

BLOODY THURSDAY

DRAWINGS BY BITS HAYDEN



The mainstream mediacrities have lately saturated the American public with the 50th anniversary on June 6 of D-Day, the allied invasion from England of Adolf Hitler's *Festung Europa* (Fortress Europe). This might be the start of a year long media beating of wardrums that won't stop until next year's golden anniversary celebrations of the end of World War II. The nationalist fires are relit; any wonder a Florida school-board ordered its district schools to teach a curriculum of America First?

Perhaps we should glance inward a trifle and take account of an anniversary that commemorates a bloody battle which occurred during the lopsided and never ending labor wars in this country. July 5 is the 60th anniversary of "Bloody Thursday," the most violent day of the Great Pacific Coast Maritime Strike of 1934.

Sixty 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 (stevedores, as they were often called) walked off the job because they were sick of bad pay and humiliating treatment. They were joined by seamen, teamsters, and 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, Bellingham, Aberdeen, Gray's Harbor, Portland, Astoria, Stockton, Los Angeles, San Diego 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 San Francisco'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 resisted 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, the 70th anniversary of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, 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 open 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.

Mike Quin, who was a participant of the 1934 maritime strike and a close associate of the strike leader, an Australian stevedore named Harry Bridges, wrote an account of "Bloody Thursday" in his book *The Big Strike*. "At 8 a.m. promptly the police went into action," Quin wrote. "Teargas bombs were hurled into the picket 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. ... Shots rang out as police opened fire with revolvers. Flying bricks and bullets crashed windows. Teargas...sent workers in nearby factory and office buildings swarming into the streets. The whole area was swept by a surf of fighting men."

Quin quoted a newspaper: "The hottest battle took place in front of the ILA (International Longshoremen's Association, now the ILWU, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union) on Steuart St., where scores were gassed, clubbed and shot. Police cars literally filled the headquarters with gas from longrange guns and persons entrenched there poured from the doors." He wrote that 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."

"Police charged into the Seaboard Hotel," Quin continued, "where many strikers were quartered, and drove all occupants into the streets, swinging their long riot sticks and cracking skulls right and left. The building was filled with gas and riddled with pistol fire."

"Stubbornly holding their ground and fighting every inch of the way, the (strikers) were driven back into the city and off the Embarcadero. The battle swept over into the busy downtown district, endangering crowds of pedestrians. One picket (striker) entrenched himself in a parking lot, devised a crude slingshot from an old inner tube, and began bombarding Chief of Police William J. Quinn's (no relation to Quin) car with bricks. It took a barrage of tear gas and pistol fire to dislodge him."

"Scores of men littered the sidewalks, either lying silently or crawling away painfully on their hands and knees."

"A woman alighting from a streetcar at the Ferry Building screamed and collapsed when a bullet struck her in the temple. A man rushed to her assistance, was struck by another bullet, and crumpled to the street beside her."

"A Chronicle reporter described: Women who had been shopping in downtown stores arrived at the loop to step into an inferno. With screaming children clinging to them, they



**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.**

--MIKE QUIN

disembarked from the cars to find themselves in clouds of smarting tear gas. Guns cracked. Men fell screaming as they went down. Police clubs cracked against skulls. Smothered and blinded by gas, the women and children staggered about helplessly. Policemen grabbed them as fast as possible and sent them to (a) hospital where they were horrified by the sight of men dripping with blood, moaning from bullet wounds and injuries.

"People in surrounding buildings were driven out by gas and many were winged by stray shots as they fled."

"At the height of the battle a delegation from the strike committee, headed by Harry Bridges, called on Mayor Angelo J. Rossi to protest. The mayor simply repeated what (acting) California Governor Frank Merriam had said earlier: 'You refused to arbitrate; now take the consequences.'

"Hospitals were put on a wartime basis to accommodate the wounded. At the morgue, covered over by white sheets, were two cold, quiet bodies (Howard Sperry and Nicholas Bordoise)..."

"The striking unions had men detailed to the hospitals to see that wounded pickets received adequate attention when brought in from the battlefield. These men reported later that injured strikers were threatened and intimidated by police when they stated that their club and gunshot wounds were caused by officers."

"At the close of the day (acting) Governor Merriam ordered the National Guard onto the waterfront. Two thousand troops marched into the area equipped with rapid-fire guns, machineguns, gas equipment and bayoneted rifles."

"By the time they arrived the fighting had ceased and the pickets had been driven from the Embarcadero. The guardsmen posted themselves at intervals down the whole length of the waterfront and mounted machineguns on the roofs of piers."

