

### The 1907 General Strike On the New Orleans Waterfront

On October 5, 1907, the New Orleans' Times-Picayune daily newspaper reported the start of a general levee strike at the port of New Orleans, a strike that involved over 8,000 workers and that would ultimately last through October 25 of the same year.<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning, coverage of the strike illustrates its marked departure from union activity and race relations in other parts of the country. Perhaps most obviously, the New Orleans strike involved both black and white dockworkers. The group's long-established system of "fifty-fifty" or "half-and-half," in which they insisted that work crews be comprised of an equal number of black and white men, appears to have carried over into their strike initiative. Although they maintained segregated unions, the Picayune coverage reflects their united stance in the strike from the beginning of the conflict.

The strike was also distinctive insofar as workers from varying positions on the docks joined together in support of an elite group of skilled individuals known as screwmen who clamped and loaded bales of cotton into ships for transport out of the New Orleans port. At the heart of the strike was the shipping agents' and owners' demand that the screwmen increase their loading quota from about 160 bales per day to 200 bales or more, justified by the claim that New Orleans must keep pace with the rate of lading in Galveston, Texas, the port's strongest competitor. The rate of pay for each unit of work also became a key issue. Although this trigger only peripherally involved the longshoremen, yardmen, loaders, inspectors, and other unskilled laborers, those groups stood firm with the screwmen in order to effectively shut down operations at the New Orleans port and provide leverage for the screwmen's demands.

### Parity and Quotas: The Substance of the Conflict

In the days leading up to the general strike and in the early days of the event, the Picayune acknowledged that the conflict on the docks was "a supreme effort to place New Orleans upon a parity with other and competing ports."<sup>2</sup> Labor, just as much as management, was expected to work towards making New Orleans dominant in the shipping business. As the screwmen would not accept the quotas imposed by shipping agents and owners, management began campaigns announcing that these skilled workers were simply not needed if they refused to perform at a satisfactory rate; any other classification could do the job.<sup>3</sup> If intended as a way to pressure the screwmen and create dissention among the strikers, this approach was unsuccessful.

The rate of bale stowage was the substance of the conflict on the docks, as management pushed for the screwmen to stow over 200 bales per day compared with the 160 rate that the workers had negotiated over the previous few years. The question of parity with Galveston, Texas was the basis of the conflict. According to management, screwmen and others on the New Orleans levees were effectively charging too much for their labor by maintaining a lower rate of work but often getting paid on a flat-rate basis, putting New Orleans at a competitive disadvantage.<sup>4</sup> During the second week of the strike, negotiations between labor and management became more pressing with management offering a rate of 200 bales per day. Both the black and white screwmen unions (backed by their overarching Dock and Cotton Council) refused that offer, insisting that such a rate was impossible.<sup>5</sup> Soon after, negotiations began over the possible rate of 180 bales per day, a rate that workers seemed willing to consider.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Picayune, Oct. 5, 1907, p. 4 ("General Strike Of All Levee Unions Is Now On").

<sup>2</sup> Picayune, Oct. 5, 1907, p. 6 ("The Levee Strike").

<sup>3</sup> Picayune, Oct. 7, 1907, p. 3 ("Governor Blanchard Asks To Hear Strike Story").

<sup>4</sup> Picayune, Oct. 14, 1907, p. 6 ("The Strike Must Be Settled").

<sup>5</sup> Picayune, Oct. 15, 1907, p. 12 ("Screwmen Balk At The Two Hundred Bale Mark").

<sup>6</sup> Picayune, Oct. 19, 1907, p. 12 ("Strike Still Unsettled, Arbitration The Hitch").

Yet by the third week of the strike, the Picayune started to frame the issue differently. In a commentary on October 23, it maintained that “[t]he contest has apparently narrowed down to a fight for supremacy in the matter of dictating the wages to be paid labor, and not the placing of the port on a parity with Galveston.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the parity issue remained central to those affected by the strike, workers and management alike.

