

# LESSON 13



## 1934 WEST COAST LONGSHORE STRIKE

**It's a Mystery** pointed to a major continuing obstacle to worker solidarity; this lesson focuses on a key event in the labor renewal of the 1930s. The workers' victory in the longshore strike gave a powerful impetus toward the revitalization of an existing union and toward organizing new ones. The union that eventually resulted, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), is still one of the more democratic in America.

The **Homestead** lesson indicated that industrywide labor organizing would be necessary to counteract increasing concentration of ownership and growing management coordination. In **Lawrence**, students saw a successful united labor response to a number of companies, located in the same geographic area. Here students role-play an industrywide strike that took place up and down the entire West Coast. This story has most often been told from the standpoint of San Francisco, which was the hub of the strike. We've chosen to set the lesson in Portland instead. In Portland, the importance of the ties built with other groups in the region, including farmers, is particularly clear.

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will understand the role that alliances between different social groups can play in making change.

### Materials Needed

- **Student Handout #13-A: Terms You Should Know.**
- **Student Handout #13-B: Portland Daily News.**
- **Student Handout #13-C: Longshoreman; Student Handout #13-D: Unemployed Person; Student Handout #13-E: Waterfront Employer; Student Handout #13-F: Farmer; Student Handout #13-G: Central Labor Council Representative.**
- **Student Handout #13-H: Questions Facing Your Group.**
- **Student Handout #13-I: Longshore Role Play: Summing Up.**
- **Background Notes: Agitate, Educate, Organize: Portland, 1934.**
- Two or three sheets of construction paper (for groups to make name placards).

## Time Required

- Three to four class periods.



### Procedure: Day 1

1. Explain to the class that each student will be assigned to a group representing a real person or persons who were involved in the 1934 longshore strike.
2. Write the names of all the groups in the role play on the board.
3. Tell students that before the role play starts, it will be important for them to be familiar with certain terms. Distribute **Student Handout #13-A: Terms You Should Know**, explaining that some of these names and expressions will already be familiar from earlier lessons in the curriculum. Students should be allowed to keep these handouts as they may wish to refer to them later in the role play.
4. Distribute **Student Handout #13-B: Portland Daily News**. Read the *Portland Daily News* editorials aloud to ensure that everyone in the class understands the causes and issues in the strike. *This understanding is essential for a successful role play.*
5. Next, divide students into five groups and have them gather in different areas of the classroom. Distribute the roles (**Student Handout 13-C** through **13-G**) to the various groups. Each person in a group should, of course, receive the same role as the others in his/her group.
6. Have students read the roles to themselves. The teacher should be familiar with the content of all the roles.
7. As a way of working students into their roles, ask them to write short interior monologues describing their hopes and fears for the strike. After they've finished, students within each group should read their monologues to one another.
8. If there is time this first day, "interview" some of the people in the different groups (e.g., What do you do for a living? What kinds of problems are you having these days? How does the longshore strike affect you? Are you for or against the strike? Why? etc.) This last activity for the first day might be a good opener for the second day, depending on the time available.

### Procedure: Day 2

1. Get students back in their groups.
2. Distribute **Student Handout #13-H: Questions Facing Your Group**. (If you prefer, these could simply be listed on the board.)
3. Explain to students that it has been proposed that Governor Meier of Oregon call the National Guard to Portland to protect the strikebreakers. The governor will be holding a community meeting in Portland to listen to views on the strike and on this proposal. Each social group will make a presentation at the meeting. All the presentations must include thorough answers to the questions posed in **Student Handout #13-H**. Tell students that they will meet ("caucus") with other groups to discuss positions, build alliances, and make deals, and

that this will be a good time for them to get support from other groups for the positions they favor. But first they should discuss the questions within their own groups. Tell students they should decide what they need to know from other groups in order to arrive at a definite position on the strike. Under what, if any, circumstances would they support the strike? What could they offer another group to make that group more sympathetic to their position? What pressure could one group—or one group in combination with other groups—exert on the governor to get its way? (Remind students that simply because they may not be wealthy does not mean that they lack power. Encourage them to think about the kind of leverage they have, especially if they unite with other social groups.)

Students should be given construction paper with which to make placards indicating their social group.

4. After 10 or 15 minutes of discussion, explain to students that they will now have an opportunity to “caucus” with other groups to try to agree on the different issues facing them in the strike. Tell students: “Each group will be making a speech at the community meeting on all four of the ‘Questions Facing Your Group.’ If Governor Meier hears the same idea from more than one group, it’s possible he’ll be convinced (or intimidated enough) to take the action you urge.”

You may wish to suggest some types of deals and alliances that different groups can make, e.g., longshoremen to unemployed: “The six-hour day will mean more work for the unemployed. We won’t give in on this demand if you won’t scab on our strike.” Waterfront employers to unemployed: “Come to work for us and we’ll offer you secure jobs at good pay,” etc.

Be sure that each group is clearly identified. At least two people from each group should stay seated so that *everyone* in the class is not roaming around. Also, tell the students who are “traveling negotiators” that they can discuss the issues only with students who remain in their seats. This will prevent all the “travelers” from huddling together and leaving out everyone else.

