# The Whacking of Ship Scalers Local 541

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You gather early in the morning on the floor of a dry-dock on Elliott Bay with the perfume of low tide in your nostrils. Over you looms the flat bottom of a massive steel hull perched on stacks of railroad ties. First you pull on a black rubber hood that comes down over your body, squint out of a rectangular Plexiglas window, and suck air through a rubber respirator attached to an air hose. You and your fellow blasters look like Darth Vader wannabes or rubber fetishists.

Then suddenly you're deafened by the hiss of the compressors and a moment later blinded by gusts of black grit. Thick black braided hoses for abrasive and thin red rubber ones for air writhe and twist around each other like mating snakes.

You wrestle with one of the sinewy, foul-tempered black ones. To turn on the primitive switch on the nozzle, you jam a wooden wedge into it—it's not a dead-man switch, so if you drop it, it can twist around and blast you or somebody else like a shotgun. It feels a little bit like you're in a war. But your main fear is of friendly fire, because the choreographers of this shindig do not seem not overly concerned about safety regulations or who's blasting where.

That fear is not paranoia. One sandblaster I worked with told me he was once blasting with steel grit in a tight space. Somebody put a sucker in the space to clear the air, but it sucked the glass right out of his mask and he got steel grit in his eyes. They took him to Harborview. His eyes were bleeding and hurt like hell. Now he needs strong glasses.[1]

An older blaster said that one time he had the nozzle of a hose blow out in his face. He had noticed that it was loose, but his lead man wouldn't do anything about it. It sandblasted half his face, broke and dislocated his jaw, injured his neck vertebrae and put him out of commission for six months. Sandblasting for 20 years left him with emphysema.[2]

Ship scaling originally meant scraping the rust and barnacles off the hull with a metal scraper. When I worked at Todd Shipyard on Harbor Island over twenty years ago, small jobs were still occasionally done this way. Besides sandblasting, the shipyard laborers known as scalers did a lot of other kinds of heavy work: moving scrap steel, cleaning up asbestos; any job deemed too dirty or unskilled by other crafts, the riggers or painters or machinists, was scalers' work.

Truth be told, we also enjoyed our fair share of traditional shipyard amusements like hiding out in tanks, getting stoned or drunk, and multifariously jacking off. We pursued these extracurricular activities not just to avoid our hard, nasty work, but also because management and the division of labor were resolutely inefficient and disorganized. Tides ebbed and flowed as we simulated activity while waiting for other crafts to finish their jobs or for a part to arrive. And all the while Uncle Sam, through cost-plus Navy contracts, picked up a generous share of the tab.[3]

Graffiti in the head captured the *zeitgeist*: "Important Notice: The management regrets that it has come to its attention that employees dying on the job are failing to fall down. This practice must stop, as it makes it almost impossible to distinguish between death and the natural movement of the staff. Any employee found dead in an upright position will be terminated immediately."

## An old-fashioned union

The union that represented scalers had an old-fashioned name: Ship Scalers, Dry Dock and Miscellaneous Boat Yard Workers Local 541 of the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA). And Local leaders ran it the old-fashioned way—go along to get along, one hand washes the other—with the blessings

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[1] *Shipyards I*: 22-23.

[2] *Shipyards I*: 11-13.

[3] Barnes follow-up interview, June 14, 1999.

of the International. In the late '70s, a reform movement grew out of disaffected rank-and-file members, and in 1980 its leaders were elected to clean up the Local (Disclosure: I supported this movement, but before it came to power I left the shipyards to work in construction).

The wise guys who ran LIUNA in the other Washington, however, did not look kindly on rebellion in the ranks. After the reformers' second election victory in 1983, International President Angelo Fosco's *consiglieri* stepped in to fit the insurgent leadership with the legal equivalent of concrete overshoes.

Over the intervening twenty years, the Laborers International has continued to come down hard on other democratic upswellings in locals across the continent. And in the past five years, the U.S. Department of Justice has come down hard on the International for its leaders' creative personal financing and chumminess with La Cosa Nostra.[4]

Meanwhile, the national labor movement has bottomed out and perhaps begun to rebound, but the spirit of the corpse of Jimmy Hoffa keeps resurfacing in various guises. Two decades later, the cautionary tale of the whacking of Local 541 picks at some of the old wounds unions are still nursing today. And it points to what labor needs to do to rebuild itself as a political and economic player and, at its best, a democratic force for the common good.

## Common labor

Among the shipyard craft unions, Local 541 was the traditional union for African-American workers. World War II had unleashed an exodus of workers black and white from the South to the Puget Sound area to build ships and aircraft. Founded in 1936 with only a couple of hundred members, the Ship Scalers local swelled during the war to about 1,500, a good half of them black.[5]

Most craft unions then excluded black people, with membership often passed from father to son or uncle to nephew. But Scalers founders included communists and other leftists who believed that the labor movement needed to organize minority workers, according to Theo Nassar, the daughter of an early leader.[6] The wartime influx of Southerners brought internal friction in the union between the newcomers and long-time Seattleites, says Del Castle, who was then secretary-treasurer. Members united to support the war effort, though, and some were involved in the early stirrings of the civil-rights movement.
With demand for labor high, the union could command 85 cents an hour for common labor. That was not too far below the $1.05 to $1.10 made by skilled members of the Boilermakers Union, which represented welders and shipfitters.[7]

For decades, ship scaling remained an entry-level job that paid a decent wage without requiring formal training. Bob "Red" Barnes, a leader of the reform movement, estimates that in the '80s well over half of Local 541 members were African-American, while many others were Filipino or Hispanic. One-half or close were women, a constituency that dated back to wartime Rosie-the-Riveters.[8] Many scalers saw their job as a way to get a foot in the door of the shipyards and a "conveyor belt" into one of the better-paying crafts.
The Scalers union hall was a beat-up one-story storefront on Madison just east of 23rd. It had one door to the office and another to the hiring hall. Early on a June morning in 1977, I opened the hiring-hall door and jammed myself into the smoky gloom, along with a noisy crew of fellow hopefuls draped over battered folding chairs. From behind the dispatch window, a pair of bloodshot basset-hound eyes peered out at the tumult and a gravelly voice called for eight experienced sandblasters for Todd's. Never having sandblasted

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[4] Mulligan, Jan. 8, 1999.
*Associated Press*, June 4, 1981.
*Seattle Times*, June 5, 1981.

[5] Interview with Del and Pearl Castle, Seattle, March 8, 1998.

[6] Phone interview with Theo Nassar, Seattle, March 4, 1998. She is the daughter of Emil Clark, a Scalers founder and CP member who had also integrated the Boilermakers.

[7] Interview with Del and Pearl Castle, Seattle, March 8, 1998. A.250.

[8] Interview with Bob Barnes, Seattle, September 28, 1998. Tape1.A.340.

in my life and with only a vague idea of what the job entailed, I went up to the window and lied unconvincingly to Van Harrison, the business agent.

A few days later, I took a poll of my fellow sandblasters. Of the eight of us, five had no previous blasting experience. But the Navy needed missile frigates, so the yard took whatever riff-raff the union threw its way and molded us into bored, cynical riff-raff with an attitude.

We were among the many who owed our careers to Van, who ran the union with an open hand. But his casual approach to book-keeping and grievances had goaded angry members into action more than once.

## Dissension

In 1972, a Local 541 disciplinary board had fired Harrison, who was business agent and treasurer, after eighteen members charged him with improperly handling union funds and threatening members. When LIUNA refused to recognize Harrison's dismissal, the Local filed a complaint with a federal judge, charging the International with violating the union constitution and Federal law, and asking the court to relieve Harrison of his duties.[9] But the business agent and his backers in the International rode out this storm.

Then in 1976, a group that included some of the 1972 dissidents formed a rank-and-file caucus to push for a cleaner, more democratic and effective local.[10] This informal organization coalesced gradually in lunchtime conversations in the yards and among dissatisfied members at union meetings. Many of its members were young activists out of the women's and anti-war movements; others were apolitical scalers who had simply gotten fed up with how the union was being run. The caucus also found two close allies on the union's executive board. From a mainly white group at the beginning, the group began to look more like the diverse Scaler membership as it got more involved in day-to-day issues in the yards and the union hall.

When Bob Barnes got a job in the shipyards after stints in the army and the anti-Vietnam War movement, he says he was naturally drawn into battles for the rights of workers there. Sitting in the sun on his back porch in southeast Seattle, a burly denim-clad Texan with gray-blond hair past his shoulders, a long beard, an earring in his left ear and an easy belly-laugh, Barnes remembers: "It was a throwback to all the bad, brutal, slave-driving-boss kind of places, right up there among the worst. And people were abused pretty regularly. It was and still is among the most dangerous industries around."

