

That Man Bridges

Leo Huberman's profile of the man who is "more sincere in his convictions concerning democratic processes" than those who seek to deport him. His record on the waterfront. Why his men back him.

A WEEK ago today the CIO Executive Board was in session at the National Press Club auditorium in Washington. There was a special order of business to consider the petition for a charter presented by delegates from District 50 of the United Mine Workers. As the leaders from District 50 locals all over the country told of the abuses they had suffered, it became plain that the CIO must take some action to protect them from the arbitrary authority and "goon squad" tactics of John L. Lewis and his henchmen.

I asked Harry Bridges if he thought they should be given a charter. He was opposed to it for good tactical reasons. He advocated helping them, but didn't think the granting of a charter was the way out.

"Will you take the floor on the question?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "there's no use just being against something if you haven't got a better program."

That remark was characteristic of Bridges. The real Bridges—not the one who has been denounced week in and week out on the floor of Congress as the most destructive force in the United States. Not the Bridges who for eight years has been damned in newspaper editorials as a reckless, irresponsible, riotous troublemaker especially addicted to stirring up disorder and violence.

THE name of Harry Bridges became nationally known for the first time when he led the longshoremen's strike on the West Coast in May 1934. It became internationally known when the walkout of the longshoremen developed into a general strike which paralyzed San Francisco for over three days. Nothing moved. Take the silence of a New York blackout and spread it over a seventy-two hour period and you get the idea.

It was a frightening situation for the Industrial Association, the union of the great financial and industrial interests in San Francisco. They helped to organize the newspaper publishers under the leadership of the counsel for the Hearst press. The papers did a job on the strike and its leaders, while Mayor Rossi and other public officials did their bit on the radio.

What they were very careful not to emphasize was the fact that there would have been no progression toward a general strike had it not been for police violence which resulted in the death of three strikers and injuries to scores of others. It was only after law and order broke loose that the conservative San Francisco Central Labor Council voted 315 to 15 to go out in support of the longshoremen and the maritime unions.

The people of the nation were not told that. They were told fake stories that Harry Bridges was an advocate of violence, an agitator, a Red, and the cause of all the trouble. That was when the circulation of the whoppers about Bridges



Harry Bridges and Joseph Curran of the National Maritime Union

began. Since that time more lies have been told about Harry Bridges than about any other leader in American history.

The truth is that he does not believe in violence. He testified that, "In the 1934 strike I stood there at union headquarters with guards, and all of the men were rolled, every single man in our union to see if they had guns. We found a few, maybe, and they were thrown in the safe."

Nor is he an advocate of strikes except as a last resort—"after we have exhausted the resources of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration."

The record bears that out. Bridges' union has arbitrated constantly since the National Longshore Board, appointed by President Roosevelt, announced its award in the longshore dispute on Oct. 12, 1934. (Incidentally the settlement was a victory for the strikers—they were given a pay increase retroactive to July 31 when they returned to work, hours were cut from forty-eight to thirty per week, and hiring halls were to be jointly operated by the union and the employers.)

Under Bridges' leadership the longshore union has made labor history by being the first to incorporate into its contract with employers a commitment to *arbitrate all issues under an arbitrator appointed by the federal government*. Since 1938 any dispute that threatens a stoppage is automatically referred to the arbitrator who sits regularly one day a month for the purpose of settling all disputes. Dean Wayne L. Morse, now a member of the War Labor Board, has served as arbitrator for the past few years. He was appointed by Frances Perkins.

In December 1940 Bridges negotiated a five-year no-strike arbitration contract. Curious conduct for a man who is supposed to be a fomentor of trouble, an advocate of violence.

Dean Morse, who has learned to know and respect Bridges, was a character witness for the defense in the last hearing. On the stand Dean Morse said, "My impression of him is that he is more sincere in his convictions concerning democratic processes than many of his critics who seek to deport him."

THERE is reason for that statement. Attend a meeting of Bridges' local and you see democracy in action. No steam-roller. Three microphones on the floor for quick use by any one who has something to say. One thing they won't ever say is that Bridges is getting too much money. His salary is seventy-five dollars per week. Many of his union members earn more.

If they don't like his leadership, they can get rid of him easily and quickly. He boasts that his is the most democratic union in the country. "It has been built that way. For example, I can be removed as soon as a signed petition of fifteen percent of our membership is presented, just stating the case of why