

Angela Davis' Juneteenth speech becomes a reality

written by Lallan Schoenstein
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On the left, Clarence Thomas presents the ILWU Local 10 Honorary membership Certificate to Angela Davis. On the right, she was given an archival photo of her that Ken Green took on June 24, 1980. In his presentation Thomas talked about Davis' childhood in Birmingham, Alabama. "Her parents, who were Black leftists, lived on

Dynamite Hill, so named because white supremacists, the KKK, use dynamite to terrorize the Black community. The influence of a politically radical family on Davis's intellectual development gave her a great advantage."

On June 19, at a Juneteenth membership meeting, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 in the San Francisco Bay Area inducted Angela Davis as an honorary member.

Local 10 President Trent Willis opened the ceremony by calling on women members of the longshore workers' union and women members of the community to testify on Angela Davis' behalf.

They each said that Davis' lifetime of fighting for social justice had opened doors for them. Much of what they spoke about was written on the plaque certifying her membership:

"Sister Angela Davis' selection ... is a testament to her life's work that embodies what ILWU Local 10 stands for. She is a radical African American female activist-scholar writer and educator, who has been in the vanguard of the Black liberation movement and struggle for the emancipation of the working class at home and abroad.

"She is indeed an internationalist. Her politics and beliefs reflect those of the founders of the ILWU. As a result, Sister Angela has been the victim of targeting by the FBI, she has faced death threats, she has also been placed on the FBI 10 Most Wanted List, and held as a political prisoner. All of this is attributed to her uncompromising commitment to fighting systemic racism, capitalism, and imperialism."

Call for justice in 1971

Davis has a long history with the ILWU.

In 1971, Cleophas Williams wrote the following resolution which called for justice for Angela Davis at the ILWU Convention:

“WHEREAS: We know from California history that anti-radical hysteria and frameup are anti-labor weapons; and

“WHEREAS: We know that Tom Mooney, a labor organizer, was kept in prison for 32 years before it was officially acknowledged that he was framed. We know that Harry Bridges was persecuted for 20 years because he was an effective and militant union leader; and

“WHEREAS: Now there is a relentless crusade to kill Angela Davis, prejudice and frameup is now employed to crush Black Militancy. The same device has always been used against labor when the powers of big business and government decide that organized workers are ‘getting out of line;’ and

“WHEREAS: When President Nixon, Governor Reagan and the big money press incite the legal lynching of Angela Davis, experience tells us to beware. Those are our enemies too. It could well be us ‘next time around,’ or it could be you; and

“WHEREAS: Angela is also charged with conspiracy. An old gimmick used to repress the labor movement in this country. We defend ourselves by defending Angela Davis;

“THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: The International Convention of the ILWU goes on record to support Angela Davis and to see that she receives a fair trial and is released on bail pending trial.”

Juneteenth speech becomes reality

This is only the third time an honorary ILWU membership has been bestowed, the first being to Paul Robeson in 1943, and the second to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had spoken before ILWU Local 10 only six months before he was assassinated.

When the union's president, Trent Willis, spoke on Angela Davis' membership, he talked about what it meant to be a member of ILWU Local 10 and its historic Black, Brown, Red, Yellow and white rank-and-file unity. He said, "Know who you are!"

Willis said he'd been reading Malcolm X on "The Ballot or the Bullet." He explained that the racist war is ongoing and that the union contract is a form of war meant to prevent real war. He said that if people were denied participation in the voting process, as is currently being enacted by some in the U.S. Congress and some states, that denial of rights is an open act of war.

In upholding the fighting legacy of ILWU Local 10, Willis pointed out that Davis had gone to prison to defend her people. The union hall erupted!

Angela Davis expressed her appreciation by reiterating the role of Local 10 in linking the fight for workers' rights to combating racist capitalism. She talked about how Local 10 had refused to unload cargo from apartheid ships from South Africa as well as the recent apartheid ship from Israel; how they used their power at the point of production to support Mumia Abu-Jamal. The union hall erupted again!

One year ago, during the height of the pandemic, Angela Davis spoke to dockworkers and community protesters at the 2020 Juneteenth Commemoration at the Port of Oakland.

She said, "I was thinking the other day that if I did not become a university professor, my next choice probably would have been to become a dock worker or warehouse worker in order to be a member of the most radical union in the country, the ILWU."

In her speech on Juneteenth 2021, Honorary ILWU Local 10 Member Angela Davis spoke about the official U.S. government recognition of the holiday occurring some 158 years after the Emancipation Proclamation and one year after the burst of

outrage that gripped the country following the police murders of George Floyd, Breona Taylor and all the others.

