

The 1934 San Francisco General Strike

Timeline

Dec 1932 – First publication of the *Waterfront Worker*

June 1933 – Section 7(a) opens the door for legal union organizing

1934

Feb 25 – Pacific coast convention votes to authorize a strike

May 9 – Longshoremen's strike begins

May 15 – Maritime strike begins

July 5 – Bloody Thursday

July 9 – Funeral march for two murdered workers

July 12 – General Strike begins as Teamsters join strike and as solidarity strikes grow

July 17 – Vigilantes and police attack left wing offices and union halls

July 19 – General Strike concludes

October 12 – Arbitration award gives workers and union a significant but only partial victory

Introduction

In the decades before the 1930s, dockworkers at the port of San Francisco and other West Coast ports had been an abused, precarious, and downtrodden segment of the working class. Despite attempts at organization, they had been beaten back time and again by the powerful port owners and their capitalist allies and political representatives.

During the Great Depression and especially in 1934, the working class as a whole, and these port workers in particular, began a massive push to organize themselves and form unions. In doing so, they initiated an intense struggle between themselves and the port owners. This struggle took the form of a port strike in San Francisco and throughout the West Coast, which then morphed into a citywide general strike in San Francisco itself.

Tens of thousands of workers participated in organizing their developing unions, and in the financially painful and often violent struggle against the port bosses and their forces of repression. Throughout the strike and general strike that followed, the workers themselves took the lead in organizing fellow workers for the struggle. Militants with revolutionary politics played a role in shaping the union struggle on the docks and across maritime trades. Together they contributed to a groundswell of solidarity that forced concessions from the owners and the capitalist state. In these ways, the San Francisco General Strike is an example of what working people can accomplish when workers in a single industry do not fight alone, but rather spread the struggle across all working people of a region.

After the upsurge in Minneapolis in January 2026, and as some activists in the period began to think seriously about the possibility of a future general strike, we can benefit from looking back at the 1934 San Francisco General Strike. We can see what factors pushed it to commence, and what the working class did to organize themselves and carry out the struggle. We can also identify the challenges that they faced and that we will still face today if a general strike were to become a possibility.

The Decades Before the Great Depression

The San Francisco Bay area and other cities on the West Coast became important ports in the mid-19th century. The workers at these ports, generally known as stevedores, worked hard labor with unpredictable schedules. From waterfront managers calling for “men along the shore” to work ships as they came in, these workers came to be called “longshoremen.” The work was physically demanding, requiring lifting and moving hundreds of pounds of bulky cargo. It was also incredibly dangerous, and workers had to be knowledgeable and alert to avoid serious and even life-threatening injuries that could be caused by dropping these heavy loads. They could also work for two or three days in a row, then be off for two or three days. They could work all morning, but when a ship’s hold was emptied, they might be sent home in the afternoon. It was “feast or famine,” even if the so-called “feast” was only enough to get them through the next day or two.

In 1851, shortly after the shipping industry began to develop on the West Coast, and in light of the dangerous labor conditions and high level of worker exploitation, West Coast longshoremen formed the Riggers’ and Stevedores’ Union in San Francisco. In 1853, they went on their first strike and won both improved pay and a 9-hour workday.

During the late 19th century and early 20th century, workers along the shore slowly became better organized. The San Francisco Riggers’ and Stevedores’ Union became affiliated with the larger International Longshoremen’s Association, or ILA. Workers who labored on the boats themselves formed their own union, the International Seamen’s Union, or ISU. Other workers transporting goods off the docks and on to stores and customers, like the Teamsters, were also formed in this period, and played a role in the work of the ports in the Bay Area. Longshoremen at other west coast ports also formed locals and soon also affiliated with the larger ILA. The ILA was, in turn, one member of the much larger American Federation of Labor, or AFL.

Port and shipping company owners were also getting organized. Through the local Employer's Association, the local Chambers of Commerce, the Industrial Association of San Francisco, and their very own Waterfront Employers Union (WEU), the Bay Area capitalists organized themselves as a class to undermine, stifle, and in some cases violently destroy the nascent workers' organizations. As a matter of course, their influence reached into the press, where they owned the local newspapers and magazines, and into the political sphere, with deep connections to, and influence over, powerful local and state politicians.

These two forces, the labor unions and the bosses, were increasingly coming into more intense conflict. In one instance in 1901 San Francisco, a strike began when Teamsters refused to handle goods produced by non-union workers. It lasted 11 weeks, included thousands of Teamsters, and spread into a number of other workplaces throughout the city. Bosses hired scabs and mercenaries, there was an open gun-battle on Kearny Street, five workers were killed, and hundreds more were injured in the fighting. The city's mayor, responding to complaints of police brutality, said "if they don't want to be clubbed, let them get back to work." This was real class conflict, and most political leaders were clear about whose side they were on. Although the workers were forced to give up the strike when California's Governor intervened and threatened martial law, the Teamsters managed to survive as a union.

In 1916 another strike took place in San Francisco, when 10,000 longshoremen up and down the coast struck to force the implementation of a new wage scale that had just been negotiated by the west coast branch of the ILA. Employers brought in strikebreakers, and even when an agreement was seemingly reached in which the workers would have gotten the new wage increases, the employers refused to remove those strikebreakers. This resulted in violence between the strikebreakers and the workers that caused the strike to intensify. All the biggest local and regional business leaders threw their money and influence into stopping the strike, and they pressed political leaders for a crackdown on the workers. Under intense pressure, the San Francisco Riggers' and Stevedores' Union backed down

after six weeks, and in short succession other locals up and down the coast also gave up. Without coastwide solidarity, strikes of this nature would be difficult for workers to win.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, tens of thousands of workers, particularly in the Pacific Northwest and along the West Coast, had some contact with, and were often influenced by, the militant workers of the Industrial Workers of the World (also known as the IWW or the Wobblies). The IWW called itself a union and led masses of workers in struggles to improve their conditions. Its core activists were united by the revolutionary perspective that workers, organized on an industrial basis and regardless of ethnicity or skill, could take control of industry away from the profit-mad bosses and instead produce for the common good. The IWW was particularly active in the western mining regions, the Pacific Northwest and the West Coast. They had many militants in and travelling through the Bay area, and at least some of them were active in the 1916 strike. Harry Bridges, who only arrived in the U.S. in 1920, but would go on to be a leader in the 1934 strike, exemplified this type of militant worker. He was born in Australia and worked as a seaman in his teens, learning about socialism and international solidarity from the workers who sailed from country to country, and coming to see the working class as a class without borders. In 1920, he joined the IWW and from there became an active worker militant in the labor conflicts that would follow. Although Bridges soon left the IWW, it is clear that he and many other activists from the IWW were active in the area. In the longshore and shipping industry, militant, socialist ideas were in the air, and these ideas spread every time class conflict intensified.

Another, more consequential strike took place in 1919. This strike grew out of the radical upsurge that followed World War I, in which a wave of working class mobilizations spread across the United States. The end of the war, soaring price inflation for most basic goods, and the example set by the Russian Revolution, where workers and peasants took power in 1917, all contributed to this wave. Union leaders in San Francisco made radical demands like stock ownership and

seats on the boards of directors for workers. Not only were the local unions not strong enough to engage in a long struggle, but as in 1916, not all the locals were on the same page in what they were demanding.

Radical demands like the ones they proposed triggered an aggressive response from the port-owning capitalists of San Francisco and the surrounding region. They pooled their money into an extensive anti-union propaganda campaign, intimidated judges and the legal system into prosecuting strikers vigorously, pitted local unions against one another to disrupt potential coastwide solidarity, and brought in Black and Caribbean workers as strikebreakers to stimulate racial divisions. With all these tactics, the port employers and their politicians defeated the strike.

Coming out of the defeat of 1919, the ILA and several other locals were severely weakened on the West Coast and in some cases completely eliminated, as happened in Seattle. In San Francisco, the port owners themselves formed a company union which they would dominate, and which would determine who could work and who could not. It was given the intentionally misleading name of the “Longshoremen’s Association,” and because their membership books containing the union’s constitution and tracked dues payments were blue, it was known as the “Blue Book” union. Anyone who was suspected of being a radical, or simply anyone who protested unsafe and unfair conditions, were all banned from the Blue Book union and could not get work on the docks.

After 1919, workers also became subject to a dehumanizing hiring process called the “shape-up.” Although this had always been practiced to some extent in ports on both coasts, and was always the preference of the port owners, it became the norm along west coast ports after 1919. The shape-up was a process where workers would show up at the dock early in the morning and wait. A boss or foreman would then choose the workers he wanted to work for him for the day. Sometimes he would choose only 20 or 30, even though there were 100 men waiting for work. The foreman would only choose workers who didn’t cause “trouble,” those who carried Blue Books, those who were of the same ethnic

background as the boss, or who were willing to go the extra mile to satisfy their employer for the day. Often it led desperate workers to give kickbacks or outright bribes of money or liquor to the foremen in return for a chance to work.

The pervasive exploitation faced by the thousands of longshoremen up and down the coast, the use of the Blue Book as a tool of employer control, and the continuation and intensification of the shape-up were all driving forces that nurtured workers' anger as the 1920s went on. While the bosses and their political elites could manage worker discontent in that decade with the tools they had developed, the situation would change with the worsening of economic conditions. It was then, when the Great Depression hit in late 1929, that the situation would begin to change, and workers would begin to organize in new and more successful ways than ever before.

The Great Depression

In late October of 1929, the Great Depression began. Triggered by capitalist overproduction and increasing banking and consumer debt that continued throughout the twenties and sparked in late 1929 by the mass selloff and devaluation of stocks on Wall Street, the Depression changed conditions considerably.

Within months, more than 600 banks had failed. Credit dried up, small businesses shut down, big businesses slashed production and their workforces, and farms and homes were lost to foreclosures. Millions of jobs were lost and official unemployment rates shot up to nearly 25%, but even this didn't capture the true scale of the crisis. Soup and bread lines grew, evictions skyrocketed, Hoovervilles sprouted up, and desperate migration for work became common. Under these conditions, mass discontent began to rise. This could be seen in the growth and militancy of tenant unions and unemployed councils in all the big cities, the Bonus Army March of 1932 in Washington, D.C., farmworker strikes in California, the growth of new unions, and hunger marches demanding relief.

In this context of tremendous human suffering, people were coming to recognize that the system did not work for them, and revolutionary political views gained a new hearing among the working class. This was seen most clearly in the growth of the Communist Party (CP) nationwide, but also in California.

