

# THE SWEAT & BLOOD OF LABOR

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strike. But the fact is that the employers in the mass production industries had not yet accepted the fact that the unions in such industries were here to stay.

In 1903, when the late Emil Hendrickson was organizing longshoremen at Port Gamble by the light of a candle in a vacant shack, unions were illegal. But many of the things that later came to be legal in the course of human events were not legal at one time. In my grandmother's day it was illegal to teach a chattel slave to read. And many wage slaves in the Sawdust Belt in the 1930s could not read or write, as the Woodworkers' Union Auxiliary learned when its members embarked on a drive to register loggers and sawmill workers to vote against Ironpants Martin.

What was the spur that goaded working men and women to band together for their own betterment in the face of teargas, bullets, court injunctions and frameup?

Ernest E. Baker, a retired longshoreman, describes the conditions which forced the dock workers to organize as follows: "Men were hired off the docks and through fink halls. There was no security, no dignity in the work. Conditions were little better than in sailing ship days when the name 'longshoreman' came into the language through the rounding up of beachcombers by the cry, 'Men along the shore!' Stevedoring in most ports was an industry of crooked bosses and tramp labor. Efforts to organize were bitterly and bloodily resisted... If a man got hurt, there would be a dozen to take his place. The pay was so low — some men often spent more money on streetcar fares to catch a day's work than they could earn. The loan shark was another menace.

"Long hours of work without rest were common, with many shifts that lasted as much as 48 hours, sometimes more. Most of these long shifts came after the men had gathered at the docks in the early morning and then waited for a ship to come in.

"Safety on the job was another factor. There were times when the work would not slow down long enough to take an injured worker out of the hold so he could be taken to a hospital. Men who fought to improve their conditions were blacklisted."

Father Andrew M. Prouty, in a paper on *Violence in the Timber Industry*, wrote of the "physical injury done to workers in the woods" by the "highball methods and fast machinery which sent flying cables singing over their heads in West Coast forests."

In the woods as on the waterfront, injured and dead workers were often merely dragged out of the way while the work went on, "stacked up like cordwood," as one oldtime timber faller remembered it, waiting for the end of the shift to be hauled down to camp on the "Mulligan Train."

One of the first articles on the hazards of logging in Big Fir to appear in *The Timber Worker* was entitled "The Price of 2x4s is Blood and Sweat."

In the oldtime sawmill camps the operators not only owned the means of production — the mill and stumpage from whence came the logs for the headrig, but they also owned the company houses, and the store and pool hall where the workers



JULIA RUUTILA

spent their meager pay. These workers, known as "scissorsbills" by their more rebellious brothers in the woods, on the booms and in the shinglemills close to tidewater, were chained to the job with its 10-hour days like serfs of old to the land.

The loggers, boommen and seafarers were migratory workers, agitators and dreamers, readers of *Solidarity*, the *Industrialist*, and the little red IWW songbook with the picture of Joe Hill on the inside cover. It was against these workers and their heirs in the CIO that the court gimmicks, with their horrendous penalties in jail sentences and "hardtime" were aimed. Designed by company lawyers and their minions in Congress, the State Legislature and City Hall, they had one purpose only: to shackle the activists and harass and buy off the timid.

In my 60 years in the labor movement I have served on so many defense committees that I have lost track of them. I no longer ask the defendant, "What did you do?" The charge invariably has no connection with what was said or done. From 1907, when Joe Ettor led a strike which spread from the greenchain at the Eastern & Western Mill to all the sawmills in Portland and Vancouver, to 1912 when he was framed for murder in a textile strike in Massachusetts, and on down through the years, through all the strikes and lockouts, deportation cases, witchhunts and conspiracy trials — from the Danbury Hatters to the Gainesville 8 (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) — what actually was said or was done remains basically the same.

Someday it will be our economic system that is indicted, tried and found guilty of crimes, too long to list here, against humankind, and of conspiracy to interfere with the beautiful clean winds of change sweeping the world.

