

[A brief background on the events leading up to the strike might be helpful for those of us who didn't live in that period. T.H. Watkins wrote about the Longshoremens Association of San Francisco and the Bay District, the so-called "Blue Book" union (after the color of its membership books) formed in 1919 to take the place of the militant International Longshoremens Association.

The union practiced the "shape-up" system, which required that all longshoremen gather at the various docks each morning to form a pool of which gang bosses would choose each day' working contingent; the consequent existence of "star gangs," men selected to work on a regular basis, often as the result of a kick-back to the gang boss; the "speed-up" system, which encouraged gangs to compete with one another in breaking the loading cargo, a practice that resulted in frequent injuries and occasional deaths; and the fact that paychecks could only be cashed at certain local speakeasies for a discount of 10 to 15 percent, which was split between the bar owners and their bootleggers. By 1930, tonnage in all Pacific Coast ports had dropped at least 25 percent and in some places by as much as 40 percent; hundreds, then thousands, of casual laborers found themselves getting no work at all, and even the dutiful "star-gang" members of the employer-dominated union saw their average weekly pay plummet to \$10.46 – below subsistence even for that time. Suddenly not even steady work was enough to offset the brutal disadvantages of membership in the Longshoremens Association of San Francisco and the ranks of the rival International Longshoremens Association began to swell.

It was pure coincidence that Dad found himself in the Bay Area at the beginning of the Summer of 1934, but it was not chance that he was tapped to play a role in this pivotal moment of history in the United States labor movement. Dad's Ph.D. dissertation was "The History of California Labor Legislation, 1910 – 1930." He was granted his degree August 1931 from the University of California, Berkeley. His thesis advisor, Charles A. Gulick, recommended Dad to be a primary negotiator for the arbitration board. The board was trying to settle the Pacific Coast Strike of 1934 when the Washington crowd arrived and needed local assistance. E. David Crockett]

THE PACIFIC COAST STRIKE OF 1934

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Delivered at the University of Colorado in 1934

During the first six months of 1934, we experienced in the United States more strikes than occurred during the previous decade. Strikes such as this country have rarely seen. Within the year, serious difficulties arose in coalfields, steel mills, automobile plants and among truck drivers, longshoremen, seamen and textile workers. Scarcely a section of the country was free from disturbances.

Though specific reasons for the strikes may vary, the underlying motivation was the same. The men were fighting for the right to organize, and to have their organizations recognized and respected by employers. In most cases the strikes had been against companies or industries whose employees were unorganized. As the men began joining unions the companies either aggressively objected or passively refused to bargain with the new groups.

The adoption of codes under the National Recovery Act precipitated the industrial warfare in a number of cases. Section 7a of the law gave to laborers the right to organize and to belong to unions of their own choosing, also to select representatives for purposes of collective bargaining with employers. Under General Johnson's supervision, most of the code agreements of NRA

were drafted principally by the employers, giving them considerable advantage. At least that was the belief of laborers. Employers formed associations. The anti-trust laws were temporarily set aside. Consequently, workers felt the need for a united front. They attempted to organize and obtain union recognition -- something they were entitled to under the law -- but in process of attempted unionization strikes appear to have been inevitable.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not in favor of strikes. They cause enormous losses and hardships for the parties directly involved in the dispute; they inconvenience the public, including innocent people who have nothing to do with the strike; then, too, it is often the case that violence, destruction of property and even bloodshed take place as the passions of the combatants reach fever heat. It seems, however, that the strike is sometimes the only weapon held by labor. It is the only way by which public opinion can be aroused and employers be forced to do that which they should.

Men are entitled to organize and bargain collectively with their employers and the majority should have the right to rule. Our country, politically, was founded upon that principle. The majority rules in political elections and the minorities must obey these laws set down by the representatives chosen by the majority. Such it should be in industry. So long as employers refuse to recognize bonafide organizations comprising the majority of their workers, we shall continue to have strikes. That is, if the men have a faint glimmer of hope that the strike will be successful.

I am a firm believer that the only way to bring industrial peace is to rely upon collective bargaining and trade agreements. These are possible if the men are organized.

The Longshore and Seamen's strike on the Pacific Coast which culminated in a four days general walkout of all laborers in San Francisco, is representative in an exaggerated degree of what took place elsewhere. The result of my remarks shall be confined to my experiences of the summer of 1934.

Please remember that I am speaking unofficially, no longer being an employee of the Federal Government. I shall perhaps be tempted to say some unflattering things concerning city and state politics in California; I hope that I am far enough away to do it safely.