The Party had only formed in the United States in 1919, and under repression in the 1920s it remained small, winning thousands of members but never rising to 10,000. In California the repression was intense, there were few functioning cadres, and the Party operated mostly underground until the Depression. In 1930 its headquarters in San Francisco was even occupied by rival factions. These problems of small membership and internal division would begin to change as the Depression deepened and workers looked for more radical political solutions. The layer of workers who had been members of, or influenced by, the IWW before 1920 helped this shift to happen. Their ideas and experience bridged the gap between the earlier period of strikes and radicalism, to the Communist Party and its militants which would develop in the 1930s. By 1934 the CP had about 3,000 members statewide and dozens in the Bay Area, although according to a CP leader in 1933, they had no members actually working on the docks.

Organizing on the Docks

In December 1932, a small, four-page mimeographed leaflet appeared on the docks with a masthead that read, *Waterfront Worker*. It raised the issue of a 10-cent wage cut for longshoremen that had been handed down from the shipowners just in time for the holidays. The leaflet pushed the longshoremen to think about how they could fight this. It put forward the idea that they did not have to accept the Blue Book union's power over their lives, and that they could organize for new conditions on the waterfront. It set its sights on the horizon "to prepare the whole waterfront between now and next December when the shipowners will try to put over another wage-cut."

It quickly sold between 1-2 thousand copies for a penny each. It was published every week or two, with plenty of misspellings and errors. The articles were short

and simple. They covered bread and butter issues that affected the longshoremen while making fun of different gang bosses or sharing jokes that could only be understood by the men who lived and breathed these experiences. (A gang was the common term for a work team of longshoremen.) It also reported current issues like the trial of Tom Mooney, a San Francisco labor leader and IWW member who was framed by the federal government for his political activism. Though the paper was based in San Francisco, it also was a way to share news across different ports on the west coast and even internationally.

In order to prepare the whole waterfront for the upcoming struggle against wage cuts, there would need to be a group to spearhead these efforts. Communist Party militants began to approach the waterfront with soapboxes and address the men waiting for the shape-up in the early fog. Their efforts were aimed at building their connections to the longshoremen and finding men that would want to organize a real fight back against the bosses on the docks.

This effort from the CP resulted in a group of perhaps a dozen longshoremen meeting in the Mission neighborhood, at a place that would be their namesake — Albion Hall, just off of 16th and Valencia. These meetings began as a Sunday morning class on trade unionism initiated by Communists, but militant longshoremen of various political views participated. The “Albion Hall group” would expand as the struggle on the docks heated up and go on to play a central role in offering a new and more rank-and-file leadership within the ILA.

The Tides Turn: June 1933

In the depths of the Great Depression, the United States Federal Government, then headed by Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt, passed a bill that would give encouragement to working people already beginning to organize themselves to fight back against their terrible conditions. Although the Democrats were reluctant to alienate their allies in business and industry, they wanted to slow or even halt the growing social unrest that was bubbling up throughout the nation. This bill, the National Industrial Recovery Act, was signed into law in June

of 1933. Although it created the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and contained many provisions related to industry standards, length of work weeks and minimum wages, its most significant section for workers was Section 7(a). Section 7(a) granted workers the right to organize and bargain collectively without interference from employers—including the right to join a labor union of their choosing.

Working people across the U.S., downtrodden after years of government repression, stagnant leadership, big business dominance, and most recently the suffering of the Depression, jumped at the opportunity Section 7(a) seemed to offer them. Throughout the second half of 1933 and into 1934 hundreds of thousands of workers joined pre-existing unions and began to revitalize the union movement across the continent.

In San Francisco, the ILA exemplified this revitalization. A man showed up on the docks with the ILA charter, and as one longshoreman described, began “selling organized labor for 50¢ a piece.” This man was Lee J. Holman, the longtime forgotten president of the defunct ILA. He had the legitimacy of the nationally backed ILA charter, which was exactly what most working men had in mind when they thought about signing up for a union. One of the longshoremen recalled, “we didn’t have to be pushed to get into that union. We knocked down the god darned doors.” Men signed up in droves.

But at the first membership meeting, Holman set the precedent of his leadership style. He assigned all officers without any type of elections, and he actually had police remove a member from the floor of the meeting because he argued that the chairman of the meeting should be elected. He railed against the Communists and with them, the *Waterfront Worker*. He had always been and would continue to attempt to use the ILA to dampen down Communist influence, although with only mixed success.

This was par for the course for officials within the ILA. The president of the national ILA, Joseph P. Ryan, was notorious in New York for working with gangs, bosses, and using brute force to keep workers in line. For Holman and Ryan, the

notion of a union was a charter on paper, yet with their own power to arbitrate. What workers wanted was not taken into consideration.

Nonetheless, by August, 4,000 men had joined the ILA to put a definitive end to the rule of the Blue Book and the shape-up. Despite this massive influx (90% of longshoremen in San Francisco), there was no clear direction given to the newly organized men. Holman's conservatism held them back when they wanted to take action. He called for the men to wait for the Blue Book to be defeated in the newly created Regional Labor Board and in court. Even with this new influx of energy from below he refused to call for meetings or take action against the hated Blue Book, and opted instead to rely on government bodies or bureaucratic processes.

The Labor Board did not prove much help to the men. When foremen on the docks made rounds to collect dues for the Blue Book, some men weren't hired again due to lapses in their dues payments. Their case was taken to the Labor Commissioner, and they ruled that "the Commission had no jurisdiction in the matter and that it was a case for settlement entirely between the men and the companies and probably the Recovery Act." Still, Holman refused to take action, thus guaranteeing that the Blue Book would continue to be the rule of the docks.

This continued into September, when four men on the Matson Navigation Company docks were denied employment for refusing to pay their Blue Book dues. Yet again the various labor commissions refused to weigh in to help these men get back to work. And Holman and the ILA were unwilling to take direct action to protect their workers — "we don't want any trouble right now," he told them.

Unfortunately for Holman, the times were troubled already, and by attempting to keep his (and the men's) head down, he only made it worse.

The fact that the ILA had burst onto the scene once more was aggression enough for the shipowners. They launched a "counter drive to get [the men] whipped back into line," as an ILA official described it. On July 18th Martin "Whitey"

Winblad was fired for lapsing on his dues for almost ten years, which was a regular occurrence and which for years many longshoremen had gotten away with without reprimand. The fact that one of their own, who did exactly as they did, was now out of a job, sparked outrage from even the most disengaged longshoremen. This was “a new development that immediately affected the livelihoods of hundreds of men on the waterfront.” Historian Bruce Nelson explains:

The offensive was concentrated at the Matson company, the largest employer in the port and the center of company union strength. At the shape-up on July 20 Matson representatives told the assembled stevedores, “Everybody has to have a Blue Book from now on,” thus initiating a lockout not only of ILA men but of anyone who wouldn’t—or couldn’t—pay his Blue Book dues. (Some delegates demanded payment of several years’ back dues in one lump sum.) Three weeks later an old-timer reported: “The Matson Lockout on non-Blue Bookers is still ironclad. . . They [would] rather go short-handed and rawhide those inside . . . than hire men who haven’t got the Blue Book.”

Arnold Hessler, another longshoreman, was hired on July 23rd on the Matson docks, and when he informed the foreman, he had no Blue Book, he was told to leave immediately. “I had been hired and thus was immediately discharged because of this company union and my refusal to comply with it. . . I had worked for Matson’s for about 3 1/2 years straight, and without a blue book either, . . . and I have been at Matson’s every day since, but have not been picked again. I didn’t belong to the ILA at that time but I am signing up now.”

In September, a special NRA board for San Francisco ruled that the Blue Book was “not a company union and is not under the control and domination of the Waterfront Employers Union.” The men were outraged. Men gathered on the Matson docks, tore up their blue books, and walked off the job.

By early October, Matson fired four more men, this time for wearing ILA buttons. The *Waterfront Worker* published a call for action, and a group of longshoremen led by Bridges went to the shape-up on the Matson docks to convince the men to refuse to work until the four had been reinstated. Four hundred longshoremen went on a wildcat strike for five days, and the company was told by the NRA board to rehire the men and not discriminate against ILA members.

This was a turning point for the union. As Bridges recalled it, it "demonstrated that you could join the union and wear your button, and if the company tried to fire you we had enough power to tie up the waterfront in order to enforce the demand."

The organizing efforts throughout 1933 laid the groundwork for the course of the struggles in 1934. A new leadership was forming, one which was willing to organize for a fight on the job. At the forefront of this group was Harry Bridges. The Albion Hall group, which began to take responsibility for the publication of the *Waterfront Worker*, was adamant that the ILA leadership should be elected by the membership and be "men from the Waterfront, whom we know well." They published these demands in the newsletter to prepare the readers for the ILA membership meetings, which they pushed to have with more frequency. They constantly drilled into their fellow longshoremen that they had to "take things into our own hands" and not leave decisions to the officials on high. These efforts were beginning to pay off.

In 1933 Bridges and others in the Albion Hall group ran an unsuccessful campaign in the election for top union offices, while managing to win two out of three business agent positions and a majority of the executive board. This gave them real influence within the local ILA bureaucracy. There was a dynamic emerging: these militant leaders had their finger on the pulse of the men on the docks and were gaining official influence in the ILA, but the top leadership positions were still held by officials who were loyal to the undemocratic and bureaucratic functioning of the conservative AFL union.

Nonetheless, when they raised proposals within the union they began to win votes and their proposals were put into effect. They fought for an early convention to meet in San Francisco in late February 1934. At the convention, demands were agreed on: \$1 per hour, \$1.50 for overtime, a 30 hour week, and – of huge significance – ILA-controlled hiring halls. This set of proposals was understood to be the only way to end the hated shape-up. There was also a coastwide referendum set for early March to vote on whether or not to initiate a strike. These would be fought for by locals along the entire West Coast with the intention of creating a coast-wide agreement for longshoremen, thus ending the isolation of each port.

However, while the left-wing militants were the driving force behind these demands, they did not come out of the convention with the upper hand. A coast-wide executive board remained under the control of the conservative officials.

When the March referendum took place, the longshoremen voted overwhelmingly to strike: 6,616 to 699. Holman, utterly disgusted by this “radical” turn by the longshoremen, begged Ryan to intervene and cancel all union meetings in order to ensure the conservatives in the ILA could maintain control. Facing this betrayal by Holman, the union membership voted to suspend Holman from the ILA. William Lewis, district president, stepped in and tried to call the strike off. His attempt was outvoted and ignored by the rank-and-file membership. The membership was looking for leaders who could lead them in a fight that could win their key demands, not sell them out for pennies. When Lewis spoke at mass meetings, the membership bypassed him and called for the more militant leaders like Bridges.

