The ILWU International Executive Board met in its San Francisco headquarters Dec. 7 and 8 to review the union’s finances, political and legislative program and its organizing efforts.

International President Bob McEllrath opened the meeting by introducing the officers of the ILWU’s new affiliate, the American Radio Association, the radio operators aboard ships (see sidebar page 3). As a maritime union with a long-time relationship with the ILWU and a tradition of rank-and-file democracy both sides agreed it would be a good fit.

The union trustees met the day before and scrutinized the union’s budget and expenses. They reported to the board that the union was in the black and on track to build its reserves. International Secretary-Treasurer Willie Adams walked the board through the details of the expenses for the first three quarters of 2006, explaining particulars and answering questions.

Clerks’ Local 63 Secretary Peter Peyton, who along with Secretary-Treasurer Adams and the union’s Washington, D.C. office, has helped devise the union’s political action strategy and fundraising, reviewed the results of the union’s 2006 activities and presented an outline of the union’s plan for the 2008 election cycle.

Peyton said that in the 2004 presidential election the ILWU set a goal of raising half a million dollars—more than it had ever done—to help labor-friendly politicians win office, and was successful. The union also mobilized its members, sending them out across the country to work on campaigns of candidates and state propositions.

In the 2006 mid-term election the union did not raise as much—only about $421,000—but used the money wisely and successfully. More importantly, the union got more of its members involved in the campaigns. Of the politicians the ILWU gave money to, 57 won their races and only 12 lost.

Peyton pointed out that the ILWU led the way in backing California Congressional candidate Jerry McNerney who went on to defy all predictions and defeat seven-term Bush hatchet man Richard Pombo. McNerney had planned to come to Washington, D.C. by new House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to attend a “boot camp” for freshmen Congressional representatives.

“ar success was incredible, but we can do even better,” Peyton said.

The ILWU now plans to use what it has learned in the last two elections in fundraising and member mobilization. It’s goal for the 2008 presidential election will be to raise $1 million, the same amount Wal-Mart contributes.

“We should go toe-to-toe with Wal-Mart,” Peyton said. He added that the dollar amount was less important than building rank-and-file participation in the political action program, and that it would be better to get a five dollar contribution from 20 members than $100 dollars from one.

Vice President, Mainland Joe Radish presented his report on the organizing program, focusing mostly on the Blue Diamond almond processing campaign in Sacramento and the Rite Aid warehouse campaign in Lancaster, Southern California. Organizing Director Peter Oney gave a brief presentation on those two efforts and how the employers’ aggressive anti-union activities in both cases would be blunted if Congress were to pass the Employee Free Choice Act. The bill, sponsored by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Congressman George Miller (D-CA), would change current labor law and level the playing field for workers trying to organize. The board went on to pass a Statement of Policy in support of the bill (see page 3).

The Hawaii Local 142 delegation updated the board on an issue that had been discussed at length at the International Convention in Vancouver, B.C. last May—the closure of the Del Monte pineapple fields and cannery. At the convention delegates from the 700-employee operation reported that in February 2006 the company announced it was closing up shop and leaving Hawaii in two years and moving their pineapple production to Guatemala where labor costs are lower.

The announcement came as a surprise to the workers. In 2004 they negotiated a five-year contract to give the company stability in its costs. “Del Monte had been in Hawaii for 100 years and they indicated they would be here for another 100 years,” said Local 142 President Fred Galdones.

The local immediately went into “effects” bargaining, asking the company for enhanced severance pay, extended medical benefits and financial assistance with keeping the workers’ plantation housing and community. Del Monte would agree to nothing, so the convention passed a resolution supporting the workers’ proposals, and the delegates signed a petition calling on the company to agree to them. The local continued talking with the company, but on Nov. 17 Del Monte announced it was accelerating its closure plans and would shut down in 60 days. Again, the local asked for assistance for the hundreds of workers who not only faced unemployment and the loss of health care for their families, but possible eviction from their homes.

Again, the company has refused to make any commitments to the workers who built its business for decades. So in response the board voted unanimously for a Statement of Policy calling on ILWU families to boycott all Fresh Del Monte produce (see page 3).

The board also reviewed the report of the International Balloting Committee that oversaw the vote count of the last union election. It agreed to set up a subcommittee to look at the IBC’s recommendations for a smoother and more efficient election process (see page 3).

The IEB discusses the union’s political action plan. From left to right: Hawaii Local 142 representative Kenneth Inge, Columbia River Area representatives Jerry Ylonen and George O’Neil, Puget Sound Area representative Max Vekich, IBU National President Alan Coté, and Northern California Area representatives Fred Pecker and Richard Cavalli.
The American Radio Association joins the ILWU

The American Radio Association has been growing in Hawaii. Organized almost 50 years, most of the workers have been members of the ILWU Local 142.

Since 1996, the company has been owned by the Alu Hanaola family of United Arab Emirates and headquartered in Coral Gables, Florida. The Hawaii operation is called Del Monte Fresh Produce (Hawaii), Inc. Its parent corporation is Fresh Del Monte Produce, Inc., and controls and manages all that major decisions for Hawaii are controlled and managed by Fresh Del Monte Produce.

On February 1, 2006, Del Monte announced plans to shut down its Hawaii operations in 2008. The announcement came as a shock to the company’s 100 employees. Nevertheless, they were relieved to know that they had at least two years to prepare themselves for the shutdown. They needed the time to find new jobs and possibly training for new careers, especially since most of them had little education and experience other than in pineapple work.

Local 142 started bargaining with Del Monte believing it had two years before the complete closure. In the bargaining, Del Monte, directed by its corporate office, was giving virtually nothing additional to ease the workers in their transition from Del Monte, especially refusing to consider any health care coverage, severance pay, or financial assistance to transfer Kina Camp, home to some 120 families, from the company’s control.

In August 2006, the ILWU Local 142 filed an unfair labor practice with the Hawaii Labor Relations Board alleging unlawful conduct and unlawful bargaining. In September 2006, Fresh Del Monte Produce relocated the general manager in Hawaii to operations in Kenya and appointed to the position the human resources director in Hawaii, who had little or no practical experience in pineapple operations.

Then, abruptly, on November 17, 2006, Del Monte announced immediate closure of the Hawaii operations. No more harvesting, no more packing, no more Del Monte pineapple in Hawaii. All of the crop in the ground would be plowed under. Because of the company’s repeated assurances to the workers and their union that operations in Hawaii would continue into 2008, the workers felt betrayed. No wonder employers routinely violate labor laws and parcel out our jurisdiction to corporations that have trained electronics technicians aboard ships, whose duties have been greatly expanded since the days of Morse code and spark-operated transmitters.
Season's Greetings from the International

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Administrative Secretary
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Have a Happy and Safe New Year!