The amount of time given to this caucus period is flexible and depends on whether or not students are still actively engaged in discussing the issues involved in the strike.

Again, the task is for every group to arrive at answers to *all four questions* by the end of this session.

5. Let ’em loose! It will be important for you to monitor this process, pointing out unrealistic deals, helping students identify the most likely (and most unlikely) groups to consider for alliances, etc.
6. Following the caucus period, ask students to return to their groups and begin writing presentations for the community meeting.

### Procedure: Day 3

1. Have students regroup.
2. Tell students to complete the writing of their presentations.
3. Students should form a large circle for the community meeting. Each group needs to be clearly identified by the appropriate name placard.
4. Appoint one student to introduce the Honorable Governor Julius L. Meier—you.
5. Governor Meier can run the meeting however he/she chooses. We would suggest that one group at a time make its presentation and submit to questioning (and arguments) by Governor Meier *and* other groups.

6. Conclude by thanking the community and explaining that, although on July 19 you put about 1,000 Oregon National Guardsmen on alert and had them stationed at Camp Wythecomb near Portland, you've decided not to call them in to protect strikebreakers.

You might point out that you were influenced by the violence in San Francisco on July 5, 1934, in which 2 longshoremen were killed and 82 people injured in clashes involving the National Guard. The resolve of

the longshoremen to defend their jobs convinced you that you might have a similar confrontation in Portland should you call in the Guard. (See **Background Notes: Agitate, Educate, Organize: Portland, 1934** for details. You might also want to assign this reading to students.)

7. Distribute homework assignment, **Student Handout #13-I: Longshore Role Play: Summing Up.**

### Procedure: Day 4

1. Discuss the homework. Students will be eager to find out about the actual events of the strike. Once again, see Teacher Background Notes for this. More able students could be assigned this reading for extra credit.

*Teachers on the West Coast:* Time permitting, you may want to locate a speaker who

can describe the strike. If you teach in a city with an ILWU local (Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, Longview, Astoria, San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, etc.), contact the union to find out whether there is an active pensioners group in the area which would be able to provide such a speaker.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-A



## TERMS YOU SHOULD KNOW

**Longshoremen:** The people who work on the docks loading and unloading the ships.

**Gang boss or foreman:** The person who is directly in charge of the longshoremen. Before the strike the gang boss would hire the longshoremen and tell them how long to work. This boss was hired by the Waterfront Employers' Association.

**International Longshoremen's Association:** The union of longshoremen in 1934.

**Stevedore company:** Shipping companies hire stevedore companies—also known as Waterfront Employers—to load and unload cargo on their ships. These stevedore companies then hire gang bosses who hire longshoremen.

**Waterfront Employers' Association:** The organization of all the stevedore companies in Portland.

**Union recognition:** When employers agree to negotiate wages, hours, and working conditions *only* with the union instead of with separate individuals.

**Picket line:** A group of workers gathered at the company(ies) they are striking against. Sometimes these workers try physically to stop people from entering the workplace. Other times they picket to show that they are on strike and to convince people to support them and not to go to work.

**Scab:** A name people on strike call a person who crosses a picket line to work at a job a striker usually does.

**Hiring hall:** The place where longshoremen wait to be hired.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-B



## PORTLAND DAILY NEWS

May 9, 1934

### Longshoremen Out on Strike!!

Tomorrow morning has been set by longshoremen as the beginning of their coastwide strike. We have asked the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and the Waterfront Employers' Association (WEA) to present their differing points of view to the public. The following are editorials representing these views.

### Terrible Conditions Force Strike by the ILA

Longshoremen on the West Coast have taken enough! For years the employers have pushed us around like we were their little play things. We are on strike to win better conditions and to regain our dignity.

Ever since the Depression hit Portland—back in early 1930—the employers have been squeezing us to death. Often employers force longshoremen to work double shifts—sometimes even as long as thirty-six hours without sleep! This makes work very unsafe. Many workers have been killed or badly injured due to carelessness caused by lack of sleep. Some longshoremen are forced to work eighty hours a week while others work as few as eight. And, of course, many are *totally* without work.

To get a job has become a humiliation. The employers hire “gang bosses” who demand bribes of bottles of whiskey or money. The bosses want only the biggest and strongest men, so older workers are often without work. They also try to hire men not in the union.

The Depression has given employers an excuse to cut our pay. They slashed it from \$.90 an

hour down to \$.75. But when they saw the union was gaining strength they raised wages to \$.85—and tried to make it look like they were doing us a favor.

While they're busy cutting our wages, employers are also speeding up the work. Many gangs have been forced to handle over three times as much cargo as they were just a few years ago!

The employers have left us no choice. They are causing us to strike.

Our demands are simple:

(1) The employers must recognize our union—the ILA. They must agree to bargain (“negotiate”) with the union in every port on the West Coast—and *only* with the union. (The phony Columbia River Longshoremen's Association was created by the employers to slow our organizing—it hasn't worked.) No more playing one man off against another. Our slogan is, “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

(2) We want a “union-controlled hiring hall.” In other words, the union should decide who would be hired to work on the longshore. We want to rotate jobs among *all* longshoremen so that everyone works about the same: No one works too much or too little. No more having to bribe gang bosses!

