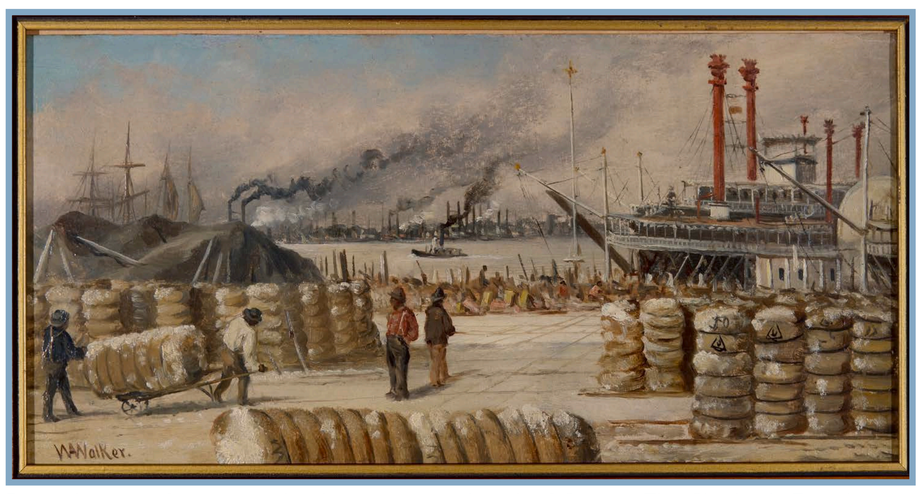
Screwmen's Strike 1903

By the end of the 19th century, New Orleans was the largest city in the South and the second most important port in the country.

In an economy built on the cotton trade, screwmen, whose skilled labor forced as many bales of cotton onto a ship as physically possible, were at the top of the occupational scale for dockworkers and some of the best paid laborers in the city. Unlike the longshoremen and other dockworkers, the screwmen's unions had never agreed to a half and half approach to sharing out labor between the white and black unions. The white union had simply restricted black screwmen to twenty gangs a day, making efforts by shipping agents to hire black screwmen for lower wages and without union rules difficult to combat during the depression of the 1890s.

After the turn of the 20th century, advances in shipping (i.e. faster Atlantic crossings, larger ships and loading methods that prioritized speed rather than skill) made screwmen's specialized labor less critical and reoriented the shipping industry. As shipping firms consolidated radically, agents of the four largest firms, which controlled 70% of the cotton shipped through the port began to call for a collapse in distinction between screwmen and longshoremen; a move towards cutting both wages and days. Faced with employer collusion and a rise in immigration that provided a seemingly unending supply of low skilled labor, the screwmen had little choice: regain control of the labor supply or face replacement.



Painted scene of screwmen loading cotton on the wharf. Source: The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1979.325.3554Collection, 1956.38.

In April 1902, the Dock and Cotton Council negotiated an agreement between the black and white screwmen's unions, setting a uniform wage, and integrating work crews as a hedge against racial gamesmanship by the shipping firms. The agreement made significant progress towards reviving the interracial labor solidarity that had emerged under the Cotton Men's Executive Council of the 1880s, eroded under the pressures of the depression of the 1890s, tentatively reemerged in the organizing that enabled the 1892 strike, and shattered in 1894–5, as white longshoremen, whose cap on black laborers was broken by British shipping agents, rioted, destroying black workers tools and killing several men.

The riots of 1894–5 had proved disastrous for workers on the wharves; with union control broken, wages fell and working conditions deteriorated. As new pressures on labor arose in a shifting economy, union leaders applied those pragmatics in support of a return to inter-racial organizing and limited solidarity. Over the course of 1903, that solidarity would be tested as negotiations for a standard agreement with the Steamship Conference, representing both large and small shipping firms, veered between strike and lockout over nearly seven months. The Steamship Conference attempted to force black laborers back to work under a standing contract, pressured other dockworkers to load ships as scabs, and failing at both, finally imported 200 white strikebreakers from St. Louis by train.

Screwmen loading cotton on the wharf. Source: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1956.38.

The scabs, who went to work with 165 US Marshals and New Orleans Police Department officers protecting them from 3000 dockworkers gathered at the fence, did not break the labor coalition. Voting down a general strike, the Dock and Cotton Council assembled a ten man interracial committee to negotiate with the Steamship Conference, which soon splintered under the varying economic interests and vulnerabilities of its larger and smaller members. As smaller shipping companies broke ranks, refusing to employ the strike breakers and agreeing to the screwmen's definition of a reasonable workload, pressure increased on the larger companies in a city that had grown tired of the prolonged battle between capital and labor and the economic upheavals that ensued. On October 11, the four largest shipping companies admitted defeat, signing an agreement with the screwmen in the Mayor's office.

Sources

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