

# WHY THE ILWU STRIKE FAILED

Richard Boyden

RECENTLY, A COSTUME BALL WAS HELD in an enclosed wharf on the San Francisco waterfront. Its theme: dock work. Some guests dressed up as longshoremen, while others came as packing crates. A young post-debutante had the letters "g-i-r-l" stenciled on her skin, while another carried a mock picket sign demanding "More Time to Get Loaded." This bizarre event revealed the contempt with which the wealthy view those who labor for them on the waterfront. Such an attitude has not often been expressed in public since 1934, when longshoremen led a general strike in San Francisco and established a powerful and respected union. Today, such a display of prejudice reflects the confidence of the employers in their campaign to weaken and dismantle unionism in the longshore industry.

A few months before this affair, the government Pay Board denied West Coast longshoremen a wage increase won in a bitter months-long strike. Even that wage increase had been a sop since the longshore union had lost the job security demands crucial in a changing industry. And while the "society" crowd frolicked, 100,000 British dockers were striking for that same job security.

In every modern seaport in the world, traditional cargo work is being displaced by containers, huge metal truck-trailer sized boxes that can be loaded at a factory or warehouse and shipped to any destination on the globe without their contents ever being "broken" or reloaded. This means the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

At issue is the work of "stuffing and stripping" the containers. Employers here and overseas have always regarded dockworkers' unions—among the most militant in the labor movement—as serious obstacles to their "prerogatives" and profits. They have therefore sought to use containerization to debilitate these unions by shifting container work to newly created, more docile groups of employees away from the docks. Since containers have now taken over the industry, longshoremen are fighting to retain, or win back their jobs.

On the West Coast, the result is jurisdictional warfare with the Teamsters union which represents most of the workers at container freight stations. The employers have made use of this jurisdictional dispute to shift the blame from themselves and set worker against worker in the transportation industry. They have been aided by an accommodating union leadership responsible for allowing the situation to develop unchecked. Bridges' concern for his membership consists of an unworkable "container tax" but his campaign to merge his International

Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) with the Teamsters is the best evidence of his total acceptance of containerization.

The "second front" in the employers' attack on the ILWU is their widespread use of "steady-men." The 1934 West Coast maritime strike established union hiring halls that equalized work and earnings among longshoremen. No employer could hire full-time workers. Instead, as each ship was loaded or unloaded, longshoremen returned to the hall to be dispatched to new jobs—those who had worked least were always sent out first. But in the last five years, with the introduction of mechanization and containers, the union leadership has allowed the employers to hire all of their skilled equipment operators on a full-time, or "steady" basis. As a result, these "steady-men" have been working long hours at large earnings, while most hall men have been reduced to working only three days per week. So, in addition to the jurisdictional dispute, the employers, again with the aid of the union leadership, have created divisions and animosity within the longshore union itself.

The equal rotation hiring hall is fundamental to the union's life. Before 1934, longshoremen were hired through the notorious "shape-up" system. While a few workers worked full-time, most dockers were "shaped" in large crowds at the pier-heads to be chosen by company hiring bosses. Job selling and favoritism were rampant. And the "shape-up" was an effective means of excluding known union members. The "shape-up" remained in the East and Gulf ports. It caused the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) to be taken over by racketeers.

The ILWU controlled and equalized employment. As a result, the workers viewed the union, not the stevedoring companies, as the focus of their work lives. And, in the years following 1934, the workers conducted a massive on-the-job campaign to end the speed-up and create safe working conditions. "Job action"—a short strike over a grievance on a ship in port—could easily wipe out an employer's profits. Since the hiring hall was the only source of workers, it was crucial to the success of any job action, because union members refused to replace the strikers. By the late 1930s, hundreds of job actions had established a mass of precedent in methods of work; in effect, virtual job-control by the workers in the industry.