(3) We demand a six-hour day and a thirty-hour week. A shorter work day will lead to fewer injuries. Also, it will mean more work to be shared with many of the unemployed workers.

(4) We want an increase in pay from \$.85 an hour to \$1.00 an hour and for overtime from \$1.25 an hour to \$1.50. This is a decent living wage.

The employers have started this strike—but we'll finish it. We urge Oregonians to support the longshoremen.

## Selfish Longshoremen Unreasonable, Greedy by the WEA

Some longshoremen are going on strike. Thinking only of themselves, they will be hurting everyone in the entire state of Oregon.

The Waterfront Employers have done everything we can to avoid this strike. Longshoremen claim that conditions are getting worse. Actually they're getting better. Last year employers increased wages from \$.75 to \$.85 an hour. This is a generous offer, made at a time when many of us are losing money.

Just looking at the longshoremen's demands, we can see what an irresponsible strike this is. They want the *union* to control hiring! Please, name one single industry where workers get to hire workers. This is a ridiculous demand, just on the face of it.

They want us to recognize the union. We are not opposed to unions. But longshoremen in Portland already have a union. It's called the Columbia River Longshoremen's Association. We are fully supportive of them. In fact, we even helped get this union started.

Longshoremen demand a six-hour day. This is silly. Even *they* must realize this. Whoever heard of a six-hour workday? We suspect some good old-fashioned laziness is at the root of this demand.

And finally, their demand for increased wages. They must think we're made of money. Having increased wages \$.10 an hour last year, they now whine for a \$.15 increase on top of that. If this doesn't show their greed, then what does?

We are in a Depression. Everyone is hurting. Our profits have suffered enormously. But we're not complaining—we realize that all Oregonians are in this thing together. However, we do feel that the longshoremen should not try to force us out of business with their selfish demands.

Longshoremen have threatened to use vio-

lence to keep the docks closed. This is regrettable. The WEA believes that in a civilized society disputes should be handled calmly and reasonably. However, should the longshoremen carry through with their threat of violence, we know the police will protect our property rights.

We also know that there are many people out there wanting work. We urge unemployed people to come forward and take the jobs of these strikers who have such little concern for the people of Oregon. We are counting on your support.

**WANTED!**  
**500 MEN for  
Longshore Work**  
**WAGES**  
85¢ PER HOUR STRAIGHT TIME  
\$1.25 PER HOUR OVERTIME  
**APPLY 7 A. M.**  
**WATERFRONT EMPLOYERS  
PORTLAND**  
NORTH ... STREET

**LONGSHOREMEN  
OF PORTLAND STEVEDORING COMPANY  
ATTENTION!**  
85 per cent of you worked for us from 5 to 12 years. You have proven yourselves to be good, loyal, efficient men, and good citizens. You and the Company never had any trouble. We treated you fair. You never had nor made any complaint that was not immediately adjusted. You did not want to strike, but you were swept off your feet by a few agitators. In 1922 the most of you belonged to the I. L. A. and you walked out in that strike. You lost. Some of you lost your homes and your jobs.  
**BETTER STOP, LOOK and LISTEN,** for you will lose this strike. You can't win and you stand to lose everything. The strike has already cracked in L. A. and in S. F. In your jobs and your homes. Search the men are disgraced with the strike. Portland may be next. Think it over. Remember 1922. You'd better come back while your former jobs are still open.  
**PORTLAND STEVEDORING COMPANY**

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-C



## LONGSHOREMAN

Before the strike you had been working on the docks in a “steel gang” (a group of workers who mostly load and unload steel from the ships). There has been less and less work for longshoremen since about 1930. The way the Waterfront Employers hire people has made it impossible to feel secure about getting enough money each week to live on. You have to be down at the hiring hall all day long whether or not there’s any work.

Sometimes you go home, having spent all day on the longshore without any wages for your wasted time. When there *is* work, a “gang boss,” hired by one of the Waterfront Employers, will go around picking men he wants in his gang. Often he chooses people who give him bribes of whiskey or money, but because you’re very strong and a good worker you haven’t had to offer any bribes . . . yet. You’re thirty-two years old and all the time there are more and more younger people coming along who are eager for your job.

Often, the Waterfront Employers say that because there won’t be much work the next day they’ll only hire the gangs which work the fastest today. This means that your gang boss will make you work fast and very, very hard to compete with the other gangs. Some days you work as many as *thirty-six hours straight*,

stopping only for short breaks. There are times when you work close to eighty hours in a week, rarely seeing your family. Other weeks you might get five to ten hours work (or none at all) and have trouble paying your family’s bills.

Another thing the Waterfront Employers have done during the past few years has been to cut your wages. In 1930, you were getting \$.90 an hour. In 1933 they cut wages to \$.75 an hour. It’s only because they’re scared of the union that they recently boosted wages back to \$.85 an hour.

Last year because of the speed-ups in your work, a good friend of yours lost one of his hands in an accident. You had been working for twenty-four hours straight, with only two short breaks. The accident happened because your friend wasn’t awake enough to pay attention and his hand got caught between thick steel rods.

With the strike now on, you’ll need to get support from as many groups as possible. The strike could hurt some groups—especially farmers who depend on shipping to sell their produce and to obtain fertilizers, baling wire, gasoline, etc.

