The Birth of the Labor Party

By KATHY WILKES

The Founding Convention of the Labor Party is history. Whether the same will eventually be said of the Party itself remains to be seen. There's a lot of work to do, a lot of organizing and building, and a good deal of learning and healing. But if any of the several political organizations vying for "third party" status has a chance to make a difference, this very well could be the one.

With an aggressive pro-worker agenda, the Labor Party has the right message at the right time. The "Call for Economic Justice," adopted by the over 1,400 Convention delegates meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, June 6-9, demands living wages, universal health care, decent retirement benefits, quality public education, an end to corporate welfare, a tax system that makes the rich pay their fair share, and a host of other provisions that are bound to strike a cord among the millions of overworked, underpaid, struggling Americans who comprise the working class.

The Labor Party also has the backing of nine international and national unions; over 300 local, state and regional labor organizations; and 40 Party chapters—all of which ensure a built-in base for organizing, expansion and action.

NOTICEABLY ABSENT

What the Labor Party doesn't have is the full support of the AFL-CIO. Fed President John Sweeney, in Cleveland over the weekend to speak before the City Club, was noticeably absent from the Convention. Nobody seemed surprised.

Sweeney is reflective of the AFL-CIO's allegiance to the Democrats—despite the Demo's lackluster performance on health care and labor law reform, and President Clinton's full-throttle push for NAFTA and GATT.

It's a pragmatic choice, AFL-CIO officials insist, because, for the moment, the Democratic Party is the only game in town, the Democratic Party is history. Whether the same will eventually be said of the Party itself remains to be seen. There's a lot of work to do, a lot of organizing and building, and a good deal of learning and healing. But if any of the several political organizations vying for "third party" status has a chance to make a difference, this very well could be the one.

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It's a pragmatic choice, AFL-CIO officials insist, because, for the moment, the Democratic Party is the only game in town, the only viable means to stop rabidly anti-work-er, pro-corporate Republicans from overrunning Congress like so many roaches in a candy factory.

If backers of the Labor Party get their way that won't be the case for long. Although immediate goals don't include electing or endorsing candidates, the Labor Party will be using its numbers and organization to influence the political powers that be. Presumably, it will run its own candi-dates... and there are a lot of ifs. Too many, some delegates believe.

The Labor Party's electoral process (or, more accurately, lack thereof) sparked heated debate as delegates hammered out the Party's Constitution—and the ILWU was in the thick of it.

At issue was a controversial proposal of the ILWU's international that had put a great deal of time and effort into the process, it deserved to be heard. There was no objection. The amendment was dead on arrival.

"You gotta walk before you run," has been the conventional wisdom repeated with constancy by the likes of LPA architect Tony Mazzocchi and Bob Wages, both of the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers (OCAW); shared by the powerhouse unions that, through block-voting of their sizable majority, strictly controlled the direction and tenor of the Convention proceedings.

Consequently, before the ILWU stated its case, the Convention majority had voted to cut off debate and to approve the Committee's proposal.

An infuriated ILWU delegation protested and were ruled out of order. Calling a truce of sorts, Tony Mazzocchi met with ILWU del-egates over the intervening lunch break. He agreed to ask the Chair to allow introduc-tion and discussion of the amendment under "special rules" when the afternoon session convened.

Calling the Convention to order, the Chair announced the accommodation, not-ing that, since the ILWU was an endoring international that had put a great deal of time and effort into the process, it deserved to be heard. There was no objection. At some point the Convention adopted an amendment by a SEIU local. It called for a committee "on developing our future elec-toral strategy" that would report to the next Convention in 1998, and it allowed an elec-toral strategy to be adopted "by a national Labor Party Convention," providing other criteria were met.

But consideration of the ILWU proposal was postponed until the delegation returned.

The amendment was dead on arrival. CUT OFF AT THE PASS

Long before the Convention, leaders of the Labor Party Advocates (LPA), the organiz-ing body that gave life and form to the Party, were adamant in their opposition to immediately running or endorsing candi-dates. "You gotta walk before you run," has been the conventional wisdom repeated with constancy by the likes of LPA archi-tect Tony Mazzocchi and Bob Wages, both of the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers (OCAW); shared by the powerhouse unions that, through block-voting of their sizable majority, strictly controlled the di-rection and tenor of the Convention pro-ceedings.