The present employer offensive against the hiring hall, the use of "steady-men" and non-ILWU container freight stations, is simply the latest episode in a thirty-year battle to get rid of job control and dispense with a "troublesome" workforce. In this the companies have heretofore been largely, but sporadically successful. Since the days just prior to World War II, the top ILWU leadership has cooperated with management to reduce "chaos" in the industry first by discouraging, then by banning the job action tactic. This reflected more than the growing conservatism of most unions at the time: added to this was the role of the

Communist Party, the strongest political force in the ILWU, with which the union's leadership, including Bridges, was closely associated. Before and during the war, the Communists subordinated the needs of the longshoremen and the labor movement to those of Russian foreign policy, going so far as to engage in open wartime strikebreaking, and to lend support to the government's attacks on civil liberties. They played on the patriotic feelings of many workers to gain support for this policy, thereby helping to pave the way for the rhetoric of the Cold War.

During the Cold War the ILWU was expelled from the CIO for "Communist Party domination," a charge that was only half true. The expulsion, a grave injustice to the ILWU and its membership, was a reflection of the CIO leaders' capitulation to Cold War hysteria which weakened the entire labor movement. The resulting isolation of the ILWU induced the leadership to adopt a friendlier attitude toward the employers, who in 1960 obtained the union's approval of the "Mechanization and Modernization" agreement, in which the union surrendered its claim to job control and security in return for cash bonuses for retiring longshoremen. Harry Bridges, for years subjected to government attempts to deport him to his native Australia, sought respectability as a registered Republican who supported Nixon for President in 1960.

The strike of 1971-72 was the first in 23 years. It was the culmination of years of growing resentment and alarm among longshoremen at the deteriorating conditions and loss of earning power. The "M&M" contracts of the 1960s had allowed the unlimited introduction of new "labor saving" machinery and an end to job-protecting work practices. In addition, these contracts created a new group of workers who had all the obligations and none of the protections of union membership, the "B-men." These new recruits were given work only after all regular longshoremen and, therefore, suffered serious underemployment. With no vote in the union and without the rights of union members on the job, the B-men were an intimidated and docile workforce. They got the lion's share of unpleasant jobs and were forced to work much harder than regular longshoremen.

The employers' profits skyrocketed. From 1960 to 1970, cargo tonnage handled on West Coast docks increased over 100% while man hours fluctuated violently—the biggest increase over 1960 was at most 20%. Conservative estimates put productivity increases in the same period at about 85%. The "M&M" contracts of 1960 and 1966 meant hundreds of millions of dollars in *extra* profits for the employers, since the per-ton cost of moving cargo decreased at least 10%. It was these inflated profits that were used to finance the extremely expensive process of containerization. Ironically, longshoremen were worked harder and more "efficiently" in order that containerization might ultimately render 90% of their jobs obsolete.

More ironic still is the fact that in a union traditionally noted for its great strength and militancy, the leadership has based its tactics for the last 23 years on an assumed position of weakness. It was such reasoning that convinced a majority of the rank and file to accept the "M&M" contracts. The clear alternative was strike action but Bridges did not believe that a strike could be won. On the East and Gulf Coasts, however, the ILA struck six times during the same period and wages established in those strikes set the pattern for more peaceful West Coast bargaining. And the ILA—the most gangster-ridden and pro-war labor organization in the country—a union in which dissidents were murdered—even the ILA managed, through militant strikes conducted by the rank and file, to hold on to many conditions given up by the ILWU. Today 18 ILA men do the same work performed by 12 ILWU men.

In July 1971, 12,000 ILWU members struck all 24 West Coast ports. Despite an impressive show of force with mass picketing and hundreds of ships tied up in port, the strike failed to deliver the necessary economic blows to the large employers. Amazingly, the ILWU had no strike fund. Instead, the strikers divided what military cargo work there was to support themselves. Military contracts which account for a large percentage of the shipowners' business became the means by which the largest firms kept most of their ships sailing at a profit during the strike. And because Canadian ILWU men in British Columbia are covered by separate contracts, they did not strike. They were induced to handle a huge flow of strike-bound American cargo which was then funneled across the border by truck and rail.

