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THE GALVESTON LONGSHOREMEN'S STRIKE OF 1920

by James C. Maroney

In the midst of a tension-charged atmosphere bred by the Red Scare, the open shop drive, and rising fears of racial warfare, the most dramatic post-World War I confrontation between organized labor and open shop forces in Texas came at Galveston in 1920. The conflict resulted in near total destruction of the Galveston locals of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and passage of an Open Port Law by the Texas Legislature.

The 1920 coastwise strike¹ took place after employers began to use non-ILA men for loading ships in various South Atlantic and Gulf ports in violation of an agreement with the National Adjustment Commission, an agency created during World War I to help alleviate labor-management disputes. The International Longshoremen's Association and the United States Shipping Board, another wartime agency, agreed in August, 1917 to create a system of national and local adjustment commissions with authority over all cases relating to wages and working conditions. Intended to operate only during the war, its success led to an agreement reorganizing the National Adjustment Commission in September, 1919, but neither the United States Railroad Administration, which supervised the coastwise lines during the war, nor the privately controlled coastwise lines participated in the decision and the National Adjustment Commission subsequently proved unable to maintain jurisdiction. By the spring of 1920 all of the coastwise lines had been returned to private control, and the attitude of numerous employers changed rapidly. In many ports, employers notified dock workers that they would no longer recognize the International Longshoremen's Association. Dissatisfaction among coastwise dock workers stemmed from the fact that during the war they had received the same rate of pay as deep-sea longshoremen; however, the National Adjustment Commission granted an increase in wages to deep-sea longshoremen in November, 1919, only a month after denying such an increase to the coastwise workers. Employers contended that the coastwise lines already were operating in the red and could not maintain operations if forced to meet higher wages. The ILA, however, continued to demand equal wage rates for coastwise and deep-sea longshore work, and coastwise operators refused to submit the case to the National Adjustment Commission for arbitration without an increase in freight rates. With no compromise in sight, the strike began on March 12, 1920, when the coastwise longshoremen in New York City walked out. The strike spread rapidly to other Atlantic and Gulf ports, affecting coastwise locals from Boston to the Rio Grande.²

On March 19, some sixteen thousand coastwise longshoremen employed by the Morgan and Mallory lines in Galveston struck, asking for a wage increase from sixty to eighty cents per hour for regular work and from ninety cents to one dollar and twenty cents per hour for overtime work. About seven hundred of the strikers—those employed by the Mallory Line—were Negroes.³

The Mallory Line suspended operations in Galveston by the end of May as a result of acts of violence against strikebreakers and threatened not to return even if guaranteed protection by city officials. Continued importation of strikebreakers by the Morgan Line, however, encouraged Mayor H.O. Sappington and the city's chief of police to request Governor William P.

James C. Maroney is associated with the Social Sciences Department of Lee College, Baytown, Texas.

Hobby to send a detachment of Texas Rangers to the city. Pro-company critics also alleged that the Galveston police force was composed entirely of union members or union sympathizers. A six-man delegation representing the Texas Chamber of Commerce and a Galveston Commercial Association presented a petition to Governor Hobby requesting "adequate protection of citizens of Texas in the port of Galveston while in the pursuit of their work, even to the extend of declaring martial law." Governor Hobby, never a friend of labor, responded to these appeals by ordering a company of Rangers into the city. After the Rangers arrived nonunion men began to work on the Morgan docks. Acts of violence erupted between strikers and strikebreakers and the tension intensified when the Mallory Line, previously employing only black union men, now hired white scabs, while the Morgan Line, previously employing only white union men, now used Negro scabs. Race riots appeared imminent. Merchants across the state complained of a shortage of stocks and delayed shipments; the Galveston *Daily News* claimed the strike had tied up about 12,000 tons of incoming freight on the Mallory Line docks for shipment to Southwestern destinations and two full cargoes for Eastern seaports.⁴

After conferring with the delegation from Galveston, Governor Hobby notified city authorities that "unless police protection is given and the laws enforced by local authorities, insuring free and uninterrupted movement of freight at Galveston," the governor "will take charge of the situation not later than 9 o'clock Saturday morning, June 5." Such a recommendation stemmed from the fact that "congestion in the movement of commerce through the port of Galveston is preventing the receipt of good[s] by Texas merchants and threatening the outwar[d] shipment of Texas crops ready for market" Mayor H.O. Sappington of Galveston denied the need for troops and promised "police protection equal to that of any other city," but caustically informed Hobby: "If you can move the freight under the constitution and laws of Texas, do it now; don't wait till Saturday."⁵ The Galveston city commissioners telegraphed Hobby that he must be misinformed about "the true facts and state of affairs in Galveston," and that a declaration of martial law "would be an insult to the citizenship of this city."⁶

