

Is it possible during the era of declining labor union membership and influence to make the story of the rise of one union relevant and engaging? Should we be paying attention to what happened during the hard fought union battles of the 1930s -1950s? The WSHM presents from

*From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks: The Life and Times of Harry Bridges.*

When Harry Bridges arrived in the United States from Australia in 1920, he began 60 years of working with the union movement on the west coast. This movement was based on strong democratic principals with ground-breaking benefits for its members.

With the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 workers for the first time had the right to organize and bargain collectively. Union activism swept the country. On the West coast this union activity led to a bitter strike with pitched battles resulting in injuries and deaths up and down the coast. The dock workers, known as dock rats, were part of this struggle. This battle culminated in the largest General Strike in American History and led to a victory for the strikers.

Three years later, in 1936, Harry Bridges became the president of the newly formed International Longshore and Warehouse Union. Harry Bridges never backed away from controversy. In fact, those who knew him like to say he encouraged it. Whether in the union halls or facing government agents he debated with vigor and passion. Win or lose his eloquence and passion led even his most ardent opponents to respect him.

**I would have worked with the devil himself if he'd been for the six hour day and worker control of the hiring hall. "**

--Harry Bridges, Deportation Hearing 1939

The story of Tacoma's new bridge is one of multi-national cooperation and cutting edge technology, but let's not forget that Tacoma's waterways, that pass under the bridge, and mark the entrance to a working port. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union Tacoma Chapter 23 is one of the oldest unions in Tacoma, founded in ... and part of the story of the rise of the union on the west coast under the guidance of Mr. Harry Bridges.

Actor Ian Ruskin, trained in classical theater in London, has put his life's passion into creating and presenting this one-man show. The Harry Bridges Project was created to promote the legacy of labor leader Harry Bridges and to aid in the public's understanding of his importance to history. During the performance audience members take a journey through some of America's most turbulent years, with one of its most dynamic figures as their guide. Bridges' work, which had and still has, an enormous impact on our lives, is largely unknown outside specific labor union and academic circles.

Today his legacy continues. Shortly after his death in 1990, ILWU pensioners and locals raised \$1,000,000 to create the Harry Bridges Chair at the University of Washington. The ILWU continues to fight for their rights and the rights of workers world wide. In 1999, they played a central role in the Seattle, Washington World Trade Organization protests. Finally in July, 2001 the public square in front of San Francisco's Ferry Building was officially named Harry Bridges Plaza to honor a man who had a far reaching impact on the lives of workers everywhere.

This presentation offers audiences a chance to learn about labor history in a personal and dramatic way.

Presented Thursday, April 19 at 7:00 PM at the WSHM Free and open to the public.