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Teamster Chris Silvera speaks on the history of class warfare

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Dockworkers commemorate Bloody Thursday 2024



Teamster Chris Silvera speaking at the ILWU Local 10 Bloody Thursday 2024 Commemoration. Photo: Screenshot from YouTube video.

On July 5, 1934, San Francisco port bosses pulled out all stops trying to break a two-month West Coast dock strike over the favoritism and racism of the “shape-up” hiring system.

Two maritime workers, Nick Bordoise and Howard Sperry, were shot in the back by the police on that “Bloody Thursday.” Outraged, over 100 unions shut down the city in the historic [San Francisco General Strike](https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2024/07/08/dockworkers-commemorate-bloody-thursday-2024/).

Today, on the sidewalk outside the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 union hall are permanently drawn figures of the two labor heroes.

Every year, the ILWU shuts down West Coast ports to commemorate Bloody Thursday.

On Bloody Thursday 2024, when ILWU retiree Clarence Thomas presented a resolution to Local 10 members inviting Chris Silvera to speak on Bloody Thursday 2024, he told Local 10 members who Silvera is, just in case they didn't know.

The Resolution said:

- Brother Chris Silvera, secretary-treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 808 in Long Island City, New York, is the longest-serving principal officer in the Teamsters; and
- Brother Silvera was a critical East Coast organizer of the ILWU Local 10 initiated Million Worker March in 2004; and
- In 2006, during his tenure as the Chairman of the Teamsters National Black Caucus (TNBC), the African American Longshore Coalition hosted delegates of the TNBC at a dinner/dance titled "A Joining of Hands," at the William (Bill) Chester Hiring Hall; and
- Brother Silvera has played a leading role in the reclaiming of May Day in the labor movement, resulting in his achieving May Day as a paid holiday for a division of his union members in their collective bargaining agreement; and
- Brother Silvera is one of the most important radical voices with a long history of struggle in the Teamsters.

This is the video of Chris Silvera:



Chris Silvera's full talk, which was cut short by time restrictions at the union commemoration.

1934, A year of good trouble

Good afternoon, Sisters and Brothers of International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10. I bring solidarity greetings from Teamsters Local 808 in NYC. I also want to express worker-to-worker solidarity. In times of open warfare between capital and labor, when we must resort to the battlefield of the picket line, Teamsters will stand firmly with the ILWU. We stand firmly on a legacy of solidarity between our international unions.

We must never forget the battles that brought us here — the sacrifices of life, blood, and the tears of families who carried the burden of family members' deaths in the ongoing struggle of labor to defeat capital.

Why was 1934 so significant in the war against the capitalist ruling class? You must first go back to the Gilded Age, the Roaring Twenties.

During the period known as the Roaring Twenties, America experienced a surging economy with highly concentrated wealth at the top of the class division. This caused massive wealth inequalities between the zero-point one percent (the ruling

class) and working-class families.

Consumption became the order of the day. For the first time in America, more people were living in cities than on farms.

The 1920s brought us the Harlem Renaissance, Jazz, and Big Band Clubs up in Harlem, mixing of the races, the introduction of the consumer culture, then Prohibition, and ending with the economic crash of Oct. 29, 1929.

The Great Depression lasted almost 12 years. Twenty-five percent of all jobs were wiped out. President Herbert Hoover acknowledged the “crazy and dangerous” actions of Wall Street speculators.

That being said, he believed that the Federal government was not the solution to the problems facing the country. Working families lost their savings and, as a result, their homes. Shantytowns grew and were nicknamed “Hoovervilles.” The 1930s brought a severe drought in the Plains states, known as the Dust Bowl. Two and a half million farmers packed up and moved to California, abandoning their farms back home. Between 1930 and 1933, over 9,000 banks folded, costing depositors over \$2.5 billion in lost deposits.

That is \$77.5 billion in today’s dollars when adjusted for inflation. At that time, banks were unregulated and uninsured, and the government offered no support to unemployed workers or banks. It must be pointed out that this period brought the American working class very close to seeking communism as a solution to their problems.

Enter Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. He was elected President in 1932 and moved to rescue capitalism with steps that some would argue were socialism.

