



They've Got Your Back!

Firm Member Service Support Ensures Smooth Sailing

Representation at MEBA's halls goes far beyond the textbook definition. A good union official not only helps ship members out, enforces contracts and fairly applies the shipping rules, he or she performs a multitude of tasks that are sometimes not overtly apparent. Such responsibilities include assisting mariners in the licensing process, helping to resolve workplace disputes or grievances and keeping members informed.

Branch Agents, Patrolmen, Representatives and Dispatchers have all helped arrange contact between our sailing officers and their family members, they visit members in the hospital or, in the worst-case, attend their funerals. They develop political relationships and promote the Union's Political Action Fund, reach out to the community and other labor unions and organizations, and even counsel members on career advancement and other things. Securing necessary documentation for members, ship visits and maintaining a harmonious and healthy working relationship with our contracted companies is all part of the job.

Besides a whole series of routine and procedural duties required to keep the halls running smoothly, a Union official keeps an eye out to organize new work, encourages attendance at and oversees hall meetings, and

seeks input from members on items that will aid contract negotiations. The life of an official can vary from crewing up a Government Ready Reserve Force fleet vessel at a moment's notice to arranging a burial at sea. It involves working together with Headquarters on a variety of projects on behalf of the members or it can entail putting a party together for a holiday or to honor a member.

Recently, we were able to speak with former West Coast official Al Camelio, who recently retired after a lengthy shipping career and years as a Union official. Brother Camelio is a 1983 graduate of the Calhoon MEBA Engineering School and shipped out of the West Coast before his appointment as Portland Representative in 1992. He was active in helping to restore democracy to the Union. In 1997, he took over as Representative in San Francisco before being elected to the office of Patrolman in L.A. the next year. In 2001 and again in 2004, Al was voted in, by large margins, as the L.A. Branch Agent. He is also a staunch trade unionist who has been active in his community on behalf of labor.

Al has strong feelings on what it takes to be a successful official and shared a few of his thoughts with the *Marine Officer*...



M.O.: Why did you become a Union official?

I first became a Union official in 1991. I was a member of the tally committee in 1990 and I didn't like the way our Union approached elections at that time. That's why I became active. It was not a popular thing to do at that time.

M.O.: What does the position of being a Union official entail?

In L.A., the Branch Agent and Patrolman have traditionally been partners. I had the opportunity to work with both Cecil McIntyre and Duncan Ballenger while I was Patrolman. They both taught me a lot. As Branch Agent, I was very fortunate to have Mike Nizetich to work with. Mike did a great job as Patrolman for the last five years and will be an excellent Branch Agent. *[Editor's note: Mike Nizetich succeeded Al as Branch Agent in November].*

To me the most important aspect of being a Union official is knowing both the shipping rules and contracts and applying them fairly and consistently day in and day out. Serving as Patrolman for almost five years was excellent preparation for this. The best way to learn our contracts and shipping rules was to dispatch jobs as well as visit vessels and represent our members. When Mike started working for me I threw him to the wolves. That's how you learn. I'm sure he and our new Representative Greg Revers will continue the tradition of partnership.

As a Patrolman I spent most of my time down on the docks – sometimes seven days a week. That's how I really learned the contracts and shipping rules. When you're on the deckplates and you have to come up with the answers you tend to do your homework ahead of time. If an official doesn't know the contract or shipping rules – he'll be of no use. You have to go on a ship and have the confidence when there's a dispute to know the right answer. Anybody can read the shipping rules or the contract. The trick is to know how they apply to a work situation.

As far as being Branch Agent I didn't make it down to the ships as much, Mike covered them for us. I focused on running the union hall and making sure we had a process where people got a fair shake in looking for work.

A unique characteristic of MEBA L.A. was the volume of people flying in to catch ships. We try to make life as easy as possible for these people. If they need transportation we'll try to help them. We'd also help coordinate motels, rental cars, or even bail. The normal things it takes to get through life are magnified when you have to travel to catch a job. Life can be very difficult at times for our guys and it's also really hard when you're on a ship and you only have a few hours of shore time during a port stop. I've chauffeured around more members than I can count.

M.O.: What qualities make a good union official?

You have to be honest, you have to be compassionate to people and their needs and you have to have determination and not be deterred by setbacks. It took a lot of time and effort to get extra work out of our companies. It takes a long time to negotiate a fair and equitable contract. These are the qualities that are important. You also have to be able to laugh at yourself sometimes too.

M.O.: What does our Union do for the member?

MEBA provides contracts that set the industry standard for the world. We have a fair and honest dispatch system for these jobs, which provide fine benefits, the best in the industry. People are provided the tools and opportunity to make a good life. That's what our function is. MEBA is not a utopian society – it's a labor union.





Member Richard McDonald among the complex equipment in the Waterman-managed SS SGT. MATEJ KOCAK's engine room.

M.O.: Can you discuss your interaction with other labor unions or other maritime councils or groups?

We have worked very closely with MM&P over the years both on our contract negotiations and local issues in the harbor. I've had a lot of interaction with both Dave Boatner and Don Marcus of the MM&P. I couldn't ask for two better guys to work with. Additionally we have fine relations with the MFOW, SUP, SIU, ILWU and IBU here in Los Angeles. They've been a pleasure to work with.