Military freight and the Canadian situation constituted gaping holes in the longshoremen's otherwise solid and militant picket lines. These loopholes could only be closed by decisive action by Bridges as president of the international union. This he was unwilling to do. Boycott of military work, he claimed, would lead to repressive, open strike-breaking by the federal government. This was very likely true. But at the same time, Bridges failed to mention what he must have known, namely, that the sea-going unions had effectively dealt with this problem in their strikes by notifying the Defense Department in advance that they would refuse to work military cargoes carried by the biggest lines like Sealand. Instead, these cargoes would have to be given to small firms or foreign lines or be shipped in the military's own merchant fleet if they were to move at all. This was a partial but important strategic weapon against the real powers in the shipping industry. Had the ILWU adopted a similar policy, it could have brought the large companies to terms, while creating splits in the employers' ranks. Instead, the ILWU's total inaction allowed the employers to take the offensive. Thus they were able, during the "second phase" of the strike early in 1972, to raise their own threat of an employer boycott of military work to cut off the

strikers' only means of support. Actually, this move provided the union with the perfect opportunity to change its policy and salvage some of the initiative for itself. Again Bridges failed to provide militant leadership.

This is only one of many examples of the defeatism of the Bridges leadership which encouraged the employers to attack the union. As the strike wore on, Bridges began telling his membership "you haven't the strength to win your demands." His bargaining strategy ignored the pleas of the membership to fight seriously on the steadyman issue. Instead, Bridges assumed that the ILWU would gain certain purely economic concessions at the price of allowing the employers "all the steadyman they ask for. The reverse was true. Due to poor leadership, the ILWU lost the steadyman issue and ended up losing its money demands before the Pay Board. The Canadian ILWU men, who worked overtime during the strike, were faced in August 1972, with striking alone, and losing, on the very same issue— steadyman.

The fact that the Canadian members work under a separate contract is a sign of the deep malaise that has crept through the union in the last twenty years. The ILWU was built on the principle of the equal rotation of jobs. Just as important was the idea that all Pacific Coast ports must act together or be defeated separately. Without unity in demands and action, the often-sporadic strikes prior to 1934 had been defeated simply by employers diverting their ships to non-struck ports. The Canadian situation therefore signified a major abandonment of the principle of coastwide bargaining by the ILWU leadership. Similarly, the fact that steadyman were introduced selectively by employers in some ports and not others meant, before the strike, that the membership's understanding of the problem was extremely uneven. Here again, Bridges abdicated his responsibility to lead. It fell to the leaders of the San Francisco local to travel to other ports to raise and explain the issue. As a result, every major local declared against the use of steadyman and for the full equalization of work. The growing uproar continued to fall on deaf ears at the ILWU main office.

Why have Bridges and his supporters followed such disastrous policies? An underlying cause is the fear of isolation and defeat which, under the heavy impact of the Cold War and McCarthyism, became an obsession. It led to an unspoken ideology of cooperation and accommodation with the employers who, recognizing Bridges' value in disciplining his membership, opposed the government's witch-hunting attempts to deny him U.S. citizenship and to deport him. This ideology found its counterweight in a distorted notion of progress, which views technological and industrial innovation as progressive *in and of itself*, even when it disrupts and worsens the lives of countless thousands of wage earners it displaces. It was this ideology of progress that was formalized and codified in the "M&M" contracts.

The only barrier to all this—the opposition of the rank and file—was not easily dispensed with. During the 1930s, West Coast longshoremen, like millions of American workers, said “no” to speed-up and to “progress” carried out at their expense. Instead, they fought for and won the right to jobs, the shortening of the work week and the establishment of work rules that created jobs, even when this had the unfortunate result of duplicating work. They correctly concluded that however demeaning “make work” practices might be, they were the employers’ responsibility, not theirs. Inherent in this was a challenge to the existing profit-based economic order: if we are to have progress, let it be genuine, let it benefit those whose labor has created it.

But by the 1950s, the social ferment of former years had been dissipated. A weakened labor movement and the deadening Cold War atmosphere had taken their toll. The government and the employers joined a growing hue and cry against “Big Labor” and “featherbedding.” Bridges told the rank and file that because of these pressures they would probably lose all their conditions, their hiring hall, and their union, if “compromises” were not made. These threats and the prospect of good pensions and cash bonuses upon retirement brought a majority of longshoremen to a half-hearted and grudging acceptance of the “M&M” proposals. The registered longshore workforce had been “frozen” in 1948. By the late 1950s, a very large number of longshoremen were nearing retirement age which made the increased retirement benefits extremely attractive. It also greatly increased the fear of strike action, since these men remembered the bloody strike battles of 1934. Bridges used this fear to great effect. Nonetheless, disillusionment with the “M&M” contract set in quickly, as it became obvious that the foundations of the union were being seriously eroded.

