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THE REPLACEMENT OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR BY THE INTERNATIONAL LONGSHOREMEN'S ASSOCIATION IN THE PORT OF BOSTON

Francis M. McLaughlin

The growth of the Knights of Labor as a national labor organization in the United States was meteoric, but its life was exceedingly short. Between 1879 and 1885-87 its membership grew from fewer than 10,000 to more than 700,000, and by 1890 it had declined to 100,000. In his popular history of American labor Thomas Brooks concludes that "before the Gay Nineties had expired, the Noble Order was all but dead."¹ This common picture of the growth and decline of the Knights obscures the fact that the organization retained a substantial membership in some labor markets into the early decades of the 20th century.

A striking example was the freight transportation industry in Boston where District Assembly 30 of the Knights was the dominant labor organization among railroad freight handlers and longshoremen until just prior to the outbreak of World War I. This seemingly solid position in the Boston transportation industry crumbled almost overnight in 1912, when a strike by Boston longshoremen was defeated resoundingly. The strike began on January 5, 1912 when the entire work force of more than 2500 longshoremen struck in pursuit of higher wages.² On February 13, they returned to work empty handed.³ On April 15, over 1500 of these longshoremen abandoned the Knights of Labor,⁴ and the Boston Longshoremen's Provident Union⁵ and joined the

¹ Thomas R. Brooks, Toil and Trouble: A History of American Labor, Delacorte Press, 1964, p. 59.

² Boston Globe, morn. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p.1. This was the first strike of consequence by Boston longshoremen since 1882. See Charles B. Barnes, The Longshoremen, Russell Sage Foundation: Survey Associates Inc., 1915, p. 184. Barnes' assertion is corroborated to some extent by the statement of Phillip Quinn, the stevedore for the Hamburg American line. Quinn remarked that the 1912 strike was his first experience with a strike in 22 years of service with the company, Boston Globe, eve. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p. 4.

³ Ibid., morn. ed., Feb. 13, 1912, pp. 1,3.

⁴ Three Knights of Labor local assemblies of longshoremen, 5789, 7174, and 9623 were established in Boston in 1886 and 1887. See Jonathan Garlock, Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor, Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982, pp. 202-204. The three assemblies were Daniel O'Connell Assembly No. 7174, Noddle Island Assembly No. 5789, and Eureka Assembly No. 9623. See Barnes, loc. cit.

⁵ The Boston Longshoremen's Provident Union was chartered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1881. See Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Religious etc. Corporations Certificates of Organization, Vol. 75, p. 62, Charter 62-1265. Charles

International Longshoremen's Association.⁶ Within a few months most of the remaining longshoremen followed suit. In February, 1913, the International Longshoremen's Association in Boston signed its first contract with the longshoremen's employers. This contract specified that only members of the International Longshoremen's Association would be employed on the Boston docks.⁷ The International Longshoremen's Association was thus firmly established as the sole collective bargaining representative of Boston longshoremen.

This paper will show that the longshoremen's experience in this strike led them to abandon the Knights of Labor and move en masse to the International Longshoremen's Association. The strategy followed by the longshoremen in the strike coupled with lack of support from their brother Knights in District Assembly 30 helps explain the strike's failure. Both the strategy chosen and the lack of support from their brother Knights followed from the Knights' long standing commitment to peaceful labor management cooperation – a commitment that characterized the industrial relations philosophy of Terrence Powderly who led the Knights in its period of greatest national importance.

The Strike Issues

In December 1911, the Longshoremen's Trade Council proposed to the Steamship Agents' and Stevedores' Conference an increase in the hourly wage from 30 cents to 40 cents for day work, and from 40 cents to 50 cents for night work.⁸ This included the provision that the new rate schedule would include much of the work that long had been done under higher special schedules.⁹ In support of their proposal, the longshoremen argued that the rate of pay for day work had been unchanged since 1882,¹⁰ and that increases in the cost of living had made it difficult for

Barnes claims a charter was issued to the Boston Longshoremen's Provident Union in 1847, op. cit., p. 183, but the statute requiring such a charter was not enacted until 1874. See Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Acts of 1874, Chapter 375. The 1847 date is also referred to in the Boston Globe, eve. ed., Apr. 15, 1912, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., Feb. 21, 1913, p.9.

⁸ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p.2.