As March ran into April, and as May approached, it was clear there would be a strike whether the official leadership wanted it or not. Negotiations were going nowhere. Even with some concessions on wages or hours, the shipowners and union officials alike were not willing to accept or pick up the demand for a union-controlled hiring hall, which would effectively end the shape-up. President Roosevelt typed telegrams promising government mediation, which delayed the

start of the strike. But as the union officials refused to fight to end the shape-up, decades of anger at the conditions on the dock made the men stand firm and get ready to head into battle. No arbitration board or presidential mediation could settle the bitterness they held in their hearts.

In San Francisco a 50-man strike committee was elected with Bridges as the chair. Preparations were underway for May 9th, the appointed day. Activists leafleted poor and working-class neighborhoods urging residents to support the strike and not cross the picket line. The Communist Party geared up to support and build for the strike. It did this through its unemployment councils and through leafleting working class areas.

The CP also played an important role in addressing the open wound of racial divisions. In previous strikes, Black strike breakers had been effectively employed against the largely white ILA. The militants on the waterfront, with the help of the CP's influence, knew particular efforts would have to be made to organize Black workers leading up to the strike. Winning the strike would depend on this.

Black Workers and the Strike

In the early 20th century, Black workers in the Bay Area were a small minority of the population, hovering around 1% in San Francisco and 2% in Oakland (where the terminus for the transcontinental rail line was a hub of Black employment). Black workers were hired as scabs during every strike in the Bay Area starting in 1901. They would work during the strikes only to be laid off shortly after. After the 1919 strike, there were only a few docks where Black longshoremen remained on the job. One Black longshoreman thought back to his experience scabbing in 1919, which he saw as a "chance to crack the labor field," because it "paved the way initially for negroes to get on the waterfront, because after the strike was over they began to hire negroes as longshoremen on the waterfront."

While Black workers were also forced to use the Blue Book, the discrimination on the waterfront, as well as from other jobs, made their conditions worse. The discrimination came not only from employers and white workers, but also came from white-only labor unions which pushed Black workers out of jobs when they

became unionized. Thomas C. Fleming, a journalist for *The Spokesman*, described the effects in the restaurant industry: "That color thing was very powerful. Up until the late 1800s, blacks had worked as cooks and waiters in some of the city's best restaurants. But when the restaurants began to unionize, they wouldn't accept blacks as members, and the black workers were replaced by whites." Another journalist said the same: "for Aframerican workers in the Bay Cities, union labor has been and still is the chief obstacle to employment."

Prior to the 1934 strike, the ILA was nominally open to Black workers, "so long as they accepted a limited and subordinate role." For them, the main route to finding work on the waterfront was from strikebreaking, not from solidarity with other workers through a union effort. Sam Darcy (leader of the western division of the Communist Party) said that the ILA was overwhelmingly informed by a "passive attitude towards the question of Negro workers, and in some cases, actual antagonism towards including them in the Union." These factors led many Black workers to see organized labor as a yet another barrier in a labor market that was already stacked against them. Black workers therefore had little incentive to respect the white-only picket line.

The 1934 strike would change the racial dynamics of the previously lily-white union. The radical leadership under the influence of the Communist Party took a different approach to the question of race among the longshoremen. In the weeks leading up to the strike, the Communist Party and Albion Hall group went into motion with the aim of ensuring the 1934 strike was not broken with the same racial divisions as the previous waterfront battles.

Two ILA members approached the local Black newspaper, *The Spokesman*, to publish a letter asking Black workers not to break the strike. *The Spokesman* refused on the basis that they did not have a clear enough program on how the unions would treat black workers. They changed their position soon after. Harry Bridges went to Black churches in San Francisco and the East Bay and promised Black workers jobs on every dock on the West Coast if they did not cross the picket line. An ILA strike bulletin promised union membership for any worker who

had been on the docks for at least a year, giving Black workers more confidence that they could support the union and a strike.

They also approached C. L. Dellums, a leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union in Oakland, and appealed to him to help organize the Black community behind the strike. Dellums went to and spoke at meetings which were initially intended to recruit Black workers as scabs. Upon being recognized in the crowd (he was a prominent figure in the Black community), workers demanded the chair recognize him. By the end of his comments addressing the crowd of would-be strike breakers, he asked every man present to take an oath not to undermine the strike! (Meanwhile white longshoremen waited outside in case Dellums faced any security risk while addressing a scab meeting.)

Perhaps it was also the case that working class Black communities could begin to trust the sincerity of the message given the role that the Communist Party had played in political cases like the Scottsboro Boys, or perhaps because the Party had helped organize the Unemployed Councils and tenant unions that many Black workers were part of. Some Black workers, like Len Greer, became members of the Party themselves after being active in unemployed or tenants councils with other Party members. That union leaders like Bridges and others also had connections to the Party gave at least some layers of Black workers the sense that these union leaders were dedicated and sincere fighters for both Black as well as white workers.

A May 10 headline in *The Spokesman* captured the question that was being asked by Black workers in the Bay Area: "Longshoremen Appeal to Negro for Strike Support; All-White Policy of Union Tottering?" As the strike began, this question hung in the air, but was soon answered by actions from the union.

The newly formed ILA leadership made sure that Black workers were an essential part of the strike leadership. Despite the small numbers of Black longshoremen, the importance of breaking the color line meant that militant union officials like Bridges worked hard to bring Black workers into positions of leadership of the strike. One was chosen as a delegate to the coastwide strike convention and five

were elected to the strike committee. In the first week of the walkout, a Black member of the strike committee was in the front ranks in a march of 5,000 longshoremen up Market Street, where they met a demonstration of workers 12,000 strong at the Civic Center.

On May 9th, the first day of the longshoremen's strike, only a single Black longshoremen gang (comprised of 16 workers) joined the strike. Many Black maritime workers respected the picket lines but did not participate in them. While some Black stewards joined the white picketers, many were waiting for "proof that the white unions' talk about racial equality [would] turn into action." By the time the strike had ended, all the Black crews had joined the walkout, united with white workers in the fight to end their dependence on the modern-day slave market.

The West Coast Waterfront Strike

Men gathering on the morning of May 9th were no longer huddled in the chilly fog awaiting orders or desperately hoping for a day's worth of poorly paid work. Instead, in San Francisco 1,000 men with their heads held high marched in pairs across the length of the Embarcadero, the waterfront road that runs between the piers and the rest of the city. In twenty ports along the coast, a total of 12,000 men gathered on picket lines. Ships stood anchored in the harbor, unable to move their cargo.

The docks were blocked off by barbed wire and thick, closed steel gates, with police standing guard. In San Francisco alone, nearly one thousand scabs were hired in the first few days of the strike. The bosses filled newspapers with words both begging and at the same time threatening the longshoremen to get back to work, and with ads looking to hire scabs.

The working population of San Francisco was overwhelmingly sympathetic to the strike. The first workers to show their support through action were the Teamsters, who worked side by side with the longshoremen as they hauled cargo off of the docks. On May 13th they gathered for a membership meeting and voted to refuse to work the waterfront. Mike Casey, the president of the Teamsters local, tried to

block this, and when he failed, he immediately framed it as a defensive measure and distanced the Teamster's action from what it really was. To the press, he claimed this was a "boycott" of the docks (not a sympathy strike), done only "for protection of the men." Undeterred, hundreds of Teamsters left the union hall after the vote and marched to the waterfront to join their brothers in solidarity.

In the days that followed, the ripples spread outward from the docks as each section of working people were impacted by the strike and had to decide their course of action. The seamen were next, as they waited on the ships stuck in the harbor. In the first few days of the strike thirteen crews walked off the decks and onto the docks to join the striking longshoremen. Beyond just showing up in sympathy for the longshoremen, they began to formulate their own demands for their strike, also in opposition to the wishes of their conservative officials. By May 16th, the International Sailors Union and its affiliates (the Marine Firemen, Oilers, Watertenders and Wipers, and the Marine Cooks and Stewards) were also officially on strike. Other maritime unions demanded pay increases or other improvements but did not go out on strike.

Street battles broke out with increasing violence between scabs and strikers, and police force was used to break the strike. In Oakland, hand to hand fighting broke out when four hundred strikers stopped 72 scabs. In Portland, strikers attacked scab housing and "400 striking longshoremen threw one policeman into the water and severely beat several others". In Los Angeles, on May 15th the police shot at strikers, killing two and injuring many more. A funeral march was held with 5,000 strikers and sympathizers in San Pedro.

On May 17th in San Francisco, a street battle was reported where 500 longshoremen "attempted to take 59 negro strike breakers from their police escort." At one of the few piers where black workers had retained jobs from previous strikes, police intervened to disperse the gathering of white strikers. The police tried to escort the Black workers and then they told "the Negroes to 'run for it', which they did, followed by scores of shouting, fighting strikers." They

were in “their own territory” and ended up getting the upper hand over the stevedores in “hand to hand combat”.

Thomas C. Fleming tells of when he signed up to work on a ship being worked by scab labor. As they were loading into a truck to take them to the waterfront, the “wrong truck” showed up. “It was loaded with striking workers, and they had baseball bats, which they started swinging. We jumped off that damn truck and took off running. I didn't try any more after that. I saw it was wrong then.”

Historian Bruce Nelson again provides a vivid description of the conflicts:

The most dramatic confrontation occurred in Seattle, where a timid and conservative ILA leadership stood by as employers put strikebreakers to work on every pier. In response, on May 12 a flying squad of six hundred Tacoma longshoremen, along with several hundred strikers from Everett and “all of the militant men we could find in Seattle,” stormed the docks. The army of two thousand men battered down pier doors, swept police aside, and halted work on eleven ships where strikebreakers had been handling cargo. The flying squad also paid visits to other cities, with so much success that a shipowner spokesman complained: “Within a few days all work at Pacific Northwest ports had to cease owing to violence by strikers and to lack of police protection. The strikers took over entire control of the waterfront.”

Violence from clashes between scabs and strikers was a daily occurrence at all the ports. The strikers were severe: patrolling by speedboat, cars, and by foot. If caught, scabs might have their legs laid across the curb and stomped on, or their teeth kicked out.

The bosses were skilled at using social divisions to their advantage. Many strike breakers were college students, looking to earn some extra cash. Several hundred scabs were Black men, and the violent clashes to defend the strike brought out racial antagonisms as well. Thus, it was particularly important to have African American longshoremen that could deter these clashes, by convincing Black communities and workers not to scab, and by confronting scabs when they did

encounter them. Longshoremen like Len Greer tried to convince other Black workers of the necessity of interracial solidarity, which he saw as joining forces to “make a better future for yourself,” even when others in his community thought he was crazy for joining up with “poor white trash.” None of this was simple or straightforward. Greer had a friend who was stabbed on Pier 18 as he was cooking for scabs and after that carried a gun to defend his right to scab. Greer turned him into the police for the gun, though his underlying motivation was his friend’s refusal to give up his strikebreaking activity.

