So he learned his lesson and had to take what they gave him. . . . That was an example of the way it was. The old Blue Book had good rules, but nobody lived up to them. And if you complained, then you weren't one of the ones picked the next morning, no matter how long you'd been working there. Very simple.5

If the Blue Book had a rival as the most despised symbol of the longshoremen's oppression, it was the shape-up—the infamous system of hiring on the docks. As far back as 1861, Henry Mayhew had stood on the London pierheads and watched as "masses of men of all grades, looks, and kinds" gathered around the foremen in the hope of finding a day's work. As the foreman came forward, "some men jump on the backs of the others, so as to lift themselves high above the rest, and attract the notice of him who hires them. Some cry aloud his surname, some his Christian name, others call out their own names, to remind him that they are there. Now the appeal is made in Irish blarney—now in broken English. Indeed, it is a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling for only one day's hire."6

In San Francisco, the Embarcadero was known as the "slave market," but to many who witnessed it the shape-up bespoke an even lower form of existence. Bridges testified that the men were "hired off the streets like a bunch of sheep," and an observer in Boston commented that the stevedores who gathered around the hiring bosses were "like starving dogs at the sound of the dinner gong, each knowing that there were enough scraps left to reach just a few of them." The ILA rightly declared that "a more cruel, graft-ridden and senseless system of hiring could not be devised. . . . Thousands of men seeking employment were forced to hang around the piers at all hours, exposed to every kind of weather. Often, hundreds would report at a single pier at dawn, stand around for hours, only to be told, 'No work today,' long after there was any chance of obtaining work elsewhere." One longshoreman recalled that "for thirty-five days, rain or shine, I was out there on the waterfront from five in the morning till all the crews were filled; but I never got a job."7

Depression conditions aggravated the problem of an already swollen work force. According to the ILA, many experienced longshoremen were forced to seek government relief while others "worked like slaves in shifts from 24 to 36 hours without sleep." As the favored few worked themselves into a state of exhaustion, crowds of hungry men would hover like vultures by the pierheads, on the chance that someone would get hurt on the job or fail to keep pace with the speed-up.8

Of course, the shape-up hiring system invited abuse, ranging from petty corruption to systematic extortion. Typical examples included the gang boss who "sold moonshine from his thermos bottle at two bits a shot to all of his gang that did not want to be fired"; a boss who for fourteen years "had the boys packing him booze and doing odd jobs around his house, etc. in order to
get a job”; and the practice on the Dollar line docks, where the men regularly kicked back 10 percent of their wages to the gang bosses.9

The MWIU set out to change these conditions among both seamen and longshoremen. But for the most part its efforts on the Pacific Coast were sporadic and relatively ineffective. Sam Darcy, who directed the work of the Communist party in California, expressed the opinion in later years that the Marine Workers Union was “more a name than a substance. . . . You never knew who had books and who didn’t and who paid dues and who didn’t. It was all very vague.” Contemporary estimates tend to bear out his recollection. In 1932, more than two years after the union’s founding, the Party’s Western Worker admitted: “Except for the scattered A. F. of L. and company unions, it can be said that the marine workers were unorganized.” At that time, the MWIU had only one branch headquarters on the Pacific Coast, in San Francisco, and scattered delegates in several other ports. In July 1933, while acknowledging that the marine industry was the “most strategic” in California, the Western Worker declared that the union still faced the “first step” of establishing effective ship and dock committees “before we can expect to form any real mass organization of the M.W.I.U.” The Communist party concluded: “Essentially the [Red unions remain] isolated from the most basic sections of the workers on the coast, in marine, railroad, agriculture, oil, and those in the large plants.”10

In early 1934, however, the pace and effectiveness of the union’s activity increased somewhat. It led a few strikes aboard ship, including one on the Andrea Luckenbach where the MWIU mobilized five hundred pickets on the Seattle docks to support the crew’s demands for higher wages and better conditions. But inspired by the example of the “Baltimore Soviet,” most of the MWIU’s efforts during this period seemed to focus on the question of seamen’s relief. In San Francisco a Western Worker headline declared, “Longshoremen, Seamen Fight for Rights Won in Baltimore.” In San Pedro, only a week before the beginning of the Big Strike, the MWIU spearheaded the formation of a Seamen’s Unemployed Council, which demanded that “the seamen shall be permitted to administer their own relief through their elected committees.”11

Within a matter of days, these struggles were cast into the background by the epic coastwide strike that the longshoremen initiated on May 9. And in this instance the Communist party was well prepared. For insofar as the Party on the West Coast made any significant headway in the maritime industry from 1930 to 1934, it was among the stevedores. The advances came by applying policies whose emphasis varied sharply from the main thrust of the Third Period line and program. While the Communist-led industrial union on the Pacific Coast languished, or moved ahead only in fits and starts, the Party gradually applied itself to the task of rebuilding the AFL craft union on the
docks. How this happened is a complex, even tangled, story, highlighted by several strong-willed, independent personalities whose roles shed significant light on the inner workings of the Communist party and the rebirth of maritime unionism during these years.

One of these personalities was Sam Darcy, who became Communist party district organizer for California, Nevada, and Arizona at the beginning of 1931. Historian Cletus Daniel has asserted that in Darcy "Communists in California gained a district organizer as resourceful and effective as any who served the American party during the 1930s." Born Samuel Dardeek in the Ukraine, he came to the United States at the age of two and grew up in the hothouse world of socialist politics and needle-trades unionism in New York City. One of his most vivid early recollections was of a garment workers' picket line where his father, an ardent union member, was beaten by police billy clubs and carried away on a stretcher. "From then on," he said, "I was a Communist." In the late twenties he went to the Soviet Union for sixteen months and served as an American representative to the Young Communist International. Upon his return to the United States, he was the main organizer of the Communist-led demonstration of the unemployed in New York City on March 6, 1930. The demonstration, one of many across the country and around the world, drew a huge crowd and resulted in a bloody confrontation with heavily armed police.

Soon after this event Darcy ran afoul of the newly appointed Communist leader Earl Browder, who apparently found his keen intelligence disquieting and his prickly manner annoying. The Party’s failure to reap a sufficiently rich harvest from the massive gathering of the unemployed was drawing criticism from the Comintern, and Darcy may have been a convenient scapegoat. In any case, Browder had him exiled to California, where the Party district was in a shambles and the opportunities for failure seemed abundant. Obviously, Browder did not anticipate that this backwater would become a storm center of some of the greatest upheavals of the 1930s and that Darcy’s stature would be greatly enhanced by his role in the massive strikes in agriculture and maritime.

Over the years the two men were to develop a long history of mutual antagonism. In 1944 Browder had Darcy expelled from the Communist party; and after his own expulsion, he characterized William Z. Foster and Darcy as "my permanent (but usually secret) opposition in America." For his part, Darcy stated with pride that "Browder and I never had good relations." In fact, his disdain for a number of national Communist functionaries, whom he described as "middle-class rejects who couldn’t make it in the bourgeois world," earned him much enmity at the top levels of the Party. Among lower-level cadres and Party sympathizers, his reputation as a martinet was