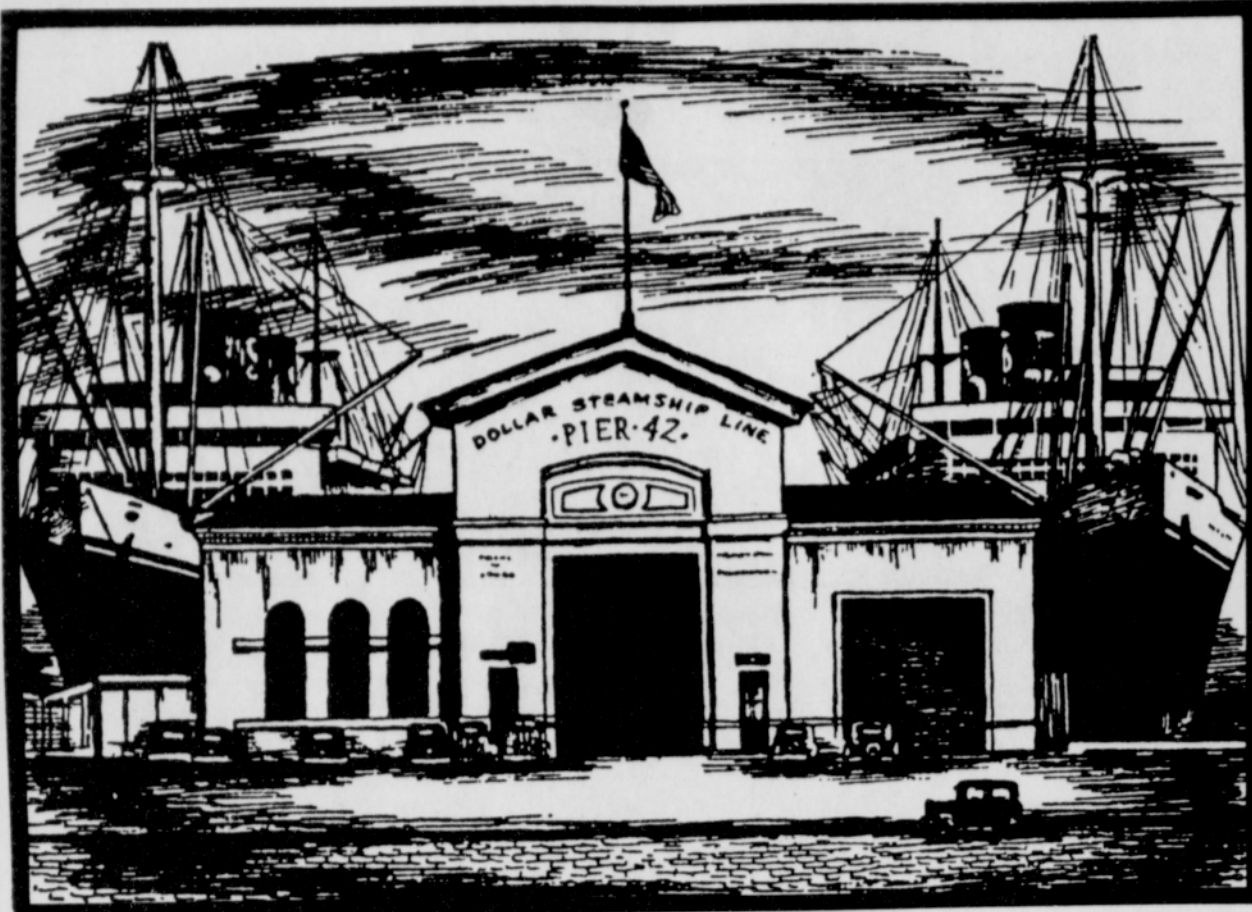




DRAWINGS BY BITS HAYDEN

THE STREAMLINED STRIKE

BY JAMES M. JONES

"A communist is any worker who wants a nickel more than the boss is willing to pay."

—HARRY BRIDGES

I was in Los Angeles during 1934 and I remember San Pedro at the time of 'Bloody Thursday'. The port had a cordon with roadblocks set up by the police, the sheriff's department and the stormtroopers from the L.A. Red Squad. It was a time of 'Hunger March' caravans from all over California, by truck and jalopy. I was on a truck which ran the San Pedro blockade one night with a load of produce for the strikers. Our Relief Workers Protection Union gave of our stale bread, canned goods and vegetables.

I moved to San Francisco at the end of 1935, when the stories of the shootings by police and the National Guard and their midnight raids on workers' homes were still fresh. I became acquainted with some of the people who had been terrorized by the police.

The workers of the waterfront who had been treated like bums and derelicts by shipowners and stevedoring companies rebounded fast. They and their Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) abolished the 'shape-up' random method of hiring hungry men, and won a few cents an hour increase.

