

HARRY BRIDGES

The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the U.S.

Charles P. Larrowe



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Now in his 70s Harry Bridges has had a long, exciting career as an independent, incorruptible, often intransigent labor leader. As a young Australian immigrant he was a seaman and longshoreman on the West Coast, helped to organize the longshoremen's union, and emerged in 1934 as the leader of the San Francisco general strike. Thirty-eight years later, in the spring of 1972, after a successful 130-day strike, he and his union were again in the national spotlight.

This biography is a sympathetic portrait of one of the most colorful labor leaders of our time. It tells how he and the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union survived attack after attack, first by the ship owners and then by the Justice Department and the Immigration Service, which tried three times to deport him as a Communist alien. It tells how the I.L.W.U. organized the multi-racial waterfront and agricultural workers of Hawaii and revolutionized the economy and social fabric of the Islands. It describes the controversial Mechanization and Modernization Agreement, one of the first union contracts to give workers a share of the increased profits created by automation.

This book is much more than the biography of one man; it provides an inside view of 40 years of American labor and social history.

ated by Colin Whitston



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Now in his 70s Harry Bridges was a long, exciting career, incorruptible, often leader. As a young man he was a seaman on the West Coast, among longshoremen's union in 1934 as the leader of a general strike. In the spring of 1934 a 130-day strike, again in the nation.

This biography is a portrait of one of the leaders of our time, the International Longshoremen's Union, attacked first by the Justice Department, then by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and finally deported him as a threat to the I.L.W. racial waterfront of Hawaii and the economy and society. It describes the union and the movement of the first union of the first unioners a share of the union, and the union's history.

This book is a biography of one of the great leaders of the labor movement, a view of 40 years of social history.

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To Peter Millhouse

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Foreword

The idea of writing about Harry Bridges first occurred to me in the mid-fifties. I was finishing a book about longshoring, and one day I said excitedly to my wife, "You know, as soon as I get this done, I'm going to start in on one about *Bridges*." Happily, she knew me better than I knew myself. "Wait at least five years," she cautioned. "You're so impressed with the guy right now you couldn't do an honest book about him."

For once, I took her advice. In fact, I did even better. I waited six years, so it was 1961 when I wrote *Bridges* to tell him of my intention and to ask if he would cooperate. He didn't answer, nor did he answer a follow-up letter I sent him a few weeks later.

His staff at union headquarters (the union is the West Coast International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union), by contrast, could scarcely have been more encouraging. "Come on out," they urged me. (I was living in Michigan.) "You'll have access to all the stuff in the records except Harry's personal files. And don't be put off by his negative attitude. He won't interfere with what you're doing and, anyway, he'll come around in time."

They were wrong. He didn't interfere, but he never came around. In 1962, the staff let me use an empty office just off the rooms where the records are kept, and I worked there for a year. Union headquarters is in a small building, and I saw a fair amount of

Bridges. Before long, we were on a first-name, casually friendly basis, but the one time I managed to corner him for a talk about the book he made it clear he was against my doing it.

It seemed reasonable enough to me that he would be. For twenty-five years, the FBI and a pride of private and other government sleuths had been following him around, keeping a record of everything he said and did. I could understand that the thought of my prying into his affairs must have been repulsive. Most of what had been written about him, moreover, had been unsympathetic, much of it unfair.

"For you to do the book right," he told me, his feet up on the corner of his old wooden desk (when he moved them off, I noticed that over the years they'd worn a groove there), "I'd have to let you sit here in this office for six months, watching me operate and asking me questions when I have time.

"And," he said emphatically, "I'm not going to do that!"

I decided to go ahead, anyway.

When the manuscript was finished and several persons friendly to him had read it and pronounced it balanced but on the whole sympathetic, I decided to send a copy to Bridges. He'd said he didn't want me to. "Look," he had told me, "if I read it and correct mistakes and make suggestions, that'll make it an authorized biography. I sure as hell don't want that!"

His reaction to what I'd written took me by surprise, nevertheless. Looking back, I realize it shouldn't have. As Marx once said in a comment on the fugitive quality of history, we can no more accept at face value an era's view of itself than we can a man's opinion of his own character.

"I have gone over the manuscript," Bridges wrote me a week after he got it.

I don't feel like discussing it with you; on the other hand, if I just pass it over and say nothing, you and other people could assume that I accepted or agreed with what the manuscript contains. I certainly don't. Not by a long shot, and I will give you my reasons.

The book as written just bears out my first reaction to what you asked me to do some years ago—and that was to cooperate with you in writing a book about me and the union. I didn't think then that either the union or myself would get fair treatment, and the book sure vindicates my judgment.

I would say it is hardly more than a series of distortions, half-truths, and, in many cases, outright lies.

I waited several weeks before replying. Then I wrote him that while I was deeply sorry his reaction was so negative, I had re-read the book after getting his letter, and I still thought of it as balanced and as presenting him and the union in a favorable light. I reminded him that I had told him when I was starting out that I was prepared to spend whatever time was necessary to run down every lead, interview everyone who could add to the story, search through archives and Presidential libraries.

"I appeal to you," I concluded, "if you have in mind specific half-truths, distortions, lies, or mistakes, to send them to me so that I can substitute truth for error. I hasten to assure you that a note at the front of the book will make it unmistakably clear to the reader that you in no way or at any time endorsed the book, that consistently, over those nine years, you opposed my doing it."

He never replied.

But as I think back over all the people who helped me with this book, the one who jumps immediately to mind, paradoxically, is Bridges himself. Many of the people I talked to are so devoted to him and to what he has stood for that if he had passed the word not to cooperate with me, many doors would have been closed in my face. Despite his opposition, he never did so.

Staff members at union headquarters who were especially helpful—without exception, everyone who worked there made me feel welcome—were Linc Fairley, then the union's research director; the late Anne Rand, who for many years was the union's librarian; her successor, Margery Canright; Bill Glazier, who was for a long time Bridges's administrative assistant; Morris Watson, founder and editor for two decades of the union's newspaper; Sid Roger, who succeeded him; and Henry Schmidt, who was with Bridges from the earliest days of the union.

The late Paul St. Sure, who headed the employers' association from the 1950s until his death in the late sixties, was very generous in his cooperation with me, as was Sam Kagel, the industry's permanent arbitrator. Aubrey Grossman, one of the San Francisco attorneys who defended Bridges in his early trials, spent many hours patiently guiding me through the legal labyrinths of political trials. Walter Lambert and Conrad Edises gave me valuable help, especially when I was groping for a key to events on the West Coast