

SAN FRANCISCO'S 1934 GENERAL STRIKE: THE FALL AND RISE OF ORGANIZED LABOR

By John S. Caragozian

The port of San Francisco used to be the economic engine for the Bay Area and beyond. Through the 1930s, San Francisco's 82 docks could handle 250 ships per day, accounting for 80% of U.S. Pacific maritime cargo.

During this pre-container era, cargo handling at ports was labor intensive, requiring thousands of longshoremen (and, in those days, they were all men) for the heavy manual work of loading and unloading ships and thousands of truckers for land transportation.

Shipping companies recognized that controlling port labor meant controlling ports. With few exceptions, west coast longshoremen either belonged to company-controlled "unions" or were entirely unrepresented.

Accordingly, longshoremen had little bargaining leverage against shipping companies. For example, longshore hiring was via "shape-up," in which longshoremen gathered in a circle around a company subcontractor, who announced jobs that were available and then, within his discretion, picked the men for the jobs. This practice resulted in low wages, kickbacks to the subcontractor, and blackballing of men suspected of pro-union sympathies.

During the Great Depression and before the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, west coast longshoremen were especially victimized. San Francisco had 4,000 longshoremen, but only 1,500 jobs. Similarly, in San Pedro, sporadic hours and various deductions resulted in longshoremen's average weekly take-home pay of \$10.34. See Kevin Starr, "Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California," 84-87 (1996).

During the early 1900s, sporadic violence had erupted between west coast shipping companies and longshoremen, but the companies prevailed in each case. For example, the Los Angeles Police Department and vigilantes from the American Legion and Ku Klux Klan crushed an attempted 1923 strike at San Pedro.

The New Deal's 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act attempted to involve the federal government in drafting and enforcing industry-wide codes of fair competition, including wages and working conditions. While the NIRA was in effect, west coast longshoremen began to organize and fight against the shape-up, low wages, and dangerous working conditions. (In 1935, the Supreme Court invalidated the NIRA on the ground that, *inter alia*, congress's authority to regulate interstate commerce did not extend to the industry-wide codes. *A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp. v. U.S.*, 295 U.S. 495.)

In early 1934, a plurality of longshoremen in San Francisco joined the San Francisco local of the International Longshoremen's Association. While the ILA's east coast leadership was conservative, the San Francisco membership pushed for a more radical agenda, including a

closed shop, union hiring hall (to replace the shape-up), a contract for the whole west coast (to prevent shipping companies from diverting commerce to non-union ports), safer working conditions, maximum hours, and a straight-time raise to \$1 per hour.

Shipping companies, however, refused to accept these demands. In response, longshoremen struck west coast ports on May 9, 1934.

Unsurprisingly, violence erupted. Shipping companies hired strikebreakers, but striking longshoremen blocked piers and warehouses and attacked cars and trucks bringing strikebreakers to the waterfront. Other unions supported the strikers. Some Teamsters refused to transport “hot cargo” that had been handled by strikebreakers. Some machinists and merchant sailors joined the strike too. *See Kevin Starr, supra, 88-91.*

With the disruption and violence at San Francisco’s port, various federal officials, including an Assistant Secretary of Labor and a President Franklin Roosevelt-appointed commission, tried to mediate. However, their proposals—a watered down recognition that the ILA represented a “majority” of longshoremen and a raise to 85 cents per hour—satisfied no one.

The strike continued, and violence escalated. The San Francisco Police Department vowed that “strikers will be shown no quarter.” The Industrial Association of San Francisco—which included businesses throughout the city and had a substantial budget—leased warehouses in remote areas of the city to avoid the violence at the waterfront. The Industrial Association also hired a public relations firm and purported to speak for the “public interest.”

Divisions also continued within the ILA, with west coast members remaining more militant than east coast leadership. San Francisco’s ILA rank and file held out for major concessions from shipping companies, but the east coast president actually favored the shape-up, because it might result in kickbacks to the ILA. *See id., 99.*

One of these rank-and-file members, an Australian immigrant named Harry Bridges, became chair of the ILA’s strike committee. When the ILA’s east coast president proposed a settlement, Bridges termed it a “sell out,” and the San Francisco local membership voted against it, 2,404 to 88.

