July 11, 2015

1934 Longshore Strike
Solidarity at Pier Park during the “Bloody Wednesday”

SCHOLL HALL
HIGHLIGHTS

4 Picket's Wounded

Chief Lawson in Command

of 90 Men on Train.

TERMINAL ENTRY Halted

Occupy St. Johns

St. Johns Heritage

Association

Columbia River

Local 5,

Local 8, Local 4,

Portland State

Department of History

Labor History

Association

Pensions

Jobs with Justice

Portland

International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union

Pacific Northwest
The Pacific Northwest Labor History Association (PNLHA) is a non-profit association dedicated to preserving the history and heritage of workers in the Pacific Northwest. We consider the “Pacific Northwest” to be British Columbia, Oregon and Washington.

Our members are trade unionists, students, academics, and others who share an interest in the history and heritage of workers in this region. We believe the labor movement must know where it’s been to know where it’s going. We depend exclusively on memberships to sustain our activities.

**Membership Levels**
- Contributing Membership ......................... $50
- Individual Membership .......................... $25
- Student / Low Income ........................... $15

**2016 PNLHA Annual Conference**
Portland, Oregon
Save the Dates May 20 - 22

Become a Member and
Learn More about the 2016 Conference at [www.PNLHA.org](http://www.PNLHA.org)
Site 1: Pier Park
Strike Begins

Marvin Ricks (1911–2009) was a longshoreman and served on the union’s “flying squadrons” during the strike. The squads proved instrumental in preventing replacement workers from taking the strikers’ jobs. He was regarded as the last surviving ‘34 man from the West Coast Strike.

This passage is arranged from Marvin’s oral history found in Solidarity Stories by Harvey Schwartz.

Over the winter of ‘31–’32, I cut wood in the Portland area. I was getting one dollar a cord, all split and piled four-foot wide. On a good day I could make two cords. That gave me two dollars a day. I had to take my saw over to the neighbor’s to file and set it—he had a vise.

His name was Neal Dagen. He also happened to be a longshoreman. Neal introduced me to a man who had a gang that worked shoveling sulfur two days a month. Nobody making any money at all wanted to shovel sulfur, but there were two days every month that I did it.

I always refused to pay for a job, which back then kept me from getting a certain amount of work. There was one gang boss who raffled off a radio. He had twelve men in his gang. Every week everybody in the gang bought a chance on the radio for a dollar. I don’t know how many years this went on, but there was never a drawing. If you’re only making twenty-five or thirty dollars a week, twelve dollars is quite a little addition. In other cases—remember, under Prohibition, liquor was illegal until 1933—a bottle of moonshine whisky passed to a gang boss bought a job.

The employers cared little about safety then. If it slowed the work down, to hell with safety. We killed five or six men a year in Portland from waterfront accidents. Any way you could think of to kill a man, we managed to do it. My friend, Dagen, who took me down to the waterfront was killed just a few years afterwards.

They dropped a load of scrap iron that hit a piece of pipe laying in the shelter deck with one end sticking out over the open hatch. Dagen was tending that hatch. The pipe hit him in the head and killed him.
You didn't have safety nets or anything. Fellas would slip off the dock and fall into the river. In those days you had a log around the dock to keep the ship from rubbing the piling. If you fell in, you landed on top of a log twenty-five or thirty feet down, and that was the end.

One day Howard Bodine came around when I was at the hall and says, “Hey, Marvin, you wanna join the union?” I said, “What’s a union?” I was from inland, I’d never heard of one. I’d heard of Communists, but I’d never heard of a union. He started explaining, and I told him, “Can I wait ‘til tomorrow to give you an answer? I’ll talk to a couple of my good friends.”

Well, Dagen and his best friend both say, “Yes, we plan on joining and we think you should, too. We don’t think the union will last over a year before they break us but it’ll give you a chance to get better acquainted.”

We all got a button when we joined the union, but nobody dared to wear one before the strike. Your gang boss might have joined the union, too, but if he showed up with a bunch of men with buttons on their hats, the walking boss, if he was a good company man, was not going to hire that gang. So there was kind of a blacklisting, but not as such.

Several ships were still working the morning the ‘34 strike started. One of my first jobs was to go around with a bunch of men to every ship in the harbor that was working and tell the gangs that everybody was out and they’d better get off the ship right now. We talked most of them into leaving. Some gangs didn’t quit, but we did nothing at the time because we were just four men per group making the rounds. As the strike got going, the things we did were considerably different.

