

Stalinism in the writing of American labor history

A new biography of West Coast longshoremen's leader Harry Bridges

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Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend, by Robert Cherny, University of Illinois Press, 2023.

West Coast longshoremen's leader Harry Bridges (1901-1990) was among the most prominent American union officials of the last century—and certainly the best known among those closely associated with the Communist Party (CPUSA) and Stalinism.

Robert W. Cherny's *Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend*, published last year by the University of Illinois Press, covers Bridges' life from his youth in Australia to the last years at the helm of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in the 1970s, with a concentration on the 1930s and 1940s, when Bridges gained fame through his leadership of the San Francisco General Strike of 1934—and through his persecution at the hands of the US government over allegations that he was a communist.

Like other prominent figures associated with but not clearly “in” the CPUSA, Bridges always denied party membership. Cherny finds nothing in the archive to contradict this. Yet Bridges' politics were never in doubt. At critical moments in the 1930s and 1940s, he attempted to direct his union in accord with Kremlin demands. Cherny's work shows this, but the historian treats it as a largely superfluous aspect of Bridges' career. And even though Cherny refers once or twice to Bridges' violent eruptions at left-wing opponents, he ignores entirely the substantial Trotskyist influence among the maritime workers of northern California, including in one of the biggest unions, the Sailors Union of the Pacific (SUP).

In these omissions, Cherny conforms to the pattern among “left” historians of American communism, who seek to separate the reactionary politics of Stalinism, which they obscure or minimize, from the CP's “grassroots” activities, which they celebrate. It is a form of historical writing that excises politics. The problem is that it is impossible to understand history without a serious approach to ideology. This is especially true of 20th-century history, where the question of questions is whether there was an alternative to Stalinism—not only in the Soviet Union but in any country in which there was a labor movement and radical politics. After all, to a great extent, the labor movement *consisted* of a struggle over political leadership and orientation. It will simply not do for historians to ignore that struggle.

It is doubly unfortunate that Cherny avoids these questions, because much of Bridges' relevance for workers today arises from the lessons to be drawn from his attempts to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party in Stalinism's “Popular Front” era of the mid-1930s, and even more so during World War II, during which the American labor movement imposed a no-strike pledge on workers that was vociferously backed by Bridges. Now, as the WWII-era slogan “Arsenal of Democracy” is again being bandied about by President Joe Biden and

union officials such as Shawn Fain of the UAW and their pseudo-left publicists, these historical lessons take on heightened significance.

As we will have some critical things to say about this biography, let us first note that Cherny, professor of history emeritus at San Francisco State University, is an accomplished research historian. In 2019, he took a principled stand against an identity politics-driven crusade to destroy or cover up supposedly “racially insensitive” murals by the famed Russian muralist Victor Arnautoff, giving an interview to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Cherny's biography of Bridges is deeply researched. The author worked in numerous archives, including the post-Soviet Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI). The research is honestly presented—though Cherny refuses to draw critical conclusions about Bridges from his own evidence.

Cherny began his work in the late 1980s at the request of Bridges himself, suggesting that the volume shades toward the category of “the authorized biography.” Cherny expresses his admiration for his subject, declaring that Bridges “long since achieved iconic status.” One should not expect a critical book with a subtitle declaring the subject to be a “labor legend.” Cherny's narrative portrays Bridges accordingly. This is a largely celebratory account that sets to the side the implications of the union leader's Stalinism.

The rise of Harry Bridges

Born Alfred Renton Bridges, Harry was raised in Australia in a middle-class family. An avid reader of the novels of Jack London, Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad, he was drawn to the adventure of the sea. Starting in December, 1917, Bridges hired on for voyages on small two-masted ketches between the mainland and Tasmania until a year later, when he shipped out to Auckland, New Zealand. It was there that Bridges hired on to the *Ysabel*, a four-masted schooner, and made his way to San Francisco at the age of 20, not to return to Australia for decades.

The American working class was then radicalizing under the influence of the Russian Revolution and amid a massive strike wave of the World War I era. Within months of Bridges' arrival, other cargo trips took him to New Orleans, where he joined the revolutionary industrial union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies”). Bridges returned to the West Coast and, at a certain point, came into the orbit of the young communist movement.

