

Juneteenth and ILWU: All workers win when slavery ends!

written by Lallan Schoenstein
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ILWU's Gabriel Prawl at Juneteenth commemoration in Seattle, June 20. Photo: Cindy Domingo

Holding signs and chanting “Black Lives Matter, honor Juneteenth as a workers’ holiday!”, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and several other organizations rallied at the waterfront in Seattle on Monday, June 20, the first workday after the June 19 commemoration.

Gabriel Prawl, a leader of the ILWU West Coast Juneteenth Commemoration, spoke at the rally. He is past president of ILWU Local 52 and president of the Seattle chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

Prawl used the occasion to talk about the significance of the day:

“We get together on the 4th of July to celebrate liberation from British rule. But that was not the case for Black people. Sadly, they were not even recognized as humans in 1776 when this country declared its independence. Freedom was far from an equally applied standard for everyone.

“Now after over 150 years, African Americans have a good reason to celebrate. Juneteenth is a yearly celebration of the liberation of enslaved Black people. Juneteenth is short for June 19th and a commemoration of the day in 1865 when General Gordon Granger led Union troops into the city of Galveston, Texas, to assume control of the state and free the enslaved Black people.

“Look around you, this is what the Union troops looked like.

“The big question here is, why should labor fight white supremacy? The answer is, because it’s in our class interest. To not do so allows the ruling class and others to divide us, the working class, by race, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion and so forth.”

Prawl asked: “Can you have capitalism without racism? Africans were truthfully the bloody foundation of capitalism. The major commodities in the world were cotton, sugar and tobacco. This was the foundation of capitalism. It’s perpetuated and

exemplified through racism, exploitation and white privilege.”

ILWU won by fighting racism

Prawl told the story of the 1934 West Coast maritime strike, when the union won by fighting racism on the docks.

Union workers were engaged in collective bargaining, making coastwide demands to end working around the clock. They called for a six-hour work day.

The most revolutionary demand of all, said Prawl, was for the right for workers to control the hiring hall. “Before this we had what was called the shape-up,” he said.

When the workers walked off the job, the bosses employed racist hiring practices to break the strike and continue to generate profits. They used Black workers, who were denied jobs and union membership, to cross the picket line.

Labor leader Harry Bridges understood that the problem was racism. He reached out to Black labor leaders like C.L. Dellums, vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized by A. Philip Randolph.

Bridges appealed to Black religious leaders to be allowed to speak in their churches, where he promised that if the workers held back their labor in solidarity with the strikers, Black workers would be welcomed into the union when they won. Bridges kept his promise.

The unity of Black and white workers was the key to the strike’s success. It became the guiding principle of the union.

Bridges stated that if only two longshore workers were left, one would be Black and the other would be white. The ILWU constitution opposes racism and all other forms of discrimination.

In 1943, Paul Robeson became an honorary member of the ILWU. In 1967, six months before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became an honorary member of ILWU Local 10.

The ILWU became one of the most socially conscious unions in the labor movement. It shut down all 29 ports on the West Coast after Dr. King was assassinated.

"I will never forget what happened in 2020 when the world witnessed the execution of George Floyd, the execution of Breonna Taylor and many other unarmed Black workers and community members," Prawl said.

On June 9, 2020, the day of George Floyd's funeral, the International Longshoremen's Association, the Teamsters and the ILWU put down their tools for 8 minutes and 56 seconds to honor George Floyd.

"After that a meeting was called. All ILWU local presidents in all 29 ports on the West Coast and two in Canada were present, including myself," Prawl said. "During the discussion there was a vote for all ILWU locals to take their monthly stop-work on Juneteenth 2020 to commemorate the end of slavery in America. This led to a strike against white supremacy, demonstrating the power of the working class.

"Juneteen 2022 fell on a Sunday. A press release dated June 14 stated that the ILWU, a proudly diverse union, honors the Juneteenth federal holiday and end of slavery in U.S. Some ILWU locals are opting to schedule their contractually allowed stop-work meeting to observe the federal holiday on Monday, June 20," Prawl said.

At the rally on June 20, Prawl closed his speech with a quote from A. Philip Randolph, who said: "Freedom is never granted. It is won. Justice is never given. It is extracted."

"Civil rights, labor rights, same fight. When I say workers, you say power! When I say union, you say power!" Prawl concluded.

On Juneteenth Gabriel Prawl said: This history is in the book

'Mobilizing in Our Own Name, Million Worker March'

by Clarence Thomas, retired secretary treasurer of ILWU local 10.

"The closer rank and file workers get to the public the more support the public will give to organized labor. Such close communication will make it apparent to those outside our ranks of labor that a community of interests lies between them. Every effort to split the ranks ranks of labor and to split the public, the majority of whom are workers themselves, to keep workers from their organized brothers and sisters must fail."

www.MillionWorkerMarch

