U.S. west coast longshoremen strike for union recognition and San Francisco general strike, 1934

9 May 1934 to 19 July 1934

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: San Francisco, California
Location Description: Ports up and down the west coast

Goals:
Recognition of the International Longshoremen Association (ILA)

No penalties for strikers
Agreeing to give ILA members hiring preference
Establishing union-controlled hiring halls
That matters of wage and working conditions to be addressed through arbitration

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
• 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 038. Marches
• 045. Demonstrative funerals
• 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
• 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
• 106. Industry strike
• 117. General strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 001. Public speeches
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 016. Picketing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights

Group characterization:

• Longshorement
• Maritime Workers
• Unionized workers in San Francisco

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Harry Bridges, the International Longshoremen’s Association, Joint Marine Strike Committee (JMSC)

Partners:
Alameda Labor Council, Teamsters, 20 other unions around the city

External allies:
Women's Auxiliary for the Longshoremen, Communist Party

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Harry Bridges
- Teamsters
- the International Longshoremen’s Association

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Joint Marine Strike Committee (JMSC)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 12 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Maritime trade bosses, the San Francisco city government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known

Campaigner violence:
There was campaigner violence in the coast-wide maritime strike leading up to the general strike, but none could be found during the general strike itself

Repressive Violence:
Leading up to the strike there was a great deal of violence, but it reduced during the general strike itself. San Francisco Mayor Rossi called in 3000 members of the National Guard. Vigilantes attacked union offices around the city, then allowing police to come in and make arrests.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
5 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Notes on outcomes:
While they did not get a completely union-controlled hiring hall, it was, for the most part, overseen by union members. Other goals seemed to be achieved as well.

The San Francisco general strike grew out of a coast-wide maritime strike in which ports up and down the west coast of the United States were closed by striking workers. While there were complaints about wages and working conditions, the strikers (headed by the International Longshoremen’s Association) were committed to workplace democracy, calling for worker control of unions and hiring and a coast-wide industrial organization inclusive of unskilled workers, skilled workers, and workers of all races and nationalities. Workplace democracy narratives, strategies, and practices had worked their way down the coast from the Seattle area (in which there was a strong radical labor faction up until the Seattle General Strike in 1919; see Seattle workers general strike for fair wages, 1919) through social and occupational networks.

After World War I, due to a drop in wages, longshoremen in San Francisco instituted a strike that failed, resulting in the formation of a company-run union. For the next ten years there were few strikes because workers did not want to lose their jobs. In an effort to offset some of the economic hardships of the 1929 stock market crash, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933, which provided a legal sanction for unionization. After the passage of the NIRA, the number of strikes across the country rose tremendously.

Still, working conditions remained undesirable. Longshoremen were forced to speed up their working rate in order to make up for lost profits, workers were fired for not working fast enough, and those left had to make up the work of those who were fired. The dominant union was the Blue Book, a company union, and anyone who tried to organize outside of it was blacklisted or fired. Longshoremen discontent continued to rise.

In December of 1932, a newsletter called the

*Waterfront Worker*

began publication, printed by members of the Albion Hall group, a small group of syndicalist-oriented longshoremen and some members of the Communist Party, led by a dockworker named Harry Bridges. The paper helped give longshoremen a way to channel their dissatisfaction and to see the more systemic reasons as to why they were discontented with their working conditions. The paper criticized working conditions and the corrupt American Federation of Labor (AFL, a moderate national union), and called for a new International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) run by the workers.

As talk of a new ILA began to spread around the docks, two main factions emerged competing to be the organizing body: a moderate AFL-supporting Catholic bloc led by Lee J. Holman and the Albion Hall group. The Albion Hall faction’s rhetoric was very accessible to most of the workers on the docks, and the idea of worker control of labor held wide appeal. Still, Holman managed to become one of the main organizers of the new ILA, largely through personally reaching out to workers on the docks to sign petitions calling for the abolition of the Blue Book. Workers by the thousands up and down the west coast started to join the new ILA.

Nine months after NIRA had passed, employers still refused to recognize the new ILA. The

*Waterfront Worker*

called for a mass convention that represented 14,000 longshoremen. Despite calls from employers and AFL officials to delay the convention, the Albion Hall group went ahead with their plans, denying AFL leaders official positions as delegates. At the convention, delegates decided to demand a coast-wide contract for all longshoremen, union-controlled hiring halls, pay raises, a thirty-hour workweek, and unemployment insurance. Employers refused to recognize the union and its demands, however, so the convention attendees called for a coast-wide strike if their demands were not met by March 23, 1934.
After delaying the strike to discuss a possible settlement with an investigative board initiated by President Roosevelt, the strike committee was not satisfied. On May 9, about 1200 longshoremen went on strike along the west coast. The strike was largely characterized not by its commitment to issues related to “bread-and-butter” concerns, but to issues related to increased worker autonomy.