In the early part of June, I left the University of North Dakota with my family and drove by auto to the Bay Region of California. We had been fondly anticipating our visit on the Pacific Coast. It had been three years since we had seen our friends there. Upon arriving, our welcome, low and behold, was the general strike and the infantile paralysis epidemic. I fear that Mrs. Crockett did not enjoy the summer as much as she might have done -- she was kept busy guarding our children from contagion. As for myself -- I feel very fortunate. I would not have missed my experiences!

The strike in San Francisco and along the coast became so critical that on June 27th, President Roosevelt appointed a board to investigate and attempt a settlement of the dispute. It was called the National Longshoremen's Board and was composed of three members. They were Archbishop Hanna of the Catholic Church, Assistant Secretary of Labor McGrady from Washington and Attorney Cushing, a prominent lawyer of San Francisco. A few days after its organization, the board appointed a professor of Stanford University and myself as special investigators. That was a piece of luck, the significance of which I didn't fully realize at the time. My appointment gave me an opportunity to see, from the inside, how corporation executives and labor leaders conduct a strike and plan maneuvers of industrial warfare. It also gave me a better knowledge of the New Deal operations and how the government attempts to handle disputes, bringing

enormous pressure to bear when necessary. Incidentally, I met prominent officials from Washington D.C.: I learned about the petty politics of the city of San Francisco; I discovered that newspapers are most reliable sources of misinformation and, finally, I found out that not all of the strikers in California were reds as we were being led to believe.

When President Roosevelt appointed the arbitration board, the strike of longshoremen and seamen had been in progress some six weeks. Ships in all ports of the Pacific except Los Angeles were tied up. They were either lying idle chained to the docks, or else were anchored in the harbors with stacks smokeless. In San Francisco Bay it was reminiscent of the gold rush days when ships upon reaching California were deserted in mass by the sailors.

By the end of June, the strike was at a deadlock. Neither side would give in an inch. The men wanted control of the hiring hall that would give them the right to organize into unions and not be discriminated against. Also, they asked for higher wages and better working conditions. The employers, forty-two steamship and stevedore companies, stood firmly together and refused the demands.

Public opinion was divided upon the subject. The average person who read the newspaper reports believed the strikers to be in the wrong. There were many others, however, who sympathized with and helped the striking men. It was the first duty of the Board to win the confidence of the employers, employees, and public.

Unloaded cargo, piled high on the docks, could not be moved to the warehouses and stores. The strikers had too effective a system of picketing. This cargo had been loaded on the docks from ships by strikebreakers, many of whom, I am sorry to say, were University of California students. It is claimed that almost the entire football squad obtained good paying jobs doing longshore work during the strike.

By July first, and before the government board could really get underway, a powerful association of business men, capitalists, and bankers decided to come to the assistance of the steamship companies and open the port of San Francisco by force. This association is known as the Industrial Association and is feared and hated by organized labor. It had been successful in stamping out unionism from San Francisco shortly following the war.

The Industrial Association made careful preparations before opening war on the strikers. First of all it obtained consent from the city government to go ahead. What is more, it was saved the necessity of hiring strike guards or sluggers to oppose the striking men, -- the city offered the services of the police department and Mayor Rossi swore in several hundred extra men giving them badges, clubs and guns.

The strikers realized what was coming and knew that if the Industrial Association and police were successful in unloading the ships and transferring the cargo, the strike would be lost. They prepared themselves for battle.

On July 2nd, trucks began attempting to transport goods; the drivers were protected by squads of policemen. The fighting began. It continued all that day. The employers were successful in transferring less than a dozen small loads of cargo. At this rate, it would take two years to empty the docks! They vowed a more strenuous attempt would be made the next day. As a result, July 3rd will go down in the history of San Francisco as Bloody Thursday. The Federal Government was powerless to do anything. We talked with the strike leaders and the steamship presidents, but they were a thousand miles apart as far as agreeing was concerned.

I watched some of the fighting from a safe vantage point and shall never forget the things that I saw. Human beings had temporarily gone mad. They acted as savages. Lines of warfare were drawn as definitely as along the Western Front in the Great War. The strikers were on one side with bricks, stones, sticks, and other miscellaneous hand weapons. The police were on the other side with clubs, tear-gas bombs and guns. It is a gruesome sight to see an elderly man, a workman with a home, family and grandchildren, deliberately pick up bricks and aim at the heads of policemen. It is likewise horrible to watch policemen ride horseback, rough-shod, over fighting men trampling them under foot or beating their heads with Billy clubs.