The contracts negotiated by the International for the Local were seen as weak by many members.[11] And in dealing with shop-floor issues like health and safety, Barnes quickly learned that you had to do an end run around the Local leadership. "We had an old-guard union bureaucrat who was a latter-stage alcoholic and was on the take from the companies, and whose job basically was to keep peace with the bosses and squelch any kind of resistance. So filing a grievance became a major battle with the union before it even got to the company. And then once we got to the company, it would usually get squelched. The business rep would go in without allowing the aggrieved parties or the shop steward to go in, and a grievance would get settled, but there would be no resolution."
Another point of contention was the job dispatch system. In deciding who would be sent out when the shipyards called for scalers, Harrison fostered a "lay a $100 bill on me and you get a job" mentality. And the business agent did not smile on efforts to change it.

A few years before, Harrison had gone out of town and left dispatching in the hands of a union officer, Oscar Hearde. At that point, there was an unspoken ban on sending women out on some calls, and a few yards would explicitly state for certain dispatches: "Do not send women." On one such call, Hearde ignored the taboo and sent out a bunch of women. Even though Hearde was the elected president, Harrison banned him from the union office, in part because of the dispatch incident. "But this was at a time when it would have been very uncool to have made an issue out of these women coming out there," says Barnes. "So the dam had been broken."

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[9] *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 10, 1972.
Interview with Bob Barnes, Seattle, September 28, 1998. Tape1.A.568.

[10] Interview with Bob Barnes, Seattle, September 28, 1998. Tape1.A.515.

[11] Clever.

Born in Alabama in 1913, Hearde was one of thirteen children, ten of whom survived childhood. His father died when he was seven, and his mother "used to work in the white folks' kitchens and take home washing" to support the family. When he was still a little boy, his mother started taking him along with her to rallies in Montgomery and Birmingham for voting rights for black people and against Jim Crow on the streetcars.

"I was packing my little sign along with my mother," he remembers. "A lot of blacks got beat up by the Ku Kluxes. And we know they gonna try to beat us up. But you didn't have no choice. You was treated like so inhuman 'til you didn't have nothing left. You had to get out there and gamble some kind of way to try to change things."[12]

After serving in Italy during World War II, Hearde settled in Seattle and went to work at Todd Shipyard. He got involved with Local 541 as a shop steward and also became known in the community as a civil-rights activist. Despite his run-ins with Harrison, he remained an active Scalers member and a spokesman on workers' issues. The rank-and-file group invited Hearde to join them as an elder, their "ship scaler emeritus." For his part, he was excited to welcome a new generation into the movement.

When Hearde was chief shop steward at Lockheed, he says, management preferred to deal with Harrison. "They knew it was nothing going to be done if it was his decision," Hearde said. "He was more representative of management than he was of working people. He was no protection for us."[13]

Hearde "wanted the union to be equal with management in certain policies. The workers, I figured, had a part to play in decision-making. And then the hours they worked, and then the kind of conditions we had to work under. See that was filthy work, and we needed protective clothing and stuff like that, some of which we did not have. And I had to go to battle with them on that."[14]

## Audits

One of the first big fights that the rank-and-file caucus took on was to bring internal union charges against Harrison once again in 1979. "We realized that our big roadblock was our union leadership," Barnes recalls. "We weren't going to get anywhere until we moved that roadblock out the way." The charges helped to distill many members' discontent, he said. Some were based on grievances that Harrison had handled improperly. Members took these issues personally—"God, I lost $500 in back pay because this son-of-a-bitch didn't process my grievance"—so a lot of people had a vested interest in seeing the case through.

Another key element of the charges was mishandling of union funds, which was bolstered by two independent audits of the local's finances by a reputable accounting firm. Despite what Barnes describes as Harrison's dismal bookkeeping and efforts to physically keep the auditors out of the union office, the first audit found over $13 thousand missing. Subsequent criminal charges pressed by the union never uncovered clear evidence of a hand in the cookie jar, and Harrison walked. But the reformers were able to recover the funds for the union from the International's bonding firm. According to a newspaper report, the check was annotated "for loss caused by Van Harrison."[15] Nancy San Carlos, who later became recording secretary, says a second audit found more money missing and the reformers eventually recovered a total of $38 thousand from the bonding agency.

The restituted funds were a windfall for the insurgents, who dramatized them by making poster-size enlargements of the reimbursement check. And they rehashed all the charges and grievances in a caucus newsletter, *Scaler News*, which aimed to stir the embers of discontent among the membership. This was a volatile period within the union, Barnes remembers: "There were slashed tires and guns pulled and there were more than one meeting that ended in a fist fight. It was serious tense times."

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[12] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.622.

[13] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.125, 166.

[14] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.066-101, 166-180.

[15] Clever.

After fighting tooth-and-claw to prevent the caucus from filing internal charges against Harrison, the International eventually threw out the charges on technicalities. By 1980, though, the rebels had already moved to challenge Harrison and his backers in the International more directly.

When the rank-and-file caucus formed, it had no strategic plan to take over the union leadership electorally. On the contrary, asserts Barnes, they merely wanted the leaders to do right by the membership. But after butting heads with Harrison and the International for a while, it became clear that the B.A. planned to go to his grave running his union his way. As the scheduled elections approached, people started asking caucus members if they were going to run.

Barnes felt they could only be outsiders for so long, standing on the sidelines yelling about how bad things were. "That gets old after a while. People want to see some action. So it was like 'You're raising all this Cain and talking all this shit. What you gonna do about it? You real about this stuff?' And we decided, 'Yeah, I guess we are.'"

## Ballots

Not many months before the July 1980 elections[16], caucus members began to grapple with how to approach the campaign and whom to run. The tone of the *Scaler News* changed from muckraking to electioneering. Rank-and-filers' hopes ran high: they felt that the leadership was discredited and that most of the executive board didn't have credibility on its own.

The Committee for a Strong Ship Scalers Union, as the group now dubbed itself, decided to go beyond challenging only Harrison and put up a full slate of candidates for all officers and executive board positions. They brought into the slate their two allies on the existing board, Geraldine Walker and R.L. Willis, to provide experience and a smooth transition from the old leadership. Most important, they dragged Oscar Hearde into the mix as their candidate for business agent. Hearde was reluctant, having been out of the fray for a few years. But the reformers thought it was critical to have a link with the history of struggle in the union that Hearde represented. Barnes himself, who had played a central role in the caucus, rounded out the slate as what he calls "the token white boy." He ran for secretary-treasurer and assistant business rep, also with some trepidation because of his deep mistrust of union bureaucracies.

The reformers optimism proved well-founded. Tarring Harrison with the money lost on his watch and his abuses of office, the rank-and-file slate easily swept the elections. Hearde defeated Harrison for business agent with roughly two-thirds of the vote.

"When I look back," Barnes remembers, "the door was open and all we had to do was walk through." Despite Harrison's patronage system and the favors people felt they owed him, the dissidents' three years of patient work had neutralized or won over a significant number of the business agent's former supporters. "We were able to point out to some of these very people that, yeah, he might have done this for you, but look what he did to you over here."

After an inconclusive flurry of internal union charges and counter-charges over the election, Harrison contested the vote before the U.S. Labor Department. But Labor upheld the elections.

"We rolled over his butt and he didn't get it," says Barnes. "The day we were supposed to assume office, he came to work and barricaded himself in the office. And we had to call the police to get him removed."

Harrison was autocratic and manipulative, irresponsible with money and sometimes threatening to members. Yet in retrospect, his antagonists believe he may not have profited personally from the missing funds. The man lived a simple life in a little apartment, Barnes recalls. "If you saw him on the street, you'd think he just came in from working in the yards—I don't know that I ever saw him in a suit. He was the kind of guy that'd take you fishing at over at Moses Lake or take you out and get you drunk at the bar."

As to the missing money, Barnes believes a lot of it went informally to scalers who needed it. "People would come in with a sad story, 'My son's in jail and needs bail,' and Van would take care of it. He was a fixer. And he probably saw that it was OK to spend the union's money this way, 'cause it was taking care of his members."

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[16] Clever.

For the new reform leadership, however, Harrison was now the least of their worries. Looming on the horizon were his patrons in the Laborers International. Another long shadow was cast by shipyards management, which had had a comfortable relationship with Harrison.

