

# Victory on the Waterfront

*The strike waged by the Maritime Federation  
is a signpost for progressive trade unionism*

By Robert Holmes

**C**RIES of "Take her away!" are heard again on San Francisco's Embarcadero and in other West Coast ports as cargoes move for the first time since the great maritime strike was called on the night of October 30 last. For ninety-five days, 40,000 longshore and seafaring workers had effectively tied up the shipping industry of the Pacific in order (1) to preserve the gains won in the bitter struggle of 1934, and (2) to obtain from recalcitrant shipowners certain new concessions.

As seamen trundled duffel bags aboard ship, and long-idle vessels were made ready for their voyages, as husky longshoremen were dispatched from the hiring halls to the various piers where thousands of tons of cargo were to be worked in some 250 ships which had been deserted, ghost-like hulks for three months, the formal end of the strike came with the signing of new agreements between operators and seven striking unions on February 4.

It was a great victory, this strike, almost unequaled in the history of the American labor movement. Forty thousand workers maintained solid, unbroken picket lines over a coast line of 17,000 miles which stretched from San Diego to Seattle. The pickets kept watch over empty piers and sheds through monotonous, lonesome nights during one of the coldest winters on record. There was wind, snow, and rain as the men huddled around their little fires in the wooden shacks which were their shelter during the long hours of picket duty. At times, it was difficult to keep up the spirits of the men who are used to active, busy lives. There was little activity on the picket lines, because the workers had done their job of organizing well. The shipowners did not bring in scabs because there were no scabs to be had. They were driven from the 'front in 1934, and during the following months until today, the maritime industry on the West Coast is 100-percent organized.

The strike was a signal victory from two aspects. First, it must be remembered that the shipowners' original intention was to lock out the men, and in effect conduct an employers' sit-down for three months until the public got tired and demanded that the strike be ended, thus giving the operators a basis upon which to smash the unions, destroy the Maritime Federation, and force the workers back on the owners' terms. This was completely defeated. Second, the strikers obtained about 85 percent of their new demands. Blocking the shipowners' plan to wreck the

unions, thereby preserving the victory of 1934, was in itself a triumph for the men. The additional success of winning most of the new demands marks this strike as the farthest point yet reached in labor's march. The militant longshoremen and seafaring workers of the Pacific are leading the way for labor.

The Maritime Federation has been strengthened beyond destruction by this strike. The West Coast strike gave impetus to the fight being waged in the East by the insurgent seamen. Out of the battle just concluded on both coasts may come a National Maritime Federation which will be an important factor in the C.I.O. campaign which is just in its beginning. The seven striking West Coast unions send their men back to work with a new and revitalized feeling of solidarity among them. They learned patience and understanding in ninety-five days on the picket line, and they remembered the lesson of 1934: the settlement of the strike must be a joint settlement. It was a joint settlement. No one union could be either tricked or forced into deserting any of the other organizations on strike. The employers finally came to realize that it was useless to try to play one union against another. And the employers also learned that they could not destroy the unions even with the billion dollars the strike cost them. The shipowners have come to accept the inevitable, that the unions are here to stay and must be dealt with on an honorable and fair basis. It must not be expected that the operators will cease their efforts to undermine the unions, for they will not. Even now, provocateurs and stool-pigeons are at work. But the owners knew that they were licked. Public support had not turned against the workers. The employers' sit-down failed. Victory for the maritime unions resulted.

Turning to the gains won by the men in this strike, longshore leader Harry Bridges pointed out that had the operators made these same offers on October 30, the strike would not have happened. But it took three months of idle ships and cut-off revenue to convince

the diehards among the employers that it would have been wiser and cheaper to have made these offers in the beginning. Some of the operators were willing to settle from the start, but they were blocked by the Big-Four western off-shore operators: Dollar, Matson, American-Hawaiian, and Swayne & Hoyt. Even these companies finally learned their lesson, however. It will be a long day before they are ready to tackle the waterfront workers again.

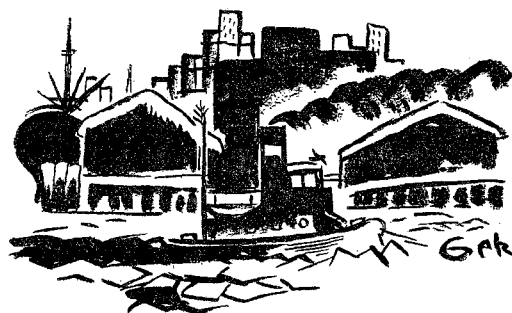
Briefly, what has each of the seven unions won?

