more difficult to achieve. The labor movement in the United States and in most other advanced industrial democracies must find ways to transform itself without losing the base it already has. To do this it must protect the job-based interests of those already paying dues and those whose dues it wishes to start collecting, but for unions to become the broad-based membership organizations they once were, they must again become a social movement. And this requires inspiring a more universalistic and longer-term set of common interests, purposes, and identities.

There is no quick fix. What the history of Seattle’s waterfront workers suggests, however, is that strategies of both opposition and interest formation change to reflect national and economic changes. With the passage of national legislation that recognized the right of workers to organize, the nature of strikes and demands changed. For the longshore, this meant a demand for collective bargaining as well as wages and an increasing reliance on contract negotiations to win pay raises and protect the hiring hall. With the globalization of capital, most American workers first responded with protectionism. The longshore were more internationalist, and now so are other unions. As one steelworker environmentalist recently said, “I’m a father and a citizen as well as a worker.” But the recognition of the bond between blue-collar workers and greens is a consequence of a common campaign against the same corporation that has locked out steelworkers and threatens a forest. Shared enemies are one source of common interests, but continuing and sustained interactions—and hardworking organizers—are necessary to strengthen the universalistic interests and the coalitions forged in the most recent of the battles in Seattle.
+ This piece will appear as the introduction to STRIKES! Past and Present, a special issue of Politics & Society to appear in September 2000. We wish to thank Fred Block, Elizabeth Kier, Mieke Meurs, Susan Stokes, and Peter Turnbull for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts.

1 Both of the authors were participants in the AFL-CIO march and closely observed what followed in Seattle after.

2 The Wobblies were the name given to members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). See Patrick Renshaw, The Story of Syndicalism in the United States (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1967).

3 The conference was partially funded by Politics & Society in its efforts to generate discussion around important policy issues facing the Left today.

4 The ICU, according to its web page [http://www.icftu.org/] represents 125 million Trade Union Members from 145 countries and territories.


10 This is as true for the various versions of the resource mobilization approach as for the rational choice collective action approach. For exemplars of the first, see, e.g. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy, Social Movements in an Organizational Society (New Brunswick and Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987); Charles Tilly, From Mobilization to Revolution (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978); Sidney

11 There is, of course, a huge literature on interests, some of which appeared in the early pages of this journal. See, e.g. Isaac D. Balbus, "The Concept of Interest in Pluralist and Marxian Analysis," *Politics & Society* 1, no. 2 (February 1971): 151-77; William E. Connolly, "On 'Interests' in Politics," *Politics & Society* 2, no. 4 (Summer 1972): 459-77; Bertell Ollman, "Toward Class Consciousness Next Time: Marx and the Working Class," *Politics & Society* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1972): 1-24; and Susan C. Stokes, "Hegemony, Consciousness and Political Change in Peru," *Politics & Society* 19, no. 3 (1991): 265-91. Also see Susan C. Stokes, *Cultures in conflict : social movements and the state in Peru* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995). We acknowledge, at the outset, that we are not engaging directly with this literature. Such a path is worthwhile pursuing, but it is not ours in this paper.


13 Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*.

14 This is one of the points made by Miriam Golden, *Heroic Defeats; The Politics of Job Loss* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Also see her *A Rational Choice Analysis of Union Militancy with Application to the Cases of British Coal and Fiat* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), The importance of local institutions as inhibitors or facilitators of militance is also central to the arguments of many other scholars of labor actions. See, e.g., Geoffrey Garrett, *Partisan Politics in the Global Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Torben Iversen, *Contested Economic Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).


17 This second is a variant of Russell Hardin’s conception of encapsulated interests in which the interests of one actor encapsulates, or includes, the interests of another. See Russell Hardin, "Trust in Government," in *Trust and Governance*, ed. Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 9-27; and "Trustworthiness," *Ethics* 107 (October 1996): 26-42.

18 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 118-34.


23 Michels, Political Parties.


27 In the 1960s, the ILWU honored the organizing efforts of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) by refusing to work scab grapes produced in California’s Central Valley.

28 The ILWU has frequently acted against particularistic job-based interests by favoring universalistic interests internationally. As early as 1936, with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the ILWU refused to work scrap iron shipments to Japan. More recently, the ILWU boycotted Chilean cargo in 1974 in protest of Pinochet’s military overthrow and murder of democratically elected President Salvador Allende. It refused to work coffee shipments from El Salvador in 1989 to protest government support of corporate growers’ campaign to bust union organizing. It boycotted cargo to and from South
Africa during the apartheid era. In 1997 ILWU members refused to work the shop, the Neptune Jade, with cargo loaded by scabs working for the same employers who sacked the Liverpool dockers. In 1998 ILWU local refused to work the Columbia Canada’s scab-loaded cargo out of Australia, when its government conspired with employers to bust the Maritime Union of Australia.


30 Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963). Also see Kerr and Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike."


34 Kimeldorf, Reds or Rackets, 35.

35 Allan Sekula, Fish Story (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995). Peter Turnbull pointed out to us in an email (3/6/00) that “there are workers on the ECT Delta Terminal in Rotterdam (reference to Alan Sekula’s photos). In fact, there are two people in each ship-to-shore crane – it is the movement of boxes to/from the stack, and within the container stack, that is automated (no people).”


37 Not surprisingly, given the analysis of this paper, the most militant and internationalist speech came from Brian McWilliams, President of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). His speech is reprinted in The Dispatcher 57:11 (December 1999): 11.