### Partially Public Negotiations

Rather than conducting negotiations exclusively behind closed doors as is conventionally done in union-management labor negotiations, the issues in the New Orleans 1907 general strike were discussed at least in part in the press. As part of its coverage of the strike, the Picayune printed letters from leaders of the various unions and the Dock and Cotton Council to leaders of the shipping companies and owners regarding the acceptability of various offers, key demands, and the status of negotiations. Responses from management also appeared. Interestingly, these rather brief letters appear to have been printed in full, but incorporated directly into the newspaper’s articles as “support” for its observations and reporting of the strike rather than as separate public announcements.

Several (non-exclusive) possibilities emerge when considering why the parties chose to carry out partially public negotiations. First, it may reflect the fact that the strike, as discussed below, dealt a severe blow to the New Orleans’ economy. Dependent as it was on the cotton trade and water-based commerce in general, the workers’ three-week long strike put a relatively far-reaching hold on commerce. The citizenry of New Orleans was quite likely directly affected by it, suggesting to the parties that keeping them informed would help keep alive and justify each of their positions in the collective consciousness. Second, the public nature of the negotiations could allow each party to put pressure on the other in order to gain concessions in the name of reasonableness. When the terms of the offers were printed in the city’s largest newspaper, individuals would be more likely to form an opinion as to whether they should be accepted by the other side; if they were not accepted, the offeree could lose public support and might be forced to fold. This public relations technique could also allow the corresponding view – promoting the reasonableness of the offerer. Third, the decision to expose at least part of the negotiations to public view might be seen as a power play: by forcing what might otherwise be secret into the open would expose how far one party could push the other – how far, for example, management could move the union representatives away from the 160 bale starting point to 180, flirting even with 200 before that was rejected. By publicizing the process, in addition to the final settlement, each side perhaps sought to show that it was in control, that it was driving the negotiations rather than responding to demands from the other.

### The Economic Toll

Interestingly, the Picayune coverage urged a swift resolution of the strike and called for both sides to come together for negotiations, in light of the damage that intractable positions would do to the port economy. The heavy focus on the cost to the New Orleans port economy suggests that the strike indeed had its intended consequences of not only drawing attention to the screwmen and dockworkers’ grievances, but also highlighting how crucial those workers were to the health of the city as a whole. By the third week of the strike, the focus was on the local merchants who relied on the port for the shipment of their goods and suffered “heavy present loss and the prospect of permanent impairment of their trade interests.” It went on to argue that “[e]very day additional that the strike continues that much additional business has been driven away. We have already lost in profits, wages, and commerce, present and prospective, more than can possibly be recovered during the whole three years that the labor contracts are expected to run.”<sup>8</sup> One might speculate that the business interests themselves were pushing for the publication of such commentary as a way to pressure the dockworkers to

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<sup>7</sup> Picayune, Oct. 23, 1907, p. 6 (“The Strike Yet With Us”).

<sup>8</sup> Picayune, Oct. 23, 1907, p. 6 (“The Strike Yet With Us”).

concede and end the strike; by highlighting the strain felt by those not directly in the shipping industry and the port as a whole, the strikers might lose credibility and support as a result of (implicitly) being painted as the cause of such unwarranted suffering. However, this is a speculation; no primary material has been found as part of this project to support or discredit this possibility.

Frustration appears to have permeated the atmosphere on the docks and in the city. The Picayune bemoans the fact that “it does not appear to matter much to the contestants that the commerce of the port is being ruined, that thousands of people not directly concerned in the contest are being injured, and that the future is being seriously handicapped.”<sup>9</sup>

### Rumors and Divisions

By the midpoint of the strike, rumors began to spread regarding the strikers’ unity in at least two respects. First, questions were raised about the continued commitment of the general dockworkers to supporting the screwmen who were the focus of the strike. The various unions on the docks were part of the overarching Dock and Cotton Council, which took the lead in governing the terms of the workers’ demands and negotiating limits. Yet the Picayune reports suggest that the laborers had some disagreements about the power of the Council to order men to either work or continue the strike, or if it was limited to merely advising the relevant smaller craft-based unions.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the politics of the multiple unions that supported the screwmen would have considerable implications for the strength of the strike. If the Council ordered the screwmen to accept certain terms of settlement and instructed the rest of the trades to return to work – but the screwmen refused to obey – the Council might withdraw support, taking the remaining crafts (longshore men, yardmen, teamsters, etc.) with them and leaving the screwmen alone, significantly weakened. Despite these rumors, however, true dissent never seems to have manifested and the various unions supported the skilled screwmen by maintaining the strike for the full three-week duration.

