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In a dark time the eye begins to see.

— Theodore Roethke

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BLOODY THURSDAY

by Mike Quin

Bits Hayden

San Francisco is the site this year for the Democratic National Convention, which begins in the second week in July. Fifty years ago this summer San Francisco was paralyzed by the largest general strike staged by labor unions in this country. It started as a maritime strike in the spring of 1934 when thousands of longshoremen walked off the job because they were sick of bad pay and humiliating treatment. They were joined by seamen, teamsters, and by other maritime unions and through unanimous action, closed the port of San Francisco for more than two months. No ship was loaded or unloaded, no cargo was moved off the docks. In sympathy with the strikers, longshoremen went out on strike in Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, San Diego, Stockton, Bellingham, Aberdeen, Gray's Harbor, Astoria, and all other Pacific Coast ports.

The strike was a bloody one. Pickets and police fought bitter pitched battles with guns, gas and clubs arrayed against rocks, bricks and fists. The Industrial Association, a group of shipowners, presidents of stevedoring companies and other maritime executives, made itself the city's legal authority and continually attempted to open the port with scabs and police, and through hysterical newspaper and radio accounts that labeled the strikers as communists and aliens, which many were. But no matter where they came from or what they believed in, the strikers sought justice and refused all attempts to outmaneuver them or force them back to work with nothing settled.

The battles grew in ferocity until at the beginning of July they were as savage as a war. On July 3 thousands of strikers and police fought all day. The July 4 holiday provided a truce and the day passed peaceably. But in the early morning of Thursday, July 5, the fighting resumed where it had left off when police and scabs attempted once more to reopen the port. Two strikers were shot to death by police revolvers, and several hundred suffered pistol wounds. Hundreds more were hospitalized or dragged into hiding after they were injured by gas and clubs.

The following account of Bloody Thursday is written by Mike Quin who was a participant in the great maritime strike of 1934 and who was closely associated with the strike leader, an Australian stevedore named Harry Bridges.

On Thursday morning fighting on the Embarcadero began as punctually as if the combatants had punched a time clock, stuck their cards in a rack, and turned to. There were no preliminaries this time. They just took up where they left off.

Newspapers announced that the "opening of the port" would be resumed promptly at 8 a.m. Spectators had come early to "get a seat." Teeming thousands covered the hillsides. Enterprising vendors moved about hawking chocolate bars, chewing gum, and cigarettes. Since last Tuesday picket lines had swollen to unheard-of proportions. Many high school and college boys, unknown to their parents, had put on old clothes and gone down to fight with the union men. Hundreds of workingmen started for work, then changed their minds and went down to the picket lines.

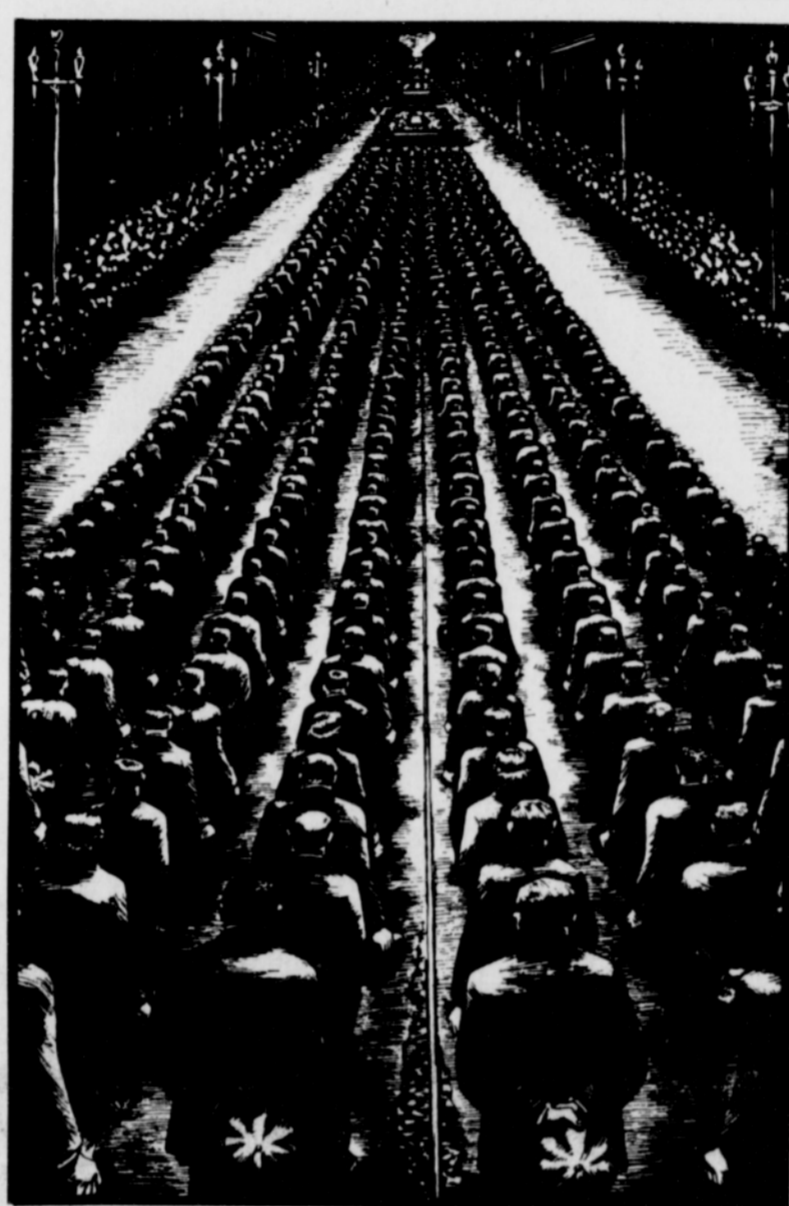
Approximately eight hundred police were on duty hefting brand new riot sticks, extra long and extra heavy. Others carried sawed-off shotguns and riot guns. The "Martian monsters" were on hand in their gas masks, heavy bags of hand grenades slung about their necks.

