

OPEN FORUM *On San Francisco's Labor Movement*

A watershed strike



Chronicle file photo

With San Francisco as the center, longshoremen went on strike in 1934, shutting almost every port along the West Coast.

It reshaped politics and culture

By Fred Glass

These days, when San Franciscans of a certain age respond to the visitors' (or their grandchildren's) query, "What made San Francisco different?" they tend to think culture. Beat poets, flower power and Castro Street are instantly recognizable tropes reflecting the city's historically tolerant attitudes and liberal politics.

But these iconic San Francisco moments and movements are actually more the lucky heirs, rather than ancestors, of what is uniquely San Franciscan. Although one might argue that the city's identification with things progressive arrived with the Gold Rush, its modern incarnation took form 75 years ago in an event now fading from living memory: the great San Francisco General Strike.

The strike established the right of working people to have a voice in the workplace, play a role in city politics and lead lives of dignity on and off the job. And it laid down the economic and political foundation on which the city's various countercultures could flourish.

On May 9, 1934, 10,000 longshoremen went on strike up and down the West Coast, protesting below-subsistence wages and the humiliating daily hiring experience known as "the shapeup." In this exercise in employer absolutism, workers gathered early in the morning on the foggy docks along the Embarcadero, competing with one another in a desperate race to the bottom of the Depression wage scale. Once at work, the worker might remain there for 10, 12, 16 or more hours. Injuries accumulated faster than cargo on the dock because of the frantic pace of the work. And should they imagine complain-

ing, there were always more workers waiting to take their place.

One who refused to take it was Australian immigrant seaman Harry Bridges, who began working the San Francisco docks in 1921. Patiently organizing his fellow workers, Bridges and like-minded dockworkers reached out to the other maritime unions in May 1934, and within weeks, 40,000 workers were on strike, shutting down almost every West Coast port. Employer associations, supported by San Francisco government officials, police and the commercial media, responded with major organized violence. Police and the employers' armed thugs sent hundreds of strikers and sympathizers to hospital emergency rooms.

Bloody Thursday

On July 5 — what became known as Bloody Thursday — police bullets killed World War I veteran and longshoreman Howard Sperry and marine cook Nick Bordoise a few feet from the longshore union hall on Steuart Street. Their bodies lay in state in the building before being moved to the front of a enormous, silent funeral parade.

The Chronicle story noted that alive, the two men "wouldn't have commanded a second glance ... but in death they were borne the length of Market Street in a stupendous and reverent procession that astounded the city." The discipline of the marching workers created solidarity among other crafts and trades, inspired an outpouring of sympathy in a previously wavering middle class, and scared the bejesus out of San Francisco's ruling elite.

The conflict escalated into a four-day, mostly peaceful (at least, compared with what

preceded it) citywide general strike. The work stoppage brought virtually all industrial and commercial operations of San Francisco to a halt. Although the San Francisco Labor Council assumed leadership of the general strike, its heart was the maritime worker unions' headquarters. After this display of determined collective power, the maritime workers gained union recognition, substantial increases in wages, and control over their hiring halls.

The San Francisco General Strike had enormous ripple effects beyond the Bay Area. Events similar to these took place across the country in 1934. General strikes rocked Minneapolis-St. Paul and Toledo, Ohio. The textile industry suffered a walkout of hundreds of thousands of workers. In each of these struggles, workers were killed. It became obvious that enforceable rules were needed to govern and resolve workplace conflict, and to protect the right of workers to organize.

With the San Francisco General Strike cited as Exhibit A, the National Labor Relations Act became law in 1935. It served its purpose for a time, extending a measure of the promise of American political democracy for workers to the economic realm.

But one of the greatest impacts of the San Francisco General Strike took hold behind the stage of everyday life in the city itself. Longshoremen, formerly the maritime employers' doormat, rose from casual labor force to working-class participants in what is commonly but mistakenly called "the middle class." With a powerful union as their entry card (or battering ram), longshoremen became upstanding citizens, homeowners, and — as one worker poet put it —

"lords of the docks."

After the general strike, the longshore union expanded into warehouses along the Embarcadero and around the bay. Dockworkers brought tens of thousands of workers in the Bay Area's commercial supply chains into the union fold, and their families into a new prosperity. Their actions filled the word "solidarity" with meaning, as when waitresses were organizing, and maritime workers drank six-hour cups of coffee in shifts until recalcitrant employers recognized the women's union.

The images' substance

Today, resistance to oppressive conditions, the right to rebellion, and access to the good things of life have become co-opted staples of advertising cool, ripped off the aesthetic traditions of San Francisco's countercultures. Largely disappearing in the mists of time are the sweaty and bloody workers' struggles that gave original substance to the images.

The connection between economic struggle and a culturally rich San Francisco was once clearer. The earliest psychedelic dance concerts in the mid-'60s took place at the Longshoremen's Hall, and the Sailors' Union of the Pacific union hall hosts concerts to this day. These are signs of a larger but mostly hidden picture: a prosperous unionized working class capable, through its collective wealth and organized power, of sustaining and innovating a city's institutions and traditions. That flowering couldn't have happened without its root: the 1934 San Francisco General Strike.

Fred Glass is the communications director for the California Federation of Teachers.