At about the same time, in 1922, Bridges began work as a longshoreman in San Francisco, at first just to earn money while awaiting a cargo trip back to Australia. Dockworkers hated the bosses' practice of the “shape-

up,” through which the employers made daily selections for who would work and who would not, a system that forced workers to pay bribes for jobs out of their daily wages. Worse, the “Blue Book” racket required that workers pay fees for the “privilege” of even having their names listed for the daily shape-up. Workers who found themselves out of favor with the bosses were easily blackballed. Cherny concludes that the system “abetted exploitative work practices by denying work to anyone who protested a speedup, challenged unsafe practices, disputed a refusal to pay overtime, reported an injury, or confronted the Blue Book.”

The call for a union-controlled hiring hall and the end to the Blue Book became one of the central demands among dockworkers. Due to Bridges’ unwavering support of union control of the hiring process, he was elected to head the Strike Committee in 1934. The strike started on the docks before transforming into the citywide San Francisco General Strike. The fourth and fifth chapters engagingly cover the dramatic and bloody struggle of dockworkers as it won the support of the entire San Francisco labor movement.

On July 4, 1934, the city of San Francisco stood on the brink of class warfare. The longshoremen’s strike had grown to include all seagoing unions, and Bridges had emerged as the principal leader of the strikers. The waterfront and maritime employers had given carte blanche to the Industrial Association, the “model of militant employer tactics,” which had enlisted the police to force open the port and break the strike. Some long-established union leaders, notably [Teamsters leader] Mike Casey, had tried to straddle the conflict. On July 5, they had to decide which side they were on. (83)

The author sums the struggle up:

Two months into the strike, the San Francisco business community united to smash [longshoremen’s] Local 38-79 and intimidate the reviving labor movement. Instead, brutal police tactics strengthened union solidarity and brought additional support to the strike, including a general strike that shut down most of San Francisco. Business leaders were both frightened and impressed by the unions’ ability to shut down most of the city. ... Both sides claimed victory when the men returned to work. In retrospect, the 1934 strike stands as the watershed in the history of Pacific Coast longshore unionism: it firmly entrenched the union and its hiring hall, established coastwise collective bargaining, initiated a system of arbitration, indelibly stamped Pacific Coast longshoremen as militant, and gave them a leader to match. (84)

Harry Bridges and American Stalinism

The relationship between the objective social forces driving workers into struggle and the conscious elements that provide leadership and orientation is vital in understanding the revolutionary significance of class conflicts. Cherny does not see this at all. Referring to the other great strikes of 1934, in Minneapolis and Toledo, he eschews any consideration of politics, insisting that these titanic labor struggles were spontaneous:

[D]id Communists initiate the general strike, and were they

significant in carrying it out? The evidence does not allow for a simple yes-or-no answer, but Communists were not the primary agents in creating and shaping this important event. Communists early on called for a general strike, but they were not alone. Talk of a general strike, by Communists and others, began in mid-May, when newspapers were reporting on general strikes in Toledo and Minneapolis, *neither led by Communists*. [Emphasis added] (158).

It does a great disservice to students of history and workers in struggle to conceal the active, theoretical side of the working class upsurge of the 1930s. Masses of workers entered into struggles not simply as passive objects of history—i.e., spontaneously—but with conscious leaders and with political thoughts in their heads. The Toledo Auto-Lite strike, which took place from April to June, was led by members of a socialist organization, the American Workers Party (AWP) of the Rev. A.J. Muste. The Minneapolis struggle, the most successful and important of the three big strikes, was led by worker-comrades of the Communist League of America (CLA), the party of the Trotskyist movement in the US, led by James P. Cannon. In December of that year the CLA merged with the AWP organization to become the Workers Party, the predecessor of the Socialist Workers Party.

