

## General Strike

Harry Bridges Plaza was ground zero for the Longshoremen. They would come down to the plaza during the Great Depression for hiring. It was called the "Slave Market". Men were fighting to get jobs.

There was no job security. The Longshoremen might work on one ship for 1, 2 or 3 days. The Longshoremen would just wait around hoping to be picked for jobs. To get a job, one had to offer perks. Offer of free drinks was common. A man might have to offer to paint an employers house over the weekend. Very desperate men would offer their sisters or wives for favors.

They would start standing here from 6 am, and starting at 8 am, they would be herded like cattle around the area by police to allow commuters to get to work from the ferry terminal.

The desperation was the impetus for the Longshoremens' Strike, which started on May 9, 1934. Shortly after the Longshoremen went on strike, the Seamen joined them. This was a strike that covered the entire West Coast from Bellingham Washington to San Diego. As a result the West Coast ports were paralyzed. Cargo ships that arrived couldn't unload their cargo.

Up until July 1934, there were many strikes throughout the country with little effect. The employers had the power, not the workers. Employers were able to break strikes by firing anyone who participated.

The Roosevelt administration tried again to broker a deal to end the strike through the National Longshoremens' Board (the Board that employed Grandpa), but the membership twice rejected the agreements their union leadership brought to them and continued the strike.

Immigrants were instrumental as a strike breaking focus.

Harry Bridges was a key figure was an Australian-born American union leader, first with the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). He successfully worked to prevent scabbing by visiting immigrant organizations and African American churches to convince them not to cross the picket line during the strike. Guaranteed jobs if they did not cross the picket line. As a result, many of the Longshoremen were people of color, as they are today.

The employers then decided to make a show of force to reopen the port in San Francisco. On Tuesday, July 3, fights broke out along the in San Francisco between police and strikers while a handful of trucks driven by young businessmen made it through the picket line.

July 4 was relatively quiet.

Turning point in 1934 was July 5, which was known as Bloody Thursday. On that day the employers organization attempted to open up the port even further. Open scabbing by employers took place. Heavy fighting occurred between strikers and police. Rocks and cobblestones were thrown. Police used tear gas. Two men were shot by police and killed in front of the International Longshoremens' Association headquarters on Steuart Street.

Newspapers were very conservative at the time and sided with the employers. They reported that the strikers were all Communists and were throwing bombs. They attempted to feed on the "Red Scare" going on at the time.

That evening, the National Guard was brought in by the governor to patrol the waterfront. Tanks patrolled the waterfront. The bodies of the two men who were killed were kept at the ILA headquarters until their funeral.

The killing of the two men was a turning point for the general strike. The Teamsters Union, which previously didn't want to strike, voted to participate, largely due to Harry Bridges' convincing arguments. The sympathies of the general public also turned in favor of the workers.

Grandpa wrote about the funeral that was held for the two slain workers on July 9. The funeral procession started at the bottom of Market Street and went up Market Street and into the Mission District, a distance of over 3 miles. The unions asked the police force to remain out of sight, and the police force agreed. Witnesses have written that it was quite a sight to behold. 14,000 Longshoremen and Seamen marched rank and file with heads bowed up Market Street. Sympathizers joined in. Back in those days, everyone wore hats. The men observing the procession all removed their hats. If someone didn't, the public would tell that person to remove their hat until he did so. The funeral won the hearts of the people, and public sympathy turned toward to workers rather than the employers.

All streetcars stopped. Sympathizers joined in with the march. The police remained true to their word. There were no police around, and there were no scuffles or trouble.

By July 12, the General Strike had begun. Union after union joined the strike. Businesses that were not unionized closed down in sympathy – restaurants, stores, barber shops. The count of the workers who were on strike was estimated to be about 127,000. At the time the population of San Francisco was 634,000.

Mural – Mission and Stuart

"Injury to One is an Injury to All". Sculpture was erected in honor of the two men who lost their lives during the strike. Painted in 1985. Not fair to say Labor Council was part of this. Labor Council leadership did not want a general strike.

In 1934, the waterfront looked quite different. There were 82 operating piers that could accommodate 250 ships. San Francisco was the main port in Northern California.

In 1933, unemployment was at 25% and employers had the upper hand. People had already started organizing against the treatment of the workers.

Also in 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act was enacted, which allowed workers to form unions.

Containerization changed the port of San Francisco. This port didn't have the land and space to accommodate containers and the large cranes that carry them. As a result, the industrial port moved to Oakland, and San Francisco ceased to be a port for cargo ships.

When the unions went on strike, the employers, of course, tried to encourage workers to break the strike, or work as scabs. The unions regarded scabs as the lowest form of human beings.

The football coach at University of California at Berkeley urged his football team to break the strike and work as scabs, which many of them did. Later, in retaliation, well after the strike had ended, when the football team had to travel somewhere by ship, the Longshoremen refused to carry their luggage and equipment and made the football players do it.

The General Strike lasted 4 days. On July 19, the unions and employers agreed to go to arbitration. At first the unions were suspicious of the National Longshoremen's Board.

The arbitration lasted 3 weeks. An agreement was reached on August 8, and the workers got almost everything they asked for.

- Wage increase to 95 cents an hour, from 85 cents. The workers had wanted \$1.
- 30 hour work week
- 6 hour work day
- Recognition of one union along entire west coast.
- One contract for all Longshoremen

What they didn't get:

- The union wanted to have control over the hiring hall. Instead of control, the hiring halls would be operated jointly with employers. The unions later got control of hiring halls in 1936.

#### Murals at Rincon Annex

Site was originally owned by Southern Pacific Railroad and was proposed as a train station. It was not here when the Crocketts were here. It was built after they left the Bay Area.

With the construction of the Bay Bridge (completed in 1937) and the popularity of the automobile, there was no need for a new train station. The land was sold to the US Government. Construction began in 1939 and was finished in 1940. The style is Art Moderne.

The murals were painted by Anton Refregier. Refregier was born in Russia and emigrated to the US when he was 15. He lived in New York and became a US citizen.

The murals are one of the Works Progress Administration projects authorized by Franklin Roosevelt as part of the New Deal. Refregier won the commission in 1941 one year after the Post Office opened. He started painting them immediately but work was quickly suspended due to the war. Rincon Annex was a very busy place during the war. Work resumed in 1946 and the murals were completed in 1948.

His style was "social realist" and he wanted to paint lives of working class as they existed, with all the challenges, rather than glamorizing life in California.

Almost immediately, the murals came under criticism. The Catholic church didn't like the depiction of the friar and made Refregier slim him down. Critics didn't like the depiction of Chinese labor being used to build the railroad tracks even though it was common knowledge such labor was used almost exclusively in California to build the railroads. Refregier had to make 92 changes while he was painting them to satisfy special interest groups.

During the McCarthy era in 1953, the murals came under attack by a committee of the House of Representatives as being Un-American and there was an effort to get approval to destroy them. Fortunately, the bill to destroy the murals never made it out of Committee.