On June 3, Governor Hobby sent Adjutant General W.D. Cope to Galveston with a group of officers and men to determine if conditions warranted a declaration of martial law and the consignment of troops. If such action became necessary, Brigadier General Jacob F. Wolters would assume control of the island. At the governor's request, the Texas legislature appropriated \$100,000 to pay the expenses of sending the National Guard to Galveston in the event the governor declared martial law. With the holiday season upon them, Galveston officials strenuously argued against the need for such action. Hobby did not declare martial law on Saturday, however, as General Cope inspected the waterfront at the nine o'clock deadline and found freight to be moving. Creation of a Galveston Open Shop Association at this time led to rumors that such activity might bring the deep-sea longshoremen into the strike in sympathy with the coastwise workers.⁷

By Monday conditions completely deteriorated and General Cope declared that only state intervention could break the stalemate. Governor Hobby immediately put Galveston Island under martial law. The *Houston Post* reported that approximately one thousand troops occupied Galveston by nightfall Tuesday, effectively protecting the nonunion dockworkers. The city commissioners, the Galveston Dock and Marine Council, and the state's labor press all denounced the action and charged that the real purpose behind the decision to send troops to Galveston was to assure open shop conditions in the

city; strike leaders, therefore, declined to call sympathy strikes of other longshore locals for fear of playing into the hands of open shop advocates.⁸ As the Mallory Line imported large numbers of unskilled Mexican strikebreakers, I.M. Barb, president of the Galveston Trades Council, remarked that the western end of Galveston Island contained "a regular Mexican colony." With troops on patrol, the Texas Rangers departed, and by June 15, the *Houston Post* reported that coastwise shipping between New York and Galveston "is gradually becoming normal." By June 19, many of the troops had left the island.⁹

Although clashes still flared up on occasion, tensions gradually cooled; by early July only five hundred troops remained. Highhanded and arbitrary actions by the military, however, continued to cause great resentment. Late in June, for example, soldiers, on orders of General Wolters, broke up a regular meeting of the Galveston Labor Council, an agency composed of representatives of the city's trade unions, declaring such public gatherings illegal under martial law. The council had met on schedule, without interruption, for twenty years, but before labor unions could hold future meetings, they would have to provide the army with advance notice as to time, place, and purpose. The further withdrawal of troops brought new strife between union men and the scab labor force, and on July 14, Governor Hobby, charging "neglect of duty," suddenly issued a proclamation suspending from office various city officials. The governor's suspension order included the police chief and the entire police department "for failure to enforce the law and for obstruction of the state's efforts." The mayor, city attorney, and commissioners remained in office to perform routine duties but retained no power to enforce penal laws. General Wolters supervised the disarming of the police and took control of the courts and jails.¹⁰ According to the *San Antonio Weekly Dispatch*, military oppression soon became even more despotic, "with all citizens . . . in mortal dread of the iron heel of militarism." General Wolters erected a "bull pen" in the heart of the city, established press censorship, and carefully scanned "every issue for criticism of the guardsmen. Citizens who condemn are roughly handled." In September, the *Houston Labor Journal* charged Colonel Billie Mayfield of the Texas National Guard with attempting to kidnap the editor of the *Houston Press*, G.V. Sanders, at the Houston Country Club, some fifty miles away from the Galveston military zone. Sanders allegedly had published articles which Mayfield claimed might incite Galveston residents to riot. According to the *Labor Journal*, a subsequent military court-martial acquitted Mayfield. Several labor papers made countercharges, contending that Wolters and Mayfield staged a fake riot with troops impersonating union longshoremen, while uniformed guardsmen rushed in with fixed bayonets to crush "a great riot" as motion pictures were taken of the whole scene.¹¹

The city commissioners called more meetings of protest and subsequently brought suit against Hobby, Wolters, and the National Guard, but Judge Robert C. Street of the 56th District Court dismissed the case. A second case arose when a private citizen, arrested by soldiers on a speeding charge, challenged the legality of the martial rule in Galveston in a federal district court; the court upheld Governor Hobby's declaration.¹²

Negotiations between city and state officials ultimately led to an abrogation of martial law under which the Texas Rangers supervised local police activity. The National Guard relinquished control in favor of the Rangers at midnight, September 30, 1920. Governor Hobby withdrew the Rangers in January, 1921, restoring full authority to the city's board of

commissioners and police department. The only fatality during the entire episode came when a National Guard sentry shot an officer of the Guard when the latter failed to stop his automobile when challenged at one thirty in the morning.¹³

The New York locals returned to work in August, 1920, at the old rates of sixty-five cents per hour for regular work and one dollar for overtime; in September the coastwise employers increased these rates to seventy-two cents and one dollar and ten cents. The Galveston locals returned to work between December, 1920, and July, 1921, at a wage scale of sixty-seven cents and one dollar. In March, at the onset of the strike, longshoremen sought wage increases from sixty to eighty cents per hour and from ninety cents to one dollar and twenty cents for overtime. Although the ILA locals survived the strike, the importation of scab labor and use of the militia to crush the walkout left the union men weakened and badly demoralized. In 1922 the emasculated Galveston ILA locals yielded their charters and company unions were formed in 1924.¹⁴

