

Book Reviews

Robert W. Cherny. *Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend*. Urbana, ILL: University of Illinois Press, www.press.uillinois.edu, 2023. xvii+478 pp., illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, index. US \$55.00, cloth; ISBN 978-0-252-04474-8. (E-book available.)

On 27 December 1936, Long Beach Police arrested and charged west coast labor leader Harry Bridges for striking and killing Joe Miranda, an eight-year-old boy riding his recently received Christmas present, a new bicycle, down the street. Bridges was on his way to address a mass meeting of striking longshore workers in nearby Wilmington accompanied by John Ring, Arthur Whitehead, and Arthur's wife, who had hosted him for dinner. Why Bridges was driving the Whitehead's automobile and whether alcohol was involved remained unanswered because the three witnesses in the car, not exactly impartial, were quick to blame Miranda and the lack of a working light on the bicycle for the accident. Lawyer Aaron Sapiro secured release of Bridges on a writ of *habeas corpus* with \$2,000 bail and represented the labor leader in the case during meetings with the district attorney and the court that eventually found Bridges not at fault for negligent vehicular homicide. As a mark of his gratitude, Bridges refused to pay a legal bill presented by Sapiro, who successfully sued International Longshore Association (ILA) Local 38-82 for \$750 instead and also launched a \$150,000 libel and slander suit against Bridges for an exchange of letters with a Hollywood boss. Miranda's parents filed a \$50,000 civil suit for damages against Bridges, which was quietly settled out of court for an undisclosed sum in May 1938. Sapiro (maligned for his own known acquaintances and dubious clients) later appeared in July 1939 as a key witness during US government attempts to deport the foreign-born Bridges back to Australia, reflecting no small amount of animosity between the two men. Robert Cherny, a retired history professor from San Francisco State University, neither mentions Miranda by name nor explains fully the

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backstory with Sapiro in a new *Harry Bridges* biography that has been many decades in the making. Still, the book is perhaps the most exhaustive look so far at the charismatic labor leader who dominated the Pacific Coast waterfront for so many decades and oversaw the rise of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) as an independent and militant trade union.

The book is divided into eighteen chapters in roughly chronological order, with several overlapping chapters addressing the question of whether Bridges was ever a card-carrying Communist, legal attempts to deport him, and later modernization and mechanization arrangements to make the transition to containerization at the same time as preserving the existing workforce.

Harry Bridges came from a lower middle class working family in suburban Melbourne and went to sea in his late teens to work as a sailor. He eventually ended up in San Francisco and to support a new wife and her children started work on the docks as a longshoreman. At the time, employment was governed by the shape-up and "Blue Book" rules that favored the bosses and meant an inconsistent existence for most maritime workers. Bridges, like others, joined a growing labor union movement looking for improvements and greater say by workers in the job environment. Taking on a leadership role during a major waterfront strike in 1934 that delivered through binding arbitration union control over dispatching, better working conditions, and increased wages, Bridges was elected head of the Pacific Coast part of the International Longshore Association and after its break-away and affiliation with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. Cherny describes the internal politics within the union, relations with the body representing employers in negotiations and other matters, and government interest in the ILWU and its leader. Bridges was subject to targeted surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and because he was not a naturalized American citizen, several attempts to deport him by legal means were tried, first by the immigration wing of the Department of Labor and then by the Department of Justice, assisted by the FBI. Frances Perkins, Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of labor, defended Bridge's right to due process, though one learns in an endnote that she gained a low opinion of him after surveillance disclosed an adulterous liaison with another union member's wife. The Supreme Court gave Bridges a reprieve by deciding in his favor on appeal, and he held the ILWU together through the world war into the period of post-war prosperity when trade and the union membership grew. A last try by government lawyers to brand Bridges a subversive Communist subject to deportation in the highly charged atmosphere of the early Cold War ended in conviction again overturned by the higher court, which released ILWU leaders from prison.

