

LABORERS' INTERNATIONAL UNION OF NORTH AMERICA LOCAL 252

Helpers as well as journeymen were needed to erect the fine brick and stone buildings that were rising in downtown Tacoma during the boom years of the late 1880s. Bricklayers, plasterers, and other construction workers had already made gains through their new unions when their helpers organized the Hod Carriers Union in June 1889. Although the union lost a strike for a wage increase, it survived until hard times following the panic of 1893 paralyzed the construction industry and wiped out most of the unions.

Another large group of laborers, many of them Scandinavian immigrants, worked for the City of Tacoma digging ditches, grading roads, paving streets, and laying wooden water pipes. One of the Tacoma Trades Council's first campaigns, in May 1890, was to elect city council members pledged to reduce hours on city work from ten to eight. When one successful candidate reneged on his pledge, the council compromised: \$2.00 a day for nine hours. The language barrier kept many immigrants out of the English-speaking labor movement, but the Norwegian Labor Society maintained good relations with the Trades Council, and the unorganized city laborers participated in the Labor Day parades.

Returning prosperity at the turn of the century revived the dead construction industry. Unions of journeymen were again becoming active when helpers organized the Building Laborers' International Protective Union Local 6 on December 1, 1902, and gained a wage increase of 50 cents a day. Wages for eight hours ranged from \$2.50 for common labor to \$3.50 for hod carriers. Building trades unions, including the Laborers, lost a strike in 1903 against the open-shop demands of the Contractors' Association. In that year nationally, the AFL-affiliated International Hod Carriers and Building Laborers' Union was organized to challenge the independent Protective Union.

The building trades unions faced another open-shop attack by the Citizens' Alliance in 1907. During these years the International Hod Carriers and Building Laborers was emerging as the majority union of laborers. At the request of the international, the Tacoma Trades Council persuaded the struggling Local 6 to change its affiliation. Hod Carriers and Building Laborers Local 252 was chartered in 1908, but the new charter was not enough to save the union from disruption in the prolonged open-shop battle.

By 1911 the union was reorganized. On March 17, St. Patrick's Day, the members gathered under the trees in Wright Park to receive a new charter for Local 252. St. Patrick must have smiled on the union that day, because through all the adversity which was to follow, the Laborers remained intact and grew in strength and numbers, and the members developed an intense pride in their organization.

In the early years the members of Local 252 dug ditches, worked in plumbing shops, carried bathtubs and equipment into buildings, and loaded and unloaded trucks of supplies at job sites and warehouses or shops. They also worked as helpers for

electricians, cement masons, ironworkers, and carpenters. It was not unusual to see a hod carrier or mason tender carrying his shovel and hoe to work on a Tacoma streetcar, as well as his lunch in a lard pail. The common laborer was considered a lower-class citizen by the crafts he assisted and received little respect or consideration. This prejudice followed the laborer even after members of Local 252 became respected leaders in the Building Trades Council.

Local 252 survived the Great Depression of the 1930s and began to grow as Tacoma's economy revived. The first six-hour day, thirty-hour week became effective in the building trades industry throughout Pierce County in 1934. The same arguments were used against the plan then as now. Wages were 62½ cents an hour for laborers and close to \$1.00 an hour for other crafts. Many believed it would be impossible to live on six hours' pay, but a greater number realized available work must be more evenly distributed among the members. The results astonished both members and employers—no one starved. To counter nonunion growth, in 1937 the Tacoma Building Trades Council developed a blanket agreement, to which were attached the individual craft agreements covering wages and conditions. No craft settled separately, and all were bound together by the blanket agreement.

Ed Younger, a charter member of Local 252 and president of the union in the 1930s, was instrumental in promoting a building fund. The fund grew slowly over the years with donations of \$5.00 and \$10.00 a member, but because of Younger's far-sighted vision, in 1961 the fund was sufficient to erect the new Laborers Hall at 1742 Market Street. The building corporation owns the building and site free and clear. Ed also created a sick committee with a sick benefit fund supported in 1937 by dances sponsored by the local.

The policy committee, established in 1938, set tough standards. Each month members were fined for not reporting their monthly earnings, or "rustling a job off the bank" instead of being properly dispatched by the union, or failing to attend a union meeting. In late 1938 and 1939 the local adopted a permit system for extra hires. If three members would sign his application for membership, the permit man could apply part of his wages on the initiation fee. In 1941 the Tacoma Laborers entered into an agreement with the Tacoma Medical Association to provide medical coverage at \$1.50 a month for each member. This was the predecessor of the benefits the Laborers were to negotiate with contractors. World War II found laborers dispatched to all areas of construction and industry that needed assistance.

