

*Seattle 1934*

## The Strike of the Longshoremen

by Cal Winslow

On the morning of May 9, 1934, a rejuvenated International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) struck shippers in the West Coast Ports, shutting down them all from Bellingham, WA to San Diego.

Seattle's dockers, some 1500, walked off their jobs that morning, to face an array of hostile shippers united to maintain an "open shop" and the "fink hall" on Elliott Bay, as well as hundreds of scabs reporting to work on city piers. Seattle was the coast's second leading port, the hub of a dozen coastal and Puget Sound ports, second only to San Francisco in volume of goods passing over its piers.

In Tacoma, a smokey industrial city, thirty miles south of Seattle, longshoremen walked as well, so did men in the rest of the ports on the Sound and along the coast. Tacoma was the one port on the Pacific Coast where the ILA emerged from the twenties unscathed, the union's single stronghold. The long twenties had taken its toll on the union, and it was not at all clear that the Seattle men would prevail. In the immediate days after the strike began, there were still hundreds of strikebreakers at work, and the employers clearly had plans to introduce more. The Tacoma dockers saw the situation as "shaky," and no one wanted to see shipping continue in Elliott Bay, least of all rank-

and-file longshoremen themselves; defeat in Seattle would undermine the strike everywhere.

On May 12, following an early secret meeting, the Tacoma leaders sent out a call. By 8:30 am, one thousand dockers from Tacoma and Everett, as well as the smaller ports, appeared at the McCormick piers, there to join the Seattle strikers in sweeping the scabs from the waterfront. These strikers and their supporters, led by Tacoma's "flying squad," marched from pier to pier, breaking down barricades and overwhelming company guards, throwing more than a few into the Bay. When strikebreakers came off the ships, they were forced to walk through "gauntlets," crowds of hundreds of jeering strikers shouting abuse. At the same time, the off-shore unions, the sailors and the Masters, Mates and Pilots made the longshoremen's strike a maritime strike. The maritime workers tied up their vessels when they reached port. On the shore, rank-and-file Teamsters joined the crowds of Seattle strikers, refusing to cross ILA picket lines

The longshoremen were joined by others as well. One striker reckoned that "1000 unemployed came down and backed us up... they stayed until there was not one scab working on the Seattle waterfront." And among these were the radicals of the day, "outsiders," loggers and sailors, IWWs (Industrial Workers of the World) and Communists. As much as anything, it was the sight of these men that shook the city's elites; it was all too reminiscent of 1919, when workers took over the

city and ran it for five days. The mayor proclaimed that “a soviet of longshoremen are dictating what can be done on the waterfront.” The *Seattle Times* led with “Soviet Rules Seattle.”

In all, it was an astonishing display of working-class solidarity and power in a year of extraordinary strikes.

The strikers' demands were for recognition of the union, coast-wide bargaining and exclusive control of the dispatch hall. These were non-negotiable. Wages and hours were to be submitted for arbitration. Any agreement would have to be approved by the entire membership. It would also have to be accompanied by a seamen's strike settlement.

Seattle's longshoremen first organized in the late nineteenth century, and from the beginning they fought long, often bloody campaigns for union recognition and a fair hiring system. In these years, almost everywhere dockers were seen as unskilled laborers, “wharf rats,” who sought work as casuals in the brutal shape-up, the daily gatherings of men, often desperate for work, at pierheads in overcrowded work “markets.” Still, the union made headway in the war years. Seattle's longshoremen, temporarily, won hiring on the basis of an alphabetical list. This, however was lost in the twenties when the shippers imposed the “fink hall” – a hall where workers were vetted and dispatched by the employers.

American workers were unprepared for the crash of 1929. The rebellions of the war years seemed distant, like another country, boom years in comparison with the cold winter of 1933, when fifteen million American workers were unemployed and millions more worked part time “Grim poverty stalks throughout our land...It embitters the present and darkens the future.” said the President, Franklin Roosevelt.

The percentage of American workers in unions had collapsed by 1933. Strikes were few, mostly lost. The steel workers had been battered in their massive strike in 1919. The railway shopmen lost in their 1922 nationwide strike. The results for the United Mine Workers, long the backbone of the American labor movement, were catastrophic. The union in the central coalfields - Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana - was impoverished and factionalized by decade's end. There was no union at all in the southern fields - from West Virginia to Alabama. The Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, heirs to the militant Western Federation of Miners, disintegrated. Seattle's shipyards, the heart of the rebellion of 1919, fueled no longer by war, were shuttered, victims of a conspiracy of the owners, the government and compliant East Coast unions, a political deindustrialization in a union town.

On the West Coast waterfront, by 1929, the ILA virtually ceased to exist; the shipowners had asserted all but complete control over wages and conditions. Tacoma alone weathered the storm, the ILA and its union dispatch hall intact. There were 30,000 workers unemployed in

Seattle and King County in 1931, with their dependents, more than a third of the population, another third had only partial employment. Gone were the queues of ships waiting for unloading in the Bay, as shipping declined and Seattle fell behind San Francisco.