On this day of fighting, two men were killed outright by policemen's bullets, while scores were seriously injured. The strikers claim that the men were nothing less than murdered. It is pointed out that movie cameras with sound affects had been stationed near the fighting and were demanding some real action. Evidently they obtained it, for right in front; the two men were killed, shot from behind with 13 bullet wounds. In a moment I shall speak of their spectacular funeral.

In illustrating the cooperation that took place between the employers and police I shall mention a most shameful and inhuman action. During the afternoon of Bloody Thursday the police made several gas attacks upon the union headquarters of the striking men. Injured and bleeding strikers had been carried to these quarters, where a temporary hospital was affected. Suddenly, at intervals, without warning, tear gas bombs were thrown by the police through the windows. The exploding bombs almost suffocated the helpless, injured men. After each attack, the telephone on the inside would ring and presumably an employer would ask: Have you had enough? Are you ready to arbitrate? Will you give up?



Such action on the part of the employers simply solidified-the-ranks of labor and made them desperately determined to win the strike. It also caused public opinion to shift somewhat in favor of the strikers. Much more important, however, in influencing the attitude of the public was the massive funeral held as a tribute to the dead strikers.

On July 4th, a truce was arranged, which gave the laborers an opportunity, to bury their dead. They did it with all due ceremony. I didn't attend the funeral, but I stood on Market Street for two and one-half hours watching the funeral procession file by. It was most impressive and thousands of people beheld it. They rode in automobiles. Next, came truckloads of flowers (floral offerings given by hundreds of sympathizers). Then came the caskets on open trucks. One casket was draped with an American flag, for the man had been a world war veteran. After the caskets marched men. Many of them were the very ones who had fought so desperately two days

before. Now they were peaceable enough. They marched eight abreast with hats off and heads bowed. There were thousands of them. On their arms were black bands and on their labels union buttons. Occasionally would be seen women in the ranks. Wives, daughters and mothers of the striking men. All of them marched with undaunted spirits. Scores of onlookers were moved to tears by the impressiveness of the occasion. Not a policeman was in sight. The unions had promised to maintain order if they were left unmolested and for once the city government trusted them.



The deaths and resulting funeral stirred all of the ranks of organized labor in the Bay Region and started the move for a general strike.

In order to prevent further violence, Governor Merriam called out the National Guard and soon several thousand young boys in uniforms with rifles, bayonets and cannons were parading the Embarcadero and waterfront. The strikers immediately quieted down and withdrew their pickets. They were tired of violence and could see it was useless to fight the combined employers, Industrial Association, police and National Guard. Soon cargo was moving on the streets of San Francisco as it had not been moved for months.

It looked as though the strike was broken. Union leaders secretly told our board that they were willing to arbitrate all issues. They had tried out their own strength and lost, now they were depending upon the compassion of the Roosevelt administration. We felt heartened and tried to obtain the same consent from the employers. It was no use and our board had no authority from the President to force arbitration.

Then on July 9th, a remarkable and spectacular event began transpiring. The longshore seamen strike was not lost yet!! Union after union, by secret ballot, voted in favor of a sympathetic strike. The truck drivers walked out, then the taxi drivers. All of the men in the building trades, the cleaners, butchers, streetcar men, bartenders, barbers and all the rest followed suit.

On July 16th, the city was plunged into a strange stillness. It was Monday morning, the city normally would have been teeming with life, activity, business and noise, but this morning there was none of it. The general strike was underway.

The ferryboats were still traversing the Bay, which made possible my getting to work for I lived in Berkeley. That morning I left the ferryboat with several hundred other commuters. We hesitated a moment and then walked in mass up Market Street, filling the entire street and sidewalks. We had no fear of traffic, there wasn't any. The strangeness of it all put the crowd in a holiday mood -- we were wondering what to expect next. Almost immediately we beheld an

elderly man approaching us, coasting down the place where streetcars normally run, on roller skates. Merchants did a fair roller skate and bicycle business for a few days.

That first day of the general strike, I believe I walked miles on the sidewalks of the city. Transportation facilities were not available even for the arbitration board. Its members were too old and dignified, however, to walk about and so the young man from Stanford and I acted as their agents.

That day I interviewed Mr. Plant, president of the Water Front Employers Association, who is also president of the American Hawaiian Steamship Company. Mr. Plant was certainly unnerved. He told me that his life had been threatened by the strikers, and that he dared not even go home. Every few minutes his wife called him, hysterically describing the maneuvers of four armed men in a blue sedan who kept passing in front of their home, apparently waiting for Mr. Plant's return. I had seen Mr. Plant before as a stern, capable, and self-confident man, but now his chin was quivering. He said that he simply worked for his corporation and tried to do his duty. He couldn't understand what the strikers might accomplish by putting him in a wooden box.

