

Summary of 2006 PNLHA Conference

The 38th annual conference of the PNLHA, held June 2nd to 4th 2006 at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, was a rich and varied event. The opening highlight was Ian Ruskin's performance as Harry Bridges in the one-man play, *From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks: the Life and Times of Harry Bridges*. People who had seen the play before agreed that Ian keeps making it better and better, and people appreciated the question and answer session which followed. In response to a couple of tough questions Ian demonstrated a serious level of thought about Harry Bridges, the ILWU, and the times during which they became powerful.

Elaine Bernard's keynote address was the opening highlight of Saturday morning. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Elaine did a comparison between unions in Canada and the United States. She covered both the numbers (decline in union membership in both countries, but still a much higher percentage of union members in the Canadian workforce) and the differences in the philosophical underpinnings of the two movements ("what we demand for ourselves we desire for all" versus "narrow collective bargaining and servicing existing members").

The workshops, films/media events, and panel discussions during the rest of Saturday and on Sunday morning were, by various accounts, provocative, thoughtful, dynamic, fun, and important. There was a good dialogue between Olympia ILWU members who load military vessels bound for Iraq and members of the Olympia peace movement. Deborah Dempsey, a Columbia River bar pilot, answered questions following the screening of *Shipping Out* (she appears in the film). ILWU Local 5 members were lively, the ASARCO researchers got lots of good leads and feedback, there was a good cross-border discussion about organizing immigrant workers, an important dialogue about combating racism in the ILWU, and a well-received presentation of and discussion about women shipyard workers of World War II. Issues of union democracy in the ILWU were addressed in a couple of workshops, and the closing panel featuring Joe Wenzl from the U.S. ILWU and Tom Dufresne from the Canadian ILWU led to a hair-raising discussion of the national security states of Canada and the U.S. as seen through the eyes of those who work on the docks.

As is customary at PNLHA conferences, two awards were presented at Saturday night's banquet. The first was to Brian Kamens of Tacoma for the Labor History Person of the Year. Evergreen faculty members Anne Fischel and Lin Nelson, who have benefited from Brian's work as a librarian in the Tacoma public libraries, made the presentation. They pointed to the great support they've gotten from Brian on their ASARCO research project and to Brian's knowledge of regional labor unions, the built environment, and other aspects of local history. Brian is the chair of the Education Committee of the Pierce County Central Labor Council and a long-time activist with that committee.

The Labor History Makers of the Year award went to ILWU Local 5's food service workers at The Evergreen State College. In presenting the award, Nina Triffleman and Peter Kardas from Evergreen's Labor Center discussed the positive organizing energy that this union has brought to the campus. From the initial organizing effort of a few years ago, when workers invited representatives from four unions to make a pitch for why their union was the best for this group of employees, to the contract bargaining campaign of last Fall, when the union reached out to students, faculty, and staff for support, the local has exhibited creativity, vitality, solidarity, and activism by both younger and older rank and file members.

Following the banquet there was a hip-hop/spoken word concert. The hip-hop politically conscious group the Blue Scholars performed first. Nearly 100 Evergreen students turned out to hear the Scholars. Zeek Green, a relatively young politically-conscious spoken word artist and union activist from the Tacoma local of the ILWU, closed the concert.