You’ll need to think of ways to get these farmers—and others—on your side.



# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-D



## UNEMPLOYED PERSON

You've been looking for a job for over a year, but you just can't find anything at all. You're beginning to wonder if there's something wrong with *you*. You have relatives in town who help out some, and you have a vegetable garden, but you're worried about your family's health. You are married and have two kids.

You've stopped paying rent on your house because you can't afford it. Your landlady has threatened to kick you out if you don't pay up. You don't know whether or not to believe her. Some empty houses have been torn apart for wood to burn for heat. She might be worried the same thing could happen to her house if she kicks you out. But you can't be too sure.

What you'd really like is a steady job that pays well so that you can feed and clothe your family and feel better about your own self-worth. You couldn't even afford to buy anything for your kids for Christmas. You're feeling more desper-

ate all the time.

You have many skills and could work at any number of jobs. You've been a carpenter, you know how to lay bricks, you've worked in the lumber mills for a time, and even spent a year working as a longshoreman.

Recently, you have joined one of Portland's unemployed councils. This is kind of like a union of unemployed people. These councils work to keep people's water, gas, and electricity turned on, even when they can't pay their bills. Sometimes if the city turns off a family's water someone from the council will come over and turn it back on.

The councils believe that unemployed people have to stick together with working people and to support each other. Council leaders talk a lot about people who aren't owners or bosses needing to help each other fight to get what they need.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-E



## WATERFRONT EMPLOYER

Steamship companies hire your company to load and unload their ships. In turn, you hire longshoremen to actually do the work. The Depression has been making your life difficult.

First, because of the Depression there isn't as much shipping going on. So all the Waterfront Employers have been busy competing with each other trying to offer a lower price to the steamship companies, hoping to get more business for *themselves*. This means that your profits have been lower than before.

Also, you still owe the bank a large part of the money you borrowed early in 1929 to expand your operations on the waterfront. You had hoped for more business but you've gotten less. Each month you need to make large payments on the money you borrowed, and you're worried you might not be able to keep them up. And, of course, now you've got the longshoremen, the people who actually do the work of loading and unloading ships, making new demands on you.

Ever since 1922 you haven't had to deal with any longshoremen unions. You have been able to hire and fire anyone you wanted. You could pretty much decide how many hours at a time

people would work. Since 1930 you've been able to lower wages and still find people willing to work. All the major decisions have been up to the small group of men who sit with you on the board of directors of the Portland Stevedoring Company, and you've gotten used to that.

You are a very important person. You can't understand why you should share your power with a bunch of uneducated longshoremen.

It's lucky for you that all the Waterfront Employers have their own "union," the Waterfront Employers' Association, where they can make plans during the strike.

Many businesses in the area use the port either to ship their goods or to get supplies. Everyone's gasoline is brought in by ship and many items sold by stores around Portland are shipped in from around the world and from other U.S. ports. The lumber mills use the port to ship their products out to the rest of the world. Farmers also use the port to ship many of their products to other cities and other countries. You can see how important your business is to the whole area around Portland.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-F



## FARMER

You own a small farm in the Tualatin Valley outside of Portland. You grow things like wheat and some vegetables. Since the Depression started, you've barely been making enough money from the sales of your produce to feed and clothe your family and pay expenses. You have a small amount of savings, but nothing substantial. A year when sales fall off could force you to borrow from the bank in order to get the seed and supplies to plant for the next year.

You sell most of your wheat to grain wholesalers in Portland who sometimes ship your produce outside the state by water. The vegetables you sell end up mostly in the small groceries around the Portland area. The wholesalers tend to have quite a bit of control over the price you get for your produce. You're not very fond of these people, whom you consider the "big guys."

So far this spring has been a good growing season. If all goes well, this might be a prosperous year for you and your family. You'll certainly need your farm equipment in good shape. You buy the oil and gas for your tractor in Portland; it comes to the port of Portland on

tanker ships. Other necessities you use, like baling wire, also arrive by ship.

A major fear you have is that you could lose everything. Some families you know have just given up trying to farm and have moved to Portland. They get whatever jobs they can: as mill workers, clerks, railroad workers, longshoremen. Some people can't find jobs at all. Those who can are often treated poorly—they have dangerous working conditions and get low wages. You are sympathetic to their problems; the Depression has been tough on everyone, and people need to help each other out in these hard times.

The strike puts you in a rough spot. You certainly have no love for the Waterfront Employers or the shipping companies—often the same people. The way you look at it, it's been their high prices that have helped keep you poor. You're not anxious for these people to become any *more* powerful.

But if you can't ship your wheat or buy needed supplies, you could go broke.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-G



## CENTRAL LABOR COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE

You're a carpenter and you're in the carpenters' union in Portland. You also hold a very interesting and important position during the longshore strike. You are a member of the Strike Investigation Committee of the Central Labor Council.

The Central Labor Council is like the coordinating committee of all the unions in Portland. It is a very important organization, combining unions with a total membership of 20,000 workers.

The council has assigned you as representative to look into the longshore strike and to help figure out whether to support the strike and if so *how* to support it.

