The Baltimore docks: then and now

By Clarence W. Hunter
AFRO Staff Writer

The dock strike is over. Close to 4,000 longshoremen went back to work this week after ratifying a new three - year contract guaranteeing a 62 percent increase in wages (from $8 to $10.40 per hour) and fringe benefits.

Members of the International Longshoreman's Association Local 333, however, refused to go back to work, protesting the guaranteed annual income provision, which will make another 1,000 longshoremen eligible for a guaranteed income of 1,900 hours, which is slightly less than $20,000 annually.

The strike, which was against containerized shipping, lasted two months and was the seventh major dock strike in Baltimore since the turn of the century.

The first major strike was in 1912. The issue then, and in all of the strikes which followed, was better pay and working conditions.

During that time the International Longshoreman's Associatin Local 858 formed to fight for equality on the docks for its black workers.

BACK TO WORK — Carville Turner (R) vice president of Local 858 in 1946, gives out work assignments to John Walton, Phil Banks and Arthur Hill (L to R) after the eight-day strike for higher wages and larger work crews.

The 1933 strike was considered insignificant by union officials because it was the middle of the Depression.

Called a "brief work interruption" by one official, dockworkers walked off the job for less than one day to protest working conditions.

The work stoppage in 1946 lasted eight days. The main issue was the refusal to employ additional men on the 145 crews working the harbor.

The longshoreman had already agreed to better working conditions, higher wages and overtime pay but wanted the number of men on each gang raised from 15 to 16.

The next major strike was in 1957. By this time local 858 had grown to 1,600 members and made up one - third of the dock work force.

Beside the wage increases and better benefits the major demands included national bargaining to include all East Coast ports and a first aid station in the harbor.

It was at this time the union and management agreed to a three - year contract.

In 1968 the strike lasted more than two months, through Christmas and New Year.

The strike nearly crippled the entire East Coast and hurt small businesses and longshoremen financially.

The biggest issue for union officials was job security and training to operate machinery used on ships having containerized cargo.

The 1971 strike for higher wages was mild compared to the heated court battle between the United States and the International Longshoreman Association to prevent Local 858, which at that time had 1,226 black members and five white members, and Local 829, which had 1,155 white members and four black members from merging.

The order to merge had been handed down by Judge Alexander Harvey II in 1970, which stated both locals were in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Neither local wanted to merge. Black union officials felt the merger would not change discrimination in the port.

Union officials took the case to the Supreme Court in 1972 but the court ruled against them. The unions merged in December 1973 to form Local 333, the largest union on the docks today.

Dock strike won't hurt Christmas

Christmas may be expensive for city residents this year but they can't blame the dock strike for high prices.

And some products might cost less in the early months of 1978.

Ed McNeil, spokesman for the Retail Merchants Association, said he does not believe the two - month strike, which ended this week, will raise prices for merchandise purchased before the holidays.

"The strike came at a time when most of the Christmas items were in," he said. "I do believe it will have an impact on future prices because of the delay of unloading imports."

Don Kling, spokesman for the Maryland Port Authority, also said it is unlikely that the Christmas cargo still on ships in the port will increase prices. Certain items might sell at lower prices after Christmas when cargo is unloaded because stores have large quantities, he said.

The strike, according to Kling, delayed delivery of some Christmas cargo which was left on containerized ships and cargo left on these ships will not be delivered in time for the holidays.

"Anything that is sitting on the docks to be processed won't be delivered for at least two weeks. Usually cargo gets delivered in two days, but we have a backlog and it's going to take time," he said.

1933 — Longshoremen walk off the job briefly to protest working conditions at the harbor.

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CHALK UP ANOTHER — Baltimore eviction victim Mrs. Beatrice Smith is one of the estimated 225 tenants that were ousted during November. (AFRO photo by Fred Hines)

You don't need to be evicted

'So what can you do about this?'

By Fred Hines
AFRO Staff Writer

Sorrow streamed down Mrs. Beatrice Smith's face like rapidly melting icicles as she stood helplessly beside her haphazardly stacked furniture.

A refrigerator door hanging on its hinges, stacked dresser drawers, mutilated tables: remnants of what used to be her kitchen, bedroom, livingroom.

Mrs. Smith felt she could do nothing Monday morning after being evicted from her northwest Baltimore apartment when she asked no one in particular, "So what can you do about this?"

The sad fact was that there was nothing anyone could do. At the beginning of November, she said the landlord sent her a notice that $480 was due in rent.

Although she maintained that her rent had been paid up to November, Mrs. Smith only showed a loose leaf sheet of paper to support her claim that she had paid her rent. But she did not produce cancelled checks or money order stubs as proof that would have made her argument stronger.

But Mrs. Smith's situation is only the tip of the iceberg because her case is an example of a growing trend of eviction victims in Baltimore city who previously had landlord tenant problems.

During the month of November an estimated 225 evictions took place in Baltimore city, an average of 7.5 per day according to Calvin Coulbourn, supervisor constable at the People's Court.

Coulbourn maintained, however, that evictions are extreme circumstances because "if the tenant has the money when the landlord arrives at the apartment to evict the tenant, the constable makes the landlord take the money" and eviction does not take place.

But there are other circumstances, Coulbourn said, where tenants are scheduled to be evicted and they move before the landlord arrives.

"In such an instance, the only way he (the landlord) can do anything is find where they (tenant) moved and sue for a specific amount of money that the tenant may have owed," Coulbourn said.

About 99 percent of the landlords do not bother to do this, he said, because in most circumstances they do not know where the tenant moved and do not have the resources to find out.

But there is an unseen danger of more apartment dwellers getting evicted at this time because many refuse to pay their rent in protest of furnaces that don't work, according to Rosetta Kerr, an associate director at the Baltimore Urban League.

"If someone calls and tells us that they have not paid their rent in two months because of a furnace we explain to them that it's their obligation to pay the rent and it's his (the land's) obligation to fix the house," Ms. Kerr said.

Although the landlord has the upper hand because of lease agreements, Ms. Kerr said, the Baltimore Urban League attempts to persuade the landlord to let the family stay until they can pay.

"They are usually cooperative depending on how you approach them," Ms. Kerr said. "But what we found out is that usually landlords who own a few properties will try to keep their tenants happy."

"You know you shouldn't see this in a country like America," Mrs. Smith shrugged with a facial expression that still managed to show self reliance. "I have no where to go and I've got to find someplace."

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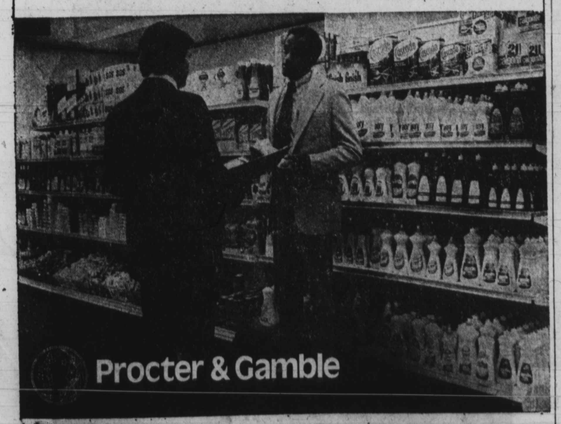
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