## Our thing

The first shoe dropped when the International refused to accept the election results. Among other objections, according to a 1981 *Seattle Times* account, it contended that Hearde was ineligible to run for office because he was retired. Hearde countered that he had been disabled and forced out of work by asbestosis, but had remained active in the union.[17]

"The International was just as fascist as management," says Hearde. "They always had been hostile to me, 'cause they counted me as a socialist. I believed in opening up the system, and they didn't believe in opening it up." He rejects the socialist label, though, calling himself a reformer. "I was trying to shape people's mind to learn how to get out and defend themselves and make things better for all of us," he explains. "And they were looking at one individual and that was self, how is it gonna affect me.[18]

The reform slate went to Federal court seeking an injunction against the International to restrain it from interfering with the functioning of the new Local leadership or refusing to seat them at the International's 1981 convention.[19] But the International ruled that Local 541 hadn't held proper elections for convention delegates, and the Scalers delegation decided not to fly to Miami just to appeal to the same officers who had already rejected them.[20]

That confab, as it turned out, was not a friendly place for dissenters. ""The Laborers' Union has lacked meaningful democracy for decades," asserted U.S. Attorney James B. Burns in 1996. "At the 1981 convention, the only occasion in which any member offered even token opposition, the candidate was physically beaten on the convention floor."[21]

According to testimony by former Laborers' official and FBI informant Ronald Fino, security arrangements were provided by the Mafia. When a Laborers member from Iowa, Dennis Ryan, tried to get to the microphone to nominate an opposition candidate, at least 20 sergeants-at-arms jumped him, beating and kicking him, according to an account in the *Providence Journal*. Shirt ripped and a cut over one eye, Ryan got up and limped to the microphone to try to make his nomination anyway, but the chairman ruled him out of order.[22] Ryan was later forced out of the union.[23] Several other dissident Laborers' members were killed or received death threats in the early '80s, according to testimony in federal court by Chris White of Local 942, Fairbanks, Alaska.[24]

That same year, a federal grand jury brought indictments for a fraudulent life-insurance scheme against several LIUNA officials and Cosa Nostra bosses Raymond Patriarca, Sr., Anthony (Big Tuna) Accardo and Santo Trafficante.[25] LIUNA president Angelo Fosco, general secretary-treasurer Arthur E. Coia and his son, current Laborers' president Arthur A. Coia, were among those accused of kickbacks, bribery and

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[17] Clever.

[18] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.269-279, 566-593.

[19] Clever.

[20] Barnes follow-up interview, June 14, 1999.

[21] Burns

[22] Starkman.

[23] Starkman.

[24] Declaration of Chris White.

[25] President's Commission on Organized Crime, pp:158-159.
*Associated Press*, June 4, 1981. *Seattle Times* wire services, June 5, 1981.

pension-fund abuses. Eight men were convicted, but Fosco and Accardo were acquitted. The case against the Coias was dismissed in 1984 because the statute of limitations had run out.[26]

Since then, Laborers officials and mob associates have continued to draw star billing in racketeering prosecutions. In 1986, the President's Commission on Organized Crime named the Laborers one of the four most corrupt unions in the country. Their conclusion was scathing: "The Commission believes there is little chance that the LIUNA membership will be able to eliminate organized crime's influence, or control their union, if the current leadership or governance structure remains intact."[27]

## Filthy work

If the International posed a menace to the reform movement, shipyards management hardly greeted them with open arms. Conditions in some of the yards represented a clear and present danger to workers. But the cozy relationship that the company enjoyed with some union leaders consigned safety and health issues to not-so-benign neglect.

My favorite lead man at Todd, Gene Rhodes, used to look down from a catwalk at a crew of us working in the bilge and cackle, “Assholes and elbows! All I want to see down there is assholes and elbows!” He was jiving, but many managers took his motto to heart.

On repair jobs, workers from other crafts were sometimes assigned to work in engine rooms while pipefitters were tearing off asbestos insulation from pipes and throwing it in piles on the deck. The asbestos-removal work area was not isolated from the rest of the engine room. On bad days, we had to work in a blizzard of asbestos fibers, which can cause lung cancer and mesothelioma. But the company, by omission, fostered a casual atmosphere toward protection.

In one engine room, Todd management put up a sign, "Warning—Asbestos hazard area—Wear respiratory protection—Breathing asbestos dust may be hazardous to your health." Somebody scratched out "may be" and wrote in "is." But the reality behind the sign was that protective equipment for workers in asbestos areas was neither required nor encouraged. If you wanted to wear it, you first had to go down to the tool room to find it. And what equipment the yard offered was inadequate: if you had to wear safety glasses and a respirator, which was often necessary, the safety glasses quickly fogged up and made it difficult to see what you were doing. The message was clear. With tough-guy posturing (“The stuff ain’t so bad”) piggy-backed on management indifference, most of the people I saw working around asbestos didn’t wear any protection.

Finally, a scaler and a shop steward complained to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Management apparently learned in advance that inspectors would be coming. First thing in the morning on the day of the visit, a supervisor came down to the engine room to tell us to put on our respirators. The work area got an unprecedentedly fast and thorough cleaning. When the inspector arrived, a little covey of nervous supervisors and shop stewards hovered around him, while workers kept their distance.

The next day, an OSHA technician came back with disposable paper coveralls and a respirator to take samples with a machine for measuring asbestos. He said the samples would be sent to Salt Lake City to be analyzed and the data would be given to our unions, but that we wouldn't hear the results for a month. Within a few days, white fibers were again wafting gently on the breeze and the engine room was back to normal. I never heard anything about the test results.

By contrast, according to union members, at other shipyards that paid more attention to the regulations, workers cleaning up asbestos had to follow stringent procedures. They were required to wipe up the asbestos with damp rags and throw away the rags and their coveralls afterwards. No sweeping or blowing of asbestos was permitted.

Sometimes negligence and pressure to cut corners led to more immediate results. One labor-saving device management used was to combine jobs. When workers were below decks in a tank, safe practice called for

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[26] Starkman.
Deverell.
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[27] President's Commission on Organized Crime: pp. 161-162.

a standby person up on deck to watch out for them. But this job was sometimes eliminated or combined with the job of lead.

Chris Wells was an energetic young shop steward on swing-shift at Lockheed. He moonlighted as an Olympic rower, Local officer Nancy San Carlos recalls. Barnes ran into Wells one day during the shift change as Barnes was going off and Wells was coming on. Wells talked about some grievances he planned to bring in the next morning, one of which was this lack of standby staffing for working in confined spaces.

Later that afternoon, the Scalers office got a call from the yard to get somebody out there fast: one of their members had been killed on the job. When Barnes arrived, he learned that Wells had been down in a tank alone spraying a solvent-degreaser that displaces oxygen. Nobody had been watching him from up on deck.

In some other cases, San Carlos says, the shipyards delayed in notifying the union of deaths and injuries to its members. But a former scaler who had risen into management at one yard would pass on the information to them through a back channel.

To deliver the goods for their membership, the reform leadership realized they had to make meaningful changes quickly in two key areas: creating an honest dispatch system and challenging bad conditions by following through on member grievances.

## Diving for dollars

The culture of patronage that Harrison had cultivated for years in the union hiring hall was now ingrained in the minds of some of the members, which meant that digging out the rot was more complicated than simply setting up fair procedures and keeping better records. An honest dispatch system required changing the expectations of favoritism and bribery for members and newcomers.

Anyone could come to the Scalers hall in the mornings to wait for job calls from the shipyards. Legally, the union couldn't discriminate between members and non-members in dispatching. But it could keep lists based on hours worked in the industry, and give priority to those with more seniority. The reformers worked to keep these lists accurate and to follow them honestly in dispatches.

Jobs were plentiful when the new leadership took office. "All you needed to do to get a job was to walk through the door," says Barnes. "you didn't need to give anybody money." But it took patience for the new officers to convince people that they were serious about being fair to all comers and eliminating palm-greasing.

The shipyards' demand for labor, too, released tremendous pent-up demand for work in the community. On one big call for 64 scalers at Lockheed, word got around that the union was hiring and 1,000 people showed up, San Carlos recalls. The dispatch workers were overwhelmed. Someone called the fire department, apparently fearing a catastrophe, and the fire trucks showed up. Union officers had to reassure them that this was just a job call.

"It was the casuals that came in through the door with $100 bills and thought they were gonna get a job," recalls Barnes. "And here's these guys who are saying 'We don't play that anymore.' Some folks got pretty upset." On a couple of occasions, job-seekers even followed him home, not threatening him, but offering more and more money. "I felt so bad for this one guy. He was new in the country, and he just thought he was doing something wrong. He was not offering me enough money or he was not properly deferring to me or whatever. And he's like almost in tears out in front of my house."