⁹ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p.2. There is a record of an agreement signed between longshoremen and their employers dated July, 1903. See Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Bureau of Statistics of Labor, Labor Bulletin No. 34, Dec., 1904, p. 368. Barnes, op. cit., reports that the first signed wage scale was dated Sept, 1909. The Bureau of Statistics of Labor does not indicate whether or not the 1903 agreement was signed, but Barnes is incorrect in claiming that the 1909 agreement was the first signed agreement, since the Bureau of Statistics of Labor reports the provisions of an agreement signed in 1906. See Labor Bulletin No. 46, Feb. 1907, pp. 113-114. The 1906 contract contained detailed work rules, and provided for differential rates for handling certain cargoes.

¹⁰ The wage rates received by longshoremen in 1882, and the wage demand they made in the strike of 1882, as reported by Barnes. loc. cit., are the same as the wage rates received, and the demand made in 1912. See Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Bureau of Statistics of Labor, Forty Third Annual Report of the Statistics of Labor for the Year 1912, Public Document No. 15, p. 252. It is hard to believe that nominal wage rates had not changed for 30 years, but John Reynolds of Noddle Island Assembly told Mayor John F. Fitzgerald, at a conference called by the mayor

them to support their families on their average earnings.¹¹ They claimed that wages were higher in many other ports, and that although Boston wages were identical to New York wages, it was cheaper to handle cargo in Boston because gangs were smaller.¹² This demand for higher wages appeared to be the only issue with which the longshoremen confronted their employers.

The employers disputed the claim that wages had not been increased since 1882. They responded that wages for many cargoes had been increased, and that the wage for night work was raised in 1909.¹³ They denied the charge that Boston wages were lower than in many other ports.¹⁴ They did admit that longshore gangs were larger in New York, but claimed that New York gangs did more work, so that cargo handling costs were the same in both ports. John Thomas, an employer spokesman, and an agent for five steamship lines operating in Boston, claimed that wages were higher in Boston than in any other port on the Atlantic coast except New York. Charles Stewart of the Cunard Lines said the longshoremen's wage proposal would increase payrolls by 24 percent and argued that an increase of this size would damage Boston's competitive position seriously. The employers rejected both the longshoremen's proposal, and their offer to compromise,¹⁵ stating that wages could not be increased if Boston were to remain competitive with other Atlantic ports.¹⁶

George Smith, representing the Boston Chamber of Commerce, and the Mayor of Boston, John F. Fitzgerald, both agreed with the employers. They warned the longshoremen of the damage that a wage increase, and the strike, would inflict on the local economy.¹⁷ However, the employers, unlike the longshoremen, were concerned about more than the proposed wage increase. Thomas and Stewart argued that the fundamental problem in Boston was restrictive work rules enforced unpredictably by pier level work stoppages. One employer said that he regarded the costs of the strike as well worth incurring if the longshoremen could be soundly defeated, and he believed that the future of the port depended upon their defeat.¹⁸

in an effort to stop the strike, that longshoremen had been getting 30 cents per hour for day work since 1882. *Boston Globe*, eve. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p. 4.

¹¹ Michael J. O'Meara of the Longshoremen's Trade Council said that longshoremen had average weekly earnings of about \$10 per week, year round. John Wylde of the Steamship Agents' and Stevedores' Conference placed weekly earnings at \$15 to \$40, *ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p.2, and morn. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p.2.

¹³ *Boston Evening Transcript*, Jan. 12, 1912, p.3.

¹⁴ *Boston Globe*, Jan., 7, 1912, p.12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan., 5, 1912, p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p.2, and Jan. 7, 1912, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 5, 1912. p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The Strike Conduct of the Employers

The employers vigorously opposed the longshoremen by employing strikebreakers. On the first day of the strike representatives of a New York strikebreaking firm met with John Thomas,¹⁹ and from that day reports of the use of strikebreakers appeared continuously. On January 6, an advertisement, "Wanted 500 Able-Bodied Men To Work on Piers and Steamers.... a strike being now in existence," appeared in the Boston Globe and continued for several days.²⁰ On January 8 it was reported that a band of 500 strikebreakers had arrived, and that it was the advance guard for 3000 that would soon arrive.²¹ The reports of the heads of the strikebreaking firms were uniformly optimistic.²² If these reports were taken at face value, it would seem that the work of the port was always just about to be done as effectively as it had been done by the regular men.