You will have to examine closely the issues involved because you know that not all union people in Portland feel the same about the strike.

For example, because the strike has shut

down the port of Portland, many workers have been laid off. No shipping means less trucking, less repair work, etc. A long strike could mean serious hardships for those workers and their families. So, many union people in Portland would like to see the strike come to a quick end.

However, union people realize that if the longshoremen lose the strike, their wages will stay low, their hours long, and their employers will be even more powerful. This could encourage other employers in Portland to try to get rid of the unions they negotiate with. At the very least, other employers might try to cut wages and lengthen hours. If the longshoremen lose, workers all over the city might feel demoralized and beaten down.

At this point, you feel pulled in both directions: (1) You want a quick end to the strike, but (2) you worry about what would happen if the longshoremen were to lose.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-H



## QUESTIONS FACING YOUR GROUP

1. Do you support the longshoremen's strike? Why or why not?
2. What is your proposal for how the strike could be settled?
3. Should Governor Meier order the Oregon National Guard into Portland to protect workers who are willing to cross the longshoremen's picket line and break the strike? Explain.
4. What action will your group take if Meier *does* order the Guard in? What action will you take if he doesn't?

# STUDENT HANDOUT #13-I



## LONGSHORE ROLE PLAY Summing Up

1. Who or what could be blamed for the longshore strike?
2. Explain the position your group took on the strike and why you decided on that position.
3. What kind of power did your social group have? Where did your power come from?
4. How did you feel about Governor Meier's decision not to call the Oregon National Guard into Portland?

## BACKGROUND NOTES

### AGITATE, EDUCATE, ORGANIZE: PORTLAND, 1934

It was known as the “Big Strike”—the 1934 longshore strike. For over two months the walk-out paralyzed shipping from California to Washington; its organization and objectives inspired workers across the country.

The action was called by the West Coast District of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA). And though just one strike, it was characterized by different tactics and consequences in each of the idled ports. In Portland, Oregon, events unfolded in ways that would affirm valuable lessons for the labor movement throughout the entire country.

Conditions on the Portland waterfront in 1934 were summed up by Ernie Baker, a longshoreman active in the strike: “Absolutely, downright miserable”—and getting worse. Throughout the 1920s, the security of the longshoremen’s jobs rested on the whims of the foremen, known as “gang bosses.” Union members (whether ILA or Industrial Workers of the World—IWW) were blacklisted when discovered. Jobs could be had by “cooperative” workers. Matt Meehan, an ILA organizer, remembered what some people were forced to endure:

“A man had to pay for his job, kick back, and oh yes, the gang boss would always leave about three jobs open on his pad so he could take care of his friends, relatives, what have you. The dispatchers had favorites too. [Longshoremen] were kicking in to the people who were running the hiring hall—if not in cash, they would bring them little presents like a fifth. A lot of times people would give the dispatchers ham or something. That was the kind of thing that was going on on the waterfront.”

The Depression set in motion a chain of events that put new strains on those longshoremen lucky enough to have jobs. With stevedore companies competing fiercely to obtain the scarcer business of shipping companies, gang bosses were ordered to speed up the work to unheard-of levels. Lumber gangs, used to handling 25,000 board feet a day, were pushed to

the frantic pace of 65,000 to 85,000 feet. There was no improvement of equipment: just harder, longer work. Shifts of fifteen hours were common; thirty-six became increasingly frequent.

Gangs pliant enough to go along with this speed were rewarded with regular work. Other gangs, however, worked as little as eight to ten hours a week.

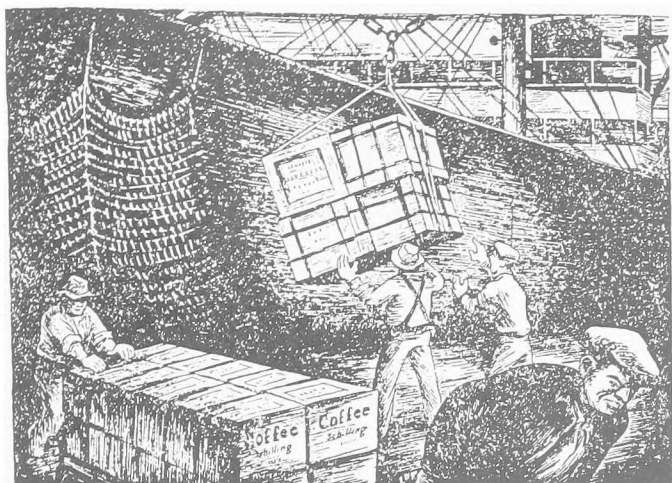
For awhile, scarcity of work forced most people to put up with these conditions. Matt Meehan was probably only half joking when he cracked: “The competition for jobs was such, well, like honest-to-Christ, as a young married man some nights I couldn’t do my homework. It was that bad.”

Frequent injuries were the result of the longer work days—though often longshoremen would be afraid to report them. In the fear-ridden climate of the pre-strike years, workers worried that an injury report could get them fired.

The docks had always been a place unemployed workers might hope to secure a job. Those now out of work, their numbers swollen by the Depression, headed for the docks. Stevedore companies took advantage of this surplus of workers to cut wages. Pay for longshoremen dropped from \$.90 an hour in 1930 to \$.75 in 1933. Worried by the ILA’s growing popularity and the potential for a strike, wages were boosted to \$.85 in early 1934.

