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978-0-521-62968-3 - The Union Makes Us Strong: Radical Unionism on  
the San Francisco Waterfront  
David Wellman  
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## The union makes us strong

American labor history is typically interpreted by scholars as a history of defeat, accommodation, or incorporation. The radical unionism practiced by Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) locals in the middle-to-late 1930s is viewed as a momentary blip on the American labor movement's otherwise straight-line trajectory from craft to business unionism. Hidden by this conventional wisdom are a handful of American unions that did not follow the putative CIO trajectory. Long after more CIO unions started practicing business unionism, some unions organized themselves to challenge systematically and continuously management's rule on the shopfloor.

Based on three years of ethnographic research, this book takes a close look at one of the CIO unions that did not move from craft to business unionism: the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union's (ILWU) major longshore local (Local 10, San Francisco). American unionism looks quite different than conventional scholarly wisdom suggests when actual union practices are observed. One finds that in the ILWU, resistance to management's authority is collectively legitimated behavior, and explicitly acknowledged as good trade unionism. This case study suggests that American labor's trajectory is neither inevitable nor determined; that militant, democratic forms of unionism are possible in the United States; and that collective bargaining need not eliminate contests for control over the workplace. Under certain conditions, the contract is a bargain that reflects and reproduces fundamental disagreement; it is a document that states how production and conflict will proceed.

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# The union makes us strong

Radical unionism on the San Francisco waterfront

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**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521450058](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521450058)

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First published 1995  
 First paperback edition 1997

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Wellman, David

The union makes us strong : radical unionism on the San Francisco  
 waterfront / David Wellman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-45005-5

1. International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. Local  
 10 (San Francisco, Calif.). 2. Trade-unions – Stevedores – California –  
 San Francisco. 3. Industrial relations – California – San Francisco.  
 4. Social conflict – California – San Francisco. I. Title.

HD8039.L82U74 1995

331.88'11387164'0979461 – dc20

94-10286

CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-45005-8 hardback  
 ISBN 978-0-521-62968-3 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2007

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For my father,  
Saul Wellman:  
mentor, comrade, and friend

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Solidarity forever!  
Solidarity forever!  
Solidarity forever!  
For the union makes us strong.  
Ralph Chaplin, 1915

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## PREFACE

**T**HIS is not another sad tale about the demise of radical labor in America. It is not the story of how America's premiere militant union was defeated by bureaucrats, corporate liberals, collective bargainers, or postindustrial technology. Quite the contrary. It tells a story of workers who currently and regularly fight with their employers over control of the workplace even though their union contract has officially settled the issue.

This is also not the story of an exceptional or "deviant" union, which, because of charismatic leadership and communist influence, was able to do what no other American union has done. The people in this book do not think of themselves as radical or politically "conscious." Left-wing organizers are not the leading players in this story. The major characters are typical American workers.

Finally, this book is not about extraordinary moments in history, those unanticipated explosions that reveal transcripts of resistance that would otherwise remain hidden. Rather, the story is located in routine settings, accepted union practices, and class conflict in institutional settings.

The story this book tells obviously does not follow what has become a traditional labor history narrative. Instead of beginning with might have been and asking why it did not, this book starts with what was and asks, what actually happened? Rather than looking for the operating rules of class relations in the contract, it locates them in the tensions generated between informally negotiated work practices and formally agreed-upon contractual provisions. Instead of assuming that contractual agreements eliminate class conflict, the contract is understood as a document that governs how production *and* conflict will proceed. And rather than asking how unions that practice militant, class-struggle unionism differ from the rest of American labor, it explores the features they have in common.



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When one focuses on actual activities and routine practices instead of formal agreements and ideological principles, a new narrative emerges for class relations. This is an account in which the war between classes figures prominently and history does not end when contracts are signed.