Spokesmen for the striking longshoremen presented a different view. In regular reports to the strikers they claimed the performance of the strikebreakers was consistently inferior. Many of the strikebreakers were said to be inexperienced, not physically robust, and not used to either the hard work, or the cold weather.²³ There were many reports of accidents and cargo damage.²⁴ The longshoremen's representatives also reported that the productivity of the strikebreakers was extremely low, and that it sometimes took them four to eight times longer to do a job than it would take a group of regular men.²⁵

The reports in the press suggest strongly that the performance of the strikebreakers was generally unsatisfactory. Marine insurance company spokesmen expressed concern about possible cargo damage due to inexpert handling, and about danger to ships and crews from improperly stowed cargo, and they made known their displeasure at the proposed use of strikebreakers.²⁶ There were many accounts of employer dissatisfaction with the strikebreakers' work; of desertions by strikebreakers;²⁷ of their ineptitude and inexperience; and even a report of a strike by strikebreakers themselves.²⁸ These reports indicate that the strikebreakers' performance was far from ideal, but their use certainly

¹⁹ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 6, 1912, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 6, 1912, p. 13.

²¹ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1, 3. The heads of the strikebreaking firms, Captains H.H. Bowen, and L. Burgoff claimed that 1400 strikebreakers were working at the end of the first week of the strike. This was the largest number of strikebreakers reported by the press as actually working. Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 13, 1912, p. 5.

²² Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1,3; morn. ed., Jan. 10, 1912, pp. 1-2; eve. ed., Jan. 11, 1912, p. 6.

²³ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 9, 1912, p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid., eve. ed. Jan. 17, 1912, p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid., eve. ed. Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1, 15; eve. ed., Jan. 27, 1912, p. 11; morn. ed., Jan. 31, 1912, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p. 2; eve. ed., p. 1.

²⁷ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 17, 1912, p. 16; Jan. 21, 1912, p. 6.

²⁸ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 10, 1912, pp. 1-2.

strengthened the hand of the employers. Despite delays that were in some instances as long as five or ten days, ships were loaded and unloaded, and the business of the port was never shut down entirely.²⁹

In any event, the employers were not forced to rely exclusively on strikebreakers to offset the effects of the strike. When the strike began, the employers' organization announced that freight being transported by rail to Boston from the west would be re-routed to New York, Baltimore, and Portland, and New-England bound ocean freight would be re-routed to New York. Employers knew that Boston longshoremen were organized independently of longshoremen elsewhere, and had no previous contact, or record of past cooperation, with them.³⁰

A spokesman for the striking longshoremen expressed the opinion that marine insurance agents would not permit shipping agents to take the exceptional risks of moving half unloaded ships.³¹ For such ships, the option of moving to another port to finish the discharge of cargo was not a realistic alternative to hiring strikebreakers. The longshoremen also did not think that ships and cargo would be re-routed readily, since they believed that cargo handling costs were greater in other ports. They also believed that Boston shipping interests would fear that business once diverted might not come back to Boston.³² This fear also was expressed by General Hugh Bancroft, the chairman of the Directors of the Port of Boston, who pointed out that no steamship company was tied to Boston, and that operators could withdraw ships at a day's notice without incurring any financial penalty.³³ Finally, the intended recipients of some Boston bound cargo wanted to know who would bear the extra cost of shipping it from New York to Boston by rail.³⁴

Despite these difficulties, the option of re-routing cargo was helpful to the employers. It provided an alternative to the use of strikebreakers for some businesses. It was an option that was used,³⁵ and its use certainly reduced the pressure on the employers to accede to the longshoremen's demands. This diversion of ships and of rail traffic would not have been necessary if the employers had expected the strike breakers to be perfect substitutes for the regular men. Nor would employers have incurred the expense of employing strikebreakers if

²⁹ The first ship to leave port fully loaded after the strike began was the Cambrian, which left on Friday, January 12. It had been scheduled to leave on the previous Sunday, ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p. 1. Three additional steamers sailed on Sunday, January 14, ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 15, 1912, p. 6. The Bostonian left 11 days late, on January 20, and the Armenian left a week late on January 21, ibid., Jan. 21, 1912, p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p.2.

³¹ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, pp. 1,4; morn. ed., Jan. 6, 1912, pp. 1-2.

³² Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 9, 1912, p. 1.

³³ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 11, 1912, pp. 1-2.

³⁴ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 26, 1912, p. 8.