Cherny points out the mutual dislike Bridges had for the Kennedy brothers, John and Robert, who became a Democratic president and attorney

general respectively and carried over settled views that some labor leaders were associated with organized crime, Bridges lumped together with the likes of Jimmy Hoffa of the Teamsters union with whom the ILWU stayed steadfast in support. Much more conservative and less inclined toward radical action in later years, Bridges stage-managed proposals for modernization and mechanization that established a newfound cordiality with waterfront employers and guaranteed stable employment, benefits, and pensions for waterfront workers until a big strike in 1971 demanded by ILWU rank-and-file threatened the whole understanding. Bridges enjoyed good relations with San Francisco's Democratic mayor Joseph Alioto and found himself on several advisory boards and commissions, including the Port of San Francisco. After two failed marriages and messy divorce proceedings, Bridges finally realized lasting love and companionship with Noriko, his third wife of Japanese-American heritage introduced through connections to his representing law firm, and they had a daughter. A simmering feud between Louis Goldblatt and Bridges marred succession at the top ranks of the ILWU and probably delayed a graceful departure long after the labor leader had become interested in other things. Cherny asserts that Bridges remained true to the rank-and-file throughout his life and is remembered with some affection within union ranks, almost to the point of mythology.

The book's strength is the range of primary sources consulted over years of research on the subject. Those include government records held at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park and San Bruno and presidential libraries, union records at the Anne Rand Library at the ILWU headquarters in San Francisco, Bridges private papers held at San Francisco State University, the voluminous redacted FBI file on Bridges released through Freedom to Information request, and related records from visiting research periods in Russia and Australia. Cherny conducted a number of in-person interviews with Bridges and his wife Noriko and drew upon earlier oral history interviews conducted by David Einstein, another would-be biographer who delivered an earlier manuscript unacceptable to Bridges. Bridges boldly claimed that no academic professor could ever truly capture the rank-and-file achievements of the ILWU and his leadership, but it is ironic that Cherny has tried just that, largely through Bridges' own words and liberal quoting of primary source materials in the text. Bridges was always parochial and chauvinistic about his chosen causes and the plight of the working class that unions like the ILWU were meant to address.

Cherny only briefly mentions Canada and developments in the coast-wide ILWU north of the international border. Some attention is given to Alaska and greater consideration to Hawaii. During the long 1935 waterfront strike against the Shipping Federation of British Columbia, Bridges abandoned striking Canadian longshore workers by agreeing to lift a ban on ships from

the province once returning from consultations in Washington, D.C.; besides, the Canadian unions were, in his words, “not ILA.” Subsequent ILA and ILWU organizing drives coordinated from San Francisco and Seattle produced few tangible results. The first ILWU locals were only chartered in Vancouver and New Westminster during 1944 thanks to the efforts of Rosco Craycraft. Jack Berry was the international representative responsible for Canadian affairs up to establishment of the IWLWU Canadian Area, now known as ILWU Canada, in 1959 when Canadian locals were given greater autonomy and control over their finances. Bridges supported the move and candidly told Canadian union officials it was “time to wear big pants.” Like the FBI, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police maintained security files on the ILWU in British Columbia over many decades and referenced Harry Bridges as a possible subversive (enough to deny him entry into Canada on occasion), available in Record Group 146 (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) at Library and Archives Canada. The strikes, regulatory environment, and negotiating parties were different than the American side, though the ILWU in Canada has naturally drawn inspiration from the Bridges leadership style and his earnest belief in the rank-and-file as a democratic union. Canadian delegates regularly attend area and international conventions. Emil Bjarnason’s 1984 25th anniversary retrospective of ILWU Canada still remains useful pending the commissioning of a fuller history by the Canadian ILWU more up-to-date.

Harry Bridges has a relatively high cover price, standard with most academic works, though the eBook is a little more affordable. Reading such a dense book on a screen however presents its own challenges. The use of acronyms in the text is heavy. Endnotes are sometimes inconsistent and often missing key reference information. As a biography, one might have expected more personal details about Harry Bridges instead of the general context of his time in union affairs. Whether Harry Bridges was ever a Communist is really a red herring, and not readily solved by Cherny, despite the most extensive research. His first wife, coached by the FBI, claimed that he was, but lack of surviving documentation and Harry’s own denials leaves the question open, if it really matters. Certainly, as Cherny concludes, Bridges was maybe a fellow traveler with the Communist Party who never abandoned his admiration for the Soviet Union. The book will appeal to readers interested in labor history related to waterfronts and ports, especially in the American context of the Pacific Coast, state persecution and surveillance of prominent trade unionists and trade unions, and ILWU members seeking to learn more about their own union and those that led it in the past.

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