

ANDREW LAWS

Summary: Andrew Lee Laws speaks to Pat Jasper about his career on the waterfront, early days in the Union, merging of the locals, being an executive board member and the impact on the workforce during the 105 day strike.

0:00

Sept 8, 2011. ILA office in Webster, TX. Andrew Lee Laws Sr.

01:18

Born in Iago, TX - Aug 29, 1927. seventh of nine children. Finished school in 1946. Went to look for work in Galveston and wanted to earn money to go to college. Got job on waterfront. First day was hard and unordinary. Liked the wages and liked the job.

03:19

bags of raw sugar weighing 350 lb. each. Had to sling it and rope it and send it out to ship. Bulk grain. Threw bags of rice, corn, flour. Cotton 575 lb. bales. "pitch" or throw bags. eight men in a hold, four on each side. The left side of ship is called the port side and right side would be the starboard side. The team of eight men would be called a gang. Four men on each side, two wench operators on deck. One flagman, two hook on men on the outside.

07:00

Today it is called OJT - on the job training. Would put an inexperienced man with three experienced people. Ships usually carry three or four hatches, at least one gang in a hatch. Five or six, 14-men gangs in a vessel.

09:40

Then, TX was not a right to work state. Got a job if you were in the union. Extra jobs, when union men have all got jobs. All workers gathered at the union hall to know what amount of work they had the next day. Business agent would write it all on a blackboard. Could tell if there was a chance to get a job just by looking at the work that was listed. Union people first and then non union.

11:32

To get into the union - had to be 21 yrs. Had to have three vouches. three union members had to sign a voucher. Investigating committee. Go to the doctor, get a clean bill of health. Initiation fee with application and after investigating committee, membership would vote on the candidates. Had to weigh at least a 150 lb..

14:23

Union was stricter than it is now. "you talked less and worked more." did whatever was told. Joined the African American union. In Galveston, then there were three deep sea locals. "Two blacks and one white." Black and white would work on either side of the hatch. Latino and Mexican American unions came along later. Latino local named 1576 and worked with green fruit. Bananas. Couldn't tell snakes from bananas. During the merger, merged all the locals together. Latino, White and African American. Merged in 1983

20:47

Merger was not sudden. In Brownsville, there was a black and hispanic locals. Judge ruling. Judge gave six months to work through the details. Locals were not able to work out the details. Judge worked it out and gave a merge order. Set leaders in place. Every port that had 2 locals or more had to merge into one. Houston had two locals - a white and a black one. Merged them together. Set out criteria about seniority. Gave everyone a number. Alternated the top leaders from the separate locals into the merged group.

25:50

Merger was in the Gulf Coast District. Lake Charles, LA to Brownsville, TX all the way to North Carolina.

28:20

Fought the merger for a number of years. Case went all the way to the Supreme Court. In Beaumont, three locals. One white and two black. The white local got work all the time and the other half of the hold was alternated between the two black locals. Merger worked in Houston because of the amount of work available.

32:25

Cotton - got paid by the bale. Piece work. Business agent would keep a record of how much to be paid.

36:43

Cotton workers paid by the piece. But then when gang get paid they divide what the gang itself earned for the day. IF there were multiple gangs from one local. Separated by time sheets and gangs. Cotton gang was always 15men. Divide by 15. Split it even. Odd extra pennies would go to gang foreman.

37:45

gang foreman, two wench men, (top) four on each side and four men on dock - one slinging and three trucking.

41:03

Gang foreman was flag and signal. rest would alternate work on ship. would alternate so everybody could get a break.

44:44

Each foreman had a boatsman or substitute foreman. Substitute. There was a committee that watched the work. If they saw potential, they would say he was qualified to be a boatsman. Like a mentor system. 28-29 years became gang foreman.

48:32

ILA leadership. got elected to trustee board in the union. 3-4 years. Then became Vice President for 5 years. then President in 1968. In 1974 ran for executive board member, elected to the top board in west gulf in SFO. Tried to get wife to convince him to take the job.

57:10

Was an executive board member but was still working on the dock. 6 exec board members in the west gulf, Lake Charles to Brownsville . 6 in the East gulf, i.e., New Orleans to Mobile. 6 in the South Atlantic from Miami Florida back to Charleston.

59:00

Representing the interests of brother laborers. More than a prestigious job. No per diem. Take care of expenses. AS a rep on two pay rolls. Negotiate contracts.

1:01:53

Responsibilities. Do whatever comes on hand. Negotiate contracts, investigate problems.

1:03:33

West Gulf Maritime Association. Gamut of stevedores and companies . Formed into an assoc. that has a contractual agreement with. Administer contracts and negotiate wages, terms etc. If they are violated, file agreements, if can't settle it it goes to step 2. Bring in two mediators - one appointed from district and the other on a per diem basis.

1:06:30

Royalton Reed and Cooke. One attorney to represent the district. Full time attorney for the district - a labor lawyer.

1:07:19

The industry has changed from needing a strong back and a weak mind to now needing a strong mind and a weak back. "Need some ingenuity about yourself." at one time had warehouses all over the dock. It is a service industry now. Need fewer men to do more work. The workforce is almost five times smaller than it was before because of automation.

1:11:35

Can't stop progress, can try to share in the profit.

1:12:17

Labor-management relations. Have not had a strike since 1968. 105 day strike, containerization had not reached its full potential yet. Was told containerization was not going to come in. New York had a contract, Management wanted Houston to settle for a lesser contract. Needed fewer men to work with containers. Tried to increase wages as knew containers were coming and didn't need a large workforce.

1:16:23

Strike was devastating for the workforce. Family to feed, rent to pay, no money coming in. It is tough. Union helped a little bit during the strike. Had a strike fund which was minimal. It was worth it. Succeeded in bringing the wages under a good condition. Houston has done well with containerization because it has a port with facilities that are conducive. But a port like Beaumont, is not conducive to containers. Freeport has no containers since it is not profitable to put them in the port. Bulk of the load is right here in Houston.

1:20:32

One nephew - longshoreman in Galveston. Five children - 2 daughters, 3 boys. "All I have amounted to has come from the waterfront. This is where my life is, where my heart is."