³⁵ For example, it was reported that Portland expected to benefit by an increase in the volume of perishable goods shipped through that port, ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 11, 1912; Jan. 14, 1912, p. 6; morn. ed., Jan. 26, 1912, p. 18.

diversion of cargo had been a perfect substitute for handling it in Boston. Both of these tactics imposed real costs on Boston shipping interests, but employers used them both to minimize the adverse impact of the strike while they waited for economic pressures to induce the longshoremen to abandon their wage demand.

The Strike Conduct of the Longshoremen

In view of the important role strikebreakers played in enabling the employers to resist the longshoremen's demands, it might be expected that the longshoremen would have tried to make their employment as difficult as possible, but the contrary was true. The longshoremen's leaders, fearing that confrontations between strikers and strikebreakers might lead to violence and undermine public support for the strike, adopted a strategy of instructing the men to keep away from the docks, and from the first day the strikers followed their leaders' instructions and avoided all contact with the strikebreakers.³⁶ There were a few scattered acts of violence against strikebreakers by young hoodlums in waterfront neighborhoods,³⁷ but not a single incident involved a striker. Business interests, master stevedores, the general public, and even representatives of the strikebreaking firms congratulated the strikers for their exemplary and quite exceptional, conduct.³⁸ Strikebreakers who became disillusioned with their experience, and who, in some instances, said they had not known of the labor dispute when they agreed to come to Boston, appealed to the Longshoremen's Trade Council for transportation money to leave Boston and return home, but their requests were refused.³⁹ Instead of discouraging strikebreakers, these actions by the longshoremen's organization may have provided a positive encouragement to strikebreakers to continue their employment in Boston.

The only actions longshoremen took to interfere with the use of strikebreakers were appeals to public authorities. They asked the Board of Health to look into the living conditions provided for the strikebreakers on the Cunard docks where they were being fed and housed.⁴⁰ They asked the authorities responsible for harbor safety to investigate the use of tugs to transport the strikebreakers to the docks where they worked.⁴¹ They complained to federal authorities that foreign seamen were used to handle cargo in violation of federal laws.⁴² They asked the Police Commissioner to investigate violations of the Sunday

³⁶ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1, 5; eve. ed., Jan. 24, 1912, p. 9.

³⁸ This evidently contrasted markedly with the most recent previous use of strikebreakers in Boston during a teamsters strike in 1907. A great deal of violence is reported to have occurred at that time, *ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1-3; eve. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1, 5; eve. ed., Jan. 9, 1912, p. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 9, 1912, p. 1. This was reported as the first time such action was taken by a labor union during a strike.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 31, 1912, p. 2

⁴² *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 16, 1912, pp. 1.2.

laws by strikebreakers who worked on Sundays when no emergency existed.⁴³ None of these efforts met with any success.⁴⁴

The longshoremen were determined to win the strike on their own without imposing hardship upon workers in different lines of work. They turned down a Teamsters' offer to refuse to handle freight being loaded or unloaded by strikebreakers, telling the Teamsters that they could win the strike without their support and did not want them to subject themselves and their families to unnecessary hardship.⁴⁵ They refused financial support offered by other local unions, saying their own funds were adequate.⁴⁶ When crew men on the steamer Michigan, who were members of an English union, refused to obey their captain's orders to unload the ship, the longshoremen's representatives thanked them, but persuaded them to return to work, since refusal to obey the orders of the captain was a violation of English law.⁴⁷

The only workers that the longshoremen planned to call on for help were their brother Knights of Labor in the other transportation assemblies of District Assembly 30. The leaders of the District Assembly had offered to call these other assemblies out whenever the longshoremen wanted their help,⁴⁸ but when the help was requested a few days after the strike began; two key leaders of the District Assembly reneged on their promise. The participation of the membership of these other assemblies would have expanded the strike to 6000 men, and the longshoremen were bitterly disappointed by the failure of these assemblies to follow through on their promise.

The several transportation assemblies of the Knights of Labor had met on January 10, with the approval of the executive board of the District Assembly, and voted to join the strike. Their formal participation depended only on an official order of the executive board,⁴⁹ but despite general support for the strike within the board, District Master Workman Alexander Ryan refused to issue the strike call, and adjourned the meeting.⁵⁰ Ryan was a member of the 1600 member Boston and Maine Freight Handlers' Assembly 5572 which represented nearly half of the additional 3500 workers being asked to join the striking longshoremen. At the request of business leaders both Ryan and Master Workman Michael White of Assembly 5572 asked the executive board to delay the strike order in the hope that the dispute still might be settled by

⁴³ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan 23, 1912, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 13, 1912, p. 2; eve. ed., Jan. 17, 1912, p. 6; eve. ed., Jan. 27, 1912, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, p. 5; morn. ed., Jan. 9, 1912, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, p. 5

⁴⁷ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 6, 1912, p. 2

⁴⁸ Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, pp. 1,3. Michael J. O'Meara, a representative of the Longshoremen's Trade Council, had told the mayor on the first day of the strike "...Mr. Mayor,... this thing has only just started, when the district assembly gets hold of it there won't be a longshoreman or a freight handler of any description handling goods from the steamships or the railroads." Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 5, 1912, p. 4.