In October, 1971, America experienced its first nationwide dock strike when ILA men on East and Gulf Coast ports joined the West Coast men and walked off their jobs. Within a week, President Nixon forced the ILWU back to work with a Taft-Hartley injunction. This was not the first time dock workers met with government intervention: every major dock strike from 1948 to 1969 suffered a similar fate. The government is heavily involved in the shipping industry, which receives huge Congressional subsidies. Union strategy has always confronted the problem of joint government-employer action.

Many highly-placed government economists have correctly pointed out that injunctions against longshoremen have been self-defeating. The Taft-Hartley Act gave the President the power to force strikers back to work for an 80-day “cooling off period.” This was first used by Truman in 1948 against the ILWU. It proved a failure: longshoremen went back to the piers and ships’ holds dragging their feet. Production dropped, rushes of job actions erupted, and the shipowners profits disappeared.



After 80 days, the strike resumed, the employers began fighting among themselves and the ILWU won a stunning victory. The ILA's response to 6 injunctions during the 1950s and '60s was not quite so decisive or well organized. But in every instance, ILA men struck again after 80 days.

The situation in 1971-72 was complicated by Nixon's wage freeze, announced during the second month of the ILWU strike. The freeze officially indicated to the longshoremen that they would be denied whatever wage gains they might force from the employers.

Clearly, the stage was set for a repeat of 1948. New generations of workers had entered the ILWU, had suffered the exploitation and humiliation of "B-list" status, and had finally achieved full status in the union only to find their jobs being pulled out from under them. Those remaining on the B-list had overcome the intimidation of past years and banded together to conduct sit-down strikes in the employers' offices. They played an active and militant role in the strike.

Bridges, who had opposed the strike from behind the scenes, was forced to respond to the renewed militancy and vitality of the rank and file. But the response was only rhetorical. In September he said:

Government intervention means Taft-Hartley. Taft-Hartley means that every disputed issue will be continued on the job, with every dispatch on every vessel, and with every gang.

Carrying the strike issues back to the job succeeded in 1948 because the international union supported the rank and file. But in 1971, this support failed to materialize. In Seattle, during the first week of the injunction period, 200 longshore gangs were fired and sent back to the hall for low productivity, a repetition of what had been done in 1948. They were unable to continue their slow-down, however, because Bridges would not support them.

Los Angeles ILWU men returned to work prepared for a showdown on the steadyman issue. 350 out of 400 steadyman there refused to report to the regular jobs demanding to be dispatched from the hiring hall on an equal basis with their union brothers. The employers retaliated by locking out the entire port. After ten days, a court order forced the men back to work under the old system. The employers had already begun diverting ships from Los Angeles to other ports. Without the backing of the international union, this local and its members were at the mercy both of this employer tactic and of government-imposed fines and jail sentences.

Bridges was relying on a strategy of merger with the ILA. He argued that the ILWU was too weak to win its demands on its own. While the membership rejected merger due to fear of gangster domination, it welcomed joint action. But Bridges pushed for a bureaucratic

unity between the two unions as an *alternative* to an effective and aggressive strike strategy on the West Coast. Without such a strategy, Bridges' defeatist course of action made any meaningful unity with the ILA an empty dream.

Gleason, Scotto, and the rest of the ILA officialdom never had any serious intention of supporting the ILWU. West Coast longshoremen expected to resume the strike on or about Christmas day, when the injunction expired. On December 24, Bridges unilaterally announced a 10 day "contract extension." He seemed to be holding off the strike to await action by the ILA, which in the meantime had also been slapped with a Taft-Hartley injunction which was to expire on February 14. On January 17, feeling he could no longer restrain his membership, Bridges finally called them out on strike. But the union had already lost an important strategic advantage: on December 23, there had been 230 ships vulnerable to strike action in West Coast ports. By January 17, their number had dwindled to 47.

