

THREE QUESTIONS FOR MM&P PRESIDENT DON MARCUS



The AFL-CIO is including this regular feature in our Dispatch newsletter, where we ask three questions of a labor leader. We continue this feature with a short interview with Don Marcus, president of the Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P).

Q: Can you tell us about a recent local campaign in which MM&P has been engaged?

A: MM&P is organizing tank barge workers in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. These workers, called “tankermen,” fuel the commercial cargo vessels in these harbors, which, taken together, are by far the busiest in the United States. Tankermen and women are critical to the flow of cargo into and out of the United States. If you have seen recent pictures of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, you will know they are overflowing with ships waiting to unload all types of consumer goods. Refueling these ships in a safe and environmentally sound way takes skilled workers. Our campaign is a joint effort with another maritime union, the Inlandboatmen’s Union of the Pacific (IBU), who are organizing the tugboat workers while MM&P organizes the barge workers. All of these workers were formerly employed by Foss Maritime, who sold out their refueling operations. Protecting the livelihoods of these workers and the well-being of their families as well as maritime industry standards in Los Angeles/Long Beach harbors is our mission, and two unions and 75 workers are working hand in hand to achieve these objectives.

Q: What are the highest priorities for MM&P?

A: Our highest priorities remain protecting the jobs, health and safety of our membership. The maritime industry was one of the first industries to feel the effects of globalization. In international trade, U.S.-flag merchant ships have largely been replaced by ships flying the flags of countries

such as Panama, Liberia and the Marshall Islands, whose First World owners and investors are free to exploit the lowest-cost worldwide labor, avoid taxation, dodge safety and environmental regulation and, quite frequently, remain anonymous while doing so. In this atmosphere, protecting our jobs means constant vigilance in Washington, D.C., to preserve federal legislation such as the Jones Act, the Maritime Security Program and Cargo Preference laws that safeguard U.S. jobs—and U.S. economic and national security. The external international pressure on our industry is, of course, coupled with the internal pressure that all unions in the U.S. face: the disintegration of the social compact between capital and labor. Preserving our job base and working conditions, overcoming the legal and practical hurdles in organizing new members, and maintaining safe, healthy and environmentally sound workplaces are our priorities. Does this sound familiar?

Q: What would you say to inspire someone who is starting to become involved in the labor movement?

A: The labor movement is the last, best bastion to defend humanity against the outrages of global capitalism. It starts with ordinary people on their jobs who decide to work together. Working in labor can amount to pissing in the wind or being an inspirational and incredibly powerful force. Cliches aside, in those rare and sublime moments when you partake in the power of solidarity in action, there is nothing else like it! Mind you, this doesn't happen very often. If unlucky, it may never happen at all, but when it—the power of the people—does happen, it is as if the clouds open up and light shines down from the heavens. These precious moments may come when justice is done for a single individual, for a group of workers or for a mass movement, but once experienced, all the heartache, sweat and anxious toil made to get there are paid off. Doing the right thing for your sisters and brothers, fighting back against the greed and hypocrisy of our economic system, and making someone's life and workplace better are the prizes, and why working in the labor movement is a mission that can sustain you through all your days on the planet.