I remember well the great march up Market Street with contingents from all of San Francisco's unions marching twenty abreast in memory of Bloody Thursday. They were proud, strong, disciplined in fire.

32 Clay Street was a half-step from San Francisco's waterfront, by the Ferry Building in the middle of the waterfront. It was a sturdy 3-storey building where the offices of most of the maritime unions clustered.

Something more than the usual rumble and bustle of cargo carts and trucks hurrying their loads to and from the docks echoed around 32 Clay Street in the fall of 1936. Just converted into the Union Recreation Center by the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, 32 Clay Street was about to become a bulwark of all the West Coast maritime unions. A central clearing house.

Only two years before the Union Recreation Center opened was the great strike of the maritime unions and the San Francisco General Strike in 1934. Then, shipowners and their allies ran droves of strikebreakers into the waterfront to try to crush the new maritime unions. Thousands of police armed with pistols and rifles backed up the strikebreakers, wounded many of the union pickets around the docks and killed two of them. Pitched battles between union pickets on one side and strikebreakers and police on the other continued. Soon the governor tried to break the strike by sending in 5000 national guardsmen onto the waterfront Embarcadero. This flood of guardsmen moved in tanks and set up light artillery and machineguns to do battle with the striking union men. Uptown, further terror was unleashed against union members with middle-of-the-night raids by police and vigilantes on homes and union headquarters.

Now, in 1936, the contracts between the unions and the employers signed in 1934 were about to run out. Steamship owners, stevedoring, barging and tug companies were lined up by the uptown Industrial Association to present a solid front to the unions. The unions were well aware of these preparations to smash them. They set up their own strike machinery under the banner of the Maritime Federation of the Pacific. Would this new struggle be like the battle of 1934?

Something important was happening to me also. The year before I had spent in the San Joaquin Valley, the valley of the *Grapes of Wrath*, trying to rally agriculture workers, the grape, fruit and cotton pickers who were constantly harassed and attacked by vigilantes and police. A sad, hopeless job — to find a chance to organize these destitute and terror-ridden migrant workers, to get them to fight against their misery.

Now, on the San Francisco waterfront I was to be in the very midst of an impending battle for union survival and for work conditions above those of expendable drudge animals. I got a job at the Union Recreation Center, responsible for the gymnasium and for basketball.

In the midst of committee activity, the coming and going of picket squads, I organized basketball games, an intramural league and a team to represent the Union Recreation Center in the city league. These men were sailors, longshoremen, ships scalers, bargemen, inland boatmen, marine firemen, cooks and stewards, commercial fishermen — the spectrum of union men from the maritime industry.

Pacific Coast longshoremen made up 17,000 of the 40,000 members of the Maritime Federation. They were shore-side and a relatively stable core of the federation, so if their

union could be smashed or at least weakened the rest of the maritime unions would not be too hard to handle. This was the strategy of the employers.

The strike had not officially begun when I arrived to take up my job at the Union Recreation Center, but it was a beehive of activity. Here picketing was organized, committees met, and discussions begun in union meetings as to the best way to conduct the strike. The hum of preparation foretold efficient strike machinery and enthusiasm from the central strike committee on down. Since seamen were piling off ships so fast, it began to look like the cohesiveness of the many unions that made up the Maritime Federation was endangered by too precipitous strike action.

Near the end of a 15-day extension of the two year old agreements between unions and employers, there was a mass meeting of all the maritime unions, with Harry Bridges and Harry Lundberg speaking. Lesser leaders and the rank and file had their say also. Bridges told the huge throng of maritime workers, "Yes, we are fed up with conditions and I know that you want to get moving with the strike, but let's remember this..." He paused, ran his thin, sharp face with its wide-open blue eyes over the great crowd, eager and electric. He emphasized each word: "Remember, the shipowners are going to force a shutdown of shipping...But they are attempting to make the public think that the maritime unions desire a strike, that we are the cause of the shutdown."

"We won't have porkchops for awhile...but we longshoremen will not go back to the shape-up, and the seamen will not go back to 'fink hall' (hiring like picking bums off the street or in an office run by shipowner agents)."

In negotiations the shipowners and other waterfront employers tried to play off one union against another, and the



NOTES

*The MFP was forged in the heat of the ferocious 1934 maritime strike.

**In 1934 strikers from the maritime unions closed the port of San Francisco for more than two months.

*** The paper of the Communist Party, *Western Worker*, was the exception. It supported the strike with excellent coverage. Mike Quin's dramatized and documented radio programs for the Maritime Federation, the strikers' newspaper *Waterfront Worker*, and union bulletins and broadsides broke the veil of vituperation against the strikers.

****Earlier the employers had offered the longshoremen an increase in pay from 85 cents an hour to 95, but they showed little sign of relaxing their adamant stand against union hiring until after the Bridges/Lapham debate.

—JMJ

SHALLON

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