These basic facts about the events of 1934 should have led Cherny to give some consideration of the role of Bridges’ politics. Instead, the historian only alludes to the policy shifts taken by the Kremlin, invariably adopted by the CPUSA and Bridges, treating them as though they were incidental to the labor struggles on the West Coast—Cherny suggests that Bridges’ “public statements of support for the Soviet Union or the CPUSA’s position on domestic or foreign policy action were almost always separate from any union action” (342). Not only does Cherny brush aside the Stalinist shifts’ influence on Bridges’ role as a union leader, he ignores completely their impact on the thinking of rank-and-file workers who were being politicized amidst the Great Depression and the rise of fascism.

A short description of the Stalinist political shifts should give some sense of their significance:

- Moscow’s proclamation in 1928 of the ultra-left “Third Period,” in which the various Stalinist parties denounced other working class organizations as “fascist.” In this period, the American Stalinists, Bridges included, suddenly dropped their policy of “boring from within” the American Federation of Labor union and called for the formation of independent “Red Unions.” By far the most tragic consequence of this policy on an international scale came in Germany, where it enabled Hitler’s rise to power.

- Reacting to that catastrophe, Stalin then careened to the Popular Front period starting in 1934, in which the Kremlin demanded Communist parties subordinate their work to the capitalist democracies, the US, Britain and France, which it was attempting to woo to an anti-German alliance. The American Stalinists, Bridges included, campaigned for Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. This policy also led to international disaster in the betrayal of the Spanish and French revolutions in 1936 and 1937, which made World War II inevitable.

- Isolated from the Western democracies, Stalin shifted again, concluding the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with Hitler in 1939. Now Bridges and other American Stalinists attacked Roosevelt as an imperialist and called for US neutrality in what appeared to be a coming war pitting Germany against Britain and France. This period came to a crashing end in 1941, when Hitler invaded the USSR, killing millions in the process.

- The Kremlin then shifted once more, demanding total subordination of the working class to the capitalist Allied war effort, even as inflation devoured workers’ pay. Bridges again fell in line. The Stalinists hewed to

class collaborationism even in the first years after World War II, in 1945-1946, in a period of revolutionary upheaval in Western Europe and, in the US, the largest strike wave in history, which took the form of a colossal “wildcat” rebellion of the rank and file against the union apparatus.

A thorough analysis of Bridges’ career would have to take into consideration how these shifts affected his actions as a union leader, as well as the political consciousness of West Coast workers. This was not Cherny’s intention. Yet certain points can be deduced from his presentation of the archival record.

Bridges came into his own during World War II when the demands from the Kremlin aligned with those coming from Washington. With the launch of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the CPUSA turned to pressuring the same President Roosevelt it had been denouncing as an “imperialist warmonger” to enter the war. Bridges abandoned his position as a “class conscious labor leader,” and, alongside many other union heads, committed his members to a no-strike pledge in accordance with Roosevelt’s National War Labor Board (NWLB).

At this point, there was little practical difference between Bridges and other significant union officials, for example, Walter Reuther, who was then rising rapidly in the UAW. Bridges did all he could to resolve the wartime production labor shortages and to encourage workers to “sacrifice,” admitting to a correspondent in 1942 “[w]e are urging our longshoremen ... to do more work and to relinquish certain gains that we have fought for in the past.” (208)

Bridges condemned as traitors labor leaders who did not do the same—including John L. Lewis, head of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and at the time still the most significant figure in the industrial union movement. Lewis was the consummate labor bureaucrat, but as World War II-driven inflation devoured coal miners’ paychecks, he could no longer hold the rank and file back from striking. When the UMW launched a national strike in 1943, in the middle of the war, the “militant” Bridges denounced Lewis and the coal miners. As Cherny notes, “on May 1, 1943, John L. Lewis led the UMW to strike against it [the NWLB]. Bridges and other ILWU leaders were outraged. The ILWU’s new newspaper, *The Dispatcher*, asserted, ‘Hitler has found a pal in John L. Lewis.’” ILWU officers decried Lewis as “‘the single most effective agent of the fascist powers within the ranks of labor,’ and Bridges personally denounced Lewis as ‘a traitor to the nation and to labor.’” (202)

The Stalinist labor leaders, if anything, went deeper into what Trotsky called “the steel embrace of the imperialist state” than did the “main line” Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) leaders. And few went so far as Harry Bridges, who even imposed a no-strike pledge on the ILWU for the years *after* the war, when the whole working class was agitating to make up for lost wages.