The proof of ILA intentions came on February 1, when Gleason announced a 30 day "contract extension" to begin on the February 14 deadline. On February 9, Congress passed special legislation ordering the ILWU back to work, with assurances from the White House that the bill would not be signed for ten days to allow the strikers to vote to return to work "voluntarily." The strike was doomed. The longshoremen returned with a hopelessly inadequate contract. The wage increases still had to meet with Pay Board approval. Bridges threatened that if the Pay Board cut the contract "by one cent," the ILWU would return to the picket lines. He claimed a commitment from Gleason that the ILA would follow suit. March 8, the ILA announced ratification of a new contract. One week later the Pay Board cut the wage gains of the ILWU by 25%, *which brought them to the level already agreed on in the ILA contract!* All hopes for joint action were dead. But Bridges still refused to strike, depending instead on the transparently false hope that the ILA would come to his aid.

The Pay Board's rejection of the ILWU contract had nationwide repercussions. It forced George Meany, I. W. Abel, Floyd Smith, and Leonard Woodcock to resign from the Board in protest. Yet this was largely a futile gesture in the absence of serious protest strike action, as the British labor movement has recently demonstrated so well.

All these events have had a profoundly demoralizing effect on the labor movement, especially on the longshoremen whose magnificent display of solidarity meant four long months of economic sacrifice. The strike failed to halt the container onslaught. It failed to curb the undermining of the hiring hall or to solve the tragic and wasteful jurisdictional dispute.



Time is running out. The container revolution proceeds on schedule. A way of life nurtured by generations of waterfront workers is passing from the scene. The alternatives are clear. Either the present longshore workforce will be displaced, thereby disrupting the lives of thousands of men, their families and whole communities, or containerization will become the source of a better life, of increased leisure, improved conditions and economic security. The second course will only prevail if the workforce is maintained at shorter hours with no loss in pay, equally spreading the work. A leadership which attempts to forestall the attacks of the employers by utter capitulation is incapable of accomplishing this goal.

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# AN OPEN LETTER TO MY FORMER STUDENT, DR. GUSTAV HUSAK

Eugen Loeb

TOURISTS, VISITORS, OBSERVERS ALL AGREE that of all the countries of Eastern Europe the deepest depression, frustration and feeling of hopelessness prevail in Czechoslovakia. Since these countries are all subject to Soviet pressure, the mere fact of the occupation cannot be considered as the only cause of the specific state of affairs in Czechoslovakia. In my judgment, the cause lies with the leadership of the country, particularly with you as the most powerful and the most influential personality of the Czechoslovak leadership.

I often try to trace the roots of this role of yours in your past—to the time when, some forty years ago, as a freshman at the University of Bratislava, you attended my seminars and became the most active contributor to the university students' paper I had founded. You became very soon an outstanding and influential leader in the student movement, an excellent organizer assigning to your followers the most suitable functions. Despite your heavy involvement in political, organizational and writing activities, you continued to be an excellent student with a fine scholastic record. But these qualities alone are not sufficient to explain your extraordinary career. You were not only interested in ideological, theoretical, philosophical and even literary problems, but you translated all knowledge, views and ideas into action. Everything became a weapon in your political fight. Absolute pragmatism and action-orientation became the most characteristic features of your personality.

At that time our political fight was directed against the fatal danger of German Nazism including its Czech and Slovak followers. It seemed to most of us that the fight against antihuman fascism was by its very nature, humane. We did not realize that fighting against a particular form of fascism could evolve another form of it i.e., Stalinism. Both of us had to pay the price for this grave mistake. We were sentenced to life imprisonment, some of our best friends were executed and thousands and thousands were imprisoned and persecuted. After our rehabilitation you seemed to have learned this lesson. We lectured and collaborated on articles and we were instrumental in eliminating Stalinism. We fought for a humane society and on one occasion you told me that, although in political life compromises are inevitable, no compromises should be acceptable in the sphere of human values. But this proved to be only lipservice on your part.