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By BRIAN McWILLIAMS
ILWU International President

Congratulations! In three days you will be leaving here having accomplished an incredible feat, by developing a genuine, independent political party representing the working class that is the product of great vision and persistence by so many—Tony Mazzocchi in particular. Thank you, Tony, and thank you, Bob Wages, and all the other brothers and sisters sitting up here with me representing the Labor Party.

I am sorry to say that I will be leaving tomorrow morning. We are in the midst of negotiating the West Coast Master Longshore Agreement, and I can interrupt that only for the most important things. Being here is one of them.

We have three days to come up with a structure, a plan, and whether or not the world is watching is irrelevant. What matters is that we get our work done in a way that makes sense. That’s not as easy as it sounds.

“Justice for those whom justice ignores.”

We've got—what?—1,600 here, all willing to change the way we collectively think about the political process. So unless we want our new Labor Party to end up looking like a camel—you know, a horse built by committee—then the other component we are going to need is discipline.

Sfreciat Reizeva, the request. I give you permission. It is perfectly fine and entirely fitting for you to strip off your act and bare your own true self for these three intense days that are before us.

Now, some of you are probably sitting there thinking, “Who the hell is this guy to give me permission for anything?” Well, for starters, I’m the guy with the microphone.

I am also the guy from the union where the internal political debate isn’t about right versus left, but who’s more “left” than who. You know, “My social consciousness is bigger than yours!”

We’ve all seen that movie before, we know how it plays and ends. Most of the time it has so many subplots, we forget what it’s about.

The point is, we gotta stay on point to accomplish this. We must check our egos at the door and really listen. I will share a secret with you. The listener controls the conversation. Listen carefully to each other. If we can’t do it now, we never will.

We are primarily an organization of working people, and don’t ever forget it. But we also operate in a larger sphere: our communities, our states, the nation and the world. Workers in this country and throughout the world are facing rapid globalization of the economic system.

As a result, we see an unbelievable expansion of wealth within a small percentage of society, and a growing impoverization among the rest—the gaping contradiction of an advanced industrial democracy with great extremes of wealth and poverty.

We are facing turbo-charged capitalism with no accountability. Democracy, as it is practiced, is killing us. In many metropolitan areas the Democratic and Republican parties are second and third in number, with as many as half of the voters registering as independent. Despite that, the donkeys and elephants still control the election process and access to the money that shapes it.

The American people—the 80 percent who don’t boss anybody else around anyway—are really seeking a first party! The time is right for us to develop a relevant independent vehicle to fight for the needs and priorities of working people and their communities in this country.

Persistence has delivered us to this Convention. Persistence by Tony and lots of other trade unionists, radical activists and ordinary workers who years ago saw the need to build an independent Labor Party that was ours, and not just a pressure group or a reflection of the top brass of the AFL-CIO.

They had a vision and built a base to bring us all together and the patience to know that we are actually going to look like something for us all here to decide. We have three days to figure out how we all can walk out of here looking like a camel—you know, a horse built by committee—then the other—"Blame minorities, blame women, and you’ll feel better.”

The militia movement tells them, “Grab a gun. scare the shit out of some body, and you’ll feel better.”

The Religious Right tells them, “Feign piety, play God, and you’ll feel better.”

The Republicans tell them, “Cut welfare, bash immigrants, and you’ll feel better.”

The AFL-CIO tells them, “Get welfare, bash immigrants, and you’ll feel better.”

The Democrats tell them, “Kiss my ass, we are all you got, feel better—or not!”

And saddest of all, the AFL-CIO tells all of us we have no choice but to support the Democrats.

We will do better than that! But we’ve got to keep on track. We’ve got to stick to the issues that anyone who has to make a paycheck stretch six ways to Sunday can relate to, issues like a living wage, family health care, affordable child care, a safe place to work, freedom of association, and the right to strike! These aren’t impossible goals, and there are many more we can achieve.

So, when we get on with the business of this Convention, let’s keep our eyes on the prize: the political power necessary to achieve social and economic justice over the long run. This is not a revolution, this is an evolution in our representation of workers and their families, over the long haul.