Bridges defended this corporatist policy in terms that might have come from the mouth of a union head in fascist Italy. “This measure,” he said, “would defend the security of the nation before and after the war.” (210). In February 1945, he reiterated the no-strike promise to *Fortune* magazine—the flagship publication of the capitalist elite. “‘Labor unions have got to work with the employers, Bridges says, and with the public for the good of the community, the country, the world. Anyone who disagrees with that philosophy is a scab, a fink, a Trotskyite, or a fascist appeaser. ... He wants American free enterprise, American capitalism to work. ... The US, according to Bridges’ philosophy, must build up other countries after the war so that there can be an enormously expanded foreign trade.’” (211)

In its basic call for the subordination of labor to American capitalism, Bridges’ policy was no different than Reuther’s Treaty of Detroit. Both claimed that by holding back the working class all boats would be lifted on the rising tide of American capitalism. Bridges was only different in

his “all-in” rhetoric; Reuther shrewdly hedged his bets, even borrowing from Trotskyist autoworkers the demand that the corporations “open the books.” Cherny concedes that it was his post-war no-strike pledge, more than Bridges’ communism, that allowed Philip Murray and the rest of the CIO leadership to turn on him, a pattern that played out for the Stalinists in unions across the country. Having betrayed workers’ wage demands during and after the war, the Stalinists found themselves isolated when the inevitable anti-communist strike came.

Bridges’ vicious anti-Trotskyism is cast into relief by his wartime positions. The Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) opposed the imperialist war, and insisted on fighting, within the confines imposed by mobilization, for the independent interests of the working class. Though he himself faced relentless pressure from the capitalist state, Bridges gladly joined in the persecution of the Trotskyists, who were the first victims of the Smith Act trials that would later be aimed at the Stalinists.

Cherny cites the ILWU in a 1942 article in the ILA newsletter *The Dispatcher*—which initiated “a regular column by Bridges entitled ‘On the Beam.’ His first column blasted ‘appeasers, Trotskyists and other such Hitlerian fifth column elements’ for sabotaging efforts to resolve labor shortages.” But Cherny disregards the connection between these lines and Bridges’ demand for working class subordination to the war. And Cherny makes nothing of the fact that they show Bridges’ full solidarity with the mass murder carried out by Stalin against Trotskyists and socialist opponents in the Soviet Union—among them Lenin’s entire political leadership—and the killing of Trotskyists all over the world, including Trotsky himself, assassinated in Mexico City in 1940 with the active involvement of members of the CPUSA.

All of Bridges’ political efforts were dedicated to channeling the working class of the West Coast behind Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. In 1944, he admitted that the ILWU had handed off so much money—that is, workers’ dues—behind Roosevelt’s reelection that he “broke our bloody union ... we’re flat broke.” (213). So much for the “labor radical, labor legend.”

Bridges versus the rank and file

At moments in his career, Bridges was able to give voice to the aspirations of the rank and file. At others, the influence of Stalinism led Bridges to positions that put him in conflict with the rank-and-file workers, or with the rest of the labor bureaucracy. Then, in his later years, Bridges came to behave very much like other union officials who, in their earlier days, had been worker militants but who had come to identify completely the labor movement with the union bureaucracy and not the rank and file that it nominally represented. American labor history is littered with such figures. Very few could say, together with Eugene Debs, who turned his back on the bureaucracy, “When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks.”

Bridges retained a certain following among an older generation of longshoremen, who returned him to office year after year in spite of—or perhaps, in part, because of—the seemingly endless hounding by the federal government, which did not give up on its efforts to deport him until the mid-1950s, with two separate cases making their way to the Supreme Court. Bridges’ presidency also survived the right-wing efforts of the CIO to isolate the ILWU, which used the reactionary Taft-Hartley Act to expel the entire union in 1950.