That same day, I visited a strike leader -- low and behold he said his life had been threatened by the employers. He was barricaded behind locked doors with guns, ammunition and a police dog. He said that the employers had hired an ex-convict, a former wrestling champion from Oklahoma, to kill him.

I use these illustrations to indicate the degree of tension prevalent during the general strike. Fortunately, however, no match set off the tinderbox. The four days of general strike passed without bloodshed and with very little destruction to property.

I would like to refer to the first day of the general strike again by saying that I went hungry as well as footsore. All of the restaurants and eating-places in the city except 19 were closed. It was quite impossible to get inside the doors of these nineteen. Humorous signs appeared on some of the closed places of business. On one cafe window was the following: "This cafe is closed -- the management has gone out to eat."

The next day I carried my lunch in a paper bag. It became a familiar sight to see the hundreds of fashionably dressed commuters, each with his paper bag or lunch basket under his arm.

Numerous other amusing situations developed during the general strike. Housewives rushed to grocery stores and purchased everything in sight. Staple groceries soon were gone and the stores could get no more. Some over-cautious women kept on buying even though their larders were filled for weeks ahead. They bought the odds and ends which merchants hadn't been able to sell for years. Even a man visited a store and carried away a baby buggy filled with tinned goods, including a dozen cans of hominy. He pushed the buggy all the way up the Berkeley hills and told his neighbors that none of his family liked hominy but believed that it was nourishing and might keep them alive.

Gasoline supplies soon were exhausted and it is surprising how many people saved two or three gallons in their tanks, so that they could do as one man expressed it: "Leave the city at once if hell broke loose."

The fickleness of public opinion was soon made manifest. Former friends of labor began criticizing the strikers -- they had gone too far. As long as the public watched from the outside, everything was all right, but as soon as it was inconvenient it became critical.

The general strike was over almost as suddenly as it began. The papers told you that labor was crushed and beaten -- that the general strike was a great failure. That is not true. During the strike the united front of the employers was broken. Some of the companies told the board that they were tired of the whole affair and were willing to recognize the unions. All of the companies agreed to arbitrate. It is also true that the unions were having troubles during the general walkout. They were under a tremendous pressure and had assumed a terrific responsibility. The general strike almost got too big for them. The men, then, were glad to return to work after steamship companies had weakened enough to permit arbitration. I contend that the general strike was won by the strikers -- the Boards later award bears out that contention. It was favorable to labor.

Before arbitration could proceed very far, it became necessary to conduct an election among the seamen. Several unions claimed a majority of the same men and consequently the right to represent them in collective bargaining. A Communist group was one of these. It happened to be my task to supervise the election. The men were so anxious to vote and show their allegiance to the American Federation of Labor, and not the Communists, that most of the 6,000 in San Francisco tried to vote the first day. We could take care of not more than 400. During the first several days, men stood in line hours at a time on the sweltering sidewalks. San Francisco was having at the time one of its most infrequent heat waves. The discipline and patience of the seaman were indeed remarkable.

I spent a week going through the huge marine hospital out by the Golden Gate, allowing the sick sailors to vote for their respective unions. There I found dying men, bedfast with tuberculosis, who couldn't talk above a whisper and who had not been to sea for years. Yet they knew all about the strike and were anxious to do their bit, such as it was, by casting their ballot.

I have neglected mentioning some of the Washington personalities who helped us settle the strike. For a time it seemed as though the capital city must be surely deserted, so many prominent men came to California. At the time, President Roosevelt was on his Hawaiian Voyage. There was Senator Wagner from New York, a most remarkable man, and certainly a friend to labor. His visit lasting two days helped to still the fears of union leaders. They had been afraid that the board would be unfriendly to the striking men.

Then came Postmaster General Farley to speak to the employers. Farley is an interesting man and truly a politician. He holds enormous control over the letting and canceling of mail contracts to steamship companies. Thus he was in a position to exert pressure where it was very effective.