**The Conditions and Causes of the Strike**

**Demands of the Strikers:**
- Recognition of the Union by the employers
- Wage increase from $0.85 per hour to $1.00 per hour for straight time, $1.25 per hour to $1.50 per hour for overtime
- Reduction of hours from 8 hours a day to 6 hours a day.
- “Closed shop” with union control of dispatch
- End of speed up and reduced swing load limits

**Questions to Walk With:**
1. What about the working conditions of the longshoremen stood out to you?
2. Learning from the failure of the 1922 strike, what’s something the longshoremen could do differently to ensure they win their demands?
Site 2: The Bluff
Community Support &
Corporate Opposition

“Special Police” unit hired and stationed at Terminal No. 4 during strike.

June Armstrong Cusic was born in St. Johns and at the time of the strike she was fifteen years old. When in her eighties, she shared her memories of the strike.

This passage by June is arranged from her account published in St. Johns Heritage Vol. 5.

The 1934 Longshoremen Strike involving Terminal #4 was a popular conversation topic. It went on for several months and the local bakery and grocery store sympathized by sending daily trays of pastry, bread rolls, sandwiches and coffee to the picket line.

This strike was a major turning point for labor in the Northwest. It was used as an example for major U.S. ports. The method of loading ships of bulk grain at that time was by hand trucking huge sacks on the dock, the hardest of hard work. One of the reasons for the strike was wanting to raise the pay of those men from $4.80 per day (or 60 cents an hour for 8), to a 6 hour day at $1.00 an hour and also to improve working conditions.

Trucking wheat was a very difficult way for a man to work to feed a family. Jobs were scarce and men who didn’t have proper food to build muscle and strong bones but were desperate for work tried, but they were unable to continue, some not having clothing or heavy shoes. The docks were long and cold in winter above the Willamette River. My Father saw grown men cry when they were forced to quit.

The strike not only helped the grain handlers but worked for many types of industries who found they could do the same thing to improve and raise their wages and benefits. The 1934 strike was not the first but one of the most successful because of the stick-to-it attitude of the men involved.

Questions to Walk With:
1. What do you think about how the rank-and-file workers prepared and carried out the strike?

2. Knowing that another attempt is about to be made to break the picket line, how could picketers prevent the train from advancing?
Site 2: The Bluff Community Support & Corporate Opposition

This strike was a major turning point for labor in the Northwest. It was used as an example for major U.S. ports. The method of loading ships of bulk grain at that time was by hand trucking huge sacks on the dock, the hardest of hard work. One of the reasons for the strike was wanting to raise the pay of those men from $4.80 per day (or 60 cents an hour for 8), to a 6 hour day at $1.00 an hour and also to improve working conditions.

Trucking wheat was a very difficult way for a man to work to feed a family. Jobs were scarce and men who didn’t have proper food to build muscle and strong bones but were desperate for work tried, but they were unable to continue, some not having clothing or heavy shoes. The docks were long and cold in winter above the Willamette River. My Father saw grown men cry when they were forced to quit.

The strike not only helped the grain handlers but worked for many types of industries who found they could do the same thing to improve and raise their wages and benefits. The 1934 strike was not the first but one of the most successful because of the stick-to-it attitude of the men involved.

Questions to Walk With:
1. What do you think about how the rank-and-file workers prepared and carried out the strike?

2. Knowing that another attempt is about to be made to break the picket line, how could picketers prevent the train from advancing?

"Special Police" unit hired and stationed at Terminal No. 4 during strike.

June Armstrong Cusic was born in St. Johns and at the time of the strike she was fifteen years old. When in her eighties, she shared her memories of the strike.

This passage by June is arranged from her account published in St. Johns Heritage Vol. 5.

The 1934 Longshoremen Strike involving Terminal #4 was a popular conversation topic. It went on for several months and the local bakery and grocery store sympathized by sending daily trays of pastry, bread rolls, sandwiches and coffee to the picket line.
Site 3: Swift Blvd.  
Police Open Fire

Matthew Meehan (1896-1977) was a longshoreman and a leader of the '34 strike in Portland. In 1937 he became the first international secretary-treasurer of the ILWU and helped lead a successful organizing drive among agricultural workers in Hawaii in 1944.

This passage by Matt is arranged from an oral history found in David R. Hardy’s 1971 thesis “The 1934 Portland Longshoremen’s Strike.”

We had them completely locked out for the whole three months of the strike. The employers put the heat on Mayor Carson that, by God, St. Johns had to be opened up. That was the key. That was where the most ships could come in and dock.

They lined up two flat cars ahead of the train. They had benches on both sides of the cars, some to the side and some headed straight ahead. And on those benches they had shotguns and every other damn kind of weapon. Now those guys weren’t just out to scare somebody with pop guns. They weren’t just playing. They weren’t pushing that train with all those cars, and two flat cars full of cops just to scare anybody or make any arrests. They were out to kill, they thought they had to do it.

