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From apartheid to Palestine: Bill Proctor's ILWU journey

written by Clarence Thomas
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Trade union retiree in Seattle talks with Clarence Thomas



Photo: millionworkermarch.com

William “Bill” Proctor was on the front lines of ILWU Local 10 rank-and-filers during the anti-apartheid struggle before transferring to Local 19 in the 1980s. As a winch operator, he personally refused to discharge South African cargo. He was a member of the Southern African Liberation Support Committee, the first rank-and-file labor organization of its kind. In the 1970s, a photo of Bill with Local 10 activists loading a container to be sent to freedom fighters in Southern Africa appeared in the ILWU Dispatcher Newspaper. The photo shows Bill holding his young son Max, who is now a longshore worker in Local 19 in Seattle.

Clarence Thomas: Were your parents International Longshore and Warehouse

Union (ILWU) members?

Bill Proctor: I was born at Kaiser Hospital, Oakland, California, nine months after World War II ended, as were many of our generation. My mom and biological father separated and divorced before my fourth birthday. During the war, my mom was a Welder on the Oakland and Richmond dry docks, building Victory ships.

My grandparents were politically active and met in the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] free speech campaign. Grandad was a member of the IWW free speech Flying Squad. Soapboxing was his thing; he had the gift of gab. I am only a continuation of IWW political doctrine in the flesh. My grandad's book is *Memoirs Of A Wobbly* by H.E. McGuckin. It is, of course, out of print.



[Roscoe "RQ" Proctor](#)

Following the war, my mom, Virginia McGuckin, found work out of Local 6 ILWU Eastbay and wound up at the Colgate/Palmolive plant in Berkeley. It was at this

worksite that my mother met Roscoe “RQ” Proctor, the man who became my father by proxy. At age 16, when I wanted to find a summer job, I needed a Social Security card, and when I applied, I entered my name as William Proctor; from then on, it is the only name I go by, as RQ was the only father I knew. I met RQ when I was almost six years old, and over time, I guess you could say, RQ and I bonded soon after, and I learned lessons from him about many things, most importantly, the importance of the struggle to end racism.

We lived in West Oakland, and during that time, I attended Lafayette, Longfellow, and Durant elementary schools, went on to Hoover Jr. High, and in the middle of 7th grade, our family moved to South Berkeley.

During my formative preteen and teen years, I was part of a Red Diaper group of kids that circulated petitions to end the threat of nuclear war and to end school segregation at Housewives Market and Swan’s.

We were the kids of dyed-in-the-wool Communists. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, both of my folks were seated on the Central Committee CPUSA. My Dad, RQ, was indicted as an agent of a foreign power in the case of Albertson v. Subversive Activities Control Board in 1962 and acquitted by the Supreme Court in 1965.

I cited Proctor vs. USA in my successful avoidance of the Selective Service draft to fight in Vietnam.

As my dad read Jet magazine, I would often try to sneak a peek at the centerfold Beauties. In 1955, I opened one of his Jet magazines, and while thumbing through, I came across a photo of Emmitt Till. I was traumatized when I saw my playmates in that picture. The image is burned into my brain to this day!

CT: When did you become a member of the ILWU? Which Local?

BP: In May 1967, I was one of 600 or so B-man hires at Local 10. I started and

worked my first shift on June 6, 1967. [B men get the dirtiest and heaviest jobs.]

CT: My waterfront career lasted 42 plus years, and I retired on Oct. 1, 2009, from the Port of Seattle. My career was almost evenly split between San Francisco and Seattle.

CT: Are you active in the local?

BP: Since retirement, I have been active with the Seattle Pension Club, PCPA. I am on the verge of leaving this Club as it is not at all interested in engaging in struggle; they are a fat and sassy bunch.

CT: Did you submit a resolution regarding the Palestinians to your pensioner's club?

BP: Yes, I presented a Resolution that cited facts about civilian casualties, called for an end to the war on the Palestinian people by Zionist Israel, and an investigation of our pension funds for investments in Israeli stock, bonds, and securities, with an eye toward divestment.

It was rejected by the "Fat and Sassy" members!

CT: Did you attend the 39th ILWU Convention in Vancouver?

BP: I did not attend the 39th convention.

CT: How has the rank-and-file changed over the years, social justice issues?

BP: For the last 30 years or so, I see the union slowly moving to the right politically as the power base of the longshore division shifted from San Francisco south to Los Angeles and Long Beach, where the lion's share of West Coast cargo comes in at Southern Cal.

Los Angeles has never been as radical politically as the Bay Area. In fact, it is quite

conservative.

CT: What direction do you see the ILWU going and why?

BP: I truly do not have any idea where the union is headed. I just know it is not the same union it was when I entered the industry. When I consider our union stance on various social issues, I see that the union is losing its perspective.

Peace Out!

Clarence Thomas participated in the 39th Convention of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) held in Vancouver, B.C., as a fraternal delegate representing the ILWU Pacific Coast Pensioners Association (PCPA).

The photo of Bill Proctor with the Southern Africa Liberation Support Committee is from Thomas' book "Mobilizing in Our Own Name, Million Worker March." The book is available at millionworkermarch.com