⁴⁹ New York Times, Jan. 10, 1912, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Boston Globe, morn. ed., Jan. 12, 1911, pp. 1-2.

arbitration.⁵¹ They were afraid that by joining the strike the freight handlers might lose their jobs permanently,⁵² and they argued that the freight handlers could support the strike better by remaining at work and being a source of funds for the striking longshoremen.⁵³ After Ryan adjourned the meeting the second in command, John Stephens, stepped in and the executive board then voted to call the men out,⁵⁴ but the members of Assembly 5572, following Ryan, disregarded the order of the executive board, rescinded their strike vote, and voted to return to work.⁵⁵ The Trans-Atlantic Steamship Clerks' Assembly No. 1648 with 65 members, and the Grand Junction Freight Handlers' Assembly with 120 members did join the strike,⁵⁶ but the action of the Boston and Maine freight handlers in refusing to join the strike ended the longshoremen's hope that the strike would be extended to the large freight handlers' assemblies.

Michael J. O'Meara, the Secretary-Treasurer of the District Assembly, and a member of Noddle Island Assembly, which was one of the striking longshoremen's assemblies, and John Reynolds also from the Noddle Island Assembly, along with the other leaders of the Longshoremen's Trade Council, were extremely critical of Ryan and White for "appointing themselves... to run around and beg everyone to try and have the... strike settled, thus weakening the longshoremen's case by giving the impression that they were seeking an adjustment at any hazard."⁵⁷ The longshoremen refused the Boston and Maine freight handlers' offer of financial support as a substitute for joining the strike, saying they would never have asked the freight handlers to join the strike if Ryan had not, on his own, offered to take them out within 24 hours when requested.⁵⁸ Within the District Assembly, there was strong opposition to Ryan, and on January 21, he was voted out of office and

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 11, 1912, pp. 1-2.

⁵² Some freight handlers had gone out in support of the longshoremen without waiting for official orders, and the Boston & Maine Railroad announced that it had many substitute freight handlers who could, and would, be brought in to take the place of the strikers. The freight handlers were reported to be generally satisfied with their wages and working conditions. The threat of job loss was enough, evidently, to bring them back to work. *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p. 1; eve. ed., Jan. 13, 1912, pp. 1-2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 15, 1912, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 13, 1912, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁶ Assembly 1648 joined the strike on January 9, before Alexander Ryan had taken action to delay the participation of the other transportation assemblies of District Assembly No. 30 in the strike. *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 10, 1912, pp. 1-2; morn. ed., Jan. 17, 1912, p. 16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 15, 1912, p. 2

⁵⁸ In declining the offer of financial assistance from Assembly 5572, Master Workman Michael Keavey of O'Connell Assembly told them "Go back to work, you are absolutely of no assistance to the longshoremen in this fight." *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 15, 1912, pp. 1,15

Assembly 5572 was suspended.⁵⁹ Despite this action, the large freight handlers' assemblies never joined the strike.⁶⁰

The Strike's Outcome

There is no indication that the longshoremen wavered in their determination to pursue the strike to a successful conclusion. Not a single man deserted ranks. Strike funds were reported as adequate for several additional weeks,⁶¹ and some longshoremen had found temporary work elsewhere.⁶² The longshoremen did not take advantage of an opportunity to settle individually with some smaller steamship agents who were willing to accept the Longshoremen's Trade Council's compromise offer of an increase of five cents in both the day and night rates.⁶³ Instead the longshoremen held out for a settlement with the entire employers' conference and claimed they were prepared to continue the strike for several weeks if necessary.