I have an idea from the desperate move that they made to openly shoot the men down that they tried to shoot to kill because the trees showed that. The bullet holes were all belly button high or head high.

The lucky thing was that they happened to pick the one place where there was some trees, and the trees covered some of the men. As soon as they saw them shooting, as soon as they opened fire, the men knew that this was for real this time. After all, when you’re standing there and you’re seeing guys going down you don’t know if they’re getting killed. Of course a lot of them weren’t, they were just ducking, but they didn’t know that. And of course a couple of
(map above) The location of where the Bloody Wednesday shooting occurred was approximated using the court documents from lawsuits filed by the workers against the railroad operator.

The strikers and the defendants agreed that the four wounded men were “standing about sixty feet north” from the intersection of Swift Blvd. and the railroad when the incident began (Multnomah County Court case #114724, E.W. Beatty v. Oregon–Washington Railroad & Navigation Company, Corp. and B. K. Lawson dated July 28, 1934).

This was supported by published reports and photos in the Portland News-Telegram, Oregon Journal, and The Oregonian.

(photo right) Photo by Oregon Journal photographer Ralph Vincent printed in 7/11/34 Evening Edition. The caption stated it was taken “near Pier Park immediate after four men were shot.”
them did get shot. Like Buster, he got his jaw shot away and he was in pretty bad shape. We didn’t know, we thought he was going to die.

And so somebody brought me this shirt that was dripping with his blood and I took it into the Mayor. I’d been in a meeting with this group that I was keeping on their toes, to get the money coming in, to keep the strike up, and when that fellow came in with that shirt I found out what happened. Well, let me tell you, I went berserk. I know that area and, hell, it’s just a little canyon, just barely enough dirt to get the tracts down there. The banks go up on either side, and, hell, what a trap. Where were they going to go?

So I took that shirt over to Carson at a meeting of the City Council. Well, that was the end of him, that wrecked him. I threw that shirt at Carson and I demanded to know who ordered this. And he said, “I accept the responsibility.” Of course what else could he have said. So I said, “Adjourn this meeting now. We’re going to go down there, all of us, and examine that place.”

I was just so mad that they could do that to our people. Corner them like rats. Or they thought they had them cornered. Fortunately the didn’t. But that was the plan, that was the program. These police officers told me later that the plan had been to get them cornered and bang away. Fortunately the trees saved them.

The Four Wounded Longshoremen
Elmus “Buster” W. Beatty
Bert Yates
Peter Støffensen
W. Huntington

Questions to Walk With:
1. Why was it important for the union to prevent trains from entering the terminal during the strike?

2. What actions by the union helped prevent further attempts to break the picket line?

"The sheaf of flowers placed on the bloody spot on the pavement where one of strikers fell." Portland News-Telegram 7/14/34
Site 4: Bridge
Aftermath and Memory

Julia Ruuttila (1907-1991) lived in Linnton and visited Pier Park the day after the shooting. She assisted in the union drive at the West Oregon Lumber Company (1935), wrote for The Dispatcher, and was a prominent labor, peace, and social justice activist for nearly six decades.

This passage by Julia is found in her published oral history Sticking to the Union by Sandy Polishuk.

What I saw over there changed the entire course of my life.

This longshoreman’s son said he’d take us down the trail onto the railroad camp so we could get a real good look at what was going on down there. Before he took us there he took us up to the place where the four longshoremen had been shot. There was still blood there. Some of it had sunk in and the railroad ties were red. Longshoremen had a large wreath of red roses there in their honor and they had it roped off.

And we saw the trees in the park that were pockmarked, literally pockmarked, with bullet holes. Some of the men, to get away from the shooting, had run up to the fence around the park, and it wasn’t very far from the play area where a great many children had been at play, and they thought that was firecrackers, and they got off the swings and teeter-totters and all ran down that way. Why they weren’t killed I’ve never been able to figure out. For years, you could go out there and dig lead out of the bark of those trees.

We went up on the bluff where the strikers were set up. You could look down from there into Terminal 4. They had the scabs headquartered on ship that was tied up there. Their terminal was like an armed camp. They had barbed wire fence around it; they had sandbag huts inside the fence with gun emplacements; they had machine guns down at the gate into the terminal; they had an armored truck running around in there. The strikers had their soup kitchen up there on the bluff and they had fires going with mulligan stew cooking. They had their arsenal of weapons. What do you think their arsenal consisted of? Slingshots and a couple boxes of pebbles. Sling shots against machine guns.
And while I was standing there with my three Italian friends looking down into the armed camp, and it was an armed camp, a whole bunch of deputized thugs, is what they were, swarmed out of this one sandbag hut and ordered us off the tracks. The Italian millworker said, “You don’t have any authority here. This is railroad property. You can’t order us off.” So they knocked this striker’s son down on the ground -- he was quite slender-- and began kicking him in the stomach. We tried to stop them and they pulled their guns, and I really expected to be shot. I was so frightened that I couldn’t move. I hung on to this Italian woman or I would have fallen down. She stood like a rock.

