

End Tier Segregation in the ILWU!

The ILWU leadership likes to boast that the union's wages and benefits are among the highest a worker in this country can get. They are. Getting them is the problem. Many years must be spent as a casual, scrambling to get any work at all, at lower wages and with no health benefits. And then more years as a B-man, mainly working lower-paid, backbreaking tractor jobs. Casuals and B's are not even allowed to be union members. Those who survive get their A-book; but even as A-men, longshore workers pay a heavy price. Many destroy their bodies working skilled heavy equipment or double and triple shifts to make up for the years they were on the bottom rungs. To regularly work the most highly paid crane and mechanic jobs takes another negative trade-off: being directly hired by the terminal owners as a steady man. This takes jobs away from the union hiring hall and leaves the steadies dependent on the good will of the bosses.

These divisions in the workforce pit different tiers against each other in a struggle to survive, eating away at the very fabric of the union and its capacity to fight for the interests of the workforce as a whole. Safety, in what is a deadly dangerous industry, goes by the boards as everyone works harder and faster to get—or stay—ahead. The ILWU leadership, which works with the PMA to enforce the tier system, says that the lower tiers are a necessary “apprenticeship.” But what kind of apprenticeship program provides little work and minimal company-paid training? Even many A-men don't have access to the highest-paid mechanic jobs, which mainly go to those who got their training outside the industry.

Why should A-men literally work themselves to death, with many not even living long enough to collect their pensions, while the casuals struggle to get one or two shifts a month? Many casuals are the children or other relatives of A-men. Everyone wants their kids to get ahead, not to have to work multiple jobs to try to survive. ILWU Local 10 now has 1,000 casuals, almost as many as the number of A-men. Either the union fights to

end the tier system by bringing up the casuals, B's and A's alike or the PMA will try to use the casuals, desperately for work, as a battering ram against the union.

The Local 10 leadership in the Bay Area claims that B status is necessary to “educate” these workers in the principles of the union. But what kind of union denies co-workers membership rights for years? The fight to abolish the tiers would be a powerful teacher of *genuine* union principles.

The ILWU leadership argues that the tier divisions are the only way to ensure that there's enough work for the A's. But that's only if you accept the PMA's “right” to call the shots on the hours of work and the number of jobs that are available. There is another way. A union fight to spread the work among all those who want it at no loss in pay would ensure all longshore workers would be better off. Today's casuals would get jobs at full union wages and benefits. Those who are now A's and B's would be saved wear and tear on their bodies and have more time for themselves and their families.

The PMA bosses, and *they alone*, should have to shoulder the cost of eliminating tier divisions. They rake in billions of dollars just from denying casuals health care benefits. For the union to get its hands on that money will take a head-on confrontation with the shipping bosses, disrupting the supply chain crucial to the U.S. economy. But that's not going to happen under a union leadership whose whole strategy is based on tying the fate of the workers to the fortunes of America's rulers. When its contract was up last year, the ILWU was in a strong position to fight for workers' needs and open a broader labor counteroffensive against the bosses. Instead, the ILWU leadership pledged in advance not to strike and then surrendered to the PMA's contract bribe, lending a hand to the ailing Biden administration at the expense of the workers. Today, as the Democrats increasingly fan fears of the openly racist Trump returning to the White House, the union tops' commitment is firmer than ever to heading off any struggle that

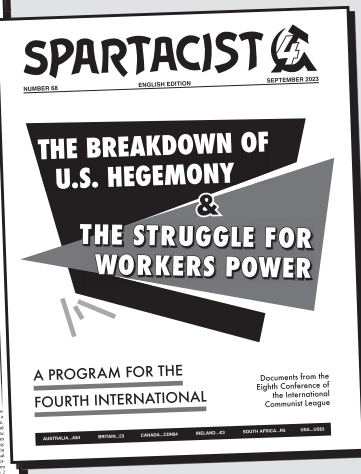
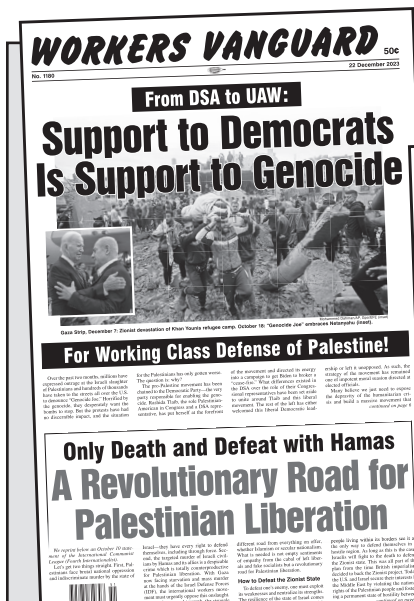
might cause trouble for Biden and the capitalist rulers as a whole.

Dividing the workers and pitting them against each other is how both the Democratic and Republican wings of the ruling class maintain their profits and power. Their most prized "divide and rule" weapon is the segregation of black people at the bottom of society. This treatment of black people as second-class citizens is mirrored in the tier divisions in the ILWU. At most West Coast ports, there are more black workers on the bottom rungs than at the top. Some ILWU locals make B's and casuals enter through the back door of the union hall. At union local meetings, B's and casuals who attend have to sit in segregated areas and are denied a vote. Even in Local 10, whose membership is majority black, the higher up the skill level you go the whiter it gets, while manning scales and working conditions are worse than at other West Coast ports. The tier divisions themselves stand in the way of the union mobilizing in collective action to break down racial disparities and establish equal—and better—conditions up and down the coast.

The ILWU leadership's line that bringing up the lower tiers will cost the A-men echoes the bosses who instill white workers with the fear that good jobs, wages and benefits for black people will only come at the expense of white workers. This club is used to pound

down conditions for all workers, while keeping black people segregated at the bottom. Just as white workers will advance their interests only if they take up the fight for black equality, black workers will make steps toward their freedom only if they unite with white workers against this country's rulers. ILWU members need to understand that either they fight together to abolish tier segregation or the PMA will continue to use these divisions to cut through the union. The bosses have imposed tier divisions in one industry after another. By putting black liberation at the center of the fight against tiers the ILWU and other unions can draw in the black community and broader layers of the multiracial working class, creating a powerful force to make real inroads against segregation and improve the situation for all workers.

In opposition to the union bureaucracy's losing strategy, longshore workers who want a fighting ILWU need to begin now to convince and mobilize others to abolish the tier system. This is crucial to build working-class unity and prepare the union for the battles ahead—whether in its own defense or the defense of black people or the besieged Palestinians facing U.S.-sponsored genocide. To move forward, the fight against tiers needs to be organized as a challenge to the "right" of the bosses to run the ports and society at large. *End tier segregation in the ILWU!*



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