I must mention a young man about 22 years of age who came from Washington representing Francis Perkins, Secretary of Labor. He was Thomas Eliot, grandson of the late Charles A. Eliot of Harvard and a brilliant chap. I worked with him for several weeks and learned more about inside operations in Washington than I could from reading the papers for months. Already young Eliot is being mentioned as candidate for the net attorney general of the United States. (I predict a bright future for him.)*

At the climax of the strike, along came General Johnson of the National Recovery Act. I would like to convey my exact impressions of General Johnson. He is very dramatic in everything that he does. One around him feels rather insignificant because of his big, brusque, blustering way. I believe that at one time everyone in Washington was a little afraid of him except the President. Johnson did nothing to aid the arbitration board but left San Francisco taking credit for having settled the strike.

During the strike, you heard much regarding Communists and reds. It was claimed by the employers that the Communists were controlling the strike activities of the seamen. The newspapers were not slow in playing up this phase of the dispute and began a campaign against reds and all radicalism in California. These statements given out by the press were misleading to say the least.

It is true that Communists came to the state. They gather wherever there is a labor disturbance. They work hard to make converts, taking advantage of class antagonisms and prejudices. Sometimes they even try to further their cause by assuming responsibility for the whole dispute and proclaim that the men are striking against the capitalist order instead of a few employers.

The communist press circulated literature throughout the bay region, especially among the strikers. They tried to organize the men and started a union, "the Marine Workers Industrial Union" but never did it represent more than a small fraction of the men. We estimated less than 1% of the strikers.

It became a powerful weapon for the employers, working through the newspapers, however in influencing public opinion. A man bearing the brunt of the attack was [Alfred Renton] Bridges, chairman of the General Strike Committee. He was said to be not only a Communist but also a Communist organizer, a representative of the 3rd International of Moscow. It was pointed out that he was not a citizen of the U.S. but an alien. The press asked that he be deported as an undesirable. He was said to be a gangster, racketeer and a friend of Al Capone and Dillinger. Letters, telegrams and telephone calls were sent to Washington. Almost everyone with influence in the capital was appealed to in an attempt to obtain deportation of this dangerous character, Mr. Bridges.

I met Mr. Bridges, became acquainted with him and found him a very different individual than that pictured. It is true that he is not an American citizen. He was born in Australia but he has worked as a longshoreman on the Pacific Coast of the United States for 18 years. The employers couldn't really object to Mr. Bridges because of being an Australian that simply made deportation a possibility. What they objected to was his ability and activity as an organizer and leader. He is a born leader, has intelligence and knows how to use it. He has the best memory for details I have ever seen. I found Mr. Bridges an earnest, sincere, likeable man. Not a man dangerous to society at all, but disliked by employers because he was not afraid of them.

At the height of the anti-Communist agitation, secret vigilante committees were organized. It is claimed that fascist groups backed them. I can't say as to that. Their movements were closely guarded. Their main objective was to stamp out Communism. The headquarters of Communists were raided in all of the bay cities. Windows were broken, furniture destroyed, printing presses hammered to pieces, and literature burned. The police were always conveniently absent when these raids were made. Some were conducted in broad daylight. I happened to be near the Western Workers headquarters when it was destroyed. I watched what took place. It was less than a block from the city hall in San Francisco, but the police didn't arrive until the damage had been done and the men escaped. When the police came on the scene, some bystanders in the crowd who were incensed at the destruction of property were arrested and taken to jail as Communists or sympathizers, or dangerous characters, or vagrants.

During the strike, the jails were filled with people, a most deplorable situation. One of the more enlightened judges turned them loose as fast as he could if they came under his jurisdiction. After hearing the evidence or lack of evidence against many, this judge made apologies to the arrested men, turned them loose, and gave each a dollar out of his own pocket.

I left California late in September, after receiving my appointment here in Colorado. That was before the board had rendered its decision. Later, a decision was made, whose terms were considered victorious for the longshoremen and seamen. As my sympathies were with the striking men, I am glad for my small part in aiding them.

*[Thomas Hopkinson Eliot graduated from Harvard Law School, served a term in the U.S. House of Representatives, practiced law in Cambridge Massachusetts, and taught in the Harvard Law School. He came to the Washington University in St. Louis in 1952 as chair of the Political Science Department, in which he later taught, as well as in the School of Law, and is a distant relative of William Greenleaf Eliot, the University's founder. He served as the University's twelfth Chancellor from 1962 to 1971, and held administrative posts in the U.S. departments of Labor, the Social Security Board, and the Interior. He assisted the U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, was a member of the House of Representatives in the 77th Congress, and served as director of the Massachusetts "Little Hoover" commission on reorganization of the state government. He was also named to the Charles Nagel Professorship of Constitutional Law and Political Science in 1958, and authored the well-respected book Governing America: The Politics of a Free People.]