The organizers of the local ILA had learned from their own past failures. Matt Meehan’s experiences are illustrative. Meehan began his maritime career as a seaman. The first strike he joined, “We were out there on the picket line and the longshoremen would walk right through and they’d wave to us, ‘Hi, fellas.’” It became clear to Meehan and others that success could only come from industrywide solidarity. Workers in and around the port, though they might be in different unions, would have to support each other’s strikes.

The loss of the 1922 longshore strike served



Meehan as a university course in what *not* to do in a strike. “You see, the ports went out individually, and since the strike had gotten no support from the International, financial or otherwise, the employers were able to beat the ports one at a time.” Meehan says the ILA had wisely concluded by 1934 that “when one local strikes, all the locals strike, and we have the same demands. We’d go out on the same day, and go back on the same day, all the contracts would be the same.”

### Strike Goals

The single most important goal of the ILA was union recognition. Without employer recognition of the union as official bargaining agent, workers would be limited in their ability to defend themselves. From November until March 1934 the employers along the coast had steadfastly rejected that single demand. Attempts to talk with the owners had gotten longshoremen nowhere; the leadership of the union proposed a coastwide strike.

Final approval rested with the membership. The strike vote, taken in each port in March, was an overwhelming eleven-to-one margin in favor of a walkout. Its starting date was delayed by a personal plea from President Roosevelt, but May 9, 1934, saw all West Coast ports out on strike.

The first demand, of course, was for union recognition. Just as important to the strikers

was the goal of a union-controlled hiring hall. The years of favoritism and bribery for work had convinced longshoremen that the only trustworthy hiring procedure was one run by themselves. Further, they demanded a reduction in “straight” time from eight to six hours, and a thirty-hour week. The intention was to help spread available work—a fact not lost on the many unemployed longshoremen.

Wages, though by no means the major issue in the strike, were also a concern. Longshoremen wanted straight-time pay boosted from \$.85 an hour to \$1.00, and overtime from \$1.25 to \$1.50.

The employers rejected all these demands. They called for the open shop (i.e., business as usual), employer-operated hiring halls, port-by-port elections to determine union representation, and bargaining by individual ports.

To the longshoremen, their bosses’ offer was a transparent attempt to divide and conquer. They were adamant: Any agreement reached must be voted on by membership in all ports; and no longshoremen would return to work until the other maritime unions, also on strike, had gotten satisfaction on their demands.

### The Question of the Unemployed

Their employers were confident of victory, believing that with high unemployment, strike-breakers would be easy to find. E.C. Davis, of the Waterfront Employers’ Association in Portland, stated assuredly that the depressed economic situation “created a large supply of men who could be called on to work on the docks if the regularly employed longshoremen refused to work.”

Longshoremen, too, realized that if the unemployed crossed their picket lines en masse, their strike would be crushed. They concluded, long before their walkout, that they would seek the support of people out of work.

Beginning in the winter of 1929–30, the Communist Party had organized unemployed councils throughout the country. In Portland, by the spring of 1934 these councils had won



much support among the unemployed. Dirk De Jonge, a council organizer, talked about how they worked:

“The Unemployed Council in Portland, for instance, set up sub-organizations in different districts of the city. They elected their own leaders and whatever complaint was presented, they would take action as to what to do. For example, a person comes in there and says his water has been shut off ‘cause he couldn’t pay his bill. Well, the Unemployed Council in that particular part of the city would simply go and turn on the water. It was the same with natural gas. . . . People wouldn’t pay their bills because they didn’t have the money anyway. They would take their complaint to the welfare. Each part of the city had their own programs, their own activities.”

Months before the strike, the longshoremen sent delegations to the councils explaining the issues and asking for their support. Longshoreman Ernie Baker claimed success. “‘If it’s gonna help you, it’s gonna help us eventually.’ That’s the attitude these fellas had.” And he concluded: “We got ourselves an ally.”

Matt Meehan agreed. “All during the strike there wasn’t one of those unemployed groups, not one man, that scabbed. Not one of them broke ranks, not one of them went to work on the waterfront. They were down there—one day there was 5,000 down there on the picket line.”

For their part, longshoremen were active helping unemployed workers and their families. Strike commissaries welcomed them, sharing the food that had been donated by farmers and other unions. And longshoremen scoured the city searching for floor space in warehouses to accommodate families without homes.

Strikers relied mainly on this working-class solidarity to keep the docks shut, but they also felt force would need to play a role. Scabbing, as they saw it, was the worst form of theft. A scab stole the jobs men had sweated for their entire working lives—robbing, as well, the future security of their families. The police, enforcing laws set up to protect the employers’ control over their private property, did not see a scab as a criminal. Therefore, it would be up to the longshoremen to stop the criminal in the act.

## The Strike Begins

On the morning of May 10, the second day of the strike, employers sat in their hiring hall anxiously awaiting men to show up for work. They’d threatened that longshoremen still absent by 8 a.m. would be fired. By 9 o’clock, the hall held just 150 men—mostly gang bosses. Outside, about a thousand strikers surrounding the hall were determined that no cargo would be unloaded on the docks.