An unemployed carpenter may have begun it 2000 years ago when he drove the moneychangers from the temple and advocated dividing up the bread and wine.

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Julia Ruuttila wrote *THE SWEAT & BLOOD OF LABOR* in 1974 for *Metropolis* magazine at my request as editor. This remarkable narrative of NW labor history of the first half of the 20th century has appeared three other times in the *Times Eagle* (Sept. 1982, 1986 & 1994) and has also had several readings on KMUN-FM. She was 70+ when she wrote it and very active in anti-Vietnam War and pro-humanistic issues, leader of a cohort of elderly women who wore black and appeared everywhere there was opposition to unjust social, political and military policies. When she was 80 she expressed wonder she had lived so long and concluded her longevity was due to her constant anger at political impropriety and insensitive stupidity. "I think being damned mad most of the time keeps my blood clean," she said. She lived in Astoria for many years and in Portland after that. At 90 she moved to Alaska "to start a new life." She died there, actively protesting the Persian Gulf War.

~MPMc

## VANPORT: THE TOWN NOBODY WANTED

One of the world's worst examples of city planning was Vanport (Oregon), the city where Delta Park (in Portland) is now.

When it was dramatically submerged like a latter day Atlantis on Memorial Day in 1948, Vanport had a population of almost 20,000 persons, all of whom were made homeless by the rampaging Columbia and Willamette Rivers in less than an hour and a half.

A faulty dike system was the cause of Vanport's death.

The water poured through a break in an old railroad embankment and for weeks Vanport was at the bottom of a lake.

The reason Vanport died is of vital importance to contemporary landuse planning.

What was Vanport?

It was a war baby born of necessity for housing some 40,000 workers for Henry J. Kaiser's shipyards in Portland and Vancouver.

It was the second largest city in Oregon during World War II, and was once described by former Portland Mayor Earl Riley as the "largest housing project in the nation."

Vanport was built in 1942 on marshy lowlands along the Columbia River less than two miles from where the Columbia converges with the Willamette.

Touted as "The Miracle City on the Columbia That Kaiser Built," Vanport was never more than a huge collection of "crackerbox houses strung together fast and cheap," according to one of its residents.

But from its conception, Vanport was more than just a war baby — it was a bastard child.

It had no mayor or city council, but was instead administered by the Portland Housing Authority.

It had no local industry except for gas stations and grocery stores.

It had a population of blue-collar workers, at least one-fourth of whom were blacks recruited by Kaiser from southern states.

"After the war, Portland used Vanport as the dumping ground for its human waste," a former resident said. "By the time the flood wiped us out it was almost all low-cost housing for the poor."

"The City of Roses made no pretense of hiding its fears that Vanport was a slum in the making, a potential cesspool of crime, a debaser of real estate values and a prospective leech on the tax roll," Walter Mattilla wrote in *The Oregon Journal* a year after the flood.

"As the largest housing project in the nation, Vanport could become the biggest municipal headache of its time," Mayor Riley said in October, 1945.

Julia Ruuttila, who was fired from her job with the State Welfare Division for her investigative reporting of the flood, said that after the war "the power structures in Portland and Vancouver (Washington) wanted all the blacks to go back where they came from.

"Many of them did," she said. "But at least one-fourth of Vanport's population at the time of the flood was black. The other largest single group was veterans who came to Vanport after the war and couldn't find jobs. Because of that situation, one-fourth of the city was on welfare.

"I think that because the majority of Vanport's population was poor," Ms. Ruuttila continued, "black and white, whether on welfare or working at low-paying jobs, the housing authority just didn't care to meet its responsibilities to the people."

"Never has a city grown so big so fast, lived so short a life and died so suddenly with so little loss of life," Leverett Richards wrote about Vanport in *The Oregonian* on the 20th anniversary of the Memorial Day Flood.

At least a score of Vanport's residents died in the flood. Thousands lost everything they owned.