At 7 a.m. a string of empty boxcars was sent rattling down the Embarcadero behind a locomotive. Strikers shouted at the scab train crew but made no effort to interfere with it.

Shortly before the 8 a.m. deadline a locomotive shunted two refrigerator cars into the Matson docks. A cry went up from two thousand pickets assembled nearby.

Still no action.

At 8 a.m. promptly the police went into action. Tear gas bombs were hurled into the picket



STOP IN YOUR TRACKS, YOU PASSER-BY;
UNCOVER YOUR DOUBTING HEAD.
THE WORKINGMEN ARE ON THEIR WAY
TO BURY THEIR MURDERED DEAD.

THE MEN WHO SOWED THEIR STRENGTH
IN WORK,
AND REAPED A CROP OF LIES
ARE MARCHING BY. OPPRESSION'S DOOM
IS WRITTEN IN THEIR EYES.

lines and the police charged with their clubs. Gasping and choking, the strikers were driven back to the alleys off the Embarcadero, or retreated up Rincon Hill.

A couple of blocks away from the point of the first attack, two boxcars standing on a siding burst into flames.

Shots rang out as police opened fire with revolvers. Flying bricks and bullets crashed through windows. Tear gas again sent workers in nearby factory and office buildings swarming to the streets. The whole area was swept by a surf of fighting men.

Workers on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge (then under construction) were forced to abandon the job for the day because of stray bullets whistling around their heads.

One newspaper report read:

"Vomiting gas was used in many cases, instead of the comparatively innocuous tear gas, and scores of dreadfully nauseated strikers and civilians were incapacitated. There was no sham about the battles. Police ran into action with drawn revolvers. Scores of rounds of ammunition were fired, and riot guns were barking throughout the day."

Spectators were amazed by the suddenness with which the conflict began and the high intensity it reached almost instantly. It was like a torch flung into dry straw and flaming to a maximum blaze within a few minutes.

A reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle said:

"Don't think of this as a riot. It was a hundred riots, big and little, first here, now there. Don't think of it as one battle, but as a dozen battles."

And again:

"At Bryant and Main streets were a couple of hundred strikers in an ugly mood. Police Captain Arthur DeGuire decided to clear them out, and his men went at them with tear gas."

A large number of pickets reassembled on

Rincon Hill, down which they charged in a determined mass. Police met them with a fusillade of revolver shots and a barrage of gas shells. It was described:

"These boys, a lot of them kids in their teens, came down the hill with a whoop. It sounded bloodcurdling. One policeman stood behind a telephone pole to shelter him from the rocks and started firing with his revolver."

What followed was a hand-to-hand battle that ultimately left the street littered with fallen bodies. A hail of bricks and stones showered the police and laid many of them in the street. Smaller encounters were taking place at a score of points along the front. The streets were filled with running men as pickets, repulsed at one place, quickly moved to another and renewed their efforts to maintain a stand on the Embarcadero.

Seizing upon every object they could find in nearby lots, the pickets threw up a hasty barricade at the foot of Rincon Hill. It did not hold long.

Royce Brier, Chronicle reporter, described: "Then DeGuire's men, about twenty of them, unlimbered from Main and Harrison and fired at random up the hill. The down-plunging mob halted, hesitated, and started scrambling up the hill again."

"Here the first man fell, a curious bystander."

"Up came the tear gas boys, six or eight carloads of them. They hopped out with their masks on, and the gas guns laid down a barrage on the hillside. The hillside spouted blue gas like the valley of the Ten Thousand Smokes."

"Up the hill went the moppers-up, phalanxes of policemen with drawn revolvers. The strikers backed sullenly away on Harrison Street, past Fremont Street. Suddenly came half a dozen carloads of men from the Bureau of Inspectors, and right behind them a truckload of shotguns and ammunition."

Firing their revolvers and swinging their long riot sticks, the police charged up the hill, driving the men before them up the steep, grassy slope. The tinkling of glass sounded as bullets crashed through the windows of residences at the top, sending inhabitants screaming to the streets.

Tear gas shells ignited the dry grass of the hillside, producing a roaring inferno. The Fire Department arrived to the screams of sirens and turned high-pressure streams of water on grass and pickets alike, knocking men off their feet and sending them spinning.

Gas and gunfire at last drove the pickets back into the city. Police took command of the hill and surrounded it with guards to prevent recapture.

All morning long the battle raged furiously over a far-flung front. At noon both sides knocked off for lunch. It was the most orderly and systematic chaos imaginable. The grim seriousness of the encounter and the awful casualties which resulted cannot be minimized. Nevertheless, armies of movie extras on a Hollywood lot could not have observed hours with greater time-clock precision.

Already the possibility of maintaining a picket line on the Embarcadero in the face of gunfire and gas appeared as hopeless. Pickets from all positions drifted back to ILA headquarters on Steuart Street and congregated outside. Most of the morning's fighting had taken place in the southend of the Embarcadero, a more or less out-of-the-way industrial district. ILA headquarters, however, was situated right in the heart of town, a block off Market Street and a stone's throw from the Ferry Building. Strikers felt more or less that they had retired to a "neutral zone" when, shortly after one o'clock, the police swooped down in full force, staging the most crushing surprise attack of the entire strike.

Tear gas cartridges came hurtling without warning, followed by a loud crackling of pistol fire. Dozens of pickets fell to the pavement where they lay silent, streams of blood pouring from under their coats. Two of them were dead.

Bullets smashed through windows of streetcars. Bystanders fled weeping from clouds of

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