Despite these real divisions and how they were worsened by the bosses, the strikers managed to maintain their unity, and after six days of the strike, not a single freighter had left the port of San Francisco. The strikers along the coast were close to 22,000 total: 12,000 longshoremen, 5,000 sailors, and thousands from other maritime unions. The pickets held and the strike spread across the maritime trades. This despite the fact that there was no strike bulletin that came out consistently, and that there is no indication there were many regular meetings for the rank-and-file to gather to decide the course of the strike.

The conservative leadership of the ILA desperately wanted to call off the strike, get the men back to work, and appease the industrial bosses. Joseph P. Ryan, the ILA President, arrived in San Francisco from the International office in New York City to pick up the negotiations. During May and June he signed onto agreements that made various concessions to the company owners. In all these instances, the workers consistently voted down these top-down concessionary agreements. Their main grievance, the shape-up, had no solution in any of these contracts. The employers refused to give up control of the hiring hall and defended their right to hire union and nonunion workers. These contracts would have left the ILA powerless to end the most hated of their egregious work conditions.

On June 16, for example, Ryan signed a contract with the head of the Waterfront Employers’ Union (WEU), knowing full well he had no authority to sign an agreement on behalf of the membership. He had promised the shipowners his signature would be effective and he would “exercise the necessary authority” to

get the longshoremen back to work. The agreement gave “joint and equal” control of hiring to bosses and the ILA, and the expenses for the union hall would be split. A labor relations committee would decide wages, hours, and work rules locally. It restricted new membership, pushed deadlocks into arbitration, and banned sympathy strikes. Ryan bragged about the agreement, and the newspapers all announced the strike was over. Local government cheered.

Bridges confronted Ryan outside his hotel and reminded him that he had no authority for the secret maneuvers he was attempting. The membership wouldn’t budge, and a contract would only be passed if it was voted on by two-thirds of the entire Pacific Coast membership.

This sentiment proved true at a meeting of 2,500 longshoremen that packed the hall and spilled over into the street. Ryan was greeted with boos and threats of violence. Bridges criticized Ryan for going above the strikers’ heads and conducting secret negotiations. The agreement was voted down unanimously in San Francisco. It was rejected in other ports but accepted by a narrow margin in San Pedro.

In the days following this meeting, both sides of the struggle increased their organizing efforts. Local governments ordered shipments of tear gas and arms as they prepared for battle. They mobilized their police forces and assured the bosses that the ports would be opened by force, now that the strikers had proved impossible to negotiate with.

For the longshoremen, Ryan claimed he “was not aware the strike was so widespread” across the different unions. He cried he had no idea that the solidarity strikes were taken so seriously by the strikers. The strikers were proving their resolve to remain out until all the demands were met across the various unions.

In order to coordinate further, the rank-and-file leadership created the Joint Marine Strike Committee to “carry on all future negotiations for a settlement of the strike.” The unions on strike had been meeting daily in informal sessions to coordinate, but now that was brought into a formal capacity through the

committee. It was composed of five delegates from each union on strike. The Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU), the Communist Party organized “red union,” was asked to join but was voted down and rejected. The Teamsters were invited to join, but the president of the local told Bridges that “our refusal to handle goods in the waterfront is sufficient assurance that we support you.” This stance meant that the Teamsters were not only excluded from joint coordination, but also closed the door on the chance for the membership to elect delegates to coordinate their strike.

The committee organized a rally at the Civic Auditorium on June 19th. Ten thousand filled the seats and left standing room only. 40% of the audience were strikers, but the rest were families, friends and the general public of San Francisco. Amid speeches laying out demands and criticizing the bosses and the union leadership, the idea of a general strike was floated. For the first time, a sense began to develop that a general strike could be possible.

The next day the headlines of the capitalist press implored workers to settle for the June 16th agreement in order to avoid “bitter and disastrous warfare.” The newspapers screamed of the radicals, communists, and “alien” provocateurs on the waterfront. The temperature was rising: the official, bureaucratic methods of settling the strike had failed. The conservative union officials were impotent in stopping the strikers’ fight. Therefore, the bosses and their media amplified their divisive propaganda and the conservative leaders leaned to the right in an attempt to divide the strikers’ forces and settle it before it got out of hand.

Under this intense pressure to show how moderate and respectable they were, the San Francisco Labor Council met and overwhelmingly passed a resolution for the longshoremen to cut all ties with communists on the waterfront. The S.F. Labor Council even implored the Roosevelt administration “act quickly” to arbitrate the strike, because they feared they would not be able to stop a general strike if the bosses used force to open the port. The conservative union officials were still trying their hardest to pull on the reins and slow down the momentum that was quickly carrying the strike beyond their control.

After the June 19 meeting, some unions began to consider and then vote on what they would do if the governments and port-owners tried to use force to reopen the port. Some voted they would walk out, while others, like the Teamsters, voted against any notion of a general strike. But as workers were weighing how best to stand up to employer and state violence, the idea of a general strike was being contemplated. The strike committee met on June 30th and started to take up the question of how to organize for a general strike. Although a general strike had first been mentioned just three weeks into the strike, it was only after six weeks that efforts began to solidify this as a real possibility.

The employers were also divided as to the strategy to take to open the port. Should they let the strike wear itself out? Or bring it to a head-on collision? By late June, they were escalating preparations to use force: amassing freight trucks to use to move cargo, and with the promise of the Chief of Police that they would “do everything possible to handle the situation” for the employers. Despite an intervention from Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins pushing for federal arbitration, the Mayor pushed back and reiterated that even though it would involve bloodshed, the port would be forcibly opened.

As industrial actions spread through the country in 1934, the Roosevelt administration was developing its methods of managing the increasing class conflicts. On June 26th, they created the National Longshoremen’s Board to navigate disputes, investigations, and conduct elections for collective bargaining representatives. In other words, they wanted to bureaucratize the decisions and take decision making power away from the masses of longshoremen who were actually on strike.

The following week, the Board held a series of meetings with dates chosen to open the port, only for those dates to be pushed back. The Board came to the conclusion that the main issue holding back a settlement was the fact that the unions were trying to win simultaneous demands that would apply to all union locals. The bosses refused to deal with these generalized demands of the workers of San Francisco. They desperately wanted to divide them, pick each of them off

and settle individually, diluting their larger potential power that could win gains for all workers in various sectors. But the strike committee held strong and refused to budge on their commitment to settling the strike together.

Bloody Thursday

On July 2nd, thousands of workers gathered on the docks, with approximately 4,000 standing in front of Pier 38, where it was expected that the companies would try to open to docks. They had announced the pier would be opened by force at 3pm. Police presence was overwhelming, but so was the crowd that had responded. A 21-hour delay was announced, and when the crowds dispersed in the afternoon, trucks slipped through the picket lines. A committee of strikers were escorted by police behind barbed wired gates to verify that further trucks were not being loaded.

On July 3rd, the crowds gathered even earlier in the day. The air was tense. Historian David Selvin described the beginnings of the conflict.

At 1:27 P.M., the steel doors of Pier 38 rolled up. A string of police cars led the way for five old trucks, two men on each truck. "They look scared," said one reporter. A thunderous shout greeted the clumsy, little parade as still more police – on horses and motorcycles and in cars – joined the escort. The crowd surged forward. Barrages of tear gas opened the way for the trucks. The police moved on the crowd, nightsticks flailing. Slowly, the crowd fell back, breaking up into smaller, rock-throwing clusters, fleeing in retreat. Sounds of revolvers and riot guns echoed over the clash. Pickets fell back to 2nd and Brannan streets, some to Townsend. Bricks and stray bullets crashed windows; one stray bullet penetrated a window of the American Trust Co. at 3rd and Townsend streets, wounding a teller.

Amid these battles, five trucks made 18 round trips off the docks, and the next day, July 4th, ads from the Industrial Association in local newspapers declared

emphatically: "The Port is Open." Although they mostly respected the day as a holiday, they refocused their efforts towards Thursday, July 5th, when they would open the port in a definitive battle.

A little after 8am on the 5th, the gates of Pier 38 opened again and lines of police on foot, in cars and on horses began to escort more trucks off the docks and into the city. As the number of strikers and onlookers swelled, the police were ordered to attack. Tear gas was fired, and police then charged into the crowds.

The furies of street warfare raged for hour piled on hour," the Chronicle's Pulitzer prize-winning reporter, Royce Brier, wrote. "Don't think of this as a riot. It was a hundred riots, big and little, first here, now there. Don't think of it as one battle, but as a dozen battles." But battles or riots, they were lopsided contests. Against the tear gas grenades, riot guns, and revolvers of the police, the pickets were virtually weaponless, grabbing at bricks or stones, pieces of lumber or construction scraps. Against the police mounted on horses and motorcycles, and in squad cars, the pickets could only run, in panic and terror, from their constantly reinforced and heavily armed attackers.

In the early afternoon, roughly six thousand strikers were concentrated near the ILA hall on Steuart Street. A car pulled up and two policemen jumped out and shot into the crowd. Three men were shot, two killed.

The murders of Howard Sperry and Nick Bordoise were declared "justifiable homicide" in the act of suppressing a riot. Over 70 strikers and sympathizers were shot (many of them in the back) on that day, earning it the name "Bloody Thursday."

One bystander recounted that the police were the initiators of the violence: "Such rioting as occurred, was the direct product of their own aggression." Of course, the Chief of Police did not see it that way: "we were faced by from five to seven thousand infuriated men bent on" causing violence to nonunion men, and destroying company property, and of course, he concluded, "after that, only the

imagination can determine what they would have done in the way of sacking San Francisco."

While the mayor and the employers called for the union to officially give up, the strikers refused. The Strike Committee called on all local unions to send delegates to Eagles Hall on Saturday, July 7th to prepare for a general strike.

The governor called out 1,500 National Guard troops and 5,000 more on reserve. Troops covered every pier along the Embarcadero from Fishermen's Wharf to Islais Creek, armed with bayonets and machine guns. It was this level of force that was required to forcibly open the way for trucks to run from the docks to the warehouses.

In other ports the violence was immense. In San Pedro alone there were five hundred arrests over the course of the strike. The Los Angeles Police's Intelligence Bureau was called "unbelievably sadistic" for the "campaign of brutality and terrorism indulged in... in the confines of the harbor department jail." One sailor remembers going to the picket line on July 16th and being taken to the police station, where a cop beat him until he broke his shoulder and shins. "Then he twisted the right foot until the bones he had splintered with his club cracked and came thru the flesh, severing an artery. It started [to] hemorrhage and the blood simply poured out of me." He remained in the hospital until August 14th and in a cast far longer.