"Fair hiring halls" was a battle cry of many union reformers during the 80s. For Local 541, the retraining process proceeded without major violence. In the Seattle-based Alaska Cannery Workers Union, however, the effort to clean up internal corruption stirred up a vipers' nest of international forces. Criminal gangs controlled gambling in the Alaska seafood canneries and depended on union graft to get their members dispatched there. Many of the union's members were Filipino and Filipino-American, and the reform movement also angered the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines by supporting labor and opposition movements there.

The two offended parties converged in a deadly conspiracy, later unearthed by a decade-long lawsuit. The Marcos régime provided the funding and logistics; local gangs provided the hitmen. In 1981, they gunned down reformist union officers Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes in the doorway of the Cannery Workers union hall in Pioneer Square.

The assassination of their friends and colleagues brought home to fellow labor activists the seriousness of their efforts to challenge entrenched interests. It was not unusual for members to pack guns in the union hall and occasionally to pull them on someone. Hearde, though, still refused to carry one.[28]

## Don't mourn, grieve

In their efforts to do something about bad working conditions, the reform leadership again ran head-on into the comfortable *entente* between management and union bureaucracies. The new Scalers team began an aggressive campaign of filing grievances with the yards on behalf of members and following through on them. The officers went out to shipyards in the morning to picket with members before going into the union office, San Carlos remembers. To support these efforts, they also tried to build up the shop steward system, the network of union representatives on the job in each workplace. Although Laborers regulations called for shop stewards to be appointed, Local 541 held unofficial elections for shop stewards in the larger shipyards and then appointed the electees.[29]

The shipyards' response was predictably hostile, as few unions had put serious pressure on management around these kinds of issues for years. At the same time, Barnes says, Harrison was meeting with management of some yards and telling them not to deal with the reformers, who were not legitimate union representatives and against whose election he had filed a challenge. The yards, says Hearde, were "working with the International to try to get me out of there. Well, management and I had two different camps we worked for. They wanted to pressure us into overworking, I wanted to bring us back to normal working."[30]

While the Scalers won some grievances at first, the Pacific Coast Shipbuilders Association soon began to stonewall their complaints. Soon every grievance became a pitched battle, with many going to arbitration. A growing portion of the local's funds were being spent on attorney's fees, and even when they won, this money did not flow back into union coffers.

As the reformers poured more and more energy into these nuts-and-bolts battles for members in the yards, they found themselves overwhelmed and exhausted. Their longer-term goals, such as involving and training more of their own rank-and-file members and building coalitions with other unions, had to be downsized.

The shipyards began to subcontract scaler work out to non-union firms or assign it to other crafts. This tactic decimated Local 541. Over a few years, says Barnes, membership dropped from 1,200 down to 500, even while the yards were still booming.

Relations with other locals in the Metal Trades Council, the umbrella group of shipyards unions, grew increasingly rocky as well. The Scalers often found themselves fighting the other crafts on jurisdictional issues. And when a yard assigned scaler work to another craft, the other unions usually said in so many words, "Tough luck, guys. More work for us."

Small rank-and-file groups had also sprouted in some of the other craft unions, including the Boilermakers, Sheet-Metal Workers and Machinists. With Barnes and Hearde representing the Scalers, they formed a loose network of about 20 activists and launched a committee for a better contract, which was soon to be negotiated with the shipyards by the Metal Trades Council. But few of these activists reached leadership positions in the other unions. In many cases, they were locked in conflict with their own bureaucracies. Making common cause with these upstarts did not endear the Scaler reformers to the other unions' more conservative leadership.

## At the table

As Local 541 became increasingly isolated and embattled, its leaders had to gird for local elections again in August 1983. A few months before the vote, Oscar Hearde agreed to step down as business agent. The International's challenge to his election on the grounds that he was retired had been upheld by a court. Rather than appeal, Hearde appointed Joe Warren, the vice president, as interim business rep so he could

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[28] San Carlos interview, June 20, 1999.

[29] Barnes follow-up interview, June 14, 1999.

[30] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.279-302.

run as incumbent. A number of new faces also ran on the reform slate, which billed itself "QED - Qualified, Educated and Determined."

Some supporters of Van Harrison ran against the reformers, calling Barnes a white devil who was controlling the other six people of color in the union leadership. The race-baiting didn't work, however, as QED won six of the seven positions on the Scalers board. The seventh was won by a candidate from the old guard's slate, Ernie Rouse, who nevertheless became an ally of the rank-and-file caucus. QED won by a bigger margin than they had in 1980 and took this as a mandate to continue their efforts.

The first big challenge for the new board was West Coast contract negotiations between the Pacific Coast Metal Trades Council and the shipyards association. Economic prospects for shipbuilding had turned grim, as President Ronald Reagan finished building his Navy and global demand for ships dried up with the early '80s recession. Shipyards were closing around the world, and large yards in Korea and Japan had laid off workers wholesale.

A Laborers International representative had told Local 541 that, in effect, shipyard workers had been getting a good deal for some years and now it was time for the shipyard corporations to have their turn. The Metal Trades Council had decided that the unions had to save the yards from closing down by giving them significant concessions.

In these negotiations, the International representatives were the ones that sat at the table, while Local representatives had to sit along the wall. "We could pass them notes," says Barnes, "and they generally would not be heeded."[31]

The Scalers leadership believed the pink slips were as good as written: some yards were going to close down and union membership was going to decline. The only question in this situation, they believed, was, "Are we going to operate for lower wages, or the same wages, or better wages?"

The other craft unions in the Council closed ranks against the Scalers. "We weren't permitted in the last round of negotiations," says Barnes, "because that was a totally unacceptable line to be putting out. They'd hold special meetings at midnight" to exclude Local 541. At one point, he recalls, a Boilermakers Union official "got in my face, pointed his finger at me, and said, 'The shipyards have eaten shit for 15 years and it's our turn.' Tested my will to non-violence."

A contract favorable to management was ultimately signed, Barnes says. But that did not prevent Lockheed from later locking out its workers in an effort to cut wages further and hiring non-union replacement workers. Two people reportedly committed suicide after losing their jobs.[32] Eventually the firm shut down its Seattle shipyards, eliminating roughly 1,000 jobs.[33]

## Slashed and burned

Not long after the contract negotiations, the other shoe finally dropped: the Laborers International fired a fatal salvo of its own at Local 541. The reformers feared that LIUNA would try to put their union into trusteeship, a procedure that allows higher levels in a union's hierarchy to assume direct control of locals which are found to be operating illegally or incompetently. In a national labor publication, Local 541 leaders had been quoted as saying they would launch a public campaign against any takeover. "Subtlety was not our strong point," laments Barnes. "No, we were brash and foolish."

When the Ship Scalers fell behind on their payments to the International, it gave LIUNA fresh ammunition against them. Herb Lobdell, LIUNA vice president and regional manager at the time, says that Local 541 was in arrears on its payments into the pension fund for Scalers officers and the per capita tax, which locals pay to the International to cover dues, pension contributions and other fees for each member. Barnes acknowledges that the Local had fallen behind, but says that they had chosen to put this money into

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[31] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.439.

[32] Acohido, November 15, 1987. The lockout began in November 15, 1986 according to this article. Barnes interview.

[33] Hayes, May 17, 1988. Gilje, May 30, 1987.

fighting grievances, hoping that the International would recognize they were trying to build the union. They sold the union hall to cover their costs and moved into the Labor Temple on First Avenue.[34]

While they were still bargaining over the payments, the International pulled the rug out from under Local 541 with a deft legal tactic. It simply took jurisdiction over all the major shipyards away from the Seattle local and gave it to Local 252 in Tacoma. This was possible because contracts for these yards were negotiated by the International rather than the Local. Barnes says LIUNA told the Local leadership that it was just too out of touch with the reality of the Metal Trades Council.[35]

The reformers' weaknesses rapidly became debilitating under this attack. Their bad blood with the rest of the crafts' leadership meant they would find no solidarity there against LIUNA's maneuver. Because their work of continuing to organize their own rank-and-file members had been shortchanged in the daily grind of dispatches and battles over grievances, the membership could not be quickly mobilized to defend their Local. Perhaps most seriously, 541's finances were in disarray. So much money had been plowed into major arbitrations of grievances that the treasury had been depleted.

The choice for members boiled down to this: stay with Local 541 and lose your job, or transfer to Local 252 and keep it. The Local 541 board considered encouraging members not to join the Tacoma local and then fighting it out in court. But unless a lawsuit could be won quickly, members who resisted would not have had the resources to hold out. And the reformers were by now wasted from fighting on too many fronts. People were dropping out of the executive board. Scalers business rep Joe Warren moved over to the same position in the newly formed Seattle shipyards branch of the Tacoma local, in the face of resentment from some of his fellow reformers.