Second, several skeptics challenged the extent to which the black dockworkers and their unions would support their white counterparts. Early in the strike, the Picayune printed a comment from the president of the black longshoremen who maintained that “the white men and the colored men are standing together as solid as the rock of Gibraltar and there is no chance of a break in the ranks.”<sup>11</sup> But approximately one week later, the newspaper noted that there were hints that the black longshoremen were splitting over the question of how far they would support the screwmen in their strike.<sup>12</sup> Labor leaders continued to refute these allegations, insisting that both races continued to stand together. No break took place, either during or after the strike.

The lack of a substantial break seems more noteworthy given that the general dockworkers’ strike reflected (1) unskilled workers rallying in support of specified skilled craftsmen in a separate union with arguably different interests; and (2) separate black and white unions for the various waterfront positions realizing that they had at least some interests in common and that those interests could best be achieved by maintaining a united front. With respect to the first issue, the normal assumption might be that unskilled workers would view the skilled group as an unjust elite, governing the rules of the waterfront and exercising some degree of power since it was harder to replace them than it would be the unskilled class. To some extent, the screwmen were seen as the elite of the waterfront, but the available documents do not seem to show significant resentment on the part of the unskilled workers; rather, they were seen as part of the cycle of work that kept everyone going. Considering the second, it seems somewhat over-simplistic to conclude that there was no division or break between the black and white union representatives during the general strike. While the groups did not break

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<sup>9</sup> Picayune, Oct. 23, 1907, p. 6 (“The Strike Yet With Us”).

<sup>10</sup> Picayune, Oct. 13, 1907, p. 13 (“Exchanges Answer the Mayor’s Proposition”).

<sup>11</sup> Picayune, Oct. 9, 1907 (“Port’s Commerce Active Without Striking Unions”).

<sup>12</sup> Picayune, Oct. 15, 1907 (“Screwmen Balk At The Two Hundred Bale Mark”).

ranks with respect to their actions, the available documents do not reflect their internal discussions when, for example, deciding whether to accept a particular offer or whether to press for more concessions. It may be posited that the lack of a break between the various unions was in part because of the long tradition of half-and-half, in which pay, opportunity for work, and conditions of labor were to some degree equalized. The workers knew this convention; they lived and worked within it. They also knew the benefits the system offered when dealing with management representatives that tried to thwart it in order to avoid awarding same benefits. While it is not readily known what the workers themselves thought about the effect of the half-and-half philosophy during the strike itself, coming into the protest there was a commonality of interests in these basic points that allowed for a starting place of discussion as to what would be acceptable moving forward.

### A Remarkably Peaceful Strike

The overall peaceful nature of the general strike is somewhat startling, given the volatility of the relationships between the dockworkers, shippers, and owners. From the beginning, union leaders, both black and white, insisted that those who thought riots were even a possibility were gravely mistaken.<sup>13</sup> The commitment of the strike leaders to non-violence in their demonstrations and demands is repeatedly and positively reported in the *Picayune*. Coverage suggests that the insistence on peaceful protest earned the strikers considerable respect and bolstered the credibility of their substantive claims: “The quiet, orderly conduct of the strikers is generally commented upon, and commended...the union leaders have impressed upon the men that if they hope to win the fight they must remain law-abiding, peace-loving citizens, and the men have followed instructions to the letter, and have laid violent hands on no strikebreaker, although the opportunity to do so is theirs all day long.”<sup>14</sup>

