

Excerpts from Oral History Interviews with George Love & Walter Williams

The "Unemployed 500" were a group of primarily Black longshoremen that joined the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) union during World War II. After the war they were deregistered from the union under a newly-instated seniority rule. In these two clips George Love and Walter Williams, both longshoremen, discuss their work and perspectives on the Unemployed 500.

Love was interviewed in 1989 by Tony Salcido, and Williams in 1988 and 1990 by Tony Salcido and Robert Marshall, both as part of the ILWU Local 13 Oral History Project. Love, a white man, was born in Texas and grew up in Louisiana. He served in the Navy for six years before settling in San Pedro and beginning work as a longshoreman. Williams was Black and born in the 1920s. He faced and fought discrimination in several union jobs before beginning work in 1943 under temporary registration in the ILWU. He was a central organizer for the Unemployed 500's efforts to seek reinstatement into ILWU, Local 13.

Excerpted Transcript from George Love Oral History:

GL: Yeah.

TS: ...you could work for...

GL: You would be called back when work picked up. And that is what they were told, and that was in writing somewhere. I think that they found that in writing. But, hundreds of them, a lot of 'em took their twenty-five dollars and left.

TS: Um hmm. 'Course, there were a few that stuck around because...

GL: Yes.

TS: ...when I got an ID in '49 and I know we always came out after the 500 unemployed. They had a bunch called that, that were in essence "casuals to work after all the registered men had got out." And then if they finished with the "Unemployed 500" then we use to be able to get jobs tied in with the sister locals and stuff.

GL: Um-hum.

TS: But as far as you know it was just a question of economics, the work dropping off and no...

GL: Right.

TS: ...racism tied in at all?

GL: Right.

TS: Now, you mentioned that they did sue to get in. Now, why did they have to sue to get back in?

GL: Because the policy of the local, one I helped to carry out as a member of the Membership Committee at that time...and we were cursed! I mean, one black guy in particular, [Ralph] Griffin would come to the Membership Committee, and L. B. Thomas cautioned us, who was the

president who always came to those meetings that, "Don't anybody blow their top," particularly guys like Pete Grassi and...

TS: Dewey...

GL: ...Dewey Long and some of the others. And, "I don't care what this guy's going to call you, you're not going to have a donny-brook, you're not going to attack him. He's going to walk out of here, he's here to cause disruption. Griffin, I'll never forget the guy's name. And, we, at every meeting we had to sit through that because we developed some kind of formula, too, that...I can't recall the details...that number one, for anyone we took in, because work was picking up, that no matter who we took at least one of 'em would be a returning veteran who should have got in. And first thing we did we took any guys who had "permits" as we called them, when they left for the war, who should. And later that became the law, you know, entitled to the job. And then, I forget, we did take some unemployed. But we didn't take 'em because were unemployed, we were pickin' and choosin'.

TS: Uh-huh.

GL: And they weren't all guys out of town, and they weren't all Black. As you know, I can name some names that was on that list of guys who got in. In fact, I think the last guy we took in there...and we squeezed him in was [Nate] Dibiasi, and Jim Conway right ahead of him, who went to bat for Nate and guys like that that we took in who, who got in on that last group of 500. Yeah, they were unemployed.

Excerpted Transcript from Walter Williams Oral History:

TS: Yeah, the last "500" ["Unemployed 500"]...

WW: Yeah, who came in [during] the war, World War Two, and there you have the "500" group because they kept saying, "Well, it's going to be about five hundred," you know, "guys that were going to be deregistered..." And...so we appealed that. I remember that I went to the Executive Board. I remember this very clearly...And, oh...I do believe L. B. Thomas was president at that time. Prior to that he made a statement... made a statement at the Wilmington Bowl. He said, "We're going to make this union lily white again!"

TS: That was L. B. Thomas?

WW: That was L. B. Thomas. Right. And that has always stuck in my craw...you know...

TS: Of course he wasn't alone in this.

WW: Of course he wasn't, there were a lot of guys. [Recording inaudible]...Like I say, there were plenty of guys around this town anti-black, very strong racists, then I walked out and I went down in the hatch to work, you know.

I'll never forget this incident. Peanuts, I think they called him...[Recording inaudible]...and so it carried of course, and he said, they were going to do it on a seniority basis, that it was legal and all that sort of thing...[Recording inaudible]...and I can recall at the meeting where this was done, that Bill Lawrence got in the...into the damn thing and he more or less challenged it and he spoke against it...

TS: ...of the guys releasing the "500?"

WW: Yeah, he did. He said he didn't think it was morally right or that it was legally right that it should happen. And I always appreciated Bill [Lawrence] for that because, you know, that was a political thing and he was a politician, and he wanted to maintain his popularity. So I say, it took a lot of guts.

TS: Yes, but it worked against him politically in those days.

WW: That's what I'm saying...he took [it was] a calculated risk that he took. But he did it. And as I said, I really appreciated this. I'm not sure that when he did this that we had gone into, gone to the Executive Board to asked them to rescind the motion, of the action calling for the de-registration of the "500" or whether it was after this took place in the [Wilmington] Bowl, after Bill [Lawrence] got up and spoke against it. But, like I'm saying, the record is the best source, but I know these things did happen. But they refused to rescind, and it stuck. And then we were deregistered, and that was in '46.

TS: So, they deregistered all five hundred in one swipe?

WW: As I recall, I mean, I never looked at the figures to show, you know, to see whether they did it in tens or hundreds or increments of fifty or whatever, I don't know what they did but...