Local 252 strongly supported community projects, including the Boys Clubs and Tacoma-Pierce County Blood Bank, due in part to Vernie Reed's conviction that the union should reach out beyond the workplace. The Laborers Scholarship of \$400 established in 1949 for a Lincoln High School graduate was undoubtedly Reed's project. After attending a number of union meetings, Dick Trowbridge, a scholarship recipient, wrote this tribute to William Paddison, who had served on the sick committee:

A large copy of the Bible is opened at the beginning of each meeting of Local 252, this unique bit of ceremony has been a regular part of the order of business ever since the Holy Book was presented to the local in 1947.

In a sense it is a tribute to the man who presented it, William Paddison. It wasn't that Bill did spectacularly good deeds; he just took care of all the little things. It was this attention to little things that earned him the respect of his brother laborers. He was never too busy to visit sick members and see to their comforts. His time was never too taken up to lend a hand to help the families of sick or injured brothers.

A deeply religious man, Bill feels it was Divine Guidance that made his work successful. One night he dreamt that something was wrong at the home of an injured member. The next morning he hurried to the family and found that a tree limb had fallen during the night cutting off their electricity. The poor mother had her hands full taking care of six children, so Bill cleared away the fallen limb, called for someone to fix the wires, and helped around the house until things calmed down. Bill, being a devout man, was bothered by the profanity that sometimes filled the local hall and punctuated the meetings. He was no sissy, but he felt that such language didn't encourage sober thought. Until he retired [in 1942] he tried to discourage profanity in the meetings. After he retired, other members carried on his campaign. Finally in 1947 some of the members decided a Bible should be placed in the meetings. Lowell Bamford, then president, called Bill Paddison back from retirement to present the Bible to the local.

From the late 1930s until his death, Vernie Reed greatly influenced his union. He encouraged a bowling team, a baseball team, union picnics, and Christmas parties for the children and grandchildren of members. Even Santa Claus made his annual appearance. Reed was a legend in his time. A 1934 graduate of Lincoln High School, Vernie joined the Laborers shortly after graduation and worked on various projects, including Grand Coulee Dam, Mud Mountain Dam, and the first Narrows Bridge.

While he worked in construction, Reed was also active in union affairs and was soon elected full-time secretary. He later served on the executive board of the Pierce County Central Labor Council and the Washington State Labor Council. Reed was instrumental in negotiating a clause in the Laborers' master agreement that allowed students to seek summer employment with the Laborers' Union. Hundreds of local youths were able to finance their education thanks to the forethought of Vernie Reed, and many of these have gone on to successful careers.

Reed rose through a series of Laborers and Building Trades positions to president of the Western Washington District Council of Laborers. He was called next by the international to serve as director of organization. Shortly after that he was elected international vice-president, and in 1975 he was elected general secretary-treasurer of the Laborers' International Union. Vernie Reed had a strong interest in construction safety and took an active part in developing safety programs for the Building Trades and the federal government. He often said that the Laborers did not want extra pay for hazardous work, but wanted the contractor to find a safe way to perform the job. Many

unions and contractors disagreed with Vernie's thinking, but in succeeding years when the issue was analyzed everyone agreed his ideas were correct. Most of his suggestions are being implemented today.

Vernie Reed passed away October 5, 1979, after a long struggle with cancer. He was so well respected by his fellow laborers and contractors that a living memorial was founded in his name, the W. Vernie Reed Memorial Scholarship Fund. His friends could not have thought of a more fitting tribute to this dedicated man. Vernie's father died when he was quite young. When he was old enough to help support the rest of his brothers and sisters, Vernie had to assume the responsibilities of his family and forgo the higher education he would have liked so much. Reflecting Vernie's desire to make life a little better for young people, one of the principal criteria of the scholarship is financial need. Nearly \$100,000 was raised and placed in an investment fund for a perpetual scholarship for laborers and their immediate families.

Many other union leaders were from Laborers 252. The Tacoma Building Trades Council and its successor, the Pierce County Building and Construction Trades Council, were led the majority of their recent years by directors who were members of Laborers Local 252. These include: Ray Moisio, Vernie Reed, Homer Coyington and the present director, Ted Bolton. Many members of Local 252 held high office in the international union. Bob Sheets was an international vice-president, Don Ahrens a regional manager and international vice-president, Lloyd Worrell special representative to the international, and W. K. "Bill" Reynolds business manager of the Washington and Northern Idaho District Council of Laborers.