"Generally, working people know the difference between right and wrong," says Hearde. "But they won't stand up. They're afraid of what might happen to them and their jobs. So we didn't gain too many allies" in standing up to the International.[36]

In the face of these odds, the remainder of the reform officers decided to lead their members on a mass visit to the Laborers regional office in downtown Seattle to sign up under protest for the Tacoma local. They had no energy left to bring their organizing efforts to another city, as a minority within a much larger and more geographically dispersed local. The only tasks left for them were the details of closing down Ship Scalers Local 541. "Rather than International killing the Local," Barnes says, "we got to do it."

Seeing work into which he had put years of his life get "slashed and burned" left Barnes devastated. "I didn't have the motivation or the vision to take this fight on in the union," he recalls. But he soon found other venues for his political energies as chair of the newly formed King County Rainbow Coalition. San Carlos also joined the Coalition, and went on to work with prisoners with disabilities. She still believes the global economy will generate "a vast increase in the need for the labor movement. We'll go a little further and need for it will come back."[37]

Hearde is stoic: "It didn't bother me one bit because they had the power on their side. I did what I knew in my heart was right to do to try to make things better for myself and my fellow workers, and if it failed, it failed."[38] After leaving the Scalers, he became active into the Elder Citizens' Coalition, putting the heat on the city council and state legislature for the rights of the elderly. "You just gotta stay in and fight, regardless." He smiles slowly. "Things don't change by themselves. Some crazy nuts like me have to get in there and start something, and stick with it."[39] All told, Hearde stuck with it for about 70 years.

Shortly after the demise of Local 541, Todd kicked out the Laborers Union altogether and hired a non-union subcontractor to supply unskilled labor. The union fought its expulsion in court and got back into the yard after ten months. But in the next contract, in 1986, all workers suffered a deep pay cut and the

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[34] Barnes follow-up interview, June 14, 1999.

[35] Barnes interview.

[36] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.363-379.

[37] San Carlos interview, June 20, 1999.

[38] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.593-622.

[39] Hearde interview, Scalers5.B.063.

differential between scalers' and other crafts' wages increased, according to 25-year scaler veteran Ann Carlson.

Around the same time, crackdowns against dissidents were destroying the rank-and-file movements in other shipyard unions. In International Association of Machinists Local 79, a rank-and-file committee had managed to elect its members to a majority of local offices in 1982, according to Tom Gibbons, who became president. From this position, they were able to pass reforms to eliminate favoritism in the union hiring hall and to make the local's internal functioning more democratic.

But they too had difficulty managing union finances, and some business agents resisted the changes they sought. The old guard red-baited the new leadership: Gibbons recalls they spread rumors that he was an agent sent from Chicago by the Communist Party, although he had never lived in Chicago and had no connection with the CP. After less than a year in office for the reformers, the International put the Local in trusteeship and threw out the elected leaders. Gibbons continued as an elected shop steward at Todd for several years after, but some other caucus members were blackballed by the union and prevented from working as machinists.

## Unto the sons

Within LIUNA, which claims 750,000 members mainly in construction, this pattern of trampling local sprouts of democracy was not an anomaly confined to Seattle. Since the dismantling of the Ship Scalers, numerous other Laborers locals across North America have continued to suffer similar experiences.

In the mid-'80s, for example, shortly after Local 541's death throes, LIUNA placed locals in Toronto and London, Ontario, under trusteeship to prevent members from voting out corrupt officers allied with the International. When Local members in London resisted the takeover, the Ontario Supreme Court rejected an International request for an injunction, finding the International's intervention unjustified. The *Toronto Star* called the Laborers International "a kind of hereditary union monarchy that has long been linked with organized crime in the United States."[40]

Only last year, similar problems erupted again in Canada. The 1998 Canadian Building Trades convention passed a resolution threatening to expel LIUNA if it didn't stop abusing Canadian locals.

In many U.S. locals, too, the International continued to crack down on internal challengers with a heavy hand. In 1994, for example, LIUNA representatives physically threw out the elected leadership of Local 435 in Rochester, NY, because they opposed joining a new regional organization. Local 435 claimed that the two top officers of the new regional council were Cosa Nostra associates. A Federal judge concurred, voiding the International takeover and reinstating the local officers.[41]

As the 1986 report of the President's Commission on Organized Crime noted: "The typical laborer has a limited formal education and few skills. He depends on the collective strength of the union to provide job security, a fair wage, and health and pension benefits. If the union's leadership is corrupt—if the leaders steal or misuse workers' funds or if they accept payoffs to permit employers to overwork, underpay, replace workers or disregard job safety measures—the individual has limited recourse."[42]

Beyond Mafia infiltration, the underlying autocracy and nepotism that encourage mob influence have continued to plague the Laborers into the 90s. Current general president Arthur A. Coia is the son of Arthur E. Coia, former LIUNA general secretary-treasurer. Peter Fosco, son of former general president Angelo Fosco, is also a LIUNA vice president.

Coia, Jr., who took over the top position in 1993, incarnates some of the most striking internal contradictions in the labor movement. He came up as a young prince of the union's mobbed-up élite and was named along with his father in the 1970s Federal racketeering indictment. To make president, he had to win a fierce power struggle against John Serpico of Chicago, linked with the Chicago mob by the Justice Department, who Coia claimed in an internal union hearing was the Mafia's choice.[43]

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[40] Deverell

[41] Starkman, Part Two.

[42] President's Commission on Organized Crime: p. 144.

[43] Starkman, Part One.

From LIUNA, Coia draws a $254,000 annual salary,[44] while his law firm reportedly bills millions more on union-related business.[45] Shuttling between the Carlton Hotel in Washington, DC, his mansion in Barrington, Rhode Island, and his getaway in Delray Beach, Florida,[46] his lifestyle seems ostentatious even for the old labor aristocracy: buying a $450,000 Ferrari F40 with the help of a union vendor,[47] breeding and showing champion Rottweilers.[48] Coia is also well-wired politically, a certified Friend of Bill who has exchanged custom golf clubs with the President.[49] In 1994, two weeks after the FBI warned the White House that Coia was under investigation as a criminal associate of the Patriarca crime family of New England, Clinton gave Coia a private audience in the Oval Office.[50]

Yet at the same time, Coia has emerged as a relatively progressive voice in the AFL-CIO on some issues. In 1996, the union launched a Minority Advancement Initiative to encourage more participation in the union by minority members and to revitalize "the historic labor-civil rights alliance."[51] Minority people now make up well over half of LIUNA's national membership and are moving up into higher leadership in a few areas.[52] When a string of African-American churches was torched in the South, the union raised funds and mobilized volunteers to help rebuild them and prevent further violence.[53]

The LIUNA president was a charter member of—and later a swing vote—for the new guard who pushed out the old AFL-CIO leadership of Lane Kirkland and Thomas Donahue and swept John Sweeney of the Service Employees International Union into the presidency in 1995. When the Carpenters union shifted its vote to Donahue, Coia was heavily lobbied by both camps, according to the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, but in the end stuck with the challenger.[54] Shortly after, Sweeney appointed Coia the first chairman of the new AFL-CIO Organizing Committee. An official of another AFL-CIO union, though, called this position largely ceremonial.[55]

An exotic hybrid of old-school boss and post-modern leader, Coia flourished in the hothouse of a labor movement in transition. But behind the scenes, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) was focusing its attention on the blight still withering the union and, allegedly, its chief.

## RICO rules

In November 1994, the DOJ informed the Laborers International that it was considering a civil racketeering action "to remedy long-standing organized crime influence in the affairs of LIUNA." After three months of negotiations, the union and the DOJ reached an agreement under which LIUNA would have up to three years to clean up its own affairs by setting up a complete internal justice system run by outside talent, subject to DOJ approval. Under the agreement, if the Justice Department became dissatisfied with the union's progress, it could impose a consent decree at any time and take over. The union hired a roster of

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[44] Mulligan, March 10, 1999.

[45] Starkman, Part One.

[46] Starkman, Part One.

[47] Office of the Independent Hearing Officer, March 8, 1999.

[48] Starkman, Part One.

[49] Starkman, Part Two.
Church.

[50] Allen.

[51] LIUNA Web site, http://www.liuna.org/Pages/departments-menu/minorityad.html.

[52] O'Sullivan interview.

[53] O'Sullivan interview.

[54] Mulligan, November 9, 1997.

[55] Source 2.

former Justice Department officials including an organized-crime prosecutor and the second in command at the FBI to run the new legal machinery.[56]

The oversight agreement was extended for a second time in January and is now in its fifth year. The Justice Department and union defend the arrangement as a more cost-effective and democratic way of reforming a big union than a complete government takeover, which has been the usual remedy in labor racketeering cases.