Just then a longshoremen came from behind one of those little yellow railroad huts. He was a big tall man about six feet tall and had his hand in his pocket bulged out like this. I realized afterwards it was his hand and not a gun, You see these things in the movies and you think what a bunch of baloney. He said, “If you’re looking for trouble, you’re going to get it. Now get back down where you came from and move right now.” And they slithered off the track and back down the bank, through the barbed wire fence, into their stupid huts and we were left alive.

As we walked along, Mrs. Tenderelli kept saying, “You with your machine of writing could do much.”

I typed a petition on my beat-up, thirdhand Underwood, demanding the removal of that police chief -- his name was Colonel B. K. Lawson -- for the shooting of unarmed men near a park where children were at play. Many people signed the petition and that triggered off quite a wave among various groups throughout Portland, and “Bloody Shirt Joe” had to fire him. It was the first conscious, planned, political action of my life.

By the time I got home, I was convinced that the longshoremen were on the right track and, whatever kind of union they belonged to, there was nothing wrong with it. So I told Butch, “We’ve been quite wrong about this strike and about the AFL longshoremen. This isn’t the ordinary craft union. This is industrial war, It’s the real thing and we belong in it.”

The 1934 strike of the longshoremen was sort of a mainspring for everyone else that wanted to organize in the industrial type of unions. There always had been crafts around this area, you know, but there was nothing much for the industrial workers or nothing that amounted to anything.

**Question to Walk With:**
1. Why were the trees of Pier Park significant to Bloody Wednesday? What meaning do they have now 81 years later?
Historical Marker Concept:

**Bloody Wednesday**

**July 11, 1934**

The 1934 West Coast Longshore and Maritime Strike began on May 8, 1934 and was a pivotal event in Portland’s history during the Great Depression. The strikers won recognition of their union 83 days later and ushered in an era of rapid unionization in other local industries.

Before the strike, longshoremen were regularly subjected to “the shape up” during which employers gave jobs based on favoritism and weeded out those who sought improvements to working conditions. The strike won the longshoremen the right to control the hiring process to ensure equity.

On July 11, 100 police boarded a train bound for Terminal No. 4 with the intention of breaking the union’s picket line. As the train crossed Columbia Blvd at Pier Park, the police opened fire on the workers and wounded four men.

Public outrage over the shooting prevented further efforts to break the strike and convinced employers to negotiate with the workers. Portland area farmers, students, small business owners, the unemployed, and the general public supported the strikers with material and moral support.

For decades, bullet holes in the trees of Pier Park served as solemn reminders of Portland’s “Bloody Wednesday” and a time when workers attempts to form unions was met with violence.

Those once pockmarked trees have now either fallen or have healed their wounds. But the memory of Bloody Wednesday remains tied to Pier Park’s trees which longshoremen Matthew Meehan and labor activist Julia Ruuttila credited for saving the lives of the strikers who would later form the International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU).

This historical marker was erected on DATE. It is generously funded and cared for by the following organization: NAMES OF SPONSORS.
The Future for Bloody Wednesday’s Memory
The creation of a historical marker to commemorate the memory of Bloody Wednesday depends upon volunteer time and energy. We are starting at the beginning of the process. If you would like to be a part of the effort to design, fundraise, and compel the city for its approval, please email or call Ryan Wisnor.

Acknowledgements
Thank you to all the longshoremen and community members, as well as archivists, professors, fellow students, and friends who assisted in this project. This commemoration event was an extension to a research project conducted for a Portland State University history class.

For more information on the PSU project visit: http://www.pdx.edu/history/heritagetrees

Your Feedback Welcomed
Your feedback about this event is encouraged and welcomed in order to help the PNLHA better plan future events.

Take a minute and share positive and critical feedback to Ryan Wisnor at his contact information below.

Ryan Wisnor
Phone: 503-577-6283 or Email rwisnor@pdx.edu

Further Reading:


City of Portland, City Council Minutes, July 11, 1934, p.478


Cover Images:
Top – Oregonian July 12, 1934
Bottom – 1934 Longshore strikers on railroad tracks near Pier Park and N Columbia Blvd (City of Portland Archives, Oregon, A2004-002.9377)