The General Strike

The "high tide of united labor action in San Francisco" washed over the city in the week following the killing of Bordoise and Sperry. A somber funeral march of nearly forty thousand marched up Market Street in silence. One marcher recounted: "an ominous silence among spectators and marchers alike.... The sound of thousands of feet echoed up that hollow canyon—nothing else.... It was a magnificent sight—those careworn, weary faces determined in their fight for justice thrilled me. I have never seen anything so impressive in all my life."

Years later, workers would recall this day “with awe and pride”. Even businessmen walking down the street took their hats off, as the overwhelming severity of the atmosphere washed over them. No policeman dared show their face. Row after row of men, marching shoulder to shoulder, marched with absolute discipline and sobriety.

Any hope of arbitration had collapsed. The fight for control of the hiring halls was a battle that would be fought until the end. There was no chance of leaving this up to an arbitration board. Instead, the only option was to expand the struggle beyond the confines of the maritime strike.

The Labor Council met on July 6th as hundreds of participants packed the room, the halls, and the street outside. 14 unions already supported a general walkout, and the Joint Marine Strike Committee brought a proposal before the Council for a general strike. The conservative Labor Council officials were forced to act. They either got out in front of the current wave, or they would be swept aside, powerless to control the direction of the movement. A union official described the situation: “It was an avalanche. I saw it coming so I ran ahead before it crushed me.” The momentum of the entire working class of San Francisco forced the union bureaucrats to get out in front of a movement they had consistently opposed from the beginning.

Thus, the Labor Council formed a “Strike Strategy Committee” (which the Communists called the “Strike Tragedy Committee”) and appointed AFL representatives from various unions. None of the representatives were from the waterfront unions. The goal was to get out ahead of the situation and lead it in a direction acceptable to them. George Kidwell, a sharp union strategist and part of the Teamsters and Bakery Wagon Drivers’ Union, articulated his aim in creating the Strike Strategy Committee. He explicitly wanted to get the strike “out of the hands of the individual unions, particularly the longshore, and get it into the hands of the Labor Council.”

The conservative leaders had succeeded in taking the reins back from the more radical layers of rank-and-file leaders in the maritime unions. To do this well,

Kidwell had a twofold strategy: “first, to force both the employers and the marine unions to accept arbitration; and second, to turn an avalanche of class feeling into an orderly and limited expression of sympathy.”

Kidwell’s views represented much of the Labor Council’s membership and the union officialdom. He in particular had learned from the Seattle General Strike in 1919 and was very clear: “In a general strike situation, you’ve got to end it fast.” He knew the best way to do this was to create a general body that has “the loyalty of the people involved” but which is able to “control the situation” and “work out a solution” – meaning, end the strike.

The new, militant leadership did not expose what the conservative bureaucrats were doing. Instead, the July 7th ILA Strike Bulletin read “The San Francisco Labor Council has not blocked a general strike. The Council has set up a committee to make plans for a strike that will stop every industry in the city.” By publishing such an empty analysis of the forces at play, it critically failed to prepare the population of the city to keep up the momentum towards a general strike.

They continued to press forward with the strike, even while being out maneuvered politically and tactically by the conservative officials. Even if maneuvers to keep control of the strike in the hands of the most active unions were to fail, the least the militants could have done would have been to expose to the population what was happening. Not only did they fail to explain clearly who was selling out the strike, they also failed to propose ways for mass meetings of longshoremen and maritime strikers to regain control of the direction of the strike.

All throughout the Bay Area, workers were meeting and voting to go on strike. Workers without unions discussed what they would do as others walked off the job. Official union leaders pleaded with workers to delay their strike, but their pleas had little impact on the votes. Across the Bay, the Alameda Labor Council formed its own strike strategy committee.

The Teamsters gathered 1,500 of their members into the Dreamland Auditorium. Their local president reflected on the sentiment: “In all my thirty years of leading

these men, I have never seen them so worked up, so determined to walk out. I don't believe any power on earth can prevent their going on strike unless the marine strike is settled by Thursday." The conservative union leader tried his best to undermine the strike, but his efforts had no effect on the determined upsurge of workers.

On the morning of Thursday, July 12th, 4,000 Teamsters across the Bay Area joined the strike. Over the course of the next two days, tens of thousands of other workers joined the strike, which now surpassed 30,000 workers in San Francisco alone. Two dozen more unions had voted to walk out *if* the Strike Strategy Committee recommended joint action.

Workers were taking matters into their own hands. Teamsters posted picket lines around the area, blocking non-union drivers. They issued permits for deliveries of food and fuel to essential services. Grocery stores rationed their wares. Gas stations shut down due to lack of supplies. Those who were able fled the city out of fear of lack of supplies. The rest filled strike kitchens and showed up to picket lines.

The newspapers exploded in hysteria, fueled by the very real panic from individuals in government and among industry heads. *The Chronicle* published hysterical reports of a so-called Communist army marching on the city with supposed plans to destroy infrastructure and shut down communication. The Industrial Association used its connections in the news to create lists of anything that could be construed as strike violence. Anything to drum up fear of the supposed revolution happening in San Francisco. Politicians begged President Roosevelt to come to San Francisco to put down the insurrection they believed was at their doorstep.

To experienced labor organizers (including Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins), they were confident there was no "revolution" on their doorstep. Although it was workers driving the strike forward, no larger political demands had been raised, and the conservative bureaucrats had successfully gotten into the lead of the strike, out maneuvering the left and rank-and-file leaders.

The violence and mayhem that the newspapers worried about did not come to pass. Sunday, the day before the official start of the general strike, San Francisco was already shut down:

The National Guard patrolled a deserted Embarcadero. Most street and cable cars had stopped running; the four parallel pairs of track stretching up Market Street lay shiny and abandoned. Employees of the privately owned Market Street Railway had left cars in the barns. Municipal Railway employees were expected to join the strike later. Taxi drivers had quit at 5:00 that morning. Few private automobiles had gas to operate. In the East Bay, Key Route trainmen had voted to walk out Tuesday morning, which would shut down many of the trans-bay ferryboats. Grocery stores were closed; signs in their windows told customers they were out of stock, "closed till the boys win," or "closed for the duration."

The General Strike Committee, composed of 900 delegates, met nearly continuously to coordinate the general shut down of San Francisco and maintain life for working people. There was also a much smaller committee of 25 that had been selected by the top officials to coordinate further, and were far more loyal to the top union brass' interests than the larger committee. Mike Quin, a Communist sympathizer and journalist wrote:

As a consequence, although the progressives succeeded many times in putting through resolutions that would have organized the distribution of food, the regulation of housing, and the prevention of profiteering within the hands of the strikers, these resolutions were either ignored or only partially carried out by the committee of twenty-five.

Between these committees, representatives coordinated which restaurants would remain open, where food distribution depots would be, the continued delivery of milk and bread, and regulating food distribution to prevent profiteering. Taxis were shut down, as were car mechanics, movie theaters, night clubs, barbers, and

tailors. The industrial belt of the city was shut down and many workplaces closed due to the workers spontaneously walking out. The crews working on the Bay and Golden Gate bridges walked off the job, bringing construction to a halt.

Elsewhere, workplaces remained open in a limited capacity. Hotels instructed guests to use limited linens due to the laundry workers joining the strike. After a conference of owners, department stores remained open, and employees were instructed on how to use elaborate alarm bell systems should they need to “repel an attack by Reds.” The clerks had various takes on how to interpret this hysteria from their bosses. “Some took it as an amusing joke and related the story with peals of laughter. Others seriously believed that mobs of the ‘lower classes,’ armed with pitchforks and brickbats, might storm the revolving doors any minute.” Ultimately, the stores that were open had few customers to wait on at all.

The streets had life to them, but in a totally new way: thousands walked in the streets without access to gas or trolleys that were all shut down. Some biked, a few roller-skated in the middle of the streets. The few restaurants had long lines: a city of 700,000 and only 3,000 seats were available. Nonetheless, as the number of open restaurants increased, it gave the creeping feeling that the strike was crumbling.

There was no independent strike news. All the news of the strike came from the occasional ILA strike bulletin, and the daily barrage of news from the owners’ perspective. The *Waterfront Worker* had been produced only twice in May and June, and not at all in July. *The Western Worker*, the paper of the Communist Party, was a source of news on the strike, but this was only distributed once a week (and their printing press was destroyed in the July 17th raids). The fact that this was one of the few places for workers to get consistent news from the workers’ perspective meant that the red-baiting and anti-worker sentiments of the bosses’ newspapers could still have a broad influence. The workers did not have a consistent and timely way to combat the owners’ narrative and share news from their own perspective.

Nonetheless, working people continued to come out in support of the strike, and by doing so, raised demands that went beyond an initial show of solidarity. Their actions began to call into question whose interests their work served. By doing so, they edged up against dangerous questions about how society should be organized. It was for this reason that these actions struck such deep fear into the hearts of even the most calculated and measured employer.

The Amalgamated Streetcar Workers met in the early hours of the morning, after the trolley system's daily shutdown at 2 A.M., to consider what action to take. Employers were confident that this vital artery would remain in operation, because the company had recently granted a voluntary wage increase and its work force included many "old-timers . . . loyal to the company." Imagine the employers' shock, then, when the Streetcar Workers passed a resolution that committed the union to walk out in sympathy with the waterfront and general strikes "and called upon the employees of the Key System and workers of the community to take over the transit company as a mass transportation system for working people." At that moment, [employer representative] St. Sure remembered, the East Bay business community became convinced that "there was a revolution in progress. . . frankly we were frightened . . . [because] the streetcar workers, who had no direct connection with the strike, . . . were actually proposing taking over the property; . . . we felt this was the first step in [a] class conflict that might lead to anything.

The idea that this was a "class conflict that might lead to anything" is what drove the bosses and their newspapers into hysteria. They had been banging the drums and screaming of a "communist invasion" for weeks, and the actions of the general population were truly terrifying them. The fact that suddenly, regular working people—even the workers who had seemed so loyal to them for years before—would refuse to work and begin to question the fundamental laws of property ownership, was too much for them to allow.

On July 17th, the fifth day of numerous unions out in a general strike, police and vigilantes raided left-wing offices and union halls, smashing windows, destroying literature and office files. They destroyed first the MWIU, where the National Guard blocked the entire street in front of the hall and arrested 85 people while destroying the property. The police then went to the ILA soup kitchen and picked out anyone in line that “looked like” foreigners or Communists.