Shortly after nine the employers foolishly called for buses to transport the strikebreakers to various worksites. Longshoremen greeted the buses by ordering them to stop and rocking them back and forth until they were almost overturned. The drivers and guards scurried inside to the safety of the hall. Later attempts to move the men to the docks failed. At 3 p.m. police patrol wagons arrived to escort the 150 away.

As a precaution against further strikebreaking activity, longshoremen formed “flying squads.” “That’s where those old boxers and wrestlers came in handy, those football players,” Meehan remembered. “They used to put the fear of God into all the ones who used to try and get in on that job to scab.”

The violence of the strikers—in self-defense, as they saw it—certainly helped discourage would-be stevedores. But more important to the outcome of the strike was the ILA’s success in getting its members to secure widespread support for their cause.

At least half of the leadership of the strike had earlier been active in the IWW. These men had



a class-conscious sense of “us against them,” as well as very definite ideas about how to run a strike. While not rejecting the notion of raising money to support people on strike, they felt that keeping the union’s membership involved was more important. People needed to be out talking, recruiting allies and securing supplies. Insuring that strikers stayed active would be the best tonic for low morale. Not only did relying on lots of money fail to win strikes, according to the IWW, but it also helped erode union democracy. “The most conservative unions are always those with the largest treasuries,” warned the *Industrial Worker*, the IWW newspaper.

For Wobblies, winning was only one of the goals of a strike; another was educating. A strike showed workers their power to change job conditions—more importantly, it demonstrated that they could transform the entire society. Rank-and-file control, mass involvement, working-class solidarity: the IWW taught that these were characteristics of the new society they were aiming for, as well as winning tactics.

### Harvesting Support

The longshoremen knew that the Oregon farmers would need to be convinced that the strike was in their interests; like an army, a strike travels on its stomach. And, in the long run, ILA leaders knew that any social movement for lasting change would need the farmers’ participation.

The ILA arranged for speakers to travel throughout the state explaining the strike and soliciting aid. Farmers responded. The United Farmers’ League gave its endorsement to the longshoremen and made donations to keep the strike commissary full. According to former longshoreman Jack Mowery, “We had a beautiful set-up with the people around the country here, the farmers, what we called the poor farmers. We got all kinds of donations of vegetables, fruits, and everything else. We sent pickets out to help them gather their crops.”

On July 4, twenty-five farmers from the Oregon coast dug clams for the striking long-

shoremen. With the clams came their promise of further aid, their prayers for success, and a request for more union speakers. Ernie Baker remembers one farmer who brought a live pig to the commissary. He butchered it, dressed it, and presented it to the strikers.

It was probably more than just kindness that motivated the farmers’ generosity toward the strikers. As longshoremen organized, so did farmers. In one nearby county, membership in the National Farmers’ Union went from zero to seven hundred in less than two years. Especially angered by the banks and railroads, farmers could see that they shared a common foe with longshoremen: corporate control over decisions affecting their livelihoods.

The ILA, appreciating the support and eager to solidify its budding alliance with the farmers, agreed to release gasoline—provided the farmers actually got it. The union also arranged to pull some of their pickets, so much-needed baling wire and fertilizers could be picked up by the farmers. Longshoremen were even on hand to help the farmers load supplies onto trucks. ILA member Toby Christensen remembers, “Employers couldn’t say anything about it. We outnumbered them.” Worried about the loss of cannery jobs, the longshoremen also issued permits to release fresh fruit and sugar. In early July, it was reported that the ILA had offered to negotiate the loading of Oregon’s wheat crop. The shippers refused to discuss whether or not the cargo should be handled.

While most farmers apparently were sympathetic toward the strike, according to one report some farm co-ops telegraphed Governor Meier, urging him to call out the National Guard to end the walkout. (In a later longshore strike, employers bused seed farmers’ wives to Portland for a demonstration opposing the strike. Longshoremen’s wives met the women on the docks, inviting them to the union hall where refreshments had been prepared. After listening to arguments for the strike, farmers’ wives apologized, explaining they’d been misled.)

Longshoremen were especially eager for support in Portland. Ernie Baker worked with the “Propaganda Department”: “We fanned out all over the city. We covered it like a blanket.” Jack Mowery recalled, “We went to the small gro-

cerymen, neighborhood groceries, and so forth—which was many in those days. . . . We went to the churches, all those places, and set this all up two months ahead of time.” The ILA also took to the air waves, broadcasting a nightly fifteen-minute update over a local radio station. Scripts for each program, Baker explained, were tailored to address the concerns longshoremen heard as they canvassed neighborhoods.

### **Enter the International**

Ironically, at a time when so many different groups were offering aid to the strike, longshoremen were fighting the leadership of their own International. On two separate occasions, ILA President Joseph Ryan unilaterally signed agreements with employers, ostensibly ending the strike.

Because of the ILA structure, with its relatively autonomous districts, Ryan had only limited authority in the West. In his home base of New York City, his control rested on dispensing patronage to favored members and on the close relations he maintained with employers. There, he was able to keep union dissidents from being hired on the waterfront and, when sufficient pressure grew from below, to come up with a raise for his members.