His first step was to shore up the surviving banks. By June of his first term, he had passed 15 major laws. Some of these were the Glass-Steagall Act, the Home Owners’

Loan Act, the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Agricultural Act, and the National Industrial Recovery Act. These laws fundamentally changed the economy and its trajectory. In addition, he created the Civilian Conservation Corps, which gave millions of young men jobs on environmental and public works projects.

In 1941, President Roosevelt's most well-known program was the Work Progress Administration. This program employed over 8 million people in government-created jobs. Skilled and unskilled workers found jobs in manufacturing, infrastructure construction, and the arts. One of the most important intellectual achievements was documenting the lives of surviving enslaved Africans.

The National Industrial Recovery Act was enacted on June 16, 1933. This law led to a growth spurt in organizing workers.

The birth of the Congress of Industrial Organizations - breaking away from the AFL and craft unionism

The Congress of Industrial Organizations chose to organize all workers in the industry, increasing the mass of workers who were now unionized and fighting for a greater share of the profits.

This new model brought significantly more workers into the fold of organized labor.

It also was more inclusive of Africans in America.

Some of the major unions were the United Mine Workers, ILWU, National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians (NABET), TWU, RWDSU, and United Steelworkers of America, just to name a few.

Now unto good trouble, 1934, workers are feeling the brunt of a Depression that is now four years old and with no end in sight.

Today, workers are threatened by greed, technology, and greed. Our economic well-being in the workplace and in retirement is threatened as never before. The advancement of artificial intelligence and robotics is being developed to threaten workers across the spectrum of work. We must reach back and call upon our ancestors in the workplace and imbue the militancy of 1934 to protect our future and the future of our children and grandchildren.

What did the troublemakers all have in common? They were identified as socialists and/or communists.

Three great events created the momentum for labor's advancement that carried us well into the mid-1960s.

Toledo Auto-Lite strike

The Toledo Auto-Lite strike started on April 1 and ended on June 3, 1934. The workers were organized by the American Federation of Labor into a Federal Labor Union. A Federal Labor Union is a group of workers who are organized and affiliated with the AFL but are not affiliated with an International Union.

The strike is most notable for a five-day running battle between 10,000 strikers and 1,300 members of the Ohio National Guard.

It is remembered as the Battle of Toledo. That struggle cost the lives of two strikers and injured 200.

In March 1934, the four Federal Labor unions organized in the automobile industry voted to strike for union recognition, a 20% wage increase, and the reinstatement of all workers fired for union activity.

William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, opposed the strike, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt also opposed it because of its impact on the

national economy.

Roosevelt created the Automobile Labor Board to resolve the issues. He also endorsed the idea of company unions.

Green endorsed a weak settlement, which resulted in the loss of almost half of the automobile workers that had been organized by the spring of 1934.

Unemployment had reached a staggering 70% in Toledo, and with the declaration of bankruptcy by the largest employer, Willys-Overland automobile company, the city's largest bank collapsed, and other banks and savings and loan associations also collapsed.

The city of Toledo laid off hundreds of workers, including 150 police officers. Times were increasingly more difficult each and every day.

Against the economic and social devastation of the Depression, Federal Labor Union 18384 began to demand recognition of their union and wage increases. FLU 18384 was organized with multiple employers. The companies were Bingham Stamping and Tool Co. and Logan Gear Co., both of which were subsidiaries of the Electric Auto-Lite Co., as well as Spicer Manufacturing Co. This allowed the union to strike one employer and remain economically viable.

This economic power gave rise to a necessary militancy to defeat the capitalist class.

On Feb. 23, 1934, FLU 18384 initiated a strike that lasted for five days. The company agreed to a 5% wage increase and to negotiate a contract by April 1. The union demanded an additional 20% wage increase, seniority rights, a closed shop, improved working conditions, union recognition, and an end to discrimination against union members.

The employer refused to agree, and a strike was authorized. Only 25% of the

workers walked out this time, and the strike started to collapse.

The American Workers Party intervened on the union's side. The AWP was formed the year before, in 1933. The AWP had been organizing unemployed workers under the banner of the Lucas County Unemployed League throughout the city, and those workers became allies instead of strikebreakers.