Congressional Republicans, predictably, have howled that the agreement was simply a sweet deal for a Clinton pal, and the House Judiciary Committee investigated the matter in a 1996 hearing. Critics of the clean-up condemned apparent favoritism towards a major Democratic Party donor. Clinton's inaugural committee got $100,000 from the Laborers in 1993.[57] In 1995-96, the union showered the Dems with $627,088 in soft money, sixth highest among contributors, while giving the GOP only $7,500.[58]

Union dissidents, too, have criticized the DOJ for not going after Coia and other top leaders more aggressively. Some have complained that the internal investigators seemed to pursue mainly Coia's enemies, leaving the fox to continue to guard the henhouse.[59]

In the face of these criticisms, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney has stood behind Coia. He denounced the 1996 House hearings as "bogus proceedings" that were part of an "organized smear campaign against union leaders by the House Republican leadership."[60] At the 1996 LIUNA convention in Las Vegas, Sweeney lauded Coia for his efforts to root out corruption from the union. Ironically, though, Sweeney ignored a LIUNA election officer's ruling that parts of his speech were an impermissible endorsement of Coia, because his air fare had been paid with LIUNA funds.[61] Some critics within the union view the AFL-CIO head's kudos as a quid pro quo for Coia's support of his presidential candidacy in the clutch.

Finally, in November 1997, the investigators loosed the hounds on the fox. After three years of internal investigation, the union justice system brought charges against Coia of permitting mob influence and taking kickbacks. In March 1999, however, independent hearing officer Peter Vaira cleared Coia of all but one lesser charge—his penchant for Ferraris, satisfied with generous financing by a union vendor, cost him a $100,000 fine. Vaira allowed Coia to retain his office.

The DOJ expressed "disappointment" with this outcome. While praising the investigation and "vigorous" prosecution by the internal reform system, Justice urged General Executive Board attorney Robert Luskin (the internal union prosecutor) to appeal the decision, which he has since done.[62] It also noted that "the Justice Department retains the discretion to implement the consent decree" and take over the union directly if it finds this necessary to reform LIUNA.[63]

Internal charges against another big fish, Peter Fosco, still await a ruling.[64] Overall, though, Luskin estimates the union justice system has removed "a couple hundred" of the most visible gangsters and their pals. Luskin, a Harvard Law alumnus and former Rhodes scholar, served for three years as Special Counsel to the DOJ's Organized Crime and Racketeering Section in the '80s. "Of all of the people identified in the government's draft RICO complaint as members or associates of organized crime at any level inside union," he says, "Coia is only one who continues to hold office. Every other one has been removed in some fashion." This sends a message to rank-and-file members that "it's safe to come out."

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[56] Church
Luskin interview.

[57] Allen.

[58] Washington Post.

[59] Church.

[60] Sweeney, July 24, 1996.

[61] Source 2.

[62] Laborers for Justice and Democracy, May 1999.

[63] U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, Scott R. Lassar, March 9, 1999.

[64] Luskin interview, B.155.

More important still than going after individual bad guys, Luskin believes, have been efforts to take over corrupt locals and district councils and make structural changes in their hiring halls, funds, and shop steward systems. The prosecutor claims the cleanup has put organizations representing roughly ten percent of LIUNA's membership, mostly in the Northeast and Midwest, in trusteeship or under supervision since 1995.

In one high-profile operation, the internal justice system expelled 28 alleged *mafiosi* and associates from Local 210 in Buffalo, N.Y., one of the most notoriously corrupt Laborers' locals.[65] "Sometimes it was difficult to tell the union from the mob up there," recalls Luskin. Most recently, International attorneys succeeded in throwing out the celebrated *capo* of Local 2 in Chicago, John Matassa Jr., and putting his local in emergency trusteeship.[66] In at least one case, the cleanup has energized its beneficiary: the Mason Tenders District Council in New York City, reputedly one of the town's most mob-ridden unions before being mucked out, has now begun to aggressively organize asbestos and demolition workers.[67]

## Doing the Lord's work

Beyond pruning out Cosa Nostra influence, the oversight structure has made some visible efforts to help democracy take root and to encourage genuine representation of members' interests. Under this system, the first contested and direct membership vote for general president was held in 1996. The president had previously been elected by delegates in tightly controlled conventions.[68]

A report by the union's independent elections officers, led by Professor Steven B. Goldberg of Northwestern University Law School, say reform of the electoral processes is "well under way" and "limited progress toward participative democracy" has been made.[69] The elections for general president were conducted by secret ballot and delegates to the 1996 convention were democratically elected. The report recommended, however, that the Department of Justice continue oversight of all union elections until at least 2001. It also suggested further measures to expand democracy at the local level and prevent retaliation in hiring halls against challengers to incumbent officers.
Further democratizing the political culture of LIUNA will require long-term follow-through, the elections officers warned: "A 90-year old tradition of political autocracy and member passivity cannot be reversed in one round of … elections." They singled out the reluctance of members to play an active role in union affairs, evidenced by a 16 percent voter turnout in presidential elections, as possibly the greatest barrier to reform. Only one-third of the elections for delegates to the convention were contested, and the incumbent president's entire slate of candidates was elected. The report recommended extending oversight to local elections, too, where controversies are often sharper and much of the alleged criminal activity has occurred.

Nevertheless, union prosecutor Luskin sees "substantial progress" towards a democratic culture in the Laborers in a few areas. Already, he says, there are more contested elections for offices at the local and District Council level.

Improved job referral rules and scrutiny of their implementation by locals have reduced complaints of corruption in dispatching, Luskin contends. In construction unions like the Laborers where members are dispatched by local hiring halls, this is critical for encouraging member participation: "If people fear they're not going to get work if they're active politically, then they're not going to be active politically," he points out. "And if you're the incumbent and can hand out work to your friends and withhold it from your enemies, it's a significant advantage in retaining power."

Although shop stewards are still appointed by business managers rather than elected, the reform effort is expanding steward training and certification programs and requiring that locals appoint only certified stewards. Background checks by the union Inspector General have screened out many of the gangsters.

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[65] Church.

[66] Kaiser, May 18, 1999.
Kaiser, May 25, 1999

[67] Greenhouse, March 22, 1999.

[68] Sniffen.

[69] Goldberg, Geoghegan & Hobgood.

These efforts, according to the prosecutor, have expanded the pool of qualified members and given the new blood visibility with their fellow rank-and-file, providing aspirants with a springboard into union office.

"We've gotten a lot of criticism, a lot of that just being sewage outflow from the climate in Washington," says Luskin. "But I think everybody who's worked on this feels like we're doing the Lord's work. You go to a union that now has got a training fund that works and trains people and sends them out on jobs, and you say, somebody's going to have a job a year or two years from now at better pay than he ever could have had before when the Mafia was running the training fund for its benefit. You can look around and see that you are making a material difference to the lives of people at the bottom of the economic ladder."

Nationally mandated reforms may have emboldened more local leaders to challenge the grip of higher LIUNA bodies. In 1998, the Connecticut District Council of construction locals settled a lawsuit brought by Local 665 in Bridgeport charging that it raised dues without membership approval and gave or withheld funds to control Local officials. The agreement assured members a secret-ballot vote on dues increases and proportional distribution of dues money to Locals according to hours worked by Locals' members. Local 665 members "took a stand against injustice," said business manager Ronald Nobili. "That is not an easy thing to do in this union."[70]

Despite reform in some locals, rank-and-file movements in LIUNA today remain small. Alex Corns, secretary-treasurer of Local 36 in Daly City, California, estimates a membership of 5,000 in Laborers for Justice and Democracy, less than one percent of total LIUNA membership. Another reform organization, Laborers for a Democratic Union (LDU), was inspired by the progress made in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters by the reform group Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). But such groups are still far from shifting the balance of power within the Laborers as TDU did in the Teamsters. Asks Corns: "How do you stand up for reform if you're gonna get your head cut off?"[71]

Corns credits the internal investigators with doing a good job in some areas while lamenting that they are short-staffed.[72] But some other grassroots activists are not as sanguine about the Laborers' progress towards democracy. Alaska laborer Chris White, a leader of LDU, calls the "minimal" reforms "a circle jerk" and complains that some involved in the cleanup "are making a killing off of us" from the high salaries they draw. He believes a direct government takeover would have been more effective.

