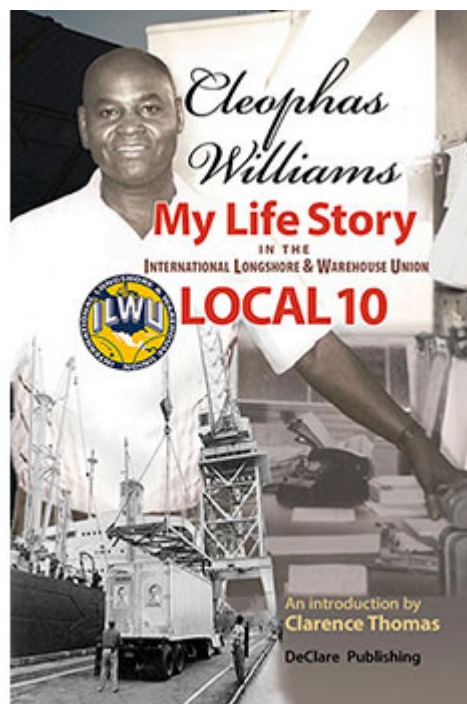




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NYC Book Signing: Cleophas Williams, My Life Story in ILWU Local 10, Aug. 5

written by Struggle - La Lucha
July 31, 2023

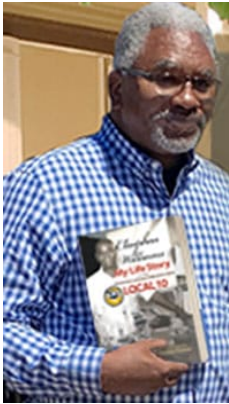


“Cleophas Williams, My Life Story in the Int’l Longshore Union Local 10”

Saturday, August 5

From 2 pm to 5 pm

St Mary’s Episcopal Church – Harlem
521 West 126th Street, NYC 10027



Cleophas Williams’ story as told by himself, will be introduced by Clarence Thomas, a leading African American radical labor and community activist.

"The history of African Americans in the Int'l Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) in San Francisco is indeed worthy of documentation. Such an individual is Cleophas Williams, whose distinguished career as a member of the Local 10 spanned 38 years.

"Cleophas Williams' election as president of ILWU Local 10 in 1967, made him the highest elected African American to serve as an officer in the entire ILWU.

"Born in rural Camden, Arkansas, and part of the great migration to the Bay Area, he arrived in Oakland, California, in 1942 - seeking to escape the horrors and multifaceted structures of systemic racism and white supremacy. He was amongst the leaders who placed Local 10 into the vanguard of the labor movement by engaging in civil-rights unionism and other social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. "Here is Cleophas Williams' historic journey - his rise in Local 10 within the greater context of the Black liberation movement.

- Clarence Thomas

Review by Sadie William

"My eyes were filled with tears of joy when I saw the cover of this book! Cleophas wrote every day about something from current events, trips, people, history of his church, life, and his beloved union. Many have said they found the book hard to put down, so did I. I have read it twice, and learned something new each time.

Hopefully this will be your experience as well."

- Sadie Williams is the 99 year old spouse of Cleophas Williams



Review by Gloria Verdieu

When I received this beautiful book from Delores Lemon-Thomas and Clarence Thomas, I could not wait to begin reading it.

I had the honor of meeting and talking with Sadie Williams, wife of Cleophas Williams, on two occasions. Once in Oakland at her home at the Cleophas Williams Rose Garden dedication shortly after the book

"Mobilizing in Our Own Name: Million Worker March" was published and again about a year later at the ILWU Pacific Coast Pensioners Association convention in Long Beach, Calif.

Each time she was surrounded by ILWU Local 10 members engaging and embracing her presence with love and respect. I was surprised when I went to introduce myself in Long Beach, and she said, "I remember you," and opened her arms for a hug.

In Long Beach, Delores let me glimpse some of the scanned pages of Cleophas Williams' handwritten journal. I held it in my hand and immediately began to read it. Delores left the journal with me for a little while.

As I examined it, I was impressed with his handwriting or, more formally, his penmanship. There are a few samples of his handwriting in the book, one on page 52 at the beginning of Chapter 2, "A Longshore Worker's Life Story."

Delores told me about Clarence's intention of editing and publishing Cleophas Williams' story. The pages would have to be scanned, which required them to keep the original transcript for a while. It was hard for Mrs. Sadie Williams to part with it, even for a short time, but she could rest assured that it was in good hands. This journal is a treasure that will be valued for generations to come.

I read through the book quickly the first time and reread it, reflecting on my own life and making connections. I was also brought up in the South, and one of the many things that resonated with me was when Williams wrote about the Booker T. Washington High School that he and his sister attended. The school was "built by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which builds schools for Black Students throughout the South where there were no Black schools."

The segregated school my eight siblings and I attended, Carver School, named after George Washington Carver, was built in 1915 using the same fund. It was renamed Carver-Hill School in 1955 after Reverend Edward Hill, who fought for well-funded schools for Black students.