Pressure by spokesmen for the open shop encouraged Governor Hobby to take decisive action as a result of events in Galveston. The governor called a special session of the legislature and proposed recommendations which became the Open Port Law, an act making illegal any interference with the free passage of commerce in the state. Widely condemned by organized labor as an anti-strike bill, the law, taking effect on January 2, 1921, subsequently was invoked in a number of cities across the state during the 1922 railroad shopmen's strike, although the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals ultimately declared the law unconstitutional in 1926.¹⁵

While the union movement among skilled AFL craftsmen was by no means eliminated in Texas during the period between the Red Scare and the New Deal,¹⁶ the mass of organized workers employed in transportation and other industries was decimated by powerful employer coalitions during the open shop drive of the early 1920s.

NOTES

¹"Coastwise work" is a term used to denote shipping between American ports, while "deep-sea work" describes shipping from America to foreign ports. Separate ILA locals of deep-sea and coastwise workers existed in every port in which the ILA operated.

²*Proceedings, International Longshoremen's Association, Gulf Coast District Convention, 1920, 15-16; ibid., 1921, 29-34, 45-46; Galveston Union Review, July 9, 1920.*

³*Houston Post, March 21, 1920; Galveston Daily News, March 20, 1920.*

⁴*Galveston Daily News, May 12, 15, June 2, 3, 1920; Houston Post, June 3, 1920; Galveston Union Review, May 7, 1920.*

⁵*Galveston Daily News, June 3, 1920; Houston Post, June 3, 1920.*

⁶*Proceedings, Board of Commissioners of the City of Galveston, June 3, 1920 (City Hall, Galveston).*

⁷*Houston Post, June 4-6, 1920; Galveston Daily News, June 5-6, 1920; Galveston Union Review, June 11, 1920.*

⁸*Houston Post, June 9, 1920; Galveston Union Review, June 4, 11, 1920; Galveston Daily News, June 8, 10, 1920; Proceedings, Board of Commissioners of the City of Galveston, June 7, 1920; El Paso Labor Advocate, June 18, July 2, 1920; San Antonio Weekly Dispatch, June 12, 1920.*

⁹Galveston *Union Review*, June 18, 1920; Houston *Labor Journal*, June 19, 1920; Houston *Post*, June 15, 1920; Galveston *Daily News*, June 11, 20, 1920.

¹⁰Galveston *Union Review*, July 2, 1920; Houston *Labor Journal*, July 17, 1920; Galveston *Daily News*, June 30, 1920.

¹¹San Antonio *Weekly Dispatch*, October 2, 1920; Houston *Labor Journal*, August 28, September 11, 25, 1920; El Paso *Labor Advocate*, September 3, 1920; W. E. Carroll to Hon. W. B. Wilson, August 31, 1920, file 17/1253, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service Records (Record Group 280, National Archives).

¹²Proceedings, Board of Commissioners of the City of Galveston, June 19, 1920; Galveston *Daily News*, July 31, 1920; James A. Clark, *The Taciful Texan: A Biography of Governor Will Hobby* (New York, 1958), 134.

¹³Proceedings, Board of Commissioners of the City of Galveston, September 16, 1920, January 6, 1921; W. P. Hobby to W. D. Cope, September 21, 1920, Hobby Letterpress Books, Box 141. 4-15/20 (Archives Division, Texas State Library); Hobby to Cope, September 21, 1920, Adjutant General's Correspondence, RG401, 2-11/268 (Archives Division, Texas State Library); Jacob Singer [Chairman, Galveston Citizens' Committee] to Hon. W. P. Hobby, Mayor H. O. Sappington, and Board of Commissioners of the City of Galveston, September 16, 1920, *ibid.*; Galveston *Daily News*, July 31, 1920.

¹⁴Proceedings, ILA Gulf Coast District Convention, 1921, 19-20, 52; F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge, 1967), 69.

¹⁵San Antonio *Weekly Dispatch*, September 25, October 30, November 27, 1920; Galveston *Union Review*, October 29, 1920; El Paso *Labor Advocate*, October 1, 1920, October 15, 1926; *Southwestern Railway Journal*, XVII (March, 1923), 16; Minutes, Houston Labor Council, October 5, 1920, (Division of Archives and Manuscripts, University of Texas at Arlington); *Proceedings*, Texas State Federation of Labor, 1921, 22; *ibid.*, 1924, 56; *ibid.*, 1925, 35-36; *ibid.*, 1927, 119-120.

¹⁶See James C. Maroney, "Organized Labor in Texas, 1900-1929" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Houston, 1975), 201-235.