## Crafting unity

Even a fully reformed and democratic LIUNA would still leave workers at most shipyards and construction sites fragmented between many competing craft unions. Veteran scaler Ann Carlson believes that jurisdictional disputes between craft unions in the yards have hurt workers because the company uses it against them. "We'd like to have one union to give us more unity," she says. "But you really can't, I mean, it's almost an impossible situation."

Some jobs at Todd and other yards, however, now use a team approach that allows cross-crafting. This means that a job is assigned to a group of workers from various crafts, and workers in one craft can help workers in another do their work, blurring jurisdictional lines.

Joe Warren, current Laborers' business manager for Seattle shipyards, calls the concept "composite crews." He says he's heard it's used in other areas, but that local yards have yet to use it successfully: "There's always been somebody who wanted to cheat."[73]

Carlson, though, finds that such teams are letting scalers recoup some work previously lost to other crafts: "Let's face it, the laborers have lost 50 percent of their work because they put a broom in everybody's hand. So as a laborer I'm extremely for this because all it's going to do is give me more work, because they've already taken as much work away from me as they can."[74]

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[70] Julien.
Laborers' Local 665.

[71] Corns interview, A.290.

[72] Corns interview, A.130.

[73] Warren interview, B.053-095.

[74] Carlson interview, 4.A.000-079.

Nationally, craft unions like LIUNA and the others that represent Todd workers are not the only form of organization in shipbuilding. The United Steel Workers of America, an industrial union that includes all the workers in a workplace, has organized shipyards in Newport News, Virginia, and San Diego. Howard Scott, a USWA spokesman, says inter-craft friction is minimal in these locals because all the crafts are in the same union.

It took a bitter strike for the USWA to win its first union contract at Newport News. "People's heads got whomped in," says Scott. But the union has managed to raise the standard of living of the large, multi-racial workforce at the shipyard. That Local, he says, is now one of largest in Virginia and has increased its membership in the last year with an internal organizing drive.

In fairness to the craft unions, though, Scott points out that many of them offer strong benefit and pension plans and more than a century of experience bargaining in their industries. They've put some effort into organizing shipyard workers too, he says.

The New Orleans Metal Trades Council, a consortium of the crafts, won a representation election over five years ago at the Avondale Industries shipyards. But shipyard owners have refused to recognize or bargain with the union and, according to a National Labor Relations Board judge, illegally fired 28 union supporters. The company is appealing the ruling. In response, the AFL-CIO has mounted a national campaign to force the company to the table.[75]

But whether craft or industrial, unions in heavy industries today face a tough global economic climate, Scott acknowledges. "Companies used to whipsaw steel plants 50 miles apart to drive wages down," he recalls (whipsawing means threatening to move production or to close a plant to wring concessions from workers). "Now they're whipsawing us across oceans, against Portuguese and Rumanian steel plants."

## Empty drydocks

The U.S. shipbuilding industry is no exception. It suffered a shakeout back in the eighties as ship construction moved offshore and U.S. shipyard employment declined from 178,900 in 1981 to 121,200 in 1990.[76] Seattle shipyards were devastated. Jobs hemorrhaged as Lockheed closed its two Seattle yards in the mid-eighties and Todd cut back its work force from 4,945 in 1985 to 700 in 1994. Todd's revenues sank from $507 million to $69 million in the same period. According to Laborers' official Warren, the number of scalers working in all Seattle shipyards has declined from 1,100 in the '80s to 250 or 300 today.

By 1998, though, Todd employment had rebounded to 1,120 and its revenues to $110 million.[77] The yard is experiencing a modest boom again, partially compensating for reduced demand from the Navy with cruise ships and ferries.[78]

Workers say the yards have made progress on some aspects of health and safety conditions. According to scaler Carlson, the quality of respirators and safety glasses Todd provides has improved and their use is encouraged more seriously.[79] Asbestos exposure is way down, too. The fiber has not been used in new construction since the '70s,[80] while on older ships, most of the asbestos has already been removed or encapsulated in the wake of major class-action lawsuits.

Some OSHA regulations have changed for the better, according to Warren. For example, rules against sending a worker alone into confined spaces below deck have been stiffened and are better enforced.

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[75] Greenhouse, July 10, 1998.

[76] Colton Company. Employment in the U.S. Shipbuilding Industry. http://www.coltoncompany.com/index/shipbldg/,

[77] Colton Company. Todd Shipyards' Financial Data. http://www.coltoncompany.com/index/shipbldg/findata/toddfin.htm.

[78] Carlson interview, 3.B.674.

[79] Carlson interview, 3.B.573-620

[80] Warren interview, B.125.

But shipyards remain a dangerous place to make a living. Carlson says that two scalers were killed recently in falls. And pressure to cut corners remains strong, asserts Warren: "Management has this tendency to want you to rush, rush, rush and forget about safety."

When the eagle flew on Friday it used to compensate a little for the dangers. But Seattle shipyard wages have stagnated,[81] hurt by competition from lower-wage foreign and southern U.S. yards.[82] In contrast to the construction industry, points out Carlson, "They can take a ship, and our work, any place in the world."[83] If the unions do succeed in raising wages, she fears, the shipyards may lose work to other yards. "So we're really in a Catch-22. But it would be nice to keep up with inflation."[84]

## Solidarity for our guys

Under the leadership of the old guard of the AFL-CIO, U.S. union membership has shrunk to under 14 percent of the workforce from around 35 percent in the '50s.[85] Since John Sweeney came to power four years ago, the revived organization has begun to pour considerable muscle and money into organizing workers and building political clout.[86] As it tries to reconstruct itself, though, labor needs to exorcise the restless ghost of Local 541.

While the good fellas and kickbacks grabbed the headlines, LIUNA's less sensational sins may have been more deadly. Too many Laborers' leaders belonged to the George Meany/Dave Beck school of unionism, which got cozy with its corporate counterparts and tried to become part of their club, but lost touch with members' concerns. They struck deals with business leaders behind their members' backs, keeping "their boys" in line in exchange for—once upon a time—economic benefits and job security. But they've long since stopped delivering the goods for their members.

Laborers' vice president Armand Sabitoni articulated the essence of this attitude in a March letter to Connecticut Locals. "A coordinated effort within our locals around the State to push the issue of rank and file contract ratification" alarmed Sabitoni. He attacked this proposal as an effort to create political divisions and undermine the union's strength and unity. Authorizing the District Council's negotiating committee to approve a contract agreement maximizes their bargaining power, he argued, perhaps correctly. "Direct membership ratification of the contract," he warned, "adds an element of instability and uncertainty at the table." How inconvenient—the negotiators might actually have to pay attention to the opinions of ordinary members. Democracy is not necessarily the easiest way to get things done in the short term, but then, it's the members who have to work under that contract.[87]

Internally, the authoritarianism and atrophied accountability of this kind of business unionism made members passive bystanders. This stifled the self-corrective mechanisms of democracy, opening the door to the mob. There is a chicken-and-egg relationship between internal democracy and driving out corruption and criminal influence. The first is necessary to thoroughly accomplish the second, but the second makes the first possible. The lack of local democracy, dissident Alex Corns points out, hurts the capacity of unions to organize as well.[88]

Politically, narrowness and exclusivity generated resentment of unions in too much of the public, creating fat, lumbering targets for the union-busting of the Reagan years. Fairly or not, many came to see unions as selfishly preserving their own higher-paying jobs at the expense of others who needed them, and passing

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[81] Carlson interview, 3.B.630-674.

[82] National shipyard wages have grown only 25.80 percent over the 10 years from 1988 to 1997. [Colton - Hourly Wages in Shipbuilding.] An annual rate of inflation of 3 percent a year would raise the cost of living by 34.39 percent over 10 years

[83] Carlson interview, 4.A.90, 470.

[84] Carlson interview, 4.A.90, 470.

[85] Kazin. Verhovek.

[86] NYT 2-19-99.

[87] Sabitoni.

[88] Corns interview, A.290.

them on in the family. And as long as the labor movement is perceived as an exclusive job program for middle-aged white guys and their sons, it will continue to shrink.

But unions, even craft unions, don't have to work that way. And in much of the world, they don't. In Italy, for example, some building-trades unions have historically been among the most dynamic and broad-minded, pushing beyond collective bargaining to work with community organizations on low-income housing. Sweden's strong union movement has been a bastion of one of the most advanced democracies: a very high rate of unionization there has helped to insure a decent standard of living for working people and given them a voice in public affairs. And an important part of Mexico's nascent democracy is the independent union movement that has sprung up in the teeth of repression to represent the shop floor where the old, government-controlled unions have ignored it.