When I began this project, I did not expect to find class-struggle unionism practiced anywhere in the house of labor. Like many of my contemporaries, I believed organized labor had been tamed. I thought labor history was, as Eric Hobsbawm had written, “by tradition a highly political subject” (1974:371), and the politics of this subject were straightforward. I expected to show how trade unionism diminished class consciousness and promoted capitalist rule. At the time, I thought the subject was strictly political. I do not recall being conscious of the personal dimension. In retrospect, however, the personal side of the subject is unavoidable. Both of my parents were CIO organizers in the 1930s and Communist Party functionaries throughout the 1940s and 50s. With hindsight, I now realize I was unintentionally challenging their politics.

Three years of field research with the San Francisco longshoremen’s union, however, shattered my stereotypes of American labor. The experience forced me to substantially revise what I thought of unions.

The three years I spent with San Francisco longshoremen did much more than make me rethink my initial perspective. The experience has also given me a new appreciation for my parents’ contribution to the American labor movement. It has given new meaning to the dialectic between the personal and the political. As an adult, I have always been critical of my parents’ politics, especially when they supported authoritarian socialism in the former Soviet Union. That critical posture, however, did not distinguish between my parents’ support for the Soviet Union and their contribution to American political culture. As I complete this project, I am discovering that the distinction is a necessary one. The unions they helped to organize look nothing like the Soviet Union they supported.

I believe there is a larger lesson in this realization. It is easy to discount and diminish the legacy of the old left in America. The good fights they fought can be discredited by their support of the Soviet Union and its subsequent failures. However, when one looks carefully at the surviving unions they helped build, the old left is not so easily dismissed. Although they failed to achieve their socialist goals, the militant democratic unions

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they helped establish, unions that would enable working-class Americans to participate in the decision making affecting their everyday lives, are a lasting achievement and profound contribution to American political culture. That may or may not be ironic. But it is an important and enduring legacy. That is why I have dedicated this book to one of America's most cantankerous and persistent old leftists: my father, Saul Wellman.

One of the important lessons I've learned from San Francisco's longshoremen is that work is a social accomplishment. However, whereas the longshore industry recognizes the social character of work, the academy does not. Individualism is the organizing principle of academic work; scholarship is constructed as a singular effort. In contrast, the organizing principle of longshore work is cooperation and the basic unit of organization is either a partnership or gang. Although this book was not created by gang labor or a partnership, it was produced by a series of collaborations. It never would have seen the light of day without the active involvement of a great many people who are not listed on the title page. My "gang" may not be the cohesive, face-to-face unit one finds on the waterfront. And it is not officially recognized. But it's real nonetheless and everybody in it made a unique and necessary contribution to the final product.

This book has been a long time coming and many people have participated in producing it. I therefore have a pretty big gang. I dare not count the number of iterations the book has been through, but there are three people who know the exact number because they have patiently and carefully gone through each iteration, page by page, line by line. Their participation in this project was absolutely essential to its successful completion. They helped me sharpen formulations and discovered promise where I found aggravation. Their faith in my abilities encouraged me to keep on when I wanted to quit. Jan Dizard, Howard Kimeldorf, and Jeff Lustig have redefined the outer limits of friendship. My indebtedness to them is hard to capture in words.

Numerous people have read various versions and pieces of the manuscript. Danny Beagle has been an all-purpose friend and colleague, patiently reading drafts, making suggestions, hearing me out, and giving emotional support. Jeremy Brecher took time from a hectic schedule to read an early iteration thoroughly and thoughtfully. His critical comments

