

Longshoreman's loss felt among Maine's unions

BY JANMARIE TOKER

GUEST COLUMN



Janmarie Toker

*"Power goes to two poles: to those who've got the money and those who've got the people."
— Saul Alinsky*

In today's 24-hour cable news world, it's easy to be overtaken by cynicism and think you have no chance to change the system. It's easy to believe that the people with the money are more powerful than those without.

However, those beliefs are not entirely true. In fact, when people come together, they can become more powerful than the wealthiest lobbyists, corporations, or even governments.

Last month, the world lost a man who wielded just that type of power. That man is union leader, activist and longshoreman Leo Robinson.

Although he wasn't well known in our part of the country, he was a true leader in every sense of the word. He was a man who had a vision of a world of equality and opportunity, and he acted toward that vision every day of his life. Through his union, he fought corporations, government and lobbyists to forward the cause of the people.

Leo may have lived and died on the opposite coast, but he fought for the same values many Mainers making a living off the waterfront fight for here: He fought for workers' rights and equality not just among races, but among classes as well. He fought for fair contracts and working conditions. He fought for a better life for those working in the ports. Perhaps the most inspiring part of Robinson's life was that he also fought for rights globally and found that, through that fight, he was able to ensure rights locally, as well.

He used his place in leadership to encourage the ILWU Local 10 members to support the cause of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress by boycotting goods shipped from South Africa. This was during a time when Mandela was imprisoned and considered a terrorist by the United States.

Through boycotts spearheaded by Robinson, ports covering the entire West Coast refused cargo from South Africa. Mandela's cause grew substantially and the U.S. eventually changed policy. When apartheid fell, Mandela came to Oakland and thanked Leo Robinson and the ILWU for their efforts fighting for freedom for South Africans.

He didn't just fight for South Africa. He fought against wars in the Middle East, against police brutality in Oakland, and for the rights of the Occupy movement. He organized the Million Workers March in Washington in 2004 to fight for basic human rights such as public education, a living wage, universal health care, the protection of Social Security, and workers' right to organize.

Leo's focus on outside events strengthened the union's power when fighting for its own needs. Through his efforts organizing ILWU Local 10 to support Nelson Mandela, he displayed the true strength of the union — something not lost on their employers. In fact, through the international and national causes the ILWU Local 10 joined, the workers realized the enormous power they had when they joined together.

There are few people who shared Leo's ability to strategize, organize and inspire workers. Through the years, ILWU Local 10 was seen as a force to reckon with. Robinson led the union to ensure members would not see their rights attacked, their contracts weakened or their livelihoods diminished.

We can all learn something from the life of Leo Robinson — a man who acted on his beliefs regardless of the powerful interests he was working against.

He taught us that, while alone, we may not get far. Joined with others, we can achieve the unimaginable.

Leo achieved no less than worldwide change through his efforts. He illustrated how, through the power of organizing, we can stand up against global powers. The will of the people can be heard through unions.

Locally, we can see the power of the people through Local S-6 and other unions at Bath Iron Works. Whether it's working together to negotiate fair contracts or helping each other when one is in need, they understand the importance of coming together to achieve results, just like Leo Robinson did.

Leo's lessons should be remembered today, as we see lower membership in unions.

As large corporations give our politicians money to attack the power of the people by attacking unions, we should be all the more careful not to let them win. When we lose the chance to join together as a people and fight against larger powers, we lose the battle for individual rights.

Leo Robinson may have died last month, but his spirit can live on in all of us. He is a true inspiration for all workers. By harnessing the power of unions, he was able to ensure rights for workers from across the globe to across the street.

JANMARIE TOKER is an attorney at McTeague Higbee in Topsham, where she has been representing longshore workers in Maine for more than 25 years.