Here in the U.S., too, the Sweeney AFL-CIO and its local affiliates have thrown their shoulders into raising the minimum wage nationally and in some states. This strategy offers concrete benefits to mostly non-union workers who really need them. Standing at the intersection of enlightened self-interest and solidarity with economic underdogs, minimum wage campaigns have been politically popular as well.

## Taking responsibility

Even before the recent labor revival, the bad old ways were gradually being overtaken by other realities in some areas of the movement. Important sectors of labor here have long been inclusive and dynamic, particularly some of the industrial and service unions that organize low-wage workers, women and people of color. Many of these are growing even as the white male bastions shrink.

Some of these unions' campaigns have doggedly targeted workers like janitors who are poorly paid and hard to organize. In Los Angeles this February, this approach led to the biggest organizing success in over 60 years: the Service Employees International Union won the right to represent over 74,000 county home-care workers, who earned $5.75 an hour. Eighty-nine percent of those who voted favored the union. Union leaders told the *New York Times* they would follow up by organizing home-care workers in the rest of California, Oregon, Washington, and New York.[89]

A few craft unions, too, have reached out to low-wage workers. In western Washington, the Carpenters District Council has launched a high-profile campaign to organize non-union workers in residential construction, most of whom are Latin American immigrants. Head organizer Eric Franklin says he's hired bi-lingual organizers and tried to tailor the campaign to the needs of immigrant workers building tract housing. Beyond pressures from employers and labor contractors, newcomers also face harassment by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service—it recently raided a Seattle job site where workers unionized by this campaign were working. Nevertheless, he reckons that the District Council has organized more than a thousand workers overall and grown by four percent in less than a year.

Since 1995, Franklin contends, the Carpenters' new president, Doug McCarron, has tried to eliminate nepotism and emphasize organizing. Nationally, the union has gotten rid of its old initiation fee, which discouraged new members, and now offers training for members in "Unionism 101" as well as carpentry.[90]

LIUNA itself has organized public workers such as school-bus drivers and mail handlers, and some low-wage workers like poultry processors. About 40 percent of its members are now outside of construction, and overall membership is growing, according to Vice President Terry O'Sullivan. In a few poultry plants with predominantly immigrant workforces, the union hired bi-lingual workers from the plants as organizers. And it has recruited new members from African-American churches with which it worked in the Southern coalition against church burnings. O'Sullivan says that money for organizing has been decentralized into regional funds that are more responsive to local conditions.[91]

A particularly impressive example of member involvement was the United Farm Workers organizing drive at Chateau Sainte Michelle, the Washington winery owned by U.S. Tobacco. Efforts to unionize farm workers have often collided with barriers of extreme poverty, transience, language, and immigration status.

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[89] Greenhouse, Feb. 26, 1999.

[90] Franklin interview, June 18, 1999.

[91] O'Sullivan interview. Starkman, Part Two.

But in 1995, after an eight-year boycott of the firm's wines, the mainly Mexican workers won the first collective-bargaining agreement in Washington state agriculture.

The union worked closely with worker-leaders to overcome their fears. After training in labor law and legal language, the *campesinos* spent long hours drafting contract proposals, according to UFW organizer Rosalinda Guillén. Then they themselves sat down at the bargaining table with their employers. "A collective-bargaining agreement," said Guillén, "is a worker taking responsibility of his own life and writing a legal document that is going to define his daily worklife."[92]

## Comparative advantage

After scrutinizing labor's warts, it's enlightening to step back for a moment and compare it to the corporations with whom it bargains. Unions are fundamentally democratic institutions, and even the most feudal must at least appear to represent their members interests. Corporations, in contrast, are intrinsically undemocratic. Although they may appear to be merely plutocratic—one dollar, one vote—real power is tightly concentrated in the biggest shareholders and top management.

To increase their comparative advantage over business, though, unions need to deepen and extend their democratic institutions.

Elected shop stewards bring representative democracy down to the job site or shop floor. Laborers prosecutor Luskin defends their appointment, saying stewards need to be the "eyes and ears of the business manager" on the site. But many unionists believe that shop stewards need to be elected to keep them responsive to the needs of workers in their workplace.[93] Dissident Chris White: "The election of shop stewards is the most important thing. That's the first guy you meet on the job. When they're appointed, it lets business managers keep things under their control."[94]

In many unions, including the Machinists and the Steelworkers, shop stewards are directly elected. After the IAM put reformer Tom Gibbons' local into trusteeship, Gibbons was able to remain in office as a steward for years after he was kicked out as president because fellow employees in his shop continued to elect him.

Beyond stewards, direct election of officers at all levels is clearly indispensable. When international and regional officers have to win elections, the rank-and-file gains some leverage to make their leaders listen to them.

Even the most democratic unions, however, can't thrive in isolation. They need to balance representation of members and their immediate interests with advocacy for consumers, non-union workers and other parts of the community who have not been invited to the Roaring '90s banquet. Jimmy Hoffa-style unionism didn't do this, and its failure made it easier to recruit non-union labor and strike-breakers.

Of course, internal democracy doesn't guarantee that workers will broaden their circle of self-interest. But there's definitely something in it for them: successful strikes and organizing campaigns have often mobilized coalitions with other parts of their communities to pressure employers.

Unions have to reach out even further, Bob Barnes believes: "Build the rank-and-file. Build coalitions both within labor and with the churches and social movements. Build solidarity with workers and union movements in other parts of the world. Until we take up the cause of workers in Mexico and in Bosnia as our own, we're going to be pitted against each other."[95]

## Keeping unionism

Back at home, Pacific Coast shipyard unions are negotiating another contract this summer. And once again, discontent with the previous contract among Seattle shipyard workers has led to rank-and-file organizing to get more member input this time.

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[92] Costantini, Nov. 19, 1995.

[93] Carlson interview, 3.B.686-696.

[94] White interview.

[95] Barnes interview, 2.A.220, 335.

"We had a group that did not like the last contract," says scaler Ann Carlson. "The electricians started it, I got involved with it, basically telling the unions that they could not bulldoze us into a contract like they did the last one." Workers had voted that contract down two or three times, she says. But after it went to arbitration, what came out was "the same contract that we had turned down with maybe a couple of words of difference. It was just ridiculous."

Most of the scaler class of '99 would be surprised to learn that another rank-and-file group was pushing for member involvement in contract negotiations twenty years ago. Hearde still believes it's critical to have "people from the working side" at the table: "In negotiations your elected officials that don't have to get out there and dig in the mud, they get up there and negotiate for you. And they'll make a tradeoff on certain things, and you're right back where you started." Each local, he says, ought to be able to decide what they're going to have in their contract, rather than having it handed down from the International. "Them folks is working somewhere else in some office. They ain't out there having to go through what the worker has. So I would like to take that away from them, put it in the hands of the people that's gotta go in that mess and work in it."[96]

The current rank-and-file group won an agreement that three independent members who were not union officers could sit in on the contract negotiations. And if the contract goes to arbitration again, union officials have promised two totally different contracts will be presented to membership for a vote. As the contract talks approach, the unions are passing out questionnaires to see what members would like to see in the contract, and are "a little more organized" about the negotiations, says Carlson. "We feel like we accomplished something."[97]

But holding leaders to their word has not always been easy. "Some of our people went to sit in on a shop stewards' meeting, and they were asked to leave," she sighs.

Carlson: "We basically feel that all the unions are in bed with the company. After the last contract, dissatisfaction was almost at 100 percent. It's like, how do we get rid of the unions but yet keep unionism."[98]

Central labor organizations are not likely to disappear any time soon. National and international coordination have become increasingly important for unions buffeted by global economic storms. But without a live core of grassroots participation, higher leaders too often become mere labor brokers and appendages of their corporations or industries.

Local unions are a key classroom and laboratory of Jeffersonian democracy: not the orderly civics-textbook representative variety, but the hollering, fist-waving, in-your-face kind where workers make decisions directly. For members, their Local may be the only place they can speak their piece and hope to be taken seriously. For reformers working for a revived national labor movement, local democracy and mobilization are the foundations on which to build political power, bring in new members, and ultimately improve workers' daily lives.

If unions can't relearn how to grow from below, they are unlikely to recover a leading role in this society. If they can, they may be able to recreate what they have been at some times and places: a strong force for social solidarity and the public good.

The old Ship Scalers Local 541 hall sits decaying behind a bus stop on Madison, awaiting the wrecking ball. But the democratic ferment in other union halls around the country is reverberating into corporate boardrooms and across borders. Debates and decisions there will ultimately determine whether the labor movement rusts in drydock or, instead, sand-blasts its bureaucratic barnacles and relaunches a more responsive and seaworthy vessel.

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[96] Hearde interview, Scalers5.A.466-507.

[97] Carlson interview, 3.B.630-659.

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