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considerably enhanced subsequent drafts. David Brundage was always there when I needed him, offering intelligent, corrective, and supportive insights. Selflessly sharing his extensive knowledge of labor history, he treated me as a colleague when I felt like an intellectual intruder. Michael K. Brown and Elliott Currie gave new meaning to friendship and collegiality. Michael didn't tell me what I wanted to hear about the manuscript, but he told me what I needed to know. And he made fine suggestions for how to do it. Elliott picked me up when my confidence was at an all-time low; his enthusiasm for the book became infectious. Aaron Cicourel has been a loyal critic and a model who is impossible to emulate. I am deeply grateful for the hours he devoted to discussing research strategies during the earliest stages of this project. Troy Duster read early drafts. His comments set the standard for intelligent reflection and careful attention to details. His sense of perspective and theoretical sophistication were valuable resources for subsequent iterations. His friendship has been an important source of strength, insight, and affection. Gene Dennis-Vrana – longshoreman, writer, and ILWU Librarian – gave the next-to-the-last draft a careful and serious reading. The book is a wiser and more balanced account because of his efforts. I am grateful for his warmth and support throughout this entire project. Herman Gray has been a wonderful source of intellectual stimulation and theoretical enrichment. Our conversations about theory and methods provoked the methodological appendix. Early on, Jean Lave saw conceptual potential in what I thought was confusion. She taught me to appreciate the mental work of manual labor. Ron Lembo's friendship and intelligent reading of the manuscript were crucial to its completion. The insight, intensity, and theoretical elegance he devoted to the effort added a new dimension to the book. Eliot Liebow supported this project in two ways. He was director of the NIMH Metro Center, which funded the effort; and he offered excellent advice throughout the research process. Anselm Strauss's critical and encouraging reading of an early version of the manuscript was a lesson in craftsmanship and collegiality. Rachael Winfree joined Cambridge University Press in the final stages of this project. She devoted considerable attention to a thorough reading of the penultimate draft. The perspective and careful editing she provided gave the manuscript the energy and

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coherence it needed to finally become a book. Helen Wheeler copyedited the typescript with appreciation, craft, and precision. She improved the text considerably. Because I did not always follow the advice these people so generously provided, none of them should be held responsible for any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations the reader might find.

I actually do have a gang. It works at the University of California's Institute for the Study of Social Change. As director, Troy Duster is the natural and official leader of the gang. Janice Tanigawa, the administrative assistant, is also responsible for the wonderful atmosphere that encourages and facilitates intellectual work. I've shared pieces of this book with everybody in the gang. I couldn't have worked so long and hard at it without their receptivity, advice, and encouragement. I am grateful to the gang at ISSC: Dianne Beeson, Hardy Frye, David Matza, David Minkus, Howard Pinderhughes, Cynthia Sharp, Wendell Thomas, Alan Watahara, Deborah Woo, and Bob Yamashita.

This book originally began as a collaborative project with David Matza. Together we wrote a NIMH grant proposal, the success of which eventually funded the effort. Our plan was to do field research in two different sectors of working-class life and then jointly analyze and write up the materials we had collected. We devoted considerable energy to the joint effort, producing a published article, a draft of an extensive outline, and detailed elements of an emerging analysis. Ultimately, however, the collaboration was unsuccessful and we decided to write independently of one another. Nevertheless, David Matza has made a profound contribution to this study. His intellectual footprints can be found throughout it. They extend beyond the instances in which I formally cite the materials derived from our collaborative effort. The book has been enhanced by our collaboration.

Without Herb Mills's sponsorship, friendship, and mentorship throughout every stage of this project, there would be no book today. Herb introduced me to the longshore community and helped make sense of the visit as well.

I've been honored to share the evolution of this project with a number of dear friends and colleagues who patiently listened as I struggled to formulate it and generously offered helpful insights and encouraging

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words. I am especially grateful to Joan Acker, Rochelle Averback, Katherine Black, Joe Canale, Steven Deutsch, and David Milton.

My gratitude to the San Francisco longshoremen extends beyond their hospitality. Their contribution to this book exceeds the permission they granted an outsider to experience and write about their community. They educated me in the profoundest senses of the term. Through their example, I learned how ordinary people routinely make history and resist class domination. They taught me to appreciate community and find it in lived experience. I learned from them that there are homegrown alternatives to competitive individualism and racial hierarchy; that popular struggle has a distinguished record which, to paraphrase E. P. Thompson, need not be surrendered to the “enormous condescension of posterity.”