In the light of these considerations the settlement on February 13 was surprising. The actual contract was not made public but some of its terms were reported in the press. The men agreed to return to work at the old wage rates and conditions with simply a statement that the employers would adjust wages in the future.⁶⁴ The employers also agreed to make it official that only union men would be hired in the future.⁶⁵ They also agreed to the establishment of a union grievance committee on each wharf.⁶⁶ Neither of these employer concessions had been mentioned as union demands during the course of the strike, and it is likely that they had little, if anything, to do with the strike's occurrence. Despite this, it was reported on February 13, that the union's insistence on an official agreement that only union men would be employed in the future, and the employers' desire that this be simply verbally understood, had been a major obstacle to reaching agreement.⁶⁷ It was reported also that the men had long wanted wharf level grievance committees, but the agents

⁵⁹ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 22, 1912, p. 11.

⁶⁰ This is in sharp contrast with what might have been expected on the basis of a statement in the press on January 6. "No secret is made of the fact that the introduction of strikebreakers would lead to a general strike in all branches of Boston's commercial and transportation sectors." Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 6, 1912, pp. 1-2.

⁶¹ O'Connell Assembly, for example, had voted five more weeks of strike benefits the previous Sunday. Ibid., morn. ed., Feb. 13, 1912, p. 3

⁶² Ibid., Jan. 21, 1912, p. 6

⁶³ Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 17, 1912, p. 6; morn. ed., Jan. 20, 1912; morn. ed., Jan. 31, 1912, p. 2. The Longshoremen's Trade Council reported to its membership as early as January 15, that the employers' conference had internal differences, and were tired of the fight, the expense, and the little work done. Ibid., eve. ed., Jan. 15, 1912, pp. 1, 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid., morn. ed., Feb. 13, 1912, pp. 1,3. The press had reported earlier that the steamship agents had agreed to raise the night rate to 45 cents, but not the day rate. The longshoremen had rejected this offer, and the final settlement did not even include the increase in the night rate. Ibid., morn. ed., Jan. 11, 1912, p. 1-2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., morn. ed., Feb 13, 1912, pp. 1,3.

⁶⁶ Christian Science Monitor, Feb. 13, 1912, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Boston Globe, morn. ed., Feb. 13, 1912, pp. 1,3.

previously had not been willing to recognize them.⁶⁸ It seems likely that the presentation of these two issues as important strike issues was an exercise in face saving by the longshoremen. It is obvious that the workers' demand for a wage increase, and the employers' refusal to accede to it caused the strike and kept it going, and the failure to obtain a wage increase means that the longshoremen lost the strike.

Reasons for the Strike's Failure

Why was the strike unsuccessful? There are at least three important factors. In the first place, it is likely that things were not going as well for the longshoremen as the newspaper accounts suggested, and that as a consequence they were under substantial pressure to get back to work. The optimistic reports about the abundant resources and staying power of the longshoremen and the difficulties of the shipping agents may have been principally the result of efforts by the strike leaders to keep the men together in a difficult situation. A careful reading of the press indicates that it may have inadvertently played the role of public relations agent for the longshoremen by reporting uncritically the statements of their spokesmen about the men's determination and the employers' difficulties. There were press accounts that hinted that the men were in more difficult circumstances than the leadership was willing to admit. After the strike had been underway for several weeks, the press carried stories of benefits being planned in the various waterfront communities to assist the longshoremen, suggesting that those who knew the longshoremen's situation best knew they needed help. At about the same time in the strike, an elected official from the Charlestown section of the city reported that families of longshoremen in his district were starving.⁶⁹ The Longshoremen's Trade Council vigorously denied the accuracy of his statement,⁷⁰ but it may have been closer to the truth than it was willing to admit. It is hard to reconcile a view that things were going as well as the Trade Council indicated with a settlement in which the men abandoned the very objective they went on strike to achieve.

In the second place, the failure of the membership of the freight handlers' assemblies to join the strike; the persistence of the employers' use of strikebreakers; and the lack of significant cooperation with longshoremen in other ports must have led the longshoremen to see how difficult it was to win a strike when their parent organization was insufficiently militant and confined helplessly to a single port.⁷¹ Faced

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb. 14, 1912, p. 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Feb. 7, 1912, p. 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Feb. 12, 1912, p. 9.

⁷¹ Some cooperation with longshoremen in other ports developed during the course of the strike, but the International Longshoremen's Association, and not the Knights of Labor, was the agency of this cooperation. The longshoremen received a report on January 10, that no union man in Portland or New York would handle cargoes diverted from Boston. *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Jan. 11, 1912, pp. 1-2. Support was also offered by British crews of British ships who told longshoremen that ships loaded by strikebreakers in Boston would be subject to long delays when the ships arrived in Britain. *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p.1.