Let’s remember who really needs a viable Labor Party and why. Let’s set achievable goals and define them in understandable terms. Let’s engage in constructive debate and really listen before we speak.

And let’s not start vast projects without the resources to accomplish what we set out to do. Let’s set ourselves up for success. No quick fixes here. Keep it short and simple. If we do that, we’ll do just fine.
Gaveled to order June 6 by Bob Clark, General Secretary-Treasurer of the United Electrical Workers (UE), the founding convention of the Labor Party lacked neither inspiring speakers nor fiery oratory. Here are some excerpts:

“There are more of us than there are them. If we organize ourselves, we can claim the political power that’s been stolen from us. We can give voice and power to the people of this country who need it and deserve it. When people say, ‘Wait, put it off, this is not the time,’ I am reminded of the slogan we use on our picket signs: ‘If not now, when? If not here, where? If not us, who?’

Bob Wages
President, OCAW
Labor Party mover and shaker

“You’re doing exactly what you ought to be doing at the right time to do it. The pretty boys in politics are not going to do it for us, they’re doing it to us! If they were doing their job, we wouldn’t be doing this job! Values is what we are fighting for—social justice, equal opportunity—door to door, hall to hall, town to town. We don’t have to create a progressive movement, it’s already out there. All we have to do is get it organized.”

Jim Hightower
Former Texas Agriculture Commissioner and rabble-rousing radio commentator (recently fired by ABC)

“When you enter the workplace you leave this country and enter an authoritarian regime. The court says the employer has freedom of speech, but the employees do not. Workers can be dismissed without cause. You can’t be fired for discriminatory reasons, but if they have no reason, it’s legal. And when they say, ‘No political talk on the shop floor,’ I can assure you they are not saying that in the boardrooms.”

Elaine Bernard
Harvard Trade Union Program

“Any society that allows so much power in corporations, whose single goal is maximization of profits, is in trouble. It’s government by the Exxons and for the Duponts. Why the few oppress the many is because the few are organized and the many are not.”

Ralph Nader
Presidential Candidate, Consumer Advocate and surprise guest

“You are organizing something real. Neither party is talking about economic justice. The Democrats and Republicans exactly are nothing more than the end products of corporate plunder.”

Jerry Brown
Former Governor of California and self-described “recovering politician”

“We face formidable barriers, but we have a program for the working class of this country. We share a collective vision, and we will work collectively to make it happen. This has been an event that should send a message to working people to prepare themselves to fight.”

Tony Mazzochi
Founder, Labor Party Advocates

“The bosses have two parties, now we have one of our own!”

Elaine Bernard, co-founder of Canada’s New Democratic Party, now with the Harvard Trade Union Program, gave no mercy in her a hard-hitting rant on our government’s version of Canada’s health care system—“dumb-ass managed competition”—and other Capitol offenses.
Continued from Page I

to the floor. Rumsore spread like wildfire through the room that the end of our struggle had been inscribed too briefly before the vote was called on the ILWU's initial amendment. Predictably, it went down in defeat.

Passage of the final version of the Labor Party Constitution took almost two full days as delegates debated rules governing the process, structure, an interim National Council, an Executive Board, voting strength, and other issues.

A visibly tired and slightly irritated Constitution Committee repeatedly explained the rationale behind their proposed amendment: delegates supporting them charged that they were being "out-picked" in pieces.

Debate raged on, with the Constitution and the Program Committees, which worked diligently to incorporate bland planks in the platform, which were then organized into a final document.

Those who feared most didn't materialize: sectarianism and identity politics, those twin hazards feared most ever, were simply swept aside.

Delegates generally stayed on point, although some second-guessing occurred as to whether a majority was "all in" at face value.

The opposition was equally impassioned and compelled. It's premature, they reasoned, to run candidates without an overarch- ing electoral strategy and, more important, without the support of the vast majority of the left.

The left's most fervent intentions, chapters alone cannot sustain the fledgling Party.

"We have this far because we have fully defied a head-on collision with the AFL-CIO and our international unions that continue to support the Democratic Party," a local union delegate said.

Others wondered how we have a Party but no candidates and saw no harm in running candidates in an area "with due diligence and without affected Party chapters.