There is much to be learned from this biography; the history of how Cleophas Williams was elected by popular vote the first African American president of ILWU Local 10, the most militant, progressive union in the United States, if not the world.

In the book, Cleophas explains that he was discharged from the army due to a knee injury after serving three months and 19 days. He heard a fellow "telling a barber that he was a Longshoreman; pay was good, and it had peacetime possibilities." So he applied, followed the steps needed, and was hired with no idea that, in his words, "I was about to embark on a journey that not only brought me employment, but a place in the sun that I would have never dreamed of."

Williams knew nothing about the ILWU when he was hired, but he was a fast learner and followed all the rules. After the 6-month probationary period, he was promoted to full union membership. Williams worked as a rank-and-file worker for 15 years, working out of the hall, attending union meetings, enrolling in the California Labor School, and just continuing to learn before deciding to run for president of ILWU.

Williams acknowledged the shoulders of those ancestors who paved the way and those that gave him much-needed support; apologized to people he hurt along the way. He took responsibility for his mistakes, not blaming his parents or the tragic experiences of growing up in the "Jim Crow" South.

Williams was a courageous working-class organizer, a fighter for social justice and the rights of workers nationally and internationally. He believed the struggle for social justice, equality, and dignity was a workers' struggle.

I highly recommend employed, unemployed, organized, and unorganized workers read Cleophas Williams' "My Life Story in the International Longshore & Warehouse Union Local 10."

Gloria Verdieu is a journalist for Struggle-La Lucha Newspaper; editor of "Black August 1619-2019" (2029) and a co-editor of "Mobilizing in Our own Name, Million Worker March" (2021) Verdieu is a San Diego activist; member of Committee Against Police Brutality and the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition.

Review by Harvey Schwartz

Cleophas Williams, My Life Story in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, Local 10, is a welcome addition to the rich literature about the famously progressive ILWU. Williams (1923-2016) was a four-time Local 10 president, the first African American to hold that office, and an iconic figure in the union's history. Former Local 10 Secretary-Treasurer Clarence Thomas describes him in the volume's introduction as the Jackie Robinson of the ILWU.

The book is a collection of Williams' writings, including a previously unpublished 92-page manuscript, brief occasional pieces, and other offerings. It was compiled by Thomas and edited by his wife, Delores Lemon-Thomas, with the support of Cleophas's widow Sadie Williams and Sade's daughter Jackie Chauhan. The great strength of the book is its accessibility. It presents Williams's recollections in rich narrative form in his own powerful voice.

Cleophas Williams is divided into two distinct and informative sections. The first focuses on Williams's personal life from his youth in the Deep South during the Great Depression of the 1930s through his early career as a longshore worker and Local 10 activist in Northern California between 1943 and 1967. Williams relied on his strong family background, his religious faith, and his belief in education to survive and persevere despite the challenges of poverty and southern Jim Crow racism. In California, he became a civil rights advocate and an elected job dispatcher in his local. He won the first of his four terms as Local 10 president in 1967.

In the second section of the book, Williams explores the intersection of union politics and race in Local 10, which has had an African American majority since 1959. In running for office, Williams had to contend with a conservative, white-led faction in the local. Going beyond this problem to review other issues, Williams analyses race and politics in the local in complex and sometimes troubling terms. At one point he perceptively observes, "Racism made monsters out of us all.... We seek a utopia but we are not there yet."

This second section of the book begins with the period immediately after World War II. Williams vividly describes pre-container break-bulk-cargo handling and has insightful observations about the 1946, 1948, and 1971 longshore strikes. He recalls how ILWU founder and long-time International president Harry Bridges defended African American longshore workers from job losses during a post-war decline in cargo tonnage, and he recounts Black-led Local 10 efforts to protect the Australian-born Bridges from deportation. Williams also traces Local 10's sustained push to integrate many of the best jobs on the Bay Area waterfront. He retired from the job — but not from the struggle, as members of the ILWU Pacific Coast Pensioners Association put it — in 1981.

Cleophas Williams can be read profitably by all members of the ILWU, regardless of their local or their background. Everyone who is interested in work and unionism will benefit from reading it. The book contains a useful glossary, a helpful index, and numerous attractive illustrations.

Harvey Schwartz is curator of the International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) Oral History Collection at the union's library in San Francisco. His writings include "Solidarity Stories: An Oral History of the ILWU" (2009); "Building the Golden Gate Bridge: A Workers' Oral History" (2015) and "Labor under Siege, Big Bob McEllrath and the ILWU's Fight for Organized Labor in an Anti-Union Era", co-authored with Ronald E. Magden (2022), books published by the University of Washington Press. He holds a Ph.D. in history from UC Davis and specializes in West Coast maritime history.

**“Cleophas Williams,
My Life Story in the Int’l Longshore Union Local
10”**

DeClare Publishing, 2023

Order in hardcover, ebook and paperback from

millionworkermarch.com/cleophas-williams-book