The company sought and got an injunction against the picketers. The workers and their allies defied the court injunction. The picketers were arrested, and with hundreds of supporters in the courtroom singing, cheering, and disrupting the proceedings, the judge released the picketers without rendering a decision. The company hired 1,500 strikebreakers and armed guards in an attempt to restart production. The sheriff's department deputized a large number of special deputies that were paid for by the Auto-Lite company. The company also purchased \$11,000 worth of tear and vomit gas. On May 23, the sheriff's deputies moved against 10,000 picketers, arresting one of the leaders of the strike and four picketers.

Then, they began to beat an old man, thus setting into motion a brick and bottle-throwing response by the supporters of the striking workers. A running battle with National Guardsmen and the police went on for two days. On May 24, the soldiers opened fire on the striking workers and their supporters. Two men died: 27-year-old Frank Hubay, who was shot four times, and 20-year-old Steve Cyigon. (Please say their names.)

On May 25, the company agreed to keep the plant closed in an attempt to quell the violence. However, violence continued around the factory, becoming more intense and ending the day with 51 of the cities' unions endorsing a general strike. The struggle intensified, and by June 2, 1934, the union had accepted a settlement. That struggle led to more organizing in the auto industry and a successful strike against Chevrolet. Toledo remains one of the most unionized cities in America. In 1935, FLU 18384 became UAW Local 12.

West Coast longshoremen's strike

In 1910, the Longshoremen on the West Coast agreed to re-affiliate with the International Longshore Association, the ILA, on the condition that they would remain and retain full autonomy within the ILA.

The Autonomous Pacific Coast District of the ILA called the strike.

On May 9, 1934, West Coast longshoremen went on strike, shutting down ports in Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, San Francisco, San Pedro, and San Diego. The issues included wages and working conditions. The workers wanted \$1.00 per hour, a six-hour day, and a 30-hour week.

Equally important, they wanted to end the shape-up system and create a union hiring hall. The Embarcadero had become known as the slave market.

The strike lasted 84 days. By May 13, the Teamsters refused to handle any work on the docks in San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, and Los Angeles. On May 13, sailors, firemen, cooks, stewards, masters, mates, and pilots joined the strike. On May 15, not one ship moved, and international commerce on the West Coast was effectively shut down.

The employer group called the Industrial Association of San Francisco and other employer groups in the Pacific Northwest and Los Angeles joined in a plan to break the strike by force.

The Industrial Association's membership included almost all of the city's banks, railroads, manufacturing, insurance, and shipping companies. Its mission was to eliminate unions and the influence of those unions that survived.

At that time, all work was casual, and there was no job security, paid vacation, sick days, or pensions.

It must be noted that the police did not work to protect the striking longshore workers but to protect the interest of the ruling class, the employers.

The media did not support the strikers; the newspapers called them vultures. The Central Labor Council passed a resolution condemning communists among the maritime workers. Remember that the media and the police are tools of the capitalist class and are never friends of labor when we are at war with them.

In mid-June 1934, the ILA International President Joseph Ryan, nicknamed King Ryan, arrived in San Francisco and entered into negotiations with Mayor Angelo Rossi, leaders of the Pacific Coast District, the head of the Industrial Association, the Chamber of Commerce and representatives of the Waterfront Employers.

On June 16, 1934, they announced that the strike was over. They were wrong, and the workers rejected the Ryan deal because it did not address the central demands of the Pacific Coast District. The strike continued with intensity, and on July 5, 1934, workers returned to the battle after taking some rest on July 4.

Some Teamster leaders stood in solidarity with the striking Longshore workers and refused to work any struck cargo.

The Mayor and the police decided to use force to end the strike. The mayor told Bridges and his committee that went to see him, "You had a chance to end this peacefully. You were told that if you didn't take that June 16 agreement, the strike would be ended by force."

Strikers and their supporters were in a rock-throwing battle to stop the strikebreakers from doing their work. The police drove them into an area at the intersection of Steuart and Mission Street. In the early afternoon, thousands had been driven into this area of Mission and Steuart streets.

A plainclothes policeman arrived and threatened the striking workers with guns in

both hands. He started shooting into the crowd. One man died, one managed to survive, and later, one was found dead from buckshot from a police riot gun. More than 100 were injured by gunshots, tear gas, and police clubs.

The Governor sent in the National Guard equipped with tanks, machine gun nests, snipers, and soldiers equipped with bayonets on the waterfront to protect the strikebreakers, the employers, and their profits.

A few days later, there was a funeral procession from the union's headquarters to a funeral parlor in the Mission District. Thousands of strikers and supporters marched in solidarity with the Longshore workers.