"Saying we are a Labor Party is not enough, we must be one," said a chapter delegate. "Putting the Democratic Party to the left is as impossible as pushing Lake Erie to the right."

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vention of the Labor Party. As for the frustrat-
ed minority, they may have walked away from the Convention dis-illusionsed, but hopefully they haven't walked out. The Party needs them for the kind of perspective and dimension that only the minority can provide.

Whatever the outcome of each vote, the delegates didn't allow an amendment to an amendment. De-
bate was only brief before the vote was called on the ILWU's initial amendment. Predictably, it went down in defeat.

The majority's intentions may have been simply to keep Convention business moving. Time was running short, and the commit-
tees, after all, had done a remarkable job, so they "put them in the stead" and adjourned the Convention.

The Constitution Committee did a remarkable job, so they "put them in the stead" and adjourned the Convention.

The entire Convention was on its feet, happy majority. People had come from all over America, hundreds at their own ex-
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The Chair, with apologies, ruled the motion to recommit the amendment out. The opposition was equally impassioned and compelled. It's premature, they reasoned, to run candidates without an overarch- ing electoral strategy and, more important, without the support of the vast majority of the left.

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tent. The omnipresent majority left pretty much the way they came in: bold, confident and united—just what the Labor Party needs to succeed.

ILWU delegates, while not totally flush with victory, were even more committed to following through with grassroots organize-
ing in their locals and with other Labor Party groups. Four days of networking paid off, and they are determined to make the most of it.

As for the frustrated minority, they may have walked away from the Convention dis-illusionsed, but hopefully they haven't walked out. The Party needs them for the kind of perspective and dimension that only the minority can provide.

Whatever the sting of disappointment sub-
sides and the heat of coalition cools, perhaps they'll see what they've gained in the Labor Party, instead of what they didn't get—yet. The next Convention is just two years down the road.

Whatever happens, the working people of America now have something they didn't have before: not just a place in the American political arena, but a home, one they can custom build to last a lifetime. If they're tough enough, committed enough and work hard enough, they'll make it bigger, better and stronger, with plenty of room for all kinds of people with all kinds of views—in other words, exactly what the Labor Party should be.
THE CREDIT

To Linda Kuhn and Suzanne Deran who got it all organized . . .
To Lindsay McLaughlin who kept it all organized . . .
To Tom Condit, Jay Donnelly, Michael Kaufman, and Caroline Lund for coming through at the eleventh hour . . .
To Scarlett Davis and Brian Wiles-Heape for going the extra mile . . .
To Laura McClure for commiserating and comparing notes . . .
To the crew at DC Type, Reproman and Howard Quinn for always making it look good . . .
And finally to Gary Hues, Mike Koropenick and John Nichols who not only knew the answers but came up with all the right questions.

Thank you!
THE MARCH

The Labor Party Convention recessed early June 7 to lend its support—and numbers—to a downtown demonstration against Cleveland Mayor Michael R. White. The 1,400 delegates and dozens of observers joined city and state workers on the steps of City Hall to protest White’s attempts to repeal provisions of Ohio’s public employee collective bargaining laws.

REPUBLICAN ‘LITE’

Described as a “liberal Democrat,” White reportedly gained wide Republican support by urging the state legislature to restrict public workers’ union rights. Currently in a 16-month bargaining impasse with the city and police unions, White has branded state labor law as “obstructionist,” “a tool of unions,” and the “emasculating of meaningful management rights.”

In other words, he can’t do what he wants. And, apparently, one of the things he wants is to reassign duties so that lesser-paid “civilians” can fill some of the jobs now held by fire fighters and police.

LOBBying

The boisterous City Hall rally flowed into a nearby hotel when word spread that White was in a meeting there. He wasn’t. His attorney was. But the distinction was lost on the demonstrators who, pushing their way past security guards, occupied the lobby and demanded an on-the-spot meeting, which, of course, didn’t happen.

But it was White, who “got no satisfaction.” The very next day, he announced he had reconsidered his position and offered to meet with city workers.

Yes, Mayor White, there is a Labor Party. And your timing couldn’t have been better.