It is worth noting that lack of coastwide organization and the ability of employers to reroute ships were not effective obstacles to the successful use of unannounced

with lack of support from the freight handlers, the employment of strikebreakers, and the diversion of ships and cargo to other ports, the longshoremen must have concluded that the likelihood of success from a continuation of the strike was quite low, and that they would be better off cutting their losses, and getting on with the building of an organization that might be more successful in helping them to deal with the employers in the future.

Finally, the lack of militantly aggressive action by the Boston longshoremen in avoiding direct confrontation with the strikebreakers, and in backing off from widening the strike by turning down the assistance of other unions, coupled with the failure of their brother Knights to join the strike when requested are all behaviors consistent with the usual characterization of the philosophy of the Knights of Labor. Under the leadership of Terrence Powderly the Knights had opposed militant trade union activity and tried to avoid strikes and follow a cooperative and conciliatory position toward employers.⁷² This philosophy continued to characterize the Knights in its declining years. On the day the Boston strike began, John W. Hayes, Grand Master Workman of the Knights, sent a circular letter to the officers and members of the Knights throughout the United States, containing the following words:

It is well understood that the offices of a properly and well conducted union find the door of the employer's office open for the adjustment and consideration of grievances. It is owing largely to the tyranny, the boycott, the blacklist indulged in by the so-called labor leader... that is largely if not wholly responsible for the office door being closed to the so-called labor leader...

Do not permit your assemblies to harbor any of the elements who believe in physical force as a means of adjusting labor troubles...⁷³

This suggests that the philosophy of the Knights concerning industrial conflict contributed to the failure of the strike.⁷⁴ A rejection of this philosophy as a realistic guide for improving longshoremen's wages and

"quickie" pier level work stoppages directed against particular ships at particular times to achieve particular objectives limited to those ships and occasions. The effectiveness of this kind of limited direct action may account for its widespread use (see employer's comment, *supra*, p. 4), particularly in a context where portwide strikes seemed to have the cards stacked against them from the longshoremen's point of view.

⁷² See George E. McNeill, ed., *The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-day*, A.M.Bridgman and Co., Boston, 1887, pp. 483-496, and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America*, Thos. Y. Crowell Co., New York, 1949, p. 126.

⁷³ *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1912.

⁷⁴ There is a hint of this philosophy in the reason given to the strikers for avoiding the docks during the strike. Longshoremen's strike leaders were concerned that any efforts to produce trouble for the strikebreakers would probably alienate public support for the strikers. *Boston Globe*, morn. ed., Jan. 8, 1912, p. 3.

working conditions helps to explain the subsequent abandonment of the Knights by Boston longshoremen.

The Arrival of the International Longshoremen's Association

The International Longshoremen's Association was established among longshoremen in the Port of New York in 1907, and negotiated its first collective agreement in New York in 1909.⁷⁵ In 1916, it became the sole bargaining agent for New York waterfront workers.⁷⁶ A week after the Boston strike began, Walter Holt, an International Vice-President of the International Longshoremen's Association from New York, came to Boston and met with the strike leaders. He urged Boston longshoremen to join New York longshoremen in forming a coast-wide federation of longshoremen and other workers engaged in maritime commerce. He offered the cooperation of the International Longshoremen's Association in the ongoing strike, and promised that the Association's members in New York would not handle any boats worked by strikebreakers in Boston and sent to New York. He also suggested that the New York union might join the strike in sympathy with the Boston men.⁷⁷ There is no evidence that it did so, but it is clear that the strike provided the occasion for stimulating the interest of Boston longshoremen in the proposed federation. It was planned that upon the formation of the federation all waterfront workers in ports from Portland, Maine to Galveston, Texas would act together on their wage demands, and that, if necessary, the whole coast would be struck to enforce the demand for an individual port. The longshoremen's representatives on the Boston Longshoremen's Trade Council discussed plans for joining this proposed federation at a meeting on January 15, less than two weeks after the strike began.⁷⁸

Two months after the strike, in April, 1912, the membership of both O'Connell Assembly of the Knights of Labor, and the Boston Longshoremen's Provident Union voted to become members of two local unions of the International Longshoremen's Association, and a third longshoremen's local of the International Longshoremen's Association, which eventually supplanted the Noddle Island Assembly of the Knights of Labor, was soon established.⁷⁹ The Boston longshoremen, by joining

⁷⁵ Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 122 and 127.