The first “rumblings of discontent” came in 1931. The Seattle unemployed formed the Unemployed Citizens League, “the first self-help organization in the United States,” according to the historian Irving Bernstein. The initiative came from Carl Brannin and Hulet Wells of the Seattle Labor College, an institution founded in 1922 in the aftermath of the Seattle’s general strike. Wells, a socialist, had been President of Seattle’s Central Labor Council during the war. The League’s Seattle waterfront branch was instrumental in reviving the IILA, whose members had begun trickling back, bypassing the Communists’ Marine Workers Industrial Union.

The revival of the union also reflected the passage of the New Deal National Recovery Act that created the National Recovery Administration to work with industry and labor to increase employment. The Act’s Section 7-A provided workers the choice of their own representatives to bargain collectively with employers.

The shippers were stunned by “Gauntlet Day.” They, having no protection, retreated; the harbor was effectively closed, though sporadic fighting continued, indeed it might be more accurate to see the waterfront as a battleground in an eighty-three-day war. There was a

“riot” in early June at the Alaska Building in downtown Seattle where strikebreakers were being hired. At the same time, violence was likely whenever strikers met sheriff’s deputies, company guards, suspected strikebreakers, or vigilantes.

The shippers soon regrouped, however. WES, the Washington Employers of Seattle, appealed to the mayor as well as the governor, demanding assurances that the strikebreakers be protected – until then there could be no work on the waterfront. Meanwhile WES organized strike committees, recruited strikebreakers, housed them and assessed the shippers, the stevedores and the various dock businesses; by May 16 they had collected \$40,000. They reiterated their stand; no union, no coastwide bargaining and no union dispatch hall

Negotiations began but by mid-May were stalled. Roosevelt responded by sending Assistant Secretary of Labor Edward McGrady to California from Washington DC. The employers, however, continued to refuse to recognize a coastwide ILA – they agreed only to recognize the San Francisco local - and the union held firm on its demands for a union hiring hall. The administration then requested that Joseph Ryan, ILA “International” President, intervene. Ryan, the flamboyant, gun toting New York mobster who ran the ILA, was known for silk suits and diamond rings. He arrived in San Francisco on May 24, immediately piling on with the employers, as did Dave Beck, Seattle’s Teamsters’ rising star, already present. They agreed to an employers’ offer – the

“May 28 Offer” for San Francisco. Ryan claimed it would “enable the ILA to get a strong foothold on the entire Pacific Coast.” At once, however, it was clear that the rank and file everywhere would reject this; word came down from Seattle that it had no chance.

Nevertheless, the next day Ryan, with Beck, flew up to the Northwest, where in Tacoma, they were met with overwhelming opposition. In Seattle, accompanied again by Beck, the two argued that the agreement was “best for Seattle,” lest San Francisco and/or San Pedro take advantage.

The strikers had little in terms financial resources, certainly nothing to match the millions of the shippers and their allies. Still, they had community support. The Seattle Central Labor Council (SCLC) took on the tasks of relief and support. Soup kitchens were set up for individuals and commissaries for families. Farmers responded with fruit and vegetables. Restaurants offered free meals. The fisherman’s union donated salmon. Most longshoremen could sleep at home, but unions donated space for sailors to sleep. Women, wives and others, organized an Auxiliary. And there were rallies, large and small. On June 19 Charles Cutright, a veteran of 1919, addressing 10,000 strikers and supporters at the Municipal Auditorium, called for a general strike, setting off a “wild” roar of support.

There were frequent threats of a general strike – in Portland, in Tacoma, in the coastal towns. In Seattle, the Beck dominated SLC

squelched any such movement. The towns, however, Longview, Kelso, Raymond, Aberdeen, Hoquiam, were still radical outposts, home to sizeable numbers of IWWs and Communists. The closest one came to a general strike was in Longview-Kelso where in response to the violence in Seattle some 600 loggers, sawmill workers, warehouse workers and pulp mill workers walked out. The Central Labor Council, representing 3,500 workers, wired the Northwest Strike Committee, "We are prepared to use whatever means are necessary to protect members of the ILA." Harry Bridges, leader of the rank-and-file strikers in San Francisco, said he felt at home in Aberdeen.

In early June, Charles Smith replaced labor-backed John Dore as Seattle's Mayor. Smith was the former President of the King County (Seattle) Republicans with the support of the WES and the Chamber of Commerce, who made it clear that he intended to open the port, if necessary, with violence. Smith took personal pride in the introduction of tear gas and machine guns on a large scale. The police were armed with the latest "riot control weapons." Sherriff Claude Bannick deputized 500 new men. Smith became known as "machine gun Smith." In preparation, the shippers organized a small army of private guards.