THE PLEDGE

“This is a war,” said one of the strikers involved in the long and bitter dispute with the Detroit News and the Detroit Free Press. Recounting how the employers have reaped $56 million in profits and still demand onerous working conditions, she said, “We’ve vowed to stay in it till we win, so that the guy right there doesn’t have to fight the same damn fight.”

Appealing for support, the strikers got a standing ovation from the entire Convention—and more. Delegates voted unanimously to back a massive “March on Detroit” and to rally the labor movement to participate. The march hasn’t been scheduled yet, but watch for details.

Delegates also dug into their pockets to help the Detroit strikers and workers at Trailmobile and Tosco, who are also in major labor disputes. A quick pass of the hat yielded almost $5,000. Even more was earned from the sale of t-shirts and buttons.

The ILWU took special care to help out the Liverpool dockworkers, whose battles with the British government have become a cause celebre among international maritime labor organizations. Attending on their behalf, Member of Parliament Jeremy Corbyn was pleased to receive $512 U.S. and $2.25 Canadian. The contribution, presented by ILWU delegate Richard Mead, came from the sale of commemorative buttons.
The Labor Party's "Call for Economic Justice" is a manifesto of sweeping vision and scope. In clear and unequivocal terms it advocates for the American working class, demands greater responsibility and accountability from business and government, and provides compelling arguments for doing so.

While these goals may seem impossible to achieve—at least for now—their makers are dead serious about the need to achieve them: one in 10 workers involved in union organizing is illegally fired; laid-off workers lose an average of $100,000 in lifetime earnings; wages, benefits and job opportunities have steadily eroded; and when the top-earning one percent of families increased their wealth by over $1.45 trillion, the national debt increased by $1.4 trillion.

The members of the Labor Party have declared themselves the "keepers of the American Dream of opportunity, fairness and justice." Their economic program proves it. Space doesn't permit us to reprint the "Call" in full, so we offer the following highlights, knowing that only a full reading of the document will do it justice.

A Job at a Living Wage: Amend the U.S. Constitution to guarantee everyone a job with a "living wage," i.e. about $10 an hour.

Severance Pay for Laid-Off Workers: Corporations with 100 or more employees to pay two months' severance to each laid-off worker and $25,000 to the local community per laid-off worker to offset social costs.

Rights to Organize, Bargain and Strike: Repeal Taft-Hartley. Guarantee card-check recognition, first contract arbitration at union request, and full collective bargaining rights for public employees and agricultural and other excluded workers. Contracts intact after mergers and acquisitions. No scabs, company unions, attacks on Davis-Bacon, prison labor, or government interference with rail union

End Bigotry: Full rights for all, through affirmative action and anti-discrimination programs and policies (including those on immigration and trade), international fair labor standards, comparable worth initiatives, and strong sanctions against sexual harassment.

Universal, Quality Health Care: Nonprofit, single payer, publicly administered and funded. Includes preventive, curative, rehabilitative and long-term care; full funding of public health programs and research; and choice and access to reproductive services. Patients and health care workers participate in decision-making.

Less Work, More Money: To create millions of new jobs and more free time for families and communities, a 32-hour, 4-day workweek; overtime at double-time; no forced overtime; 20 days' vacation and all federal holidays; and one year paid leave every seven years.

Protect Families: 12 weeks' paid family leave for new child or sick family member; flexible hours; child care and elder care.

Quality Public Education: National financing to ensure a good learning environment for all children and reduction of student-teacher ratio. Voluntary school for children at age 3. Educate parents to help kids learn. Free public university and technical education, and a livable wage for 4 years at post-secondary educational institution.

Stop Corporate Trade Abuse: Strong international labor and environmental standards regularly monitored by worker teams; a "fair trade" seal for free and open trade eligibility; and workers' right to select and join "unfair" products. Ban government policies supporting anti-labor regimes that violate human rights.

End Corporate Welfare: No tax breaks or subsidies. Corporations pay standard community investment tax and abide by national labor and environmental standards to end brutal competition among states and communities for jobs.

Wealthy to Pay Fair Share of Taxes: No loopholes. Higher taxes on the rich and super rich. New taxes on mergers and acquisitions, stock options over $1 million, electronic transfers of funds both the U.S. and $500 (to pay back the $500 billion bailout), and nonprofits with assets of $100 million or more. 100 per cent tax on portion of executive salary that exceeds 20 times average worker's pay.