⁷⁶ Charles P. Larrowe, *Shape-up and Hiring Hall*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955, p. 9.

⁷⁷ *Boston Globe*, eve. ed., Jan. 12, 1912, p.1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Jan. 15, 1912.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Apr. 15, 1912, p. 2. O'Connell Assembly, which represented longshoremen who worked on the docks in the Charlestown section of Boston, was succeeded by Local 799 of the International Longshoremen's Association. The Boston Longshoremen's Provident Union, which represented longshoremen who worked on the South Boston docks, was succeeded by Local 800. Local 805 eventually supplanted Noddle Island Assembly which represented longshoremen in East Boston which once was known as Noddle Island. Noddle Island Assembly continued in existence longer than the other Knights of Labor longshoremen's assemblies. It is listed along with Locals 799, 800, and 805 in Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Bureau of Statistics, *Forty Fifth Annual Report of the Statistics of Labor for the Year 1914*, Public Document No. 15, Part II, p. 22. Eureka Assembly

the International Longshoremen's Association, linked themselves with organized longshoremen in other ports, and with an organization that believed that their interests would be served best by coast-wide collective action.

Epilogue: The First International Longshoremen's Association Contract

The wage increase sought in 1912 was finally obtained in February, 1913. As a result of an agreement made at the settlement of the 1912 strike,⁸⁰ the Steamship Agents' and Stevedores' Conference had entered into new negotiations with the Longshoremen's Trade Council, now affiliated with the International Longshoremen's Association, and the Noddle Island Assembly of the Knights of Labor. In the course of negotiations they narrowed their differences down to two cents on the hourly rate for day work on general cargo. The longshoremen were satisfied with the employers' willingness to raise the night rate by five cents, but were unhappy with their offer of three cents on the day rate, and insisted on five cents.⁸¹ The employers unwillingness to improve their offer nearly led to a strike of 3300 longshoremen, dock freight handlers and steamship clerks affiliated with the International Longshoremen's Association,⁸² but, at the request of the International Longshoremen's Association International President, T. V. O'Connor, the men voted to delay the strike and give him three days to find an acceptable basis for settlement.⁸³ O'Connor was successful, and the strike was averted. On February 21, the longshoremen signed an agreement covering the period until December 31, with a provision that the agreement would be extended automatically to 1914 if neither party gave notice of a desire to re-open, by December 1. The demand for a closed shop for International Longshoremen's Association members was the consequence of the International Longshoremen's Association's objection to the role of the Knights of Labor in the negotiations of the previous two months, since the Knights no longer represented more than a handful of working longshoremen.⁸⁴ The new wage scale increased the day rate to 33 cents, the night rate to 50 cents, and the Sunday and holiday rate to 60 cents. A long standing Boston rule, which specified that Sunday and holiday pay covered the 36 hours from 6 p.m. the evening before to 6 a.m. the morning after, was retained. The existing

was the smallest of the Knights of Labor longshoremen's assemblies. Its membership was concentrated in the central part of Boston and evidently was absorbed by the three International Longshoremen's Association locals of deep water longshoremen.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Feb. 21, 1913, p. 9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, eve. ed., Feb. 7, 1913, p. 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, morn. ed., Feb. 15, 1913, p. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Feb. 16, 1913, p. 8.

⁸⁴ In 1911 the Knights of Labor had 27 locals and the International Longshoremen's Association was not listed in the directory of labor organizations in Massachusetts. See Forty-Second Annual Report of the Statistics of Labor for the Year 1911, Public Document No. 15, p. 102. In 1912 the International Longshoremen's Association had six chartered locals in Massachusetts, and the number of Knights of Labor locals had dropped to 16. See Forty-Fourth Annual Report of the Statistics of Labor for the Year 1913, Public document No. 15, p. 40.

rate differentials for handling bulk cargo, niter, sugar, molasses, fruit, and grain were unchanged. The contract was superior to the New York contract, which the Boston men had been offered, but had rejected. This contract would have eliminated some of the special rates on particular cargoes which Boston men had long enjoyed, and it would have confined Sunday and holiday time to a 24 hour period.⁸⁵ With the ratification of the 1913 contract by the membership⁸⁶ the issues that had caused the strike of the previous year were finally resolved.

⁸⁵ Boston Globe, eve. ed., Feb. 21, 1913. p. 9.

⁸⁶ Ibid., morn. ed., Feb. 24, p. 3.