

To Rise Together

The 1890's were the era of Jim Crow in the United States south. The south was becoming more and more racially segregated and African American people were losing their rights as American citizens. One of the few groups to challenge Jim Crow in the south was the New Orleans longshoremen. They worked on the docks loading and unloading boats. Even though many of the white longshoremen were prejudiced against black people, the black and white longshoremen learned that they had to work together. In unity there was strength.

The story of one strike by the longshoremen was recorded by a union reporter for a labor newspaper. During the 1930's, labor unions used to tell workers the story of the New Orleans longshoremen so they would learn to work together. This part of the story describes negotiations between the longshoremen and a representative of the bosses. When it was written down in the 1930's, the story used racial curses. These words have been changed in this version.

Read the story. Volunteers can act out the negotiations. Suppose you were there. Write a speech for you.

Characters:

Senator Cordell is a white man. The author describes him, saying that he looks like the Kentucky Colonel. Ellis is a Black man.

Dan Scully is a White man of Irish ancestry.

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by Oscar Ameringer

Senator Cordell:

"The idea! the very idea! White men conspiring with blacks against the honor and prosperity of the great port of New Orleans; against the honor and prosperity of the State of Louisiana itself! The idea, the very idea.

White men of honor forced to haggle (bargain) with penny-pinching traitors over a few pennies, forced to haggle with water rats (poor whites) and blacks. I shall not continue this disgraceful bickering for another second. I am leaving."

Ellis:

"Please sit down Senator. We're not here to save the honor and prosperity of the great State of Louisiana. We are here to settle the strike. That's what they sent you down here for. Your job is to see to it that we work the longest possible amount of hours at the least possible pay. Our job is to make your crowd pay us the highest possible wages for the lowest possible amount of work. Now let's get down to business. What's more, we've won the strike already, else you gentlemen wouldn't be here to talk compromise, honor and prosperity."

Scully:

"Oh, we're water rats are we? And white trash, are we? But you can't run your goddam port without us. Can you? I guess before long you'll call us black lovers, too. Take it from me, I wasn't always a black lover. I fought in every strike to keep blacks off the dock. I fought until the white-supremecy strike our white-supremecy governor sent his white-supremecy militia down here and shot us white-supremecy strikers full of holes.

You talk about us conspiring with blacks against the honor and prosperity of the state. But let me tell you and your gang, there was a time I wouldn't even work beside a black man. You made me work with blacks, eat with blacks, sleep with blacks, drink out of the same water bucket with blacks, and finally got me to the place where if a black man comes to me and blubbers something about more pay, I say 'Come on, let's go after the white bastards.'"