Bill never forgot the tough times he and his fellow laborers went through. When he was the leader of all the Laborers in the state he fought for improvements in their medical and pension coverage. Bill was often heard to say, "I could have bought medicine for my sick son if I had the medical plan we now have put in place." Bill wanted laborers to be able to retire with a little dignity at age fifty-five before their bodies were so broken down they could not enjoy the fruits of their labor. Bill hired Fred Peck and Paul McNeal, both from Local 252, to assist him in the district council. The present secretary-treasurer of Local 252, Don McLeod, has served as recording secretary and is serving his second term as president of the district council.

Typifying the business managers of Local 252, R. Larry Worrell, a member since 1959, was appointed business agent in 1965 and business manager in 1968. Larry's first taste of the hard knocks of leading the union came in 1970 when, after failing to reach a satisfactory settlement in contract negotiations with Concrete Technology Corporation, the workers struck the plant. Confident that they could defeat the employees' desires, the owners recruited scabs from out of state. The strike, lasting just over a year, was the most costly in Local 252's history.

The strike was also the most violent. Angry strikers staged a "rock festival" with pickup loads of rocks supplied by strike sympathizers instead of music. The rocks were shoveled onto the road leading to the plant, where massed pickets picked them up and

hurled them at scabs' car windows as they entered the plant. When the cars were gone the strikers used the remaining ammunition on the front windows of the building. The rock festival resulted in an injunction served on Worrell and the union to limit the number of pickets and to refrain from further violence on the picket line. Then some of the frustrated strikers took their war to scabs' homes, following scabs' cars after work so they could visit them at night. One vanload of scabs was waiting at a railroad crossing ahead of an auto filled with strikers. The frightened scabs helped the driver mash down the brake pedal as the driver of the second car pushed the van toward the moving train.

The union followed the scab products to jobs sites and picketed until the material was turned over to the new owner. Because of the "hot cargo" law that had recently been enacted, other laborers of Local 252 were forced to assemble and work with the scab-produced material. This was a sad day for the Laborers' Union when members could not honor their own local's strike. A friendly contractor who was building the monorail at Disney World in Florida provided the turning point in the strike. After Vernie Reed contacted him and explained the plight of Local 252, the contractor notified Concrete Technology that he would not use its products until the strike of Laborers' Local 252 had been resolved. Fourteen months after the strike began the workers won the benefits the owners had tried to take from them and returned to their jobs. Union members are working in the plant today.

The next major strike to test Business Manager Worrell came in 1980. Pipe, Inc., a Portland firm, had bought the Lundberg Pipe Plant and was determined to reduce the living standards of its workers. After four hard months of marathon negotiations the employees voted unanimously to reject the company's final offer and strike. The union members anticipated a short strike because they believed the company could not replace them with qualified scabs to run the plant. Little did they count on the tenacity of their adversary, Pipe, Inc. The company demanded that all striking workers immediately return or be permanently replaced. When no one crossed the picket line to return to work, Pipe, Inc. put full-page ads in all the local newspapers for replacement employees. In two days over 500 persons answered the ads, and the company had an abundance of hungry scabs from which to choose. The company brought supervisors from its Portland plant to train the scabs.

The strikers and agents of the local were sure that the company was using the Portland plant to break the strike in Tacoma. After many nights of carefully monitoring the Portland plant, it was discovered that the company was transporting pipe at night to various jobs sites under contract with the Tacoma plant. Thus the legal tie to allow Local 252 to picket the other plants of the company was established. The strikers moved part of their picketing to those plants and were successful in temporarily disrupting the operation of the company. But soon the Tacoma plant was running at near capacity, and the strikers seemed doomed to fail in their attempt to win the strike. In desperation, a group of strikers resorted to an act of violence on the picket line. Again Business Manager Worrell found himself in court, and again an injunction was issued barring any further violence on the picket line.

Worrell and the strikers always seemed to be one step behind the strategy of management and its union-busting attorney. The company finally made a tactical error when it solicited one of the scabs to petition for an election to vote union representation out and get rid of the strikers and their pickets. Business Manager Worrell, his agents, and a group of strikers began a campaign to convince the scabs that they were not receiving fair treatment from their employer, just as the union members who formerly worked there had been ill treated. Worrell also requested that all but a handful of the strikers send letters to the company requesting unconditional rehire so the company could not further load the election with union-busting employees. Enough of the strikebreakers were convinced that the union was correct in its assertions: the union won the NLRB election, and the employer was obliged to return to the bargaining table. Today these same employees are loyal members of Local 252. The strike was expensive for both Local 252 and the company. The union estimated it cost Pipe, Inc. over \$2 million. The firm could have saved money by accepting the union offer, which would have cost less than \$800,000 over the three years of the contract. While all this was going on, the company and the union were in court battling a back pay issue that was one of the stumbling blocks in the initial negotiations. The union finally prevailed after the company appealed the case all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court. The final settlement of \$208,865 awarded to the fifty-six strikers was the largest single monetary settlement in the history of any Laborers local in the State of Washington at that time. After a three-year battle with the company, a labor contract was consummated. Over the years, which have followed, the company has come to respect and enjoy the relationship with Laborers' Local 252 and Business Manager Larry Worrell. At the writing of this history, Business Manager Worrell is working at renewing labor agreements with both Pipe, Inc. and Concrete Technology.