They proceeded to go to all Communist and left-wing hubs in the city and in the East Bay. Workers’ cultural centers, like the Finnish hall, were systematically destroyed, as the vigilantes destroyed everything from grand pianos to libraries. The stairs in the Workers’ Center in Oakland were slippery with blood, its walls splattered. There were hundreds of militants arrested across the Bay Area.

According to the left-wing newspaper *The Militant*, these raids were not only done through the coordination of police and citizens councils, but also with the tacit support of the union officials. These officials also did not want the strike going any further than it had, and therefore were willing to stand aside or even encourage the police and plain clothed vigilantes to rough up the left wing and communist militants in the area.

It may seem surprising that the conservative labor officials would resort to such manipulative, dirty, and undemocratic strategies. However, the labor officials’ mode of operation had been to control their memberships through bureaucratic maneuvers and low participation for many years. Many of the top salaried Labor Council officials had more contact with the Mayor and the various owners’ councils (the Industrial Association, the Newspaper Publishers’ Council, the Waterfront Employers’ Union, etc.) than they did with their own membership and the day-to-day realities of work. All along they had made it clear that they would have rather signed an agreement that kept “the slave market” alive than rally the type of fight it would take to kill it off.

It may seem beyond comprehension for them to rely on the state to help silence the left wing—with the same police that were beating their own members in the street! However, the conservative union heads faced a very difficult situation.

They had to participate in the General Strike Committee, which had a much broader base of participants than they would have liked.

Their aims were to bring the strike to a halt, an aim which was not shared widely in the popular sentiments of the majority of San Francisco. The left wing of the Committee, on the other hand, wanted to further expand the control of the strike committee over the essential services of the city, thus, strengthening the strike so it could continue. To that end:

The progressives, though a minority, had one advantage: they could speak their minds freely. The conservatives, in a constant state of anxiety, had to keep up a pretense of militance and advance their purpose by a series of stratagems and devices. It was the extraordinary situation of a majority, scared to death of a minority, and having to maneuver with kid gloves. For this particular minority had the vast majority of outside mass sentiment on its side.

The general strike started to wane on the third day. More so than the raids, the successful maneuvering of the labor officials brought it to an end. An early example of the way the union officials undermined it could be seen in how they dealt with workers on the municipal streetcar service. These workers never took a strike vote, and instead joined the general strike by a collective understanding of what to do. The municipal government immediately threatened them with termination and the loss of all privileges. The Strike Committee could have very well folded the protection of these workers into the demands to end the strike and ensured the entirety of San Francisco's working class was behind them in their defense. Instead, the General Strike Committee, divided in bitter disagreement, passed a resolution ordering the workers back to work.

As a result, the streets of San Francisco slowly filled with examples of various fractures in the strike. Discouraged, one Sailors' Union representative observed that "our General Strike seems to be dissolving under our feet. . . The strike is now being run by other Unions, and the conservatives, having all the voting power, seem to be attempting to force us back to work immediately."

On July 19th, the seventh day of the general strike, the Labor Council voted 191 to 174 to end the strike. Over the course of the previous two months, a general strike had been held up as the maritime workers' ultimate weapon to win their demands and avoid arbitration. Now, the Labor Council recommended the working people of San Francisco return to work, *even as all the demands that had been articulated throughout the course of the strike were still on the table*. The Longshoremen and various maritime unions (as well as the Teamsters) stayed out for a few more days. But the Labor Council continued to recommend they fold their strike and accept arbitration, despite the broad popular support that they had. It was demoralizing and confusing.

Now, the mass of striking workers were left with few options as to how to proceed. It had been two and a half months since the longshoremen went out on May 9th. Across the coastline, thousands had been arrested, six had been killed, with many hundreds more injured. What had made this level of industrial battle possible was the solidarity and support of other workers in the maritime industries, but also importantly, from the Teamsters. On July 20, the Teamsters in San Francisco and Oakland voted to return to work.

Paul Taylor, a labor scholar, observed the atmosphere in the ILA hall as the longshoremen waited for the outcome of this Teamster vote:

"The big shabby room was depressing, and the three [or] four men sitting around were depressed. Ralph Mallen the head of the Publicity committee sat by the phone. He looked tired and beaten. In the three months he had aged years. . . There was no confidence now, only silence and painful waiting." Although they stated that they felt "more strengthened . . . today than at any time during the entire maritime strike," their strategic alternatives were now severely limited and their morale was being tested as never before.

The tides had turned, and the longshoremen voted to send even their most critical, hard-fought demand for a hiring hall to arbitration, and to end their strike on July 24th. A few days later, the seamen did the same. Bridges implored the

seamen to return to work together, with the longshoremen, so that at least the maritime trades could end their strike together and reinforce some of the unity that they had built up over the previous three months. But under the conservative leadership of the local president, the seamen chose to stay out for an additional two days before caving to the pressures of the disintegrated strike. 83 days after the initial walk outs, both the west coast waterfront and general strikes were over.

Returning to Work

The men were returning to work, but under very different conditions. They would wait months to hear from the National Longshoremen's Board regarding their results of arbitration. However, walking into work together after the strike raised immediate questions of working conditions. Longshoreman Henry Schmidt remembered the first day they returned to work they discovered "they had terrific power; they also had some courage, and they changed the working conditions immediately." Another longshoreman recalled that "some very good [working] rules . . . were made up, on the pierhead before we went into work that morning."

Men walked off the job to lower the load amounts. When the bosses exceeded them, they packed up to walk out. They shut down piers until strike breakers were fired. "This is what we kept doing," as one sailor remembered, "we got what we wanted. . . a little bit at a time." Some of these were not small actions. On September 20th, 800 longshoremen and seamen went on strike to fire 17 sailors who had been scabs.

These actions continued up until the arbitration agreement was handed down and beyond. The job actions and wildcat strikes were a result of the strength the men had gained during the strike. They had confidence in each other to stand up together. They also had gained a clarity they had lacked before: actions on the job, by a critical mass of workers, are what can enforce conditions on the job. They didn't have to wait for the conservative union heads to lead the way on the

immediate issues they faced. Instead, they took action. This strengthened their case during the weeks that the arbitration board deliberated.

Arbitration Awards a Victory

On October 12, three months after the strike ended, the arbitration board issued its ruling. The union won the right to operate hiring halls jointly with the employers. They also won the right to select the job dispatcher, the actual person who would dispatch workers. While the unions had wanted full control, joint control plus control of the dispatcher position were both huge victories. Union representatives would in the future have joint control over the many details of how the halls would operate. The despised shape-up and all the ills that went with it were a thing of the past!

The board also ruled that workers could work no more than a 6-hour day, or a 30-hour workweek, averaged over a four-week period. Although this mandate would be the subject of many future disputes and work-stoppages, it set in principle limitations on bosses' ability to super-exploit some workers to the exclusion of others.

The board also ruled that the longshoremen get a 10 cents per hour raise, raising their minimum wage to 95 cents per hour for regular time, \$1.40 per hour for overtime.

Although the board's ruling for seamen was not as clear a victory as they would have liked, they nonetheless won a pay raise and an eight-hour workday.

After the Strike

Even after the arbitration agreement was decided, actions by the workers to defend themselves and their new contract continued. The men had had a taste for what they could do, regardless of any contract or legal constraints. They saw the power they had to impose the conditions they demanded, effective immediately.

The union had established rules to spread the work out evenly, and whole crews would walk off the job early in order to not exceed their hourly limits. They voted to fine anyone who exceeded these hours without the union's permission.

There were other ways that the consciousness of the men had changed as well. The firemen penalized any members that bought a Hearst newspaper after the horrific slander they had faced from the conglomerate.

One longshoreman's wife recounted:

Before the strike my husband was always complaining about conditions on the waterfront, how hard he was working and how much the bosses were hollering and so forth.

Since returning to work after the strike he is a changed man entirely. He seems different and happier, and even finds time to pay a little attention to his wife. . . Thanks to the strike, a change for the better has come for the men on the front and a change has taken place in our home life.

The change she felt at home was also felt in the streets and on the docks of San Francisco. The ILA issued a publication that noted the change:

Let any San Francisco citizen walk along the waterfront today. . . No longer will he encounter those crowds of shabby men hanging around the piers with desperation written on their faces. Today these men report to the central hiring hall and are dispatched in a prompt and business-like manner to the place where they are needed. They do not have to hang around the waterfront saloons waiting for a chance to "treat" the hiring bosses. They do not have to fawn or lick anyone's boots to get a job. . . In short, they can afford the luxury of being MEN.

The press still wrung their hands about the so-called radical leaders of the ILA, but these arguments fell on deaf ears. Working people generally agreed that no workers should have to show up to work under the stress and precarity of

uncertain work, or knowing they had to give bribes or give favors just in order to bring home bread for one's family.

The control that the union had won allowed them to manage work so it was distributed fairly. The ILA wrote that the owners "want to deal with 'dependents,' grateful for handouts—not with MEN." The fact that the union had official control of dispatching, and the men now worked alongside other men who were willing to respond to any transgression on the docks, allowed them to push back on the shipowners' belief they could get away with anything, thinking that "they are the MASTERS; we are the SLAVES" as one ILA publication put it.

Black Workers

For Black workers, the shift was also historic. On August 9th, the headline of the Black newspaper, *The Spokesman*, announced on its front page: "S.F. UNION BREAKS RACIAL BARS." This was the reflection of immediate changes that were carried out as the strike ended. According to the same paper, by August 2nd, every Black worker in the San Francisco ILA had work. Of 79 work gangs (the commonly used term for crews of longshoremen), 35 had Black longshoremen in them. With 100 Black longshoremen working, their numbers on the waterfront were increased more than three times since prior to the strike. Black stevedores who joined the union were promised to be put to work "as fast as they join the union." However, special caution was used to avoid hiring anyone who had worked as a strikebreaker.

At a meeting to decide the racial policies of the union, Bridges explained the effort that would be made to enroll Black longshoremen in the union: "These men will not be Jim-crowed into separate gangs," but will be scattered indiscriminately throughout the dock personnel. As a further bar to discrimination, a committee to investigate dock conditions will be appointed. Their principal duty will be to see that no worker is fired or intimidated because of race or color."

The lily-white policies of the ILA had been broken, and locally they enforced this change on a daily basis. Black longshoremen like Len Greer became a part of overseeing the union's hiring practices and others became dispatchers. Many

times, the dispatching was more complicated than just assigning Black workers to various gangs. They often had to assign white workers who would be willing to stand up against any racial discrimination that the minority would face. This was done consciously to ensure there were teams of militants and other class-conscious workers ready to face any backlash that they anticipated. They also followed up with real punishments for workers who violated these new initiatives. In one instance, the ILA tried a gang boss for “slandering colored brothers,” and in another they stripped a gang boss of his oversight powers due to his open discrimination on the job.