Revitalize Public Sector: Prevent privatization and contracting out of traditional public services so that government can provide critical goods and services. Patients and health care workers participate in decision-making.

End Corporate Dominations of Elections: Cap campaign expenditures. Full and equal public financing and media time for state and national candidates who (a) have proven popular support and (b) pledge not to raise and spend any private money.

Protect Jobs and Environment: Full pay and benefits during transition to alternative jobs for workers displaced as a result of environmental regulations—all paid for through taxes on corporate profits.

Worker Health & Safety Inspectors: Trained worker-inspectors in every workplace, protected against company reprisals, will have the power to shut down hazardous operations, enforce workers' right to refuse unsafe work, investigate incidents, and implement findings. Test chemicals before using, advise workers of new chemicals, and allow workers to block use of new chemicals for safety reasons.

Job Design, Technology and Skill: Create labor-based, publicly-funded Technology Democratization Commission to ensure labor's role in developing and implementing technology.
"Words cannot begin to express the feelings of pride I have in being an ILWU member after our tremendous showing of leadership, courage and solidarity. Even though we had our differences, now's the time to band together and build a real political party for working people!"

Jeff Engels
IBU Puget Sound Region

"It was history! I was thrilled to have been able to play a role—albeit a small one—in this historic convention. The constitution and action program we passed will bring hope to all working class people—young and old, black and white, employed and unemployed—who are struggling today for economic justice under a system where we just make the rich richer.

"I was prouder than ever at the way the ILWU delegation stuck together. I think we lived up to our tradition in Cleveland."

Cliff Davidson
Alaska Local 200

"On the whole I think it was very positive; only one thing concerns me: I thought the OCAW and the UE were a little too dominant. They had the vast majority of delegates and were voting as a bloc. OCAW was also chairing the meeting."

"For the future, though, I think it's a tremendous step forward for working people across America. The ILWU should massively recruit our members up and down the coast to build the Labor Party and make sure it goes in a more democratic direction."

Chuck Dean
Longshore Local 19, Seattle

"If they ask you, 'When is the time for the Labor Party? When should ILWU members join? When should the ILWU and its locals and district councils step out and back the Labor Party?' you can tell them: 'Now!'"

"Many brothers and sisters ask, 'What about our friends in the Democratic Party? Should we turn our backs on them?' My answer is, 'We've been waiting on them to listen to us for 40 years. Now's the time for our friends in the Democratic Party to join us!'"

Donald Matthews
Longshore Local 13, San Pedro

"Looking at all the labor murals, seeing the Labor Party banner, and reading the reasons why we need a Labor Party—early retirement, living wages, health benefits for everyone—affected me the same as the first time I saw the AIDS Names Quilt. I realized, all these conditions are essentially history, and now we’re fighting to resurrect them.

"As the days went on, I realized that there was hope, that we were doing something about it right there. We were building something that can potentially give us working people our power back."

Debbie Crews
Marine Clerks Local 63, Long Beach

"PRESIDENT CLINTON WAS ELECTED BY LESS THAN 25% OF THE ELIGIBLE VOTERS HE THINKS HE REPRESENTS THE MAJORITY."

"THE REPUBLICAN CONGRESS WAS ELECTED BY ONLY 35% OF THE ELIGIBLE VOTERS, NEWT GINGRICH THINKS HE REPRESENTS THE MAJORITY."

"If Democracy were majority rule, then democracy is dead. But Bill and Newt aren’t still alive."

"DEMOCRACY, THE ELVIS OF THE 90'S.
DEMOCRACY IS STILL ALIVE!

When’s the best time to have a Labor Party? Not in an election year!

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"This was once in a lifetime experience. Delegates from across America represented our nation’s true face—all colors, shapes, ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, young and old alike. I hope ILWU members, locals and councils will join in our efforts to establish a working Labor Party, based on the union movement, that will address the issues that concern all working Americans."

And hopefully they’ll be ready to adopt an election strategy and start running and endorsing candidates after the next convention in 1998!"

Jess Stranahan
Pacific Coast Pensioners Assn., ILWU