The violence continued on all fronts. On June 20, for example, Smith sent his forces to Smith Cove where 600 strikers assembled under the Garfield Street Bridge. They had piled junk on to the railroad tracks, which in addition they covered with grease and oil. All telephone lines

were cut, and cars and trucks were turned away. On arrival, the truckers and railroad engineers refused to move freight, saying the conditions were too dangerous. There were many casualties.

On June 30 a contingent of strikers travelled to north Point Wells, investigating a rumor that strikebreakers at the Standard Oil docks were about to sail a tanker into the Sound that night. They were attacked by company guards, in the brawl a shot rang out. Striker Shelvy Daffron, a leader of the Seattle longshoremen, was shot. He died in a Seattle hospital. 1,000 longshoremen and seamen attended his funeral, then marched four abreast to the Lakeview Cemetery.

Nevertheless, the strike was far from broken, and the waterfront remained a battleground to the end. On July 17, police, the sheriffs deputies and the shippers, with their strikebreakers and guards massed, prevented strikers trying to get through the gates at Smith Cove to evict the strikebreakers. That evening, 3000 strikers and sympathizers attended a rally sponsored by the Joint Northwest Strike Committee at the Civic Auditorium. The following morning, flying squads from Tacoma, Everett and Bellingham, joined Seattle strikers and sympathizers to challenge police lines. Police hurled tear gas bombs at the charging men. The strikers retreated but came back a second time holding handkerchiefs to cover their faces. They broke through the police lines, and encamped on the railroad tracks in front of the dock gates.

On July 19, Smith, undaunted, ordered the police to clear Smith Cove of strikers. The strikers held their ground for a day. The following morning, however, the police, reinforced again, attacked from the top of the bridge that spanned the Cove. They rained gas from the bridge down onto the pickers. Strikers with gloves picked up cannisters and tossed them back. The police, then on foot, attacked the strikers, shooting tear gas and wielding riot sticks against those who tried to hold their ground. A few pickets, not yet affected by the gas, threw stones at the advancing police; resistance was met by police clubs. Olaf Helland, a sailors' union striker, fell mortally wounded, hit in the head by an unexploded gas grenade. More casualties, many, on both sides. But in twenty minutes, the police had chased pickets from the gates to the railroad tracks where a last stand was made. Then mounted police drove the men up the slopes of Queen Ann Hill, where they scattered. The battle had ended. Mayor Smith and the Chamber of Commerce President Alferd Lundin congratulated each other.

The picketing lingered: the outcome, however, in the most immediate sense, would best be inconclusive, worse a defeat. On August 3, the Communist Party paper, *Voice of Action*, led, "Betrayed by the top leadership of the American Federation of Labor, sold out by the government arbitration board, terrorized by the police, the longshoremen returned to work, the eighty-third day of the coast wide strike. They returned to the same hiring hall system which they had when they struck, to the same open shop method, at the same wage

scale.” William Crocker, the San Francisco banker was jubilant, “Labor is licked.”

In many ways they were. In Tacoma, with pickets still on the docks, Paddy Morris, no radical, confessed, “The labor unions are tired of the fight...The return of the Teamsters has weakened our position...We don’t feel the fight is over – it has just begun. This is merely a truce. The ship owners have lined up all capital on their side, and this is a battle between Labor and Capital.” In San Francisco, Bridges, appealing to the seamen, said much the same. “I think the longshoreman is ready to break tomorrow. They have had enough of it...The ship owners have got us backed up... we are trying to back up step by step... instead of turning around and running...I don’t think that they will last. They have had enough of it. They have their families to support. They are discouraged by the Teamsters going back to work, they didn’t get enough support from the council... I disagree with our officials in lots of things they have done.”

The longshoremen had opposed arbitration; they had little faith in the National Longshoremen’s Board when hearings were held in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and San Pedro in September. It was a surprise to many, then, when in October the Board issued its award; it fixed the basic wage rate at \$.95 an hour, \$1.40 for overtime. It established a six- hour day, thirty- hour work week. Saturdays, Sunday and legal holidays were made overtime days.

On the crucial issue of the hiring hall, the Board ruled: “The hiring of all longshoremen shall be through hiring halls maintained and operated jointly.” But “the dispatcher shall be selected by the International Longshoremen’s Association.” Longshoremen were to be dispatched “without favoritism or discrimination” because of “union or non-union membership.” Victory. The union would select the dispatcher!

The men, however, knew already they had won. They realized it well before the Board’s October findings. The strike had empowered them, it had illuminated their courage and power. There followed hundreds of strikes – “quickies” - their chief weapons, audacity, direct action and, above all, solidarity. The longshoremen had undertaken a campaign, which became a movement; in ’34 Seattle’s longshoremen joined many thousands of others in that glorious year, ultimately revolutionizing workplaces, opening the door for millions, a prologue to the story of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the great awakening of America’s industrial workers.