This was not the case across the coast. In Los Angeles, the ILA had promised jobs for those who did not scab. Over two weeks after the end of the strike, the Black stevedores were still left out of work.

But in the following years, Black longshoremen played a larger role in the union due to the walls that were broken in 1934. In the 1936 strike (which lasted 99 days), San Francisco’s strike committee had fifteen Black workers on it. By the time the second Great Migration occurred during World War II, Black workers had an open path to relatively well-paid union jobs on the docks.

The Communist Party and the Strike

The Communist Party was by far the largest left organization in both the nation and the Bay Area. It had about 3,000 dues-paying members in California alone. Prior to 1920, both the IWW and Socialist Party included many working class militants who were active in unions and the larger working class. The inspiring example of the Russian Revolution of 1917 convinced many of these militants to join up with the Communist Party in the 1920s. Its influence in different unions varied.

However, by the mid 1920s, the Russian Party that had led the first successful workers revolution had degenerated and so had the gains of the Russian Revolution. The failure of workers’ revolutionary movements in other countries left the Russian workers isolated in a nation devastated by war and starvation. The Party was no longer the revolutionary force that it had been under Lenin and

the original Bolsheviks. By 1934, all Communist Parties worldwide were under the influence of a Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. They had no interest in stoking a revolutionary workers' movement, because that held the danger of revitalizing revolutionary activity among workers in the Soviet Union, which would threaten the power and prerogatives of the bureaucracy.

The Communist Party in the U.S. had many working class militants, but, following the policies dictated by the Stalinist bureaucracy, they were shoehorned into "red unions" and cut off from the broader working class due to their extreme leftist stances (often described as "ultra-leftism"). They were told that the collapse of capitalism was near, and that they needed to form the most purely revolutionary unions possible in order to take advantage of that collapse. Thus, the most militant and class-conscious workers were cut off from the traditional AFL unions, even though those unions contained hundreds of thousands of workers. Instead, they were told to form their own "red unions" that they believed would serve as poles of attraction for the most militant workers.

This strategy fundamentally misread the situation and left most Communist Party militants isolated from many working people looking for leadership. As the Great Depression deepened, millions of workers nationwide and thousands in the Bay Area flooded into the unions, searching for ways to improve their situation and fight back against their bosses and the dire conditions of the Depression. When Section 7(a) took effect, this trend intensified, as workers tried consciously to take advantage of the new legal opening. Since CP members did not participate in these unions, but were instead working to build their own "dual" or "red" unions, the Party was largely unable to reach the large masses of workers who had flooded into the unions.

In San Francisco and the Bay Area, the local CP took a slightly different course. Some of the leaders there did modify their practices during the leadup to the strike and during the strike itself, approaching the longshoremen in a way far more sensitive to the reality of their situation. The Communist Party would go on to play a role in the maritime strike and the cascading general strike.

The impact of this was seen during the strike. At least six CP members were on the ILA strike committee. The Albion Hall group, while not all Communists by any means, were in constant discussion with the Communist Party and had cohered as a team of militants that wanted to build a powerful strike. And although Harry Bridges was never a card-carrying member of the CP, he was in close touch with militants in the party. They all wanted to unleash the power that a cross-sector, coast-wide strike could wield. Of course, despite the hysteria from the capitalist press and politicians, the CP did not have a large number of militants involved in the strike, nor did it have a plan to foment revolution in the city.

The longshoremen in San Francisco were an exception to the broader policy of the CP. While the CP maintained their red union approach to the sailors and other maritime trades, one militant on the docks led the way for a different approach. Harry Hynes initiated the *Waterfront Worker* in 1932 to approach the entire waterfront with a bulletin that spoke to the workers. At times it encouraged workers to look towards the Marine Workers Industrial Union (the CP's red union), but it was not just a vehicle for the CP line. Instead, it reflected what longshoremen thought, and by doing so it was far more impactful than the ultraleft directives of many Stalinist interventions at the time.

The fact that the CP initiated this newsletter and built up a grouping of radical longshoremen as an opposition leadership within the ILA, was an important factor that impacted the coming strike. In contrast, the lack of alternative leadership in the Teamsters, seamen, and other AFL unions was in part due to the CP having relegated themselves completely to red unions and having detached and isolated themselves from the masses of workers in the traditional AFL unions.

However, these local militants willing to go a bit beyond the party line were still hampered by the strategy of the CP at the time and outmaneuvered by the conservative labor officials. Critically, the CP failed to develop a strong left wing within the unions that could have served as a pole of attraction for the most radical workers who were looking for stronger leadership. The Stalinist policies of the CP for the years leading up to the strike waves of 1934 had a massive impact.

Cannon criticized the CP leadership during the strike: “They wrought a great work of destruction; they strangled the Left wing that had been under their leadership for a decade and left the reactionaries a free field to strangle the strikes.”

They were still operating within the larger CP strategy that had put all its efforts into red unionism, and their local strategy was therefore inconsistent and never fully carried out. Often, the national CP even removed effective militants who had spent years organizing on the waterfront, hampering the ability of the Party to organize workers and lead the struggle (Harry Hynes, despite his pivotal role on the waterfront leading up to the strike, was removed from organizing in San Francisco in 1933).

During the lead up to the strike and the strike itself, the organizing strategy that should have come from the left and revolutionary parties failed to cohere. They could have organized explicitly to encourage other unionized workers to gather themselves and build their own rank-and-file leadership. This could have prepared a layer of leadership in other unions and sections of the working class to be prepared to bypass their conservative officials and maintain control over their own strikes.

They also could have organized a structure of daily meetings and mass assemblies for workers to decide on their strategies and tactics. From the literature that still exists, it is not clear what the daily assemblages looked like. The fact that there was no daily strike newsletter speaks to the lack of communication across the workers involved in the strike. This left the strike vulnerable to the influence of the capitalist press. But it also meant that it was easier for the upper layers of union officials to make decisions without the input from or support of the rank-and-file workers themselves.

To counteract this tendency, the left wing would have had to be much more prepared to build up those assemblies and create that type of newsletter. Organizing for a powerful strike requires organizing for the aim of removing the conservative officialdom, or at least being able to retain the decision-making power in the hands of the workers themselves.

It also requires anticipating the needs of a strike and the needs of people on strike. For example, there is very little mention of strike kitchens in the history of the San Francisco General Strike. While there were some, like the ILA soup kitchen, a lack of community and worker-organized strike kitchens left the general strike vulnerable to the federal government's threats to ship in food and undermine the effects of the strike, or the pressures of opening private, strike-approved restaurants. Among the responsibilities of revolutionaries are imagining such necessary preparations and being ready to advance them as the movement opens up these possibilities.

The West Coast Maritime Strike displayed the power of workers' willingness to unite across trades in order to fight and win their respective demands. The San Francisco General Strike showed the force of working people standing up in solidarity to back up the fight of their brothers and sisters in other industries. However, as James P. Cannon (the leader of the anti-Stalinist Communist League) wrote: "The general strike revealed in a glaring light the wide disparity between the readiness of the workers for radical and militant action and the organization of the Left wing."

Conclusion

The San Francisco General Strike was an outpouring of solidarity. It showed the potential of an entire population to respond to attacks on their fellow workers. In 1934, the sentiment for a general strike was not limited to San Francisco. The movements of industrial workers across the country influenced each other.

The shipowners and others of their class made an immense effort to divide the working class. First, along the coast, to try to prevent the maritime workers from cohering a coast-wide agreement. Then, they tried to keep workers divided by different sectors – of longshoremen, the seamen, the various maritime unions. And of course, they tried to divide the working class by race. Undeterred by these efforts, various sectors of the working class hitched their wagons to the maritime strike, ready to follow the lead of the militant longshoremen.

However, when this happened, the left wing failed to create leadership bodies that remained in the hands of the most active layers of strikers. There were no daily meetings of strike committees, or even a daily strike newspaper to inform the general population (let alone the strikers themselves!) of the struggle. The failure to produce these elements allowed the union bureaucrats to gain control of the strike. The fact that the direction of the general strike remained under the control of the conservatives was disastrous: the movement was unable to take full advantage of the immense power of a general strike. Instead, its power was eroded even as it built up. The reins were quickly taken out of the hands of those whose aims were to build a large-scale fight, the likes of which could have won demands for the entire working class.

James Cannon's critique is aimed at the Stalinist CP which failed to advance the general strike as far as it could have. He wrote in September of 1934:

Public sympathy, including the sympathy of other workers, for strikers gave the main impetus to the sentiment for local general strike action in support of the Toledo strike, the May strike in Minneapolis, and the Milwaukee strike. The general strike became a popular slogan. It was looked upon as the certain way to victory. Finally, for the first time in fifteen years, the general strike was realized in San Francisco in sympathy with the marine workers. The disastrous outcome of this action put the damper on general strike agitation, for the time being at least, and impelled the advanced workers to a more sober and critical examination of the possibilities and limitations of general sympathetic strike action. Far from discrediting the idea of the general strike, the 'Frisco struggle revealed that such a radical weapon requires a sure hand to wield it if it is to bite deeply and effectively.

The union officials were a barrier in waging this broader fight. The only solution to this would have been to build up the strike forces that would have compelled the

union officials to follow the organized masses as they proceeded on their course of action. Instead, although the masses did mobilize, they faltered as they looked for direction and leadership, and nothing clear materialized. In this vacuum, the most organized layer of “leaders” – the union bureaucrats – stepped in. Their conservatism held sway, terrified that a united working-class movement might take on proportions that would slip beyond their control.

They attempted to stop the mobilized workers from cohering across trades and geographic areas. They also feared that a general strike would raise a challenge to the government they did not want to confront. As John L. Lewis (future leader of the CIO) said in 1919 when calling off the miner’s strike, “You can’t fight the Government!” Labor officials believe you must abide by contracts and laws and respect the government that enforces those laws.

But as other militants have said in contrast, “You can’t fight the Government with folded arms.” In other words, you can’t fight the government with your hands tied behind your back by the rules that the government (and by extension the capitalist class) makes. But the contracts, the laws, the pressure from politicians and the violence of the police – all of this *can* be fought when the working class mobilizes in its full force.

The danger occurs when the working class mobilizes, but does not have a steady hand on the forces it is wielding. To quote Cannon again:

The 'Frisco experience demonstrated with cruel emphasis that the general strike by itself is no magic formula. There, it was a two-edged sword that cut more sharply against the embattled marine workers. The leadership came into the hands of the reactionary officialdom. They transformed it into a weapon against the marine workers and against the “Reds”. Having shifted the center of gravity and control from the marine unions to the general strike committee which they dominated, the reactionaries then deliberately broke the general strike and pulled the marine strike down with it.

