# Reply to Balderston: Longview Contract Was Not a Victory

written by Jack Gerson | August 8, 2012

[Reply to Bill Balderston's article, "Occupy Oakland and the Labor Movement."]

I am going to focus my remarks on section 2 of Bill Balderston's article, which he subtitled "The Battle of Longview". Bill and I have very different views of the outcome of this battle, and what that outcome is likely to mean.

I disagree with much of what Bill wrote in his section on Longview, but probably found the biggest problem to be what he omitted. "The Battle of Longview" fails to discuss the battle's outcome. This is like staging a three-act play without the third act. Not coincidentally, the article does not discuss the actions of the ILWU International leadership in isolating the Longview local by a series of orchestrated steps, before stepping in to negotiate and deliver a contract worse than what the Longview workers struck over in the first place.

From just reading Bill's article, one might conclude that "The Battle of Longview" was a victory, and one might think that the contract was a decent deal.

Here are some of the inconvenient but necessary details:

The ILWU International, which had opposed the December 12 West Coast Port Shutdown, was even more adamantly opposed to the Occupy movement's planned mass caravan to Longview to block loading of the first EGT vessel to dock at the Longview grain terminal. So when, on January 5, Dan Coffman, president of ILWU Local 21 (Longview) appeared at a meeting in Portland that included Occupy speakers, the International leadership immediately responded by removing pickets from all the other locals from Longview, leaving the small 233-member local isolated.

To underline its hostility to Longview Local 21 acting jointly with Occupy to block the first EGT ship at Longview, on the following day (January 6) local presidents from the Seattle, Portland, and Tacoma locals, together with a handful of their supporters, disrupted a Seattle meeting at which several prominent ILWU activists from Longview and Oakland were speaking along with representatives from Occupy Seattle, Portland, and Oakland. The International used this provocation as an excuse to draw a line in the sand between the ILWU and Occupy.

Bill does mention the January 6 meeting in Seattle that was disrupted by ILWU local leaders and goons. Bill does not, however, mention this in context of what happened before and what happened next. The previous night, January 5, the same crew of local presidents and their goons attempted to disrupt a meeting in Portland where Local 21 President Dan Coffman was speaking, along with speakers from Occupy. Following the meeting—in retaliation for Coffman daring to speak on a platform with Occupy—the International retaliated by pulling the pickets from all other Northwest locals out of Longview, leaving the 230-member Local 21 to fend for itself.] Then, following the January 6 meeting, the ILWU International flew all local presidents to San Francisco to meet with the International leadership for the purposes of totally isolating and quarantining the Local 21 leadership. Having cut the Local off from the Occupy movement, the ILWU leadership took complete control of the negotiations; they sat down with the company and the state and announced "a tentative agreement 'in principle,'" with the specifics to be worked out. In other words, the International agreed to agree—terms to be mailed in later.

Bill does not deal with the actual contract. Veteran longshore activists I respect call it an awful deal. Local 21 (Longview) gave up control of the master panel, a major concession that will impact work rules and attrition. The contract does preserve a hiring hall, but in name only: all names must be submitted to the company in advance (facilitating blacklisting). The contract eliminates all of the traditionally strong clauses that have allowed ILWU members to express labor solidarity—honor community picket lines; refuse to handle "hot-cargoed" goods, etc.—and three violations will invalidate the entire contract (and the company has basically dictated the composition of the arbitration board). And on and on. It is down the line a major defeat when compared to the west coast master agreement—and will be used as the basis for the shipping bosses demands when that agreement is up in two years. (The full contract is available on the web at transportworkers.org. The same web site has a detailed breakdown of the rotten deal.)

What do Longview rank and file members think of the contract? What do the Local 10 (Oakland / San Francisco) activists think? What do those mentioned in Bill's article think? I urge everyone to view the following video, where all of these folks hold forth for nearly two hours at a January 29 forum. You will find that as far as the contract is concerned, the views from Occupy Oakland, from the ILWU Local 10 activists, from the Committee to Defend the ILWU, from the Longview rank-and-filers are identical: "Sellout."

It should be clear that the ILWU International leadership worked hand in hand with the state and the company to impose the contract. It is true that the ILWU retained jurisdiction at the port of Longview. But beyond that, the contract was a massive defeat, a setback that will have reverberations two years from now when the west coast master labor agreement comes up for renewal. The opportunity to wage a militant struggle with powerful community support was not just discarded; the ILWU International actively suppressed it. This is consistent with the "team concept" of management / labor collaboration that has proved to be so disastrous in auto and, indeed, throughout the private sector (where unions now barely represent one in 20 workers). The same losing strategy is being applied in the public sector by labor tops like the AFT's Randi Weingarten and the NEA's Dennis van Roekel. It is leading to the same disastrous end. Longview could have been otherwise, had it not been actively throttled by the International. There would have been a mass caravan, at a time when Occupy still could organize thousands, and at a time when the mass actions of October, and especially of November 2 and December 12, still resonated. At a minimum, this collaboration should have been cultivated, not forcibly severed as the International deliberately did.

There are many questions that an article on this topic ought to address. Did Local 21 have to accede to the International's demand that it cut communications with Occupy? (This was done under the threat of the International refusing to defend the local against the massive fines threatened by the company and the state.) How does labor deal with the legal noose that functions to stifle strikes and other forms of militancy? What can and should be done besides just solidarity demos? (Rank and file caucuses? Organize the unorganized? Reject legalism? Organize against state intervention into the labor movement? And how?) These are important questions. Unfortunately, the article does not explore them.

(Full disclosure: I was involved in occupy Oakland labor solidarity work through early February. Since then, I have focused my time on working to build the Occupy Oakland Education Committee (the group that organized and led the Lakeview sit-in and People's School for Public Education see saveoaklandschools.org for more information). So I haven't been closely involved with the labor support committee since February, and therefore won't comment on the last section of Bill's article.)