Rank-and-file militancy threatened the control he hoped to extend nationally. On his arrival in the West he declared, “We don’t give a hoot for the closed shop. All we are interested in is recognition with preference.” In fact, a union-controlled hiring hall—essentially a closed shop—was precisely what the strike was all about.

Ryan’s first agreement so disgusted Portland longshoremen that they wouldn’t even take ballots. Undaunted, Ryan on June 16 signed a second agreement. He exclaimed exuberantly, “There is no question but that they [the members] will approve and ratify it.” The agreement, which still included no provision for a union-controlled hiring hall, was voted down in every port except San Pedro. The ILA president, having flunked his course in union democracy, gave up and returned to New York.

### **Violence in San Francisco**

With Ryan’s acquiescent voice silenced and the strikers holding firm, no settlement appeared possible. Employers in San Francisco decided it was time to break the strike. On July 3, five truckloads of men, protected by seven hundred police, cruised slowly from the pier toward the warehouses. A police captain yelled, “The port is open!” The cry sparked a battle between thousands of strikers and their supporters and the police. Twenty-five people were hospitalized.

Two days later five thousand people clashed with police. In what became known as “Bloody Thursday,” hundreds of people were injured and three were killed. The next day California Governor Merriam dispatched the National Guard. Organized labor in San Francisco responded by calling a general strike: 130,000 workers walked off their jobs.

The battles in San Francisco put Portland longshoremen on alert. As early as the third day of the strike, Mayor Joseph Carson pleaded with Governor Meier to send in the National Guard and open the port. The Central Labor Council then threatened that if the Guard were used in Portland, there would be a general strike. Meier refused to act on Carson’s request.

On the Fourth of July, fifty-four picketers were arrested by police near some oil docks. On July 6, eighty Portland unions met to form a general strike committee. The announcement was made that a general strike vote would be held following any violence initiated by the employers or police.

Meier sent a frantic message to President Roosevelt: “We are now in a state of armed hostilities.” He pleaded with the President to act immediately “to prevent insurrection which, if not checked, will develop into civil war.” Rejected by FDR, the governor mobilized the Guard and encamped them near Portland; however, he did not actually send them into the “hostilities.”

Matt Meehan speculated that the longshoremen’s picketing of the Meier and Frank department store in downtown Portland helped the governor understand his potential financial losses should he use the Guard. (Julius Meier was a

major stockholder in his family's retail store business.) And it was reported that longshoremen's wives, having earlier organized an auxiliary, were sticking customers with hat pins whenever they crossed picket lines.

More likely, Meier had larger concerns. Facing the threat of a general strike, waged on behalf of a cause with widespread support, the governor decided to back off. The Guard would not move to open the port.

### **The Employers Surrender**

Met by one sound defeat after another and confronted by the continuing general strike in San Francisco, employers gave up. They agreed to arbitration by the National Longshoremen's Board, which had been formed earlier by President Roosevelt. Union leaders, who had proposed arbitration back in mid-May, immediately put the employers' offer to a coastwide vote. The overwhelming ILA ratification ended the strike. Pending the arbitration settlement, longshoremen returned to work on July 31, 1934.

In San Francisco, longshore leader Harry Bridges cautioned workers against forgetting the source of their power. "We may receive some betterment of conditions through arbitration, but that may be in the future. So it behooves us to take an aggressive attitude and establish and improve working conditions on our own initiative." (Heeding Bridges' advice, over the next two years West Coast longshoremen "hung the hook"—struck—over five hundred times, acting on their own and others' grievances.)

On October 12, the Longshoremen's Board handed down the final award. Perhaps a result of workers' ongoing militancy, the decision represented a clearcut victory for the union. The ILA was established as the coast-wide bargaining agent for longshoremen. There would be a

thirty-hour week and a six-hour day. Straight time would be paid at \$.95 an hour, with overtime at \$1.40. Hiring halls would be maintained jointly by the employers and the union but, significantly, selection of the dispatcher was left solely to the union.

The unemployed and other workers who had participated were tremendously encouraged by the victory. Julia Ruutilla, a longtime Portland labor activist, pointed out that the strike "was sort of the mainspring for everyone that wanted to organize industrial-type of unions." For example, saw mills all over Portland organized in the wake of the strike. Textile workers and loggers also renewed their organizing efforts.

The longshoremen's achievement helped shatter the myth that employers, backed by the force of the police, would always win. Other unions realized the vast power of an active rank and file in alliance with the larger working-class community—though subsequent events proved that the lesson has not always stuck.

The shenanigans of ILA President Joseph Ryan were sharp reminders that, but for the union's democratic structure, the strike would have been lost—"sold out" would be the term given by longshoremen. Following the strike, Portland's Local 8 adopted a number of rules in an effort to assure the vitality of this democracy: No one could be a union official who was not a full-time working longshoreman. The tenure of office was held to one year, and salaried officials were prohibited from succeeding themselves or rotating to other paid positions. All major decisions of the executive board had to be approved at a membership meeting before being acted upon. To assure the meeting would represent the feelings of the workers, attendance was made mandatory.

Born out of a struggle in which participants learned to care, look out for, and trust one another, the union's official slogan became: "An injury to one is an injury to all."