Although my gratitude extends to the entire longshore community, a number of people were particularly instrumental in educating me: George Benet, Andrew Dulaney, Gene Dennis-Vrana, Rudy Garcia, Nick Granich, George Kaye, George Kekai, Leonard Malliot, Herb Mills, Bill Watkins, Cleophus Williams, Tony Winstead, and Larry Wing.

I am also grateful to the employers’ association (the Pacific Maritime Association) for granting me permission to be on the docks and sit in their meetings. James Edwards and Alonzo Fields were especially supportive. Edwards was gracious with his time and his perceptive insights into the industry helped me understand it.

The emotional costs of doing a project like this one are extensive. The time and intensity devoted to it have taken their toll. I would not be able to sustain these personal costs without my very large and devoted extended kinship network: the Wellmans: Saul, Vickie, Ed, Estelle, Roni, Jeri, and Scott; Ian MacGregor, the Sheins: Sivi-Rae, Meagan, and Christopher; Meyer and Vera Baylin, Danny Beagle, Michael and Vivian Brown, Richard Clarke, Jan and Robin Dizard, Woody Donovan and Kathy Hughes-Donovan, Troy Duster, Nora Elliott, George and Willa Fields, George and Alma Hill, Ron Lembo, Jeff Lustig, Al and Juanita Rowland, Lisa Rubens, Orian and Rosemary Worden, and Deborah Woo.

I am especially grateful to Greta Fields Clarke, M.D., for being herself. Her intelligence, integrity, and support are natural cures for the hidden injuries of class. Her sense of confidence is an infectious therapy, her wisdom was sometimes communicable, and her sense of perspective was a

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useful antidote for overexposure to computer terminals and other academic occupational hazards.

David Wellman  
Richmond, California  
Labor Day, 1993

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## NOTES ON UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

**T**HIS book is based on three years of field research. That process is detailed in the methodological appendix. During this three-year period I generated and collected a substantial number of research documents. These materials are cited and quoted throughout the text. This note is intended to help the reader distinguish among the various documents.

As I indicate in the methodological appendix, I conducted approximately thirty in-depth interviews with longshoremen, union officials, and management representatives. When material is used from these interviews, it is identified by quotation marks. I do not provide the names of people interviewed, or the date of the interview, because I promised people anonymity. Sometimes quoted comments are attributed to “field notes.” That means I did not conduct a formal interview, but recorded the remarks in my field notes and, for reasons discussed in the appendix, I am satisfied that using quotation marks for talk observed in the field is appropriate.

Because I recognize the constructed nature of sociological interpretation, and because I want the reader to have access to the materials within which my interpretations are grounded, I have chosen to include relevant passages from field notes in the text. I hope this approach will facilitate a dialogic relationship between reader and writer. Given sociology’s continued preoccupation with what C. Wright Mills rightfully called “abstract empiricism,” this is my way of emphasizing that field research, and the recorded observations it produces, is as legitimate as any other research practice, and therefore should be treated with the same degree of respect – or disrespect – as are the quantified representations of human group life that so frequently appear in social science writing.

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In addition to writing field notes, I also collected leaflets, election campaign materials, documents passed across negotiation tables, and letters written by union and management officials. When these documents are quoted, they are cited as such. As I became trusted by the union and employers' association (a process that is discussed in the appendix), I was given a copy of written agendas before each Labor Relations Committee (LRC) meeting. I designated these documents "Research Documents," abbreviating them "RD," and for purposes of analysis, I numbered them. When material is used from these sources it is therefore cited as "RD # so-and-so."

The agendas contained complaints or grievances charged by one side against the other. In this industry, employer complaints are called "ECs" and union complaints "UCs." Each set of complaints is also numbered. Thus, when I quote from these written charges, countercharges, and responses, I cite them as either "UC" or "EC," using the LRC-designated numbers.

As noted in the appendix, I wrote in the margins and on the backs of these agendas or "Research Documents." They therefore became "field notes." But for some unexplainable reason, I did not categorize them as field notes. Instead, I filed them as RDs. Thus, in those instances where I quote from these field notes, I cite the RD as the source rather than identifying them as field notes.