Mike Nizetich and I actively promoted MEBA in both labor and the harbor. We participated in the L.A. County Federation of Labor, the Harbor Labor Coalition, the Maritime Trades Department and the Harry Bridges Institute. I'm proud of the Labor Solidarity Cruise our local MTD sponsored two years ago. All the unions in the harbor participated in it. It was an idea I had that I'd been promoting for years. But it took the expertise of Capt. Dave Boatner of MM&P to make it a reality. Our MTD did a fine job of getting 500 labor people out in a victory ship for a day of cruising, education and partying. It really cemented our reputation in the Harbor.

Our affiliates in L.A. (ALADS, CAPE and L.A. County Lifeguards) have helped us out a lot. We coordinated our interaction with the AFL-CIO and our political activity. All three are quality organizations headed by fine people. It's interesting, they're in our National and as such they do not participate in our elections nor we in theirs.

In addition, we actively support unions that have job actions in the area. For example, we supported the ILWU when they were locked out. Additionally, a few years ago the grocery workers in Southern California were in a long and protracted contract dispute. I'm proud that the members at our hall stepped up with donations and twice I was able to fill the back of my pickup truck with bulk food to take down to these strikers – many of who had no food in their homes. We provided for many families over that month. We collected several thousand dollars and bought food. To this day when I walk in that supermarket – people come up and give me a hug and tell me how grateful they are for what MEBA did for them. For me it was no big thing to put in money but we had people contribute money who were undergoing hard times themselves – they put their hand in their pockets and came up with help for some folks who were destitute.

M.O.: Do you have any regrets while you were in office?

I wish I had been more successful early on in backing successful

candidates for office with our Political Action Fund. For awhile, an endorsement from Al Camelio was the first step toward writing a concession speech. I'm happy to say we turned that around. We were really knocking them dead by the end.

I'm proud that our opposition against Proposition 75 in California [limiting a union's ability to participate in political activism] was successful. Had it passed, labor unions really would have been at a serious disadvantage in California and this would have spread to the rest of the country.

M.O.: Talk about the aspect of negotiations for a union official.

The way it works on the West Coast is that you really have to demonstrate your effectiveness before you are invited to take part in an MEBA negotiating team. Executive Vice President Bud Jacque allowed me to participate in negotiations and I really appreciate that.

To me it really helped going on the ships and seeing what people perceived as areas that needed improvements in our contract and being able to translate that into gains. The most effective tool I found in negotiating was sitting in my room in the morning and practicing what I was going to say in front of the mirror. It was at that point I realized while I watched and listened to myself why I hadn't had a social life in 15 years. I think everybody should try it.

M.O.: Could you discuss some things you are proud of?

I was most proud of how we ran our hall day in and day out. I'm proud of our negotiations – how hard we worked – the preparation and the execution of our negotiations. And I'm very proud of the staff I had to work with in Los Angeles including my most recent team of Mike Nizetich, Dispatcher & Political Coordinator Yvette Reed and our Plans Representative Tom Gresczyk. They were excellent people to work with.

With so many members traveling to L.A. for work it's crucial to provide enough day and night work for people to survive until they can catch a ship. It takes a minimum of three days work a week to stay even while trying to ship out. I'm proud that we were able to get a lot of work over and above the amount required by our contracts. MEBA port engineers and Chiefs helped out a lot. Extra work was a good deal for everyone. Our companies received quality work, competitive rates, our members were employed and we covered our jurisdictional areas.



We really tried to run a member friendly hall. As a Branch Agent and a Patrolman you really set the tone for how people interact in the union hall. All the rules are posted and our contracts and pay scales are readily available in our hall and on the ships. We'd go out of our way to be friendly to people when they came in. We'd always take the time to explain things to people.

Since I've dispatched and overseen hundreds and hundreds of job calls, I would find out from people what their objectives were and tried to orient them toward the right type of ship. I helped write many a resume and cover letter when people applied for permanent jobs. Some of our members hadn't had to do this type of thing before. I'm proud that a number of these people got jobs.

L.A. is a very friendly hall to ship out of – as it should be. That's really the key to how we help people.

M.O.: Any advice to new members or academy grads thinking about a career at sea?

Yes. Keep all your documents in a folder, keep them well organized, up-to-date, and take as many job-specific courses as you can that will make you eligible for employment. That's the best advice I can give. If you don't have your documents in order you can't ship out. As straightforward as that sounds, it's amazing how many people might show up without the right documents.



One of the things we did to help members was to always try to pre-screen people's documents as soon as they transferred in or before job call. That way, if they're missing something they can start working on getting it. Once we do job call – if your documents aren't there – you're out of luck. There's nothing sadder than seeing some poor guy travel thousands of miles, get the job of his dreams off the board and he can't take it because he's missing something. I'd get binders for members and say 'Put your (stuff) in here – this is yours' – so it'll take just 30 seconds to review before job call.

I would also advise people to keep a record of their evaluations on ship – it's helpful when you go to apply for a permanent job. Also try to be a good shipmate and help people out—take your job seriously.

M.O.: Is there anything you'd like to say to the membership?

I would like to personally thank them for being good friends, good shipmates and electing me to office three times and giving me the opportunity to serve in office and to run a union hall the way I always thought it should be run.

I'd like to personally thank MEBA for providing me with an education and providing me with wonderful work opportunities at sea and an honest election system. MEBA is a great organization.

M.O.: Al, what are your future plans now that you're retired?

I'm an avid fisherman and tropical red snapper season is approaching. I hear they're running really big this year. I can't wait to try out my tackle...