On June 16, 1934, shipping company representatives and ILA leadership—but not local leaders such as Bridges—met in the San Francisco mayor’s office and proposed a settlement. Once again, however, local ILA membership rejected the proposal, this time by acclamation. A shipping company representative then offered Bridges a \$50,000 bribe (over \$1.1 million today), but Bridges rejected it. *Id., 101-02.*

Throughout June, the conflict deepened and broadened. The San Francisco Police Department vowed that “strikers will be shown no quarter.” On behalf of the San Francisco local ILA, Bridges accepted Communist support.

The choice of lawyers selected by the respective sides to the dispute illustrated how the strike had become ideological as well as economic. Los Angeles lawyer Leo Gallagher had recently returned from Nazi Germany where he was attempting to assist a communist accused of setting fire to the Reichstag, *see, e.g.*, “Reich Court Bars Foreign Lawyers,” N.Y. Times, Oct. 15, 1933, at 29, col. 1. Gallagher advised the west coast ILA to hold out for a complete victory. By contrast, the shipping companies retained Francis Neylan, a prominent San Francisco business lawyer, publisher under William Randolph Hearst, and long-time U.C. regent.

Pursuant to NIRA, President Roosevelt appointed three arbitrators to try to resolve the strike, but the strike nonetheless continued. On July 3, 1934, San Francisco police and strikers attacked each other with clubs and bricks, and a strikebreaker was killed. On July 5, “Bloody Thursday,” thousands of strikers and hundreds of police, the latter armed with “vomiting gas” (more toxic than tear gas), fought again at the waterfront. With each side blaming the other, gunfire broke out, killing two people: a striker (and World War I veteran) and a volunteer cook for strikers. Kevin Starr, *supra*, 104-09.

On July 9, 15,000 longshoremen and supporters marched up Market Street in a funeral parade, the largest labor demonstration in San Francisco history. The same day, longshoremen walked out of every west coast port.

On July 16, San Francisco police joined national guard troops who were armed with bayonets and machine guns. Together, they attacked strikers and strikers’ offices, and the police jailed 85 strikers and union leaders. Shipping companies, believing that this armed force gave them the upper hand, refused to compromise with the ILA.

That day, Teamsters and 62 other unions struck in sympathy, leading to a general strike that largely paralyzed San Francisco. As viewed by a leading pro-business newspaper, “The situation in San Francisco is not correctly described as a ‘general strike.’ What is actually in progress there is an insurrection, a Communist-inspired and led revolt against organized government. [¶] [T]here is but one thing to be done—put down the revolt with any force that may be necessary.” L.A. Times, Jul. 17, 1934, A4, col. 1.

The general strike lasted only four days. On July 19, the key union—the Teamsters—fearing a permanent loss of jobs, voted to return to work. The ILA (following a vote of its members of 6,504 to 1,525) and the shipping companies agreed to binding arbitration by President Roosevelt’s three appointees.

The Oct. 12, 1934, arbitration award largely favored the longshoremen. First, it ordered a coast-wide longshore agreement. Second, it ended shape ups, and replaced them with jointly run hiring halls; the longshoremen, however, selected the dispatcher, giving the ILA *de facto* control over hiring (that is, a closed shop). The arbitration award also contained a grievance procedure with neutral arbitrators and set straight-time wage at 95 cents, with time-and-a-half overtime. *See* Kevin Starr, *supra*, 117-19.

The west coast longshoremen's perseverance galvanized labor union activity across the country. In 1935, the U.S. Congress enacted the National Labor Relations Act, which regularized rights of employees to bargain collectively with employers and which expanded union membership. See 29 U.S.C. §§ 151-169.

In 1937, west coast longshoremen separated from the ILA and created the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. It remains the west coast ports' major union, representing some 22,000 dock workers.

John Caragozian is a Los Angeles lawyer and on the Board of the California Supreme Court Historical Society. He thanks **Janie Schulman** for her contributions to this column. He welcomes ideas for future monthly columns on California's legal history at caragozian@gmail.com.

A version of this article first appeared in the August 8, 2023 issue of the Los Angeles Daily Journal. Reprinted with permission.