**Longshoremen.** Retention of the hiring hall, with rotation of jobs and equal division of work and earning among their coast membership of 18,000. Retention of the six-hour day and thirty-hour week, all other time being overtime. The longshoremen fought for the six-hour day, not for themselves alone, but, as Bridges put it, "because we owe it to the labor movement as a whole." The longshoremen also won preference of employment, which they did not have before. At the present time, this is of small practical effect, because the I.L.A. completely controls all longshore work. However, it is a safeguard for the future and a protection to weaker, smaller locals. Also incorporated in the new agreement are provisions clarifying working conditions with such sections as these: "If it is a question of convenience vs. safety—'Safety First!' If it is tonnage vs. safety, then again—'Safety First!'"

**Sailors.** Express recognition in the agreement of the union-controlled shipping hall which the men have had in fact during the past two years. The recognition of the hall gives the union a stronger hold on the dispatching of men, and is a safeguard against the blacklist which the operators had raised to a fine art before 1934. The sailors won cash wages for overtime instead of time off, which generally was given in distant ports where it meant nothing to the men. A wage increase of \$10 per month, or 14-percent raise, was also gained.

**Marine Firemen.** They have won recognition of the shipping hall, cash wages for overtime, 14-percent wage increase, and improved working conditions.

**Marine Cooks & Stewards.** They have obtained recognition of the union-controlled shipping hall, 14-percent wage increase, better living quarters and working conditions, and an eight-hour day within a spread of twelve hours on coastwise vessels. This union did not win the eight-hour day on deep-sea vessels. There they had to be content with a nine-



Arthur Gets

hour day in a thirteen-hour spread. This was one of the only two fundamental demands which a striking union did not win. The other will be noted further on.

*Masters, Mates, & Pilots.* They won a 14-percent wage increase, cash wages for overtime, extra pay for work heretofore not paid for, and improved conditions. The union did not win preference of employment for its members, the second exception of a fundamental demand not secured. However, since about 90 percent of the licensed deck officers are members of this organization, and since a strong proviso against discrimination for union activities was included in the agreement, the loss of preference at this time is minimized. Furthermore, the unlicensed personnel of the ships, joined with the Masters, Mates, & Pilots in the Maritime Federation, will protect the latter group against discrimination.

*Marine Engineers.* They won a 14-percent wage increase, cash wages for overtime, increased manning scales, and improved conditions. They did not secure preference, but here again the same situation exists as with the Masters, Mates, & Pilots described above.

*Radio Telegraphists.* They won a union-controlled hiring hall, preference of employment, 14-percent wage increase, and duties confined to radio work, whereas formerly they were required to perform "paper" work in connection with cargo in addition to their radio duties. They also secured improved living quarters and working conditions.

A SUBJECT of great importance and interest is a comparison of this strike with that of 1934. In many ways, differences are to be noted, and they are all differences which result to the credit of and emphasize the strength of the unions. The 1934 strike was an organizing strike such as the nation is now witnessing in the auto industry. In 1934, men were still coming off the ships sixty and seventy days after the strike was declared, a strike which lasted eighty-three days. In the strike just over, every one of the 40,000 men who work in the shipping industry walked off the job the day the strike call went out. The organizing job of 1934 had been thoroughly done. The 1936 strike saw every port of the West Coast completely in the hands of the workers. It was a tremendous display of workers' power, and showed what militant, rank-and-file unions, which had completely unionized an industry, could do.

Second, there was no appreciable violence in this strike, a fact which irrefutably answers those persons who say that labor advocates violence. What violence there was in this strike was perpetrated by employers' thugs in San Francisco. Lee J. Holman had recruited a crew of 200 strong-arm men who would descend in the dark of night on a lone picket who might have strayed away from the picket group and "work him over." During the latter days of the strike, Holman's gang smashed the windows of the press where the *Voice of the Federation*, maritime workers'



Lithograph by Beatrice Mandelman

weekly, was printed. Finally, a resolution was passed at the San Francisco Labor Council condemning vigilanteism and calling upon the mayor and police to blot it out. As a result of this pressure, the police raided Holman's headquarters, arrested some thirty-six thugs, and confiscated numerous lead pipes, blackjacks, and sundry other weapons. Even though these men were subsequently released despite their illegal possession of weapons and proved violence, the mere fact that police arrested them was in sharp contrast to 1934, when only strikers were arrested—on charges of vagrancy when there was no evidence of such offense. But the maritime workers have come a long way in a few months. They are a powerful force in the labor movement and an influential organization in the community. The esteem in which the public holds the maritime unions has prevented unlawful arrests of their members, and deterred the shipowners from resorting to violence to break the strike.

More than this, the shipowners could not break the strike because no strikebreakers were available. There were no licensed men to take the ships out, nor were there unlicensed men to man the ships, nor longshoremen to work cargo. This is skilled work, and the shipowners did not dare to run their ships with untrained men.