"Troops marched in wearing steel helmets and full service equipment. They set up camp inside the long, covered docks, established field kitchens, and remained there under wartime conditions. Divisions were brought in from Santa Rosa, Napa, Petaluma, Gilroy and other outlying towns. Rumors were abundant to the effect that certain units had refused service, but

strict censorship was maintained and definite confirmations were lacking.

"All day long, newspapers uptown had been pouring out Xtra after Xtra, delivering veritable hourly reports from the line of battle. Wailing sirens careening up and down Market Street aroused speculation and alarm among the public."

"The word *blood* — *blood* — *blood* recurred every three or four lines in every news story. So much blood had been seen that it obsessed the minds of newswriters, and the word (was) repeated...again and again, almost involuntarily, as they typed their copy."

"The strikers named the day "Bloody Thursday."

On Monday, July 9, 1934, a funeral march was held for Howard Sperry and Nicholas Bordoise. Forty thousand men, women and children marched in silence eight and ten abreast the length of Market Street behind trucks that carried the two coffins and flowers. A union band played a funeral march by Beethoven. A newspaper described the procession as a "river of men flowing up Market Street like cooling lava...solemn strains of dirges and hymns...uncountable thousands of spectators lining the streets with uncovered heads...overhead a brilliant sun in a cloudless sky." Another newspaper said that the two dead strikers "in life...wouldn't have commanded a second glance on the streets of San Francisco, but in death they were borne the length of Market Street in a stupendous and reverent procession that astounded the city."

A week later a general strike was declared in San Francisco and the city was effectively shut down for three days. "For all practical purposes," Mike Quin wrote, "not a wheel moved or a lever budged." The official reaction was hysteria. The general strike was confused with revolution. Rumors and newspapers claimed that a communist army was marching on the city from the north. (Northwesterners were thought to be communists and radicals because of strong IWW activity the preceding decade.) Five hundred extra policemen were hired and thousands more national guardsmen were sent to San Francisco from all over California. Police 'Red Squads' raided strikers' homes and union offices. Vigilantes attacked and beat striking workers that they accused of being communists.

The maritime strike ended in late July 1934 and the port of San Francisco was reopened. The maritime unions were awarded recognition, contracts were signed and demands were met or promised to be met through arbitration, among them the crucial issue of hiring halls to be controlled by the unions, and a ban on blacklisting strikers from employment. Longshore pay was raised and dockside hours shortened. "But all this did not bring peace to the waterfront," Mike Quin wrote several years later. "Instead there ensued a period of industrial guerrilla warfare which persisted for more than two years, ultimately resulting in the whole Pacific Coast's maritime strike breaking out again in greater force than ever."

The Great Maritime Strike of 1934 was the harbinger of future labor battles in steel, auto, rubber and other smokestack industries in the United States. It heralded the vast organizing drives that gave birth to the CIO. And it set an example of militant solidarity that proved beneficial to other unions in the great labor struggles of the 1930s.

"The 1934 strike is memorable because above all it demonstrated the power latent in the rank and file," Harry Bridges said a few years later. "The rank and file not only manned the picket lines and did the sacrificing — as it must in every strike — but it also made the big decisions and determined the strategy. The rank and file wouldn't be bulldozed or buffaloed, browbeaten or divided, and therefore it couldn't be licked. Once it knew the score the rank and file could not be misled by any phony labor leader or panicked by any barrage of newspaper propaganda."

Bridges said that "Ultimately the power of any union that serves as an instrumentality of the workers rests on the courage and conviction in its ranks. That is one fundamental truth that has not altered since 1934, nor will it alter in times to come."

"We've had strikes on the waterfront since 1934," Bridges said, "but never again have the bosses dared to shoot our men down in cold blood."

For many years after Bloody Thursday, each July 5 was commemorated by maritime workers who took unauthorized days off to march once again by the thousands up Market Street in honor of the two dead strikers. One shipowner bitterly complained that "On every July 5 there is a complete cessation of work up and down the whole Pacific Coast because of a holiday declared by the unions for the purpose of commemorating a day of violence and bloodshed."

"No one authorizes the (July 5) holiday excepting a 100% accord of the entire maritime profession," Mike Quin wrote in *The Big Strike*, which was first published in 1949, 13 years after he wrote it and two years after his death at 41. "Therefore, it is regarded as a completely unauthorized stoppage of work and an illegal act. The maritime unions have nothing by which to defend this annual disregard for 'authority' other than an old almost forgotten phrase in the yellowed documents of the Revolution of 1776, which reads "...by the consent of the governed."

--MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER