

---

## **"Crazy" Longshoremen Say "Let Us Run the Port"**

"Introduce us as crazy people, but people with a few ideas in our heads about how to make work better -- how to make life better." Thus were translated the opening words of a leader of the *Compania* of the Port of Genoa to a small group of trade unionists and labor historians from the United States to whom they had offered a tour of the port. The *Compania* longshoremen have been on strike since January, 1989.

The *Compania* is the descendant of the ancient guild of longshoremen established in the merchant republic of Genoa in the fourteenth century. It is a unique organization that has developed innovative goals and strategies with implications for the future of the labor movement elsewhere.

### **The Shrinking Port**

Genoa was and remains the largest port in Italy. But employment today is one-fifth of what it was a decade ago. The leaders of the *Compania* blame incompetent management for most of the job loss. When asked who runs the port, one replied with a laugh, "fifty percent we do; the other fifty percent is pure chaos."

The longshoremen clearly detest the port's disorganization, corruption, and poor management. They describe one instance after another where work had been lost because the wrong equipment had been installed, facilities were inadequate, or scheduling incompetent.

When management began introducing containerization and other technological innovations, the dockworkers tried to negotiate their use while vigorously opposing concessions. The result was all too typical of the era of multinational capital: the big shipping companies simply began unloading their cargoes in Amsterdam and trucking the goods south into Italy, leading to still further loss of jobs.

### **Who Will Manage the Port?**

The port of Genoa is a public facility responsible to the national minister of transportation. But much of it is operated by small enterprises, many of which are tied in with local political machines and some of which, the longshoremen allege, are corrupt. The current year-long strike grows out of a move by the minister of transportation to deregulate the docks. This would let private

entrepreneurs break the power of the *Compania* and run certain docks independently, most likely with underpaid and unorganized workers.

The longshoremen maintain that they can organize the unloading of the ships far better than management. And they cherish a tactical flexibility which allows them to negotiate with a variety of potential partners -- including the multinational shipping companies themselves.

Their ability to manage the work and to bargain directly with all parties has put the *Compania* in a position to propose a dramatic alternative: let the longshoremen run the port. The *Compania* plan would eliminate all the various intermediaries and let the longshoremen contract directly with the international shipping companies. They would negotiate a standard tonnage rate for all cargo and take full responsibility for the entire management of the port.

This plan runs the danger of turning the *Compania* into a business firm in competition with longshoremen elsewhere. But the leaders oppose such a result on principle. They maintain that their international links of solidarity with other dockers will help them prevent such an outcome. They say their plan aims to strike a balance among quality of service rendered to customers, international solidarity of dockworkers, and environmental and quality-of-life concerns.

### **The Social Side**

The leaders of the *Compania* emphasize that their goal is not just a narrow improvement

in their economic conditions, but rather a general improvement in the quality of life at work and away. They argue that their control of the port will allow them to ensure the environmental safety of everything that comes in and out. They already have prevented the unloading of poisonous waste cargos. And they maintain that drugs and guns are not moved illegally through the port of Genoa because smugglers are aware of their vigilance.

The longshoremen also see self-management as a means of asserting the dignity of work and of workers. The common Italian term for longshoremen, *camallo*, is virtually a term of abuse; the *Compania* sees its efforts as redefining *camallo* as a term of pride.

The members of the *Compania* have a highly egalitarian ethic among themselves. The *Compania* trains all members so that they can do all the jobs. Most jobs are rotated; a few highly specialized ones are not, but even those can be done in a pinch by other workers.

On the other hand, the *Compania* includes only a minority of workers in the port; teamsters and others regard them as something of a caste apart. In the city as a whole, too, the members of the *Compania* are sometimes regarded as a privileged sector of the working class, with coveted jobs handed

down from father to son. In some ways the *Compania* resembles a skilled and exclusive craft union.

The *Compania* has somewhat ambiguous and volatile relations with the Communist Party (PCI), which until recently was in the Genoese government. The PCI supported their strike, helping turn out thousands for strike support rallies. But it also has tended to be dubious if not hostile toward the *Compania's* more unusual demands for workers' control of the port.

The *Compania* leaders are rather antagonistic toward their national union, charging "They want to sell us out." They say the national union is only concerned with setting wages and hours and is unprepared either to address workers control issues or to respond to the new multinational economy. The speak favorably, however, about the network which links dockworkers in most of the major ports in Europe, some though not all of which have lent support to their strike.

It's not uncommon for workers faced with oppressive and incompetent management to think, why not get these people out of here and run the place ourselves? The Genoese longshoremen reveal one way to struggle for that objective.

Jeremy Brecher  
W. Cornwall CT

## Social Change Tool for the 90s

This quarterly subject index to over 200 publications will be an invaluable tool in your study of social change. So ask the folks at your library to subscribe to the Alternative Press Index, if they don't already.

Libraries: \$125/year

Individuals & movement groups: \$30/year

Directory of Alternative &  
Radical Publications: \$3

For more  
information write:  
Alternative Press Center  
P.O. Box 33109  
Baltimore MD 21218



FOCUS 191M