During the last twenty-five years the district council and the international union have recognized the strength of Local 252. They recommended that small locals with insufficient resources amalgamate with Local 252. Centralia was the first local to amalgamate, followed by Bremerton, Shelton, Port Angeles, and Olympia. Merger nationally of the Journeymen Stonecutters Association of North America with the Laborers' International Union in 1968 brought the Stonecutters local at Wilkenson into Local 252. Originally a Tacoma union organized about 1889, the Stonecutters moved to Wilkenson in 1948. Their members quarried and dressed sandstone for the state capitol buildings in Olympia. In 1986 the international requested that Local 252 assume jurisdiction of the Laborers Seattle boat yard contracts. The local now has jurisdiction over all heavy and highway construction, various other contracts in seven western counties of Washington, and Metal Trades Boat Yard Agreements for work in King and Pierce counties.

The membership of Local 252 has reflected Tacoma's changing ethnic and racial composition. The early Scandinavian majority disappeared as many Italians and blacks joined the union in succeeding years. Although women working in the shipyards belonged to Local 252 during World War II, they left the union when their jobs ended after the war. The heavy physical labor required on many jobs had discouraged some women from seeking work out of Local 252, but beginning in the mid-1970s many were

employed as flaggers on highway construction and repair jobs. Now a few are to be found in almost all phases of laborers' work.

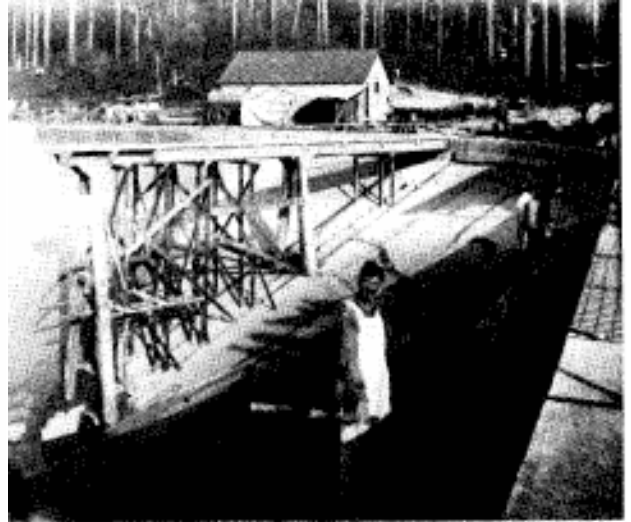
Local 252 has come a long way from being a union of common laborers and ditch diggers to a union of professional and highly qualified laborers. The union now has its own training school, which was started by the Laborers' Union of Washington. The school was first located at Duval in 1962, and then moved to a better location at White Swan, and to the present location at Kingston in 1981. This school has trained many first-class workers who have been involved in the successful completion of some of the most technical and high quality projects throughout Washington. The school teaches safe removal of asbestos and hazardous waste. The Kingston Training School teaches mason tending, forklift operation, pipe laying, safe operation of laser beam, blueprint reading, pavement breaking, jackhammer operation, tunnel drilling, flagging, grade checking, wagon drill operation, high scaling, first aid, and line foreman safety. The union also entered into an apprenticeship program in 1983. The program has been a great success with signatory contractors and has helped in the continuing battle to organize nonunion contractors.

The history of Local 252 is proof that traditional craft skills are not the key to a strong union. In the early years of the century, members riding streetcars with their hoes and shovels and lard pails built a union when their jobs required more muscle than skill. Because of their union, members have been able to maintain their position in construction and other industries as the tools and jobs became more complex. Local 252 is proud of its success in providing a better life for its members, both through training programs and the job security of union agreements.

Laborers working on Alaska Street reservoir project, October 2, 1923. (Tacoma Public Library)



Laborers leveling concrete at McMillin reservoir, September 1922. (Tacoma Public Library)



Officers of Local 252 display check from Pipe, Inc., for \$208,865 for retroactive pay awarded to fifty-six members. Left to right, International Vice-President Joel Wiegert, Business Agent Glenn Gripp, Business Manager Larry Worrell, and Business Agent Ted Bolton, with portrait of Vernie Reed in the background. (Local 252 archives)