On May 13, the Teamsters, San Francisco’s most powerful union, voted unanimously to not transport merchandise to and from the docks in support of the longshoremen. The seamen and marine firemen also joined, and soon maritime workers up and down the coast joined, initiating the first coast-wide, industry-wide strike in U.S. history.

Throughout the strike, more moderate factions tried to make compromises with the government, but the ILA workers rejected these compromises, often leading to accusations by newspapers and employers of being radicals and communists. Police repression also stepped up, leading to many violent outbreaks up and down the coast.

The ILA had begun to talk about a general strike, which frightened employers and city officials. On June 17, several thousand members of the ILA had met and elected a Joint Marine Strike Committee (JMSC), led by Bridges, to explore the possibility of instituting a general strike. The strike committee approved the idea, and by mid-June the International Association of Machinists began calling for a general strike, and the ILA’s women’s auxiliary began distributing fliers supporting a general strike. On June 19, Oakland Teamsters voted their support while waiters, window washers, and bookbinders prepared for a similar vote.

Meanwhile, the Industrial Association and San Francisco city officials wanted to open the ports by force on July 3. They opened the gates at the port to let cargo trucks through and were met by thousands of angry strikers. Over the course of three days, there were riots, beatings, and 3 union member deaths.

After the violence, the workers felt powerless, but on July 6, the JMSC proposed a resolution for a general strike at the San Francisco Labor Council (SFLC) meeting. While the council froze all strike plans, the JMSC ignored this and went directly to the union members the next day and called a meeting with delegates from all of the city’s unions. Delegates were in favor of a general strike, but did not quite know how to proceed.

Meanwhile, that weekend, the bodies of two dead strikers were displayed at the ILA headquarters, and thousands marched in tribute to them. The march heightened worker solidarity and gained public sympathy for the strikers. After the march the National Guard presence was increased and martial law was extended.

That day (July 9) the Alameda Labor Council adopted a resolution asking 79 unions to vote on a walkout in support of the longshoremen. On July 11, Teamsters gathered in an auditorium to vote on the general strike while Bridges and other maritime workers waited outside. Leaders inside discouraged the strike, but were booed off the stage, and Bridges was brought in. He spoke to the crowd about worker solidarity, as well as the fact that employers would continue to try and break unions unless the workers had control over hiring. They voted to join the strike if the maritime workers’ strike was not settled by July 12. By the 12th, 20 other unions had voted in favor of the strike, and that day the strike began to unfold.

The SFLC made a General Strike Committee, making sure to exclude Bridges, and made one last plea to employers to accept longshoremen control over their union headquarters, but by that time the strike was underway. It officially started on July 16, with a walkout of members of all unions who had voted for it, except for those who needed to provide emergency service. Throughout the strike, light, power, and newspapers continued service, and large department stores stayed open. They set up union-controlled food depots, organized labor police to keep strikers in control, and made sure bars and nightclubs were closed to shut off the sale of alcohol. Overall, there was a strong sense of community and solidarity amongst the workers throughout the city.

In response to the strike, San Francisco Mayor Rossi declared a state of emergency and called in 3000 members of the National
Guard. The government also used much reactionary rhetoric to discredit the strikers, calling on citizens to help fight the “radicals” and “communists.” Vigilantes attacked union offices and institutions around the city, swiftly followed by police to make arrests.

Largely due to efforts by the General Strike Committee, the general strike began to dissolve on the second day, and by July 19, had virtually ended. Longshoremen then voted to accept arbitration. Employers agreed to hire back all striking longshoremen, and to start arbitration. The Arbitration Committee awarded a coast-wide contract, higher wages, a reduction in shift hours, and a hiring hall jointly controlled by employers and the union with a union-elected dispatcher. This ensured that there would be no hiring discrimination against those affiliated with the union. This also allowed strike organizers to remain in leadership positions within the union.

The strike also set a precedent of direct action for the ILA. They often would use “quickie strikes” to make sure that the employers continued to follow the terms laid out in the arbitration. Employer-worker relations in San Francisco were never the same. They had shown their power and intended to retain it. Bridges and the Waterfront Worker

also continued to promote racial inclusion and workplace democracy. Tension remained high between the radical faction of the ILA and the moderate AFL-affiliated faction, so eventually the radicals split off into the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), headed by Bridges.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by the Seattle General Strike of 1919 (see Seattle workers general strike for fair wages, 1919)(1) It influenced the more radical approach the ILA would take for some time after the strike, as well as the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), a radical offshoot from the ILA. (2)

Sources:


Additional Notes:
While most of the focus of this case is the general strike, it is important to note that it was born out of an incredibly strategic coast-wide maritime strike. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this narrative to go into great detail about the coast-wide strike. For more information, see Johnson 2008.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
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