At the conclusion of the strike, several leading members of the stevedore, shipping, and railroad management interests expressed their views<sup>15</sup> on the “remarkable” nature of a strike where, as one put it, “not a single act of violence having been recorded, and not even a suggestion of lawlessness.” Another added that “the men are to be congratulated upon their attitude throughout the trouble.” This was even more notable in light of the sheer number of strikers: “[e]ven though there were thousands of men involved, there was never the sign of trouble.” Union leaders likewise took care to emphasize their members’ non-violence throughout the strike as a way to build support for – or at least avoid rejection of – their cause. This was reiterated in their statements to the *Picayune* at the end of the strike, with the Secretary of the Screwmen’s Union and President of the Labor Council stating that “[t]he men made a good fight and through it all kept the peace like law-abiding citizens. They had justice on their side, and early in the difficulty showed the true conciliatory spirit. We have nothing to fear from investigation.” His comments were echoed by the President of the Dock and Cotton Council and by the President of the Longshoremen’s Association, with the latter tying the absence of lawlessness to the overall character of the ordinary working man: “It goes to show that the working man is a respector [sic] of laws, and that he has the interest of the port at heart as much as any one else.” Drawing in the broader union public image might reflect a strategy in the long view, setting up the groundwork to legitimize any future strike or labor action by painting the working man (and by extension the union representing him) as a well-meaning individual, not looking to snuff out commerce or squash management, but merely to get a fair deal. The documents available for this project do not directly speak to this goal, but it seems possible in light of the labor relations in New Orleans and the general labor movement at the turn of the century.

It may be said that accomplishing a generally peaceful strike was even more distinctive in light of the fact that other labor strikes and actions during the same period often involved physical violence, disruption, and destruction of property. Moreover, the particular nature of racial relations in New Orleans meant that despite

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<sup>13</sup> *Picayune*, Oct. 5, 1907 (“General Strike Of All Levee Unions Is Now On”).

<sup>14</sup> *Picayune*, Oct. 17, 1907, p. 10 (“Bets Made On Quick Settlement Of Strike”).

<sup>15</sup> All quotations from *Picayune*, Oct. 25, 1907, pp. 1 and 3 (“Compressed Comment”).

the attempts of rumor-mongers to divide black and white union members, and perhaps even to raise the risk of violence between the groups, strikers and union leaders did not rise to the bait and maintained a relatively peaceful state among themselves. Disagreeing in bi-racial union meetings about strategy and the limits of compromise, they nevertheless held to a lawful stand in their actions.

#### Settlement and Aftermath

Ultimately, the general strike was settled with two primary terms: (1) a full investigation of the conditions and pay on the docks by a committee of both labor and management, refereed by an umpire – “an impartial and unbiased man” appointed by the Mayor and the President of the Cotton Exchange; and (2) a return-to-work by the screwmen at the rate of 180 bales per day pending the results of the investigation (after which adjustments might be made). The findings of the investigation committee were to be deemed final.<sup>16</sup>

The aftermath of the strike underlines both the continued solidarity between the black and white dockworkers’ unions as well as the still-existing racial divisions within the shipping interests. As part of the terms of the strike settlement, an investigation into possible abuses and/or misconduct on the docks, both with respect to the validity of the dockworkers’ demands and the conditions of work was launched. Demonstrating the deep-seeded philosophy of half-and-half in all respects between the black and white laborers, dockworkers insisted that the “labor” seats on the investigatory committee be filled with an equal number of black and white representatives. Yet, as the Picayune reported, management not only resisted seating the black labor delegates, but also maintained that they would not allow the investigation to go forward at all if black delegates took part in the process.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Picayune, Oct. 25, 1907, pp. 1-3 (“Levee Strike Settled, Work Resumes To-Day”).

<sup>17</sup> Picayune, Oct. 29, 1907 p. 16 (“Committee to Investigate Port Charges Not Chosen: Plan to Put Negroes on Tribunal Objected to as Likely to Nullify Movement”).