Next, the unions were efficiently organized for the purpose of conducting the strike. There was a Joint Coast Policy Committee composed of representatives from all the unions who laid out strategy and conducted negotiations. This committee was wisely and courageously headed by Harry Bridges, who steadily grows in stature in the American labor movement, a man who is destined to take his place with Bill Haywood and Gene Debs and those other selfless, militant leaders who saw hope for a better world in the working class. Bridges, during this strike as in 1934, was incorruptible, honest, shrewd. Time and again he turned an apparent defeat into a strategic retreat from which he returned to a smashing victory. The shipowners hate Harry Bridges, and they

hate him because they cannot buy him and they cannot lick him. Only the fact that his tireless activities have made him sick and forced him into a hospital for treatment and rest, sounds a disturbing note.

A Joint Publicity Committee educated the public to what the unions were fighting to win. They had public support which they lacked in 1934. A Joint Relief Committee conducted the food kitchens where thousands of workers were fed. Strikers' families were taken care of. Thousands of dollars were donated to the maritime workers by other unions who knew that if the strike was lost, their position was weakened. Now that the strike is over, these other unions can call upon the maritime workers for "sympathy, support, and money," to employ Bridges's words, and they will get it. Even now the longshoremen are helping the teamsters organize in San Pedro.

The strike was conducted by the rank and file. Every major issue was submitted to the men for a referendum vote. Each important decision was that of the membership. Democracy among these unions is an actuality. The workers knew what they wanted, and they got it. And now they intend to help other unions. They are going to organize the unorganized as they have been doing during the past two and a half years. They are going to extend trade-union democracy into the labor movement as a whole. Already their influence has been felt in the San Francisco Labor Council. The new president is a progressive who won with the waterfront workers' support, and four members of the executive committee are maritime leaders, one of them Harry Bridges.

It is difficult to foretell events on the waterfront. Bridges says: "The workers are desirous of maintaining peace, but we can't close our eyes to the fact that the shipowners may in the future try to take away the gains we have won. That they will never do." This much can be said, the maritime workers in this strike consolidated the gains that were recognized in the agreements of 1934 and which were won by job action during 1935 and 1936. The gains obtained will not be surrendered. The workers should continue to secure improved conditions from year to year. Their strong, democratic organizations are the best insurance of this fact.

In other fields, the maritime workers will go forward. They intend to join the forces which are building for a Farmer-Labor Party in 1940. Harry Bridges has described their plans: "The unions must battle for democracy. We'll help those who helped us by carrying on the fight along political lines. We'll fight for liberal and labor legislation, for social security, and for the unemployed. We will fight to maintain the American standard of living. We will oppose fascism. In Germany there is no democracy because there are no trade unions. Strong, powerful, and militant unions are the bulwark of democracy. We are going to carry on the fight, not only for those who helped us during this strike, but for everyone."



# Roundabout Roads to Trotskyism

*The sincerity with which a view is held does not validate it, a fact which is of special importance just at present*

## An Editorial

**A**FTER months of sharp controversy, it has become evident that the defense of Leon Trotsky has taken the form of a division of labor among his defenders. One theme has emerged with three chief variations. It is important to distinguish between the various arguments proffered in Trotsky's behalf; it is equally important to discern the essential agreement of all the various lines of approach in terms of their political implications.

1. Trotsky and his special pleaders subordinate their attacks upon the validity of the Moscow trials to their general offensive, of long standing, against the whole Soviet leadership and policies. According to the familiar Trotskyist formula, the trials were "frame-ups" of "old Bolsheviks" perpetrated by Stalin as the head of a "totalitarian" state or a "mad-house" (both from Trotsky's speech at the New York Hippodrome).

2. Some dissociate themselves from, or even deprecate, Trotsky's general line, while they profess to find the charges against Trotsky "fantastic," "incredible," or "inconceivable." This outlook is especially characteristic of the Socialist members associated in Trotsky's "defense" committee.

3. Some liberals have tried to dissociate themselves both from Trotsky's general line and from his personal defense, while they argue in favor of an "impartial commission of inquiry."

Each or all of these positions may be held with various degrees of sincerity; in any case, the sincerity with which an idea is held does not validate it. Neither are these positions so neatly boxed off that one person may not hold all three, shuttling on demand from one to the other, although it is true that Norman Thomas, for example, identifies himself with the second, and some liberals with the third. Our purpose is to indicate the full political implications of these three lines of approach to the Moscow trials in order to find where they converge.