George Kidwell, a Teamster leader of the Bakery Wagon Drivers, led the calls for a general strike. Four days after the general strike, Local 38-79 voted to arbitrate the issues.

The arbitration was a win for the strikers and provided the union with what set the stage for today's hiring hall. They got a six-hour workday and a 34-hour workweek.

The company and the union jointly paid for the hiring hall; however, the union determined the dispatcher.

In 1937, the Pacific Coast District voted to leave the ILA and affiliate with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The creation of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union permanently divided the longshore workers in the United States. The solidarity of the coast-wide organization has led to better outcomes for the ILWU members in negotiations.

Please say their names: Nick Bordoise and Howard Sperry.

We must never forget those who gave all for us to have what we have today.

Minneapolis Teamsters' strike

The other significant event of the Depression in 1934 occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They were coal drivers, and we were organized under the leadership of Vincent Dunne and Carl Skoglund into Teamsters Local 574. When the coal operators refused to recognize the union, the workers went on strike on Feb. 7, 1934.

The strike lasted three days when the coal bosses agreed to negotiate wages and working conditions. Following the small win, the union moved to target the market district that dealt in perishable food. They targeted 11 major companies demanding a closed shop and \$27.50 per week and overtime pay. The companies formed the Citizens' Alliance, representing 166 companies. The companies refused to negotiate with the Teamsters. The union called for another strike. On May 16, 1934, Teamsters Local 574 took the workers out on strike.

The union demanded recognition of the union, wage increases, shorter working hours, and the right of the union to represent the inside workers. Inside workers were warehousemen and loaders. The strike brought all trucking in the city to a standstill. The union used a tactic known as flying pickets that patrolled the street to ensure that no scabs were used to break the strike. A Women's Auxiliary group was formed to organize demonstrations at the city hall, support picket lines, and operate a food commissary and a hospital to fix up workers' injuries during the struggle.

It was noted that many of the women took part in the street fighting when workers confronted the police. The union established a constructive relationship with unemployed workers' organizations, undermining employers' ability to find scabs.

Police violence against the workers first started on May 19, when workers tried to stop scabs from unloading a truck. May 21 and 22 saw significant violence as the police and armed vigilantes working for the Citizens' Alliance attacked 20,000

workers and their supporters who were trying to keep the market closed.

Around this time, building trade workers walked out in opposition to the police violence against the workers.

On May 25, 1934, the employers agreed to accept the striking workers' demands. The strikers returned to work, and the employers chose to renege on their agreement. The union filed over 700 grievances, and the companies refused to abide by their agreement to allow the union to organize the inside workers. On July 17, 1934, the workers returned to the picket line.

A large group of workers were lured to a street corner by police in a fake scab truck. More than 100 police began firing at the unarmed workers. This incident became known as Bloody Friday. Two picketers, Henry Ness and John Belor, were killed, and over 65 were injured. Please say their names: Henry Ness and John Belor.

The violence of the police was so vicious that support and donations rushed in. Workers joined in the strike to protest the shooting and other police violence.

A crowd of 100,000 people attended Henry Ness's funeral. Governor Floyd B. Olson declared martial law and deployed 4,000 soldiers. Picketing was banned, and trucks driven by scabs were issued military permits and began to move again.

The union demanded that the permits be revoked and voted to return to the picket line on Aug. 1, 1934. On July 31, the National Guards surrounded the union hall and arrested many of the leaders.

Rank and file members from many of the city's unions, 40,000 strong, confronted the soldiers and demanded the release of their leaders. The leaders were released, and the union hall was returned to the members.

The strike ended on Aug. 31, 1934, with the union winning most of its central

demands. The Citizens' Alliance was broken, and workers began to organize in earnest.

The Minneapolis Labor Review wrote, "The winning of this strike marks the greatest victory in the annals of the local trade union movement. ... It has changed Minneapolis from being known as a scab's paradise to being a city of hope for those who toil."

The strike was pivotal for the Teamsters and the labor movement. Lessons learned from that strike led to the creation of the National Master Freight Agreement and later the UPS National Master Agreement - lessons learned by James R. Hoffa from socialists and communists.

Today, we have tent cities all over the country as wealth inequality continues to drive more people into homelessness.