Despite being out maneuvered by the conservative labor leaders and ending the strike prematurely and divided, the strike still advanced the conditions of the working class overall. The strike resulted in winning most of the demands for the longshoremen, and improvements for many other work sectors. There was an increase in unionization across the West Coast after the big strike. And, of huge significance, the color line had been broken in the longshoremen's union. The impacts of the strike shaped the waterfront, and indeed the entire Bay Area and West Coast, for decades to come.

There were countless individuals whose names have been forgotten by history books, but whose courage to stand up and encourage others to stand up with them, shaped the contours of history. These actions start with the small, initial group of a dozen longshoremen meeting on a Sunday morning to learn and strategize together. But the ripple effects of those morning meetings went so far as to reach tens of thousands of working people who walked off the job together. These actions, united together in a spontaneous outpouring of solidarity, changed a seemingly impossible situation into an advancement for the lives of working-class people.

Lessons for Today

The Maritime Strike reminds us that even in difficult conditions, workers can organize. The longshoremen were called "wharf rats" and gathered in "slave markets" at the beginning of every morning to beg for work. It was the height of the Great Depression and millions were out of work. These workers, without any concrete union structures in place, organized a powerful struggle that won the end of some of the worst working conditions on the West Coast at the time.

Today, we live in a time when very few organizations have roots in the working class and can provide radical leadership for the working class. Unions have by and large taken a beating from decades of class war, waged in a largely one-sided assault on the working class. The Trump administration is only dishing out the latest round of blows.

There has been a slight increase in strikes and job actions in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with so many attacks on our lives, there is a frustrating lack of response from unions and organizations working people look towards. The potential railroad strike of 2021 was a prominent example, when union officials caved to the fear of government penalties to the union heads and union treasuries. The opposition leadership that existed was not strong enough to challenge these officers. And, despite widespread sympathy and support for the railroad workers, it wasn't possible to assess the strength of this solidarity without a strike or point of action.

Despite the lack of leadership from the top, we have seen glimpses of broader actions the working class can take. The January 2026 events in Minnesota were a call for mass, economic action to shut down Minneapolis in response to ICE. These were by no means general strikes. But the large-scale community organizing effort and mass protests that took place showed that in response to an attack on some of us, we all must respond.

A far broader and far deeper response will be necessary just to maintain the rights and privileges that we have. It will be even more necessary if we are to win concessions from the aggressive right wing that is in power in this country and growing around the world. But if we allow our struggles to be limited by sector or confined by contracts, we will be relegating ourselves to fighting an uphill battle with our hands tied behind our backs.

As Frederick Douglass famously wrote: "Power concedes nothing without a demand." And indeed it concedes nothing if we stay within the rules of what we are told to do—whether by our union officials, our capitalist bosses, or by the government.

Working and oppressed people have often overcome these divisions and constraints and fought creatively to go beyond the confines of what they were told was possible. But without the sure-handed leadership committed to the struggles of the rank-and-file, these moments also present a danger that we should not minimize.

History is rich with the outpourings of working-class solidarity. The general strike in San Francisco warns us that the precious opportunities that arise in such a moment can be missed without the right organized leadership cohering in advance of the battles to be fought. Without this type of organization, the outpouring of solidarity can be shut down too soon or weakened by those in positions of power who do not want us to realize the full potential of our struggles.

The real struggle we will have to take up has to be fought with the greatest force, across all sectors, or else it will be defeated. And, if we were to experience the power of a general strike and what it looks like when working people run society for a brief time, this teaches a stronger lesson to working people than any theories or readings in textbooks. Working people would get a taste for the decisions we could make when we are in power, and see the power that we have over our lives. This in turn could open a path to a broader struggle against a system built on our exploitation and oppression. With a strong revolutionary leadership, a general strike could cohere forces and open the possibility to go much further in the next round of battles.

In the class society in which we live, it is inevitable that more battles will arise. The crises and conflicts we face today are real and they are ominous: worsening economic conditions, broader wars, the climate emergency, a false scarcity of housing, deplorable education, inadequate healthcare, and so on. These crises are not isolated or surprising. They are all the result of the system that we live under.

The San Francisco General Strike reminds us of the immense potential of working people to fight for ourselves and even challenge that system. But it is also a reminder of the hard work that it will take in preparing for struggles of this type. This is the hard work that we must undertake today.

Further Reading:

Books

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Photos



San Francisco Ferry Building, on the Embarcadero, 1930.

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WESTERN ORGAN OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY U.S.A.
(SECTION OF THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL)

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. JULY 23, 1934.

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STRIKE! ALL OUT! STAND FIRM!

Fight to Elect 5 Militants From Your Local

Leader of M.W.I.U. San Pedro Strikers Cheer Roy Hudson,

3000 AT BIG MASS MEETING APPLAUD FAKERS EXPOSE —WANT GENERAL STRIKE

SAN PEDRO, Calif., July 11.—Roy Hudson, National Secretary of the Maritime Workers' Industrial Union, received a tremendous ovation in San Pedro last night from the two thousand striking seamen and longshoremen who assembled in the Baying Stadium to hear his report on strike conditions in the north.

With tremendous power Hudson showed the strength of rank and file control in the north where neither Schuyler, Ryan, Furness, nor Mevian and

WORKERS OF THE WEST!!

TRADE UNIONISTS!

This is a great day for Labor. Today we show that we will not be silent while our fellow workers are, one section at a time, broken by the bosses. All workers of the West Coast should FOLLOW 'FRISCO and STRIKE IN UNITED RANKS. A GENERAL STRIKE of the entire West Coast will once and for all establish the rights of the workman.

This is a fight to victory! We must make it a strong fight. Here are some suggestions:

1.—FIGHT FOR RANK AND FILE CONTROL. The Central Labor Council in San Francisco put a phony one over on us when they ordered the local unions, on ONE DAY'S notice, to appoint 5 members each to

UNORGANIZED WORKERS!

3.—ROOSEVELT MAY COME HERE. Whether he personally comes, or his National Longshoremen's Board asks again, DON'T YIELD TO ARBITRATION. There is only one way to win this strike—that is, to make it unprofitable for the bosses. When they find that they cannot bully us into submission they will grant the demands.

4.—SPREAD THE STRIKE. Send committees to other towns in Northern California. East Bay is coming out, Contra Costa is preparing to come out. Keep on spreading the strike. Reach into every shop and place of work in the city and help the workers join the strike.

5.—UNORGANIZED — ORGANIZED! Form

LABOR'S SYMPATHIZERS!

8.—BEWARE OF PROVOCATIONS! The police and armed thugs will try to provoke bloody attacks. Stand firm and disciplined against them. Stool-pigeons may appear and under the pretense of wanting to help the strike urge you to use dynamite and other explosives. Beware of such elements! Fight in disciplined mass ranks. Report suspicious advice to your picket captains and union officers in the Central and local Union Strike Committees. Beware of people who want you to fight Communists or workers of any other belief. Stick together. No splitting. One common enemy —the bosses!

There is a sentiment amongst many workers to the effect that they recognize that only the Militants and

STRIKERS WILL REJECT MOVE TO ARBITRATE

Roosevelt Reported on Way to S. F. to Make Try Personally

STRIKERS! All locals are to meet and elect five delegates to the General Strike Committee, which meets at the Labor Temple at 10 a. m. Monday.

Elect rank and file workers, not paid officials. This is the only way to insure rank and file

The Western Worker, the CP paper, was the most consistent voice of the workers during the strike, even though it wasn't locally based or focused on longshoremen.



National Guard troops in machine gun nest, July 17, 1934.



ILA strikers escort a scab off the docks during the strike.



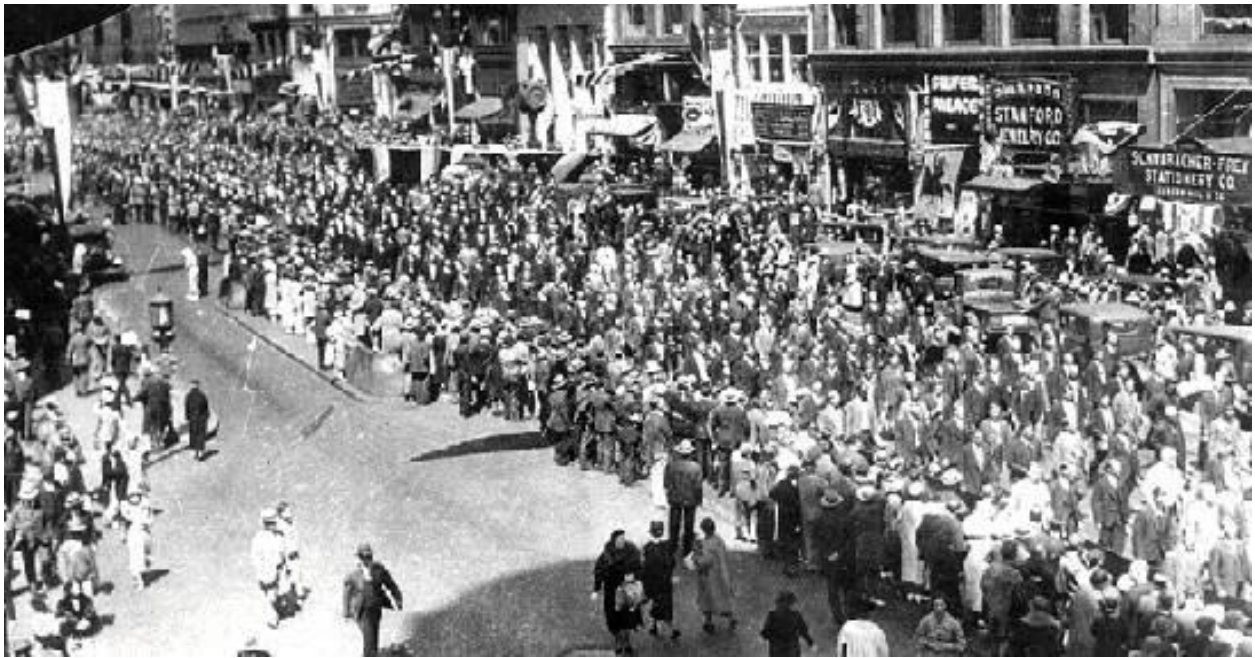
Police trying to herd strikers during the general strike.



Cops rounding up strikers during the strike.



National Guard troops prepared to use violence against strikers to defend the private property of the port and shipowners.



Funeral march for two murdered strikers.



Longshoremen's Local 10 hiring hall in San Francisco in 1946. Multiracial hiring halls like this one, under union control, were one of the major victories won by the 1934 San Francisco General Strike.