Those who defend Trotsky personally, but carefully dissociate themselves from him politically, are guilty of a flagrant, untenable dichotomy. Trotsky the man cannot be severed from Trotskyism, the system of ideas and actions. The NEW MASSES has maintained that the crimes of the Trotskyists in the Moscow trials were not acts of sudden, isolated aberration; they were, on the contrary, the fruit of long years of stubborn opposition to the policies and leadership which have made the Soviet Union great. For example, we have reminded those who found it "incredible" that

Trotsky should seek to restore capitalism in the U. S. S. R., that Trotsky never thought it possible to build socialism there anyway, failing revolutions in the most important countries of Europe. Incidentally, these same incredulous individuals never seem to consider the perpetration of "the greatest frame-up in history" by the genuine old Bolsheviks at the head of the Soviet state similarly "incredible."

This artificial separation between Trotsky and Trotskyism is responsible for the second position enumerated. Those who make this separation permit the Trotskyists to start where they leave off. For the Trotskyists draw political conclusions, even if others don't. The Trotskyists talk, write, and broadcast about "degeneration" in the Soviet Union, "madhouse," "totalitarian state," etc. They do this by posing the question: if Trotsky could not be guilty of such monstrous crimes, the Soviet leadership is guilty of monstrous crimes for "persecuting" him! The Norman Thomases cannot disavow responsibility for the conclusion when they agree to the premise.

Analysis shows the same to be true of position No. 3.

The Trotskyists, original inspirers of the campaign for an "impartial commission of inquiry," have tried to present the issue thus: are you for or against an impartial inquiry? Now, nobody is against an impartial inquiry. A partial trial is no trial at all. As raised by the Trotskyists, the issue is a false one because it has only one possible side.

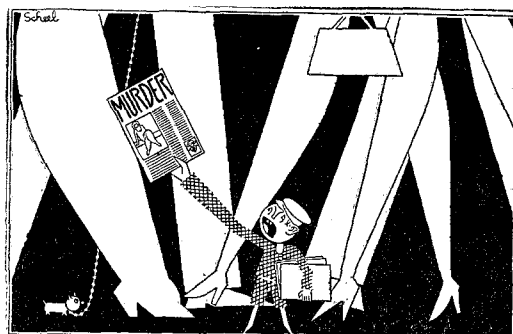
The true issue is: what agency is competent to hold an impartial inquiry and mete out justice? If the Soviet courts are truly the courts of a workers' state, then they are pre-eminently competent to hold such an inquiry. Now, two warrants for the arrest of Leon Trotsky have been issued by Soviet courts after extended trials of Trotsky's confessed accomplices. Two trials have already been held. There is no justification for an inquiry outside the Soviet courts unless the Soviet courts have been partner to a "frame-up," as

charged by the Trotskyists. It is significant that the committee most interested in this "impartial investigation" is called "The American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky."

In the final analysis, the true issue is: are the Soviet courts competent to hold an impartial inquiry? Are the courts of the only workers' Power to be impugned in favor of a trial in a capitalist court? (Trotsky has declared his desire to take his case into capitalist courts by suing Communist papers.) Those who answer no to the first question and yes to the second demand an "independent" investigation. But the political implications of this demand must not be slighted; they are just what the Trotskyists need for their whole campaign against the U. S. S. R. Trotsky indicts the whole socialist system and leadership in the Soviet Union. Liberals who become partner to his attack against the Soviet judiciary cannot disclaim responsibility for their share of the blame in the whole campaign, waged by Trotsky in the capitalist press and eagerly sought by that press, of slander against the U. S. S. R.

A subsidiary question is: are any agencies, other than the Soviet courts, competent to hold an impartial inquiry? It is significant that the Trotskyists have carefully avoided naming names. If we think of Socialists, is Norman Thomas to be a member of the commission? But Thomas has long been on record with prejudgments against the Soviet leadership and the Soviet system. If we name liberals, are those on the Trotsky "defense" committee competent to pass judgment? But they have already passed judgment by impugning the good faith of the Soviet court in an inquiry which comes clearly within its jurisdiction. Are capitalist lawyers to pass judgment? Is the capitalist press to pass judgment?

This whole campaign for an "impartial inquiry" outside the Soviet courts masquerades under liberal phraseology, but it has nothing in common with true liberalism, whose interests lie in defending, not impugning, the Soviet Union. The Trotskyists have nursed the campaign along because they will draw the political implications, knifing the Soviet Union, which some liberals refuse to draw under cover of abstract principles of justice. Again we repeat that the sincerity with which some liberals may hold this demand does not justify it. Liberalism negates itself when it becomes the unwitting ally of those forces which would weaken the authority and prestige of the only workers' state in a world shadowed by war, fascism, and Reaction.



Theodore Scheel