It would seem that the planners who would build a city in a swamp between two rivers would deem flood control as a first priority.

"All we had in Vanport was a makeshift, leaky dike system and no little Dutch boy to plug it with his finger," a survivor said 25 years after the disaster.

The dike that broke had been an old railroad embankment constructed of sand and soft earth that was "never intended to resist the powerful lateral hydrolic pressure of a flood or protect a town," an editorial in the *Portland Sun* said three days after the dike burst.

The Oregon media agonized over the Vanport disaster but all it could do was raise questions for which there were obvious answers — and just as obvious a desire to avoid them.

Former *Oregonian* reporter Bob Clark, whose Vanport home was destroyed by the flood, posed one of the questions a month later.

"We have learned that the Columbia long had regarded those murky bottoms as her own property," he wrote. "We have been told that she swept through from time to time when the Snake, Willamette, or other tributaries dumped too much water into her main channel.

"Did the men who laid out Vanport know that?" Clark asked.

Julia Ruuttila says they did.

She said several members of the Army Corps of Engineers had warned the housing authority before Vanport was built that the area was one of "calculated risk."

"But I don't think they really cared," she said. "Portland didn't want the blacks. Neither did Vancouver. That was one of the main reasons Vanport was built and I seriously believe a reason the housing authority chose to go ahead and build the city in that area of 'calculated risk.'"

Hours before the floodwaters swept through the Smith Lake Dike, Army engineers and housing authority officials inspected the dike and reported it in "good shape."

"By that time the housing authority had moved its records out of Vanport and the supermarkets moved out their safes," Ms. Ruuttila said. "All they left were the people."

Residents had become increasingly worried when the rivers began rising before the fateful Memorial Day. Unseasonal runoff of late snow and several days of heavy rains had swollen the Columbia and Willamette Rivers to levels not recorded since the 1894 Flood.

To counter growing demands for evacuation of Vanport from its residents, the housing authority responded with a handbill that was delivered from door to door proclaiming:

"The dikes are safe at present. You will be warned if necessary. You will have time to leave... Don't get excited!"

The Executive Board of the Vanport Tenants League filed suit against the housing authority a month after the flood.

The case, which never reached the courts, demanded the housing authority be held legally responsible for:

~ "...not having evacuated the people of Vanport prior to the flood;

~ "...not having provided an adequate warning system;

~ and for "having issued reassuring statements denying any immediate danger."

"When people talk or write about Vanport, they only talk about the flood," a survivor said.

"They don't deal with the fact that thousands of us were homeless or were forced to live in trailers or in barracks on Swan Island for months afterward. The housing authority did nothing to find replacement housing — we had to find it for ourselves, which was almost impossible because of housing shortages and the fact most of us were financially wiped out by the flood."

Ms. Ruuttila, a reporter for the *Longshoreman Dispatcher* since 1946, was fired from her job with the State Welfare Division because she wrote that the victims "were left entirely to their own devices with no aid from public agencies."

"The welfare division had declared the flood was a natural disaster and that the refugees were not entitled to relief," she said. "The Red Cross took the same position. Churches and schools threw open their doors and several people took some of the victims into their homes — but there were thousands."

Ms. Ruuttila said she and an Associated Press reporter went to the director of the housing authority after the flood and suggested that vacant hotel and motel rooms in Portland be used to temporarily house the Vanport refugees. "He told us he couldn't do it because the rooms were reserved for Rose Festival visitors," she said.

The Corps of Engineers says there will never be another flood like the Memorial Day Flood of 1948. They say the 14 major dams on the Columbia River and its major tributaries will resist another flood of Vanport proportion.

As for Vanport's graveyard, it was designated for recreational land use because no one wanted to live there anymore.

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"The tragedy lies in the destruction of lives and personal property," he said. "A different housing authority, more concerned for the people and less concerned for real estate values would have long since created permanent housing for low income groups in our city."

The City of Portland still has not met that responsibility.

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER  
(METROPOLIS, 12/1973)