But by the later years of his tenure, Bridges’ ability to posture as a militant had become threadbare. Most notable in this vein is the 1960 Modernization and Mechanization (M&M) agreement allowing the

dramatic expansion of containerization by the shipping bosses, which Bridges admitted was “a beautiful piece of class collaboration.” While the employers saved some 90 percent in labor costs, the benefits negotiated for workers were limited and divisive. More than anything else, they ensured a massive decline in employment. Bridges was unmoved. “When there is only one man left on the waterfront, pushing buttons, he’s going to be ILWU,” he boasted, neatly summing up the narrow worldview of the union bureaucrat.

The M&M was especially unfair to young workers, creating what was in essence one of the first two-tier systems in American industrial history. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Bridges’ defense of corporate efficiency brought him into conflict with this young generation of rank-and-file workers, just as happened with unions in other industries of the time—the UMW in coal, the UAW in auto, and the Teamsters in trucking.

Here again, Cherny, to his credit, allows the archive to speak, referring on one occasion to a Bridges’ “diatribe” against the rank and file. Ultimately Bridges could not hold back the young workers, many of them Vietnam War veterans, from a strike, which came in 1971. But Bridges made sure to exempt military shipping from the strike, ensuring the continuation of the bloody imperialist venture in Vietnam. (317-318) The ILWU issued rhetorical criticism of the war, but union-handled shipping actually increased over its duration, as Cherny notes. Indeed, wartime speed-up and job pressure were leading grievances of the young workers.

In these years, Bridges revealed himself to be the consummate political pragmatist, not at all unlike his contemporary Jimmy Hoffa of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Indeed, while it may never be known if Bridges joined the CPUSA, it is known that he joined the Republican Party in 1956. Like Hoffa, Bridges was targeted by John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, who sought to use congressional investigations to further housebreak what was somewhat erroneously called “the American labor movement.” Bridges never forgave the Kennedys and steered the ILWU between the two major parties of capitalism in the elections of the 1960s.

Cherny suggests that, at this stage of his career, Bridges’ Stalinism had taken a backseat to his hard-headed practicality. This is a misunderstanding. It is not just that the Kremlin could command this or that “line” among its adherents abroad as it suited its foreign policy exigencies. It is that it found in the US a layer of middle-class radicals and trade unionists whose characteristics suited its ideology. The Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, summed up the connection between pragmatism and Stalinism in a 1978 Perspectives document:

Like the medieval plagues that originated in the East but flourished in the unsanitary conditions of life in western Europe, Stalinism quite naturally hooked itself into the milieu of the trade union bureaucracy and middle class radicalism. Similarly, Stalinism found that the traditions of pragmatism and even populism provided a very hospitable political climate. In other words, the Stalinists have been able to utilize all that was backward in the political development of the American labor movement.

Conclusion—An effective union leader ... for whom?

Cherny’s epilogue begins by posing a series of questions. “So, then, how effective was Bridges as a union leader, and how was he effective?” Cherny asks. “Did his relationship with the Communist Party affect his

effectiveness as a union leader, and, if so, how?” (339) Cherny’s answer is that Bridges was effective, and his “relationship” with Stalinism had no bearing on that efficacy.

But Cherny does not ask: Effective *for whom*? In an unintentionally revealing passage, he provides something of an answer:

In 2001 California governor Gray Davis designated Bridges’ birthday, July 28, as Harry Bridges Day. That day Nancy Pelosi was among those who gathered on the plaza in front of the San Francisco Ferry Building—once site of the hated shape-up—for its renaming as Harry Bridges Plaza. (344)

That Bridges is celebrated by hardened enemies of the working class like Davis and the multi-millionaire warmonger Nancy Pelosi speaks volumes. Former House Speaker Pelosi does not represent California’s workers. She represents its 186 billionaires, whose wealth has multiplied during her many years in office and is now counted in the trillions. Meanwhile, millions of California workers live paycheck-to-paycheck, no better off than their forebears in the Great Depression. If Bridges is remembered fondly by the likes of Pelosi, it is strong evidence that the ruling class senses that he was “an effective union leader” for its interests during and after World War II.

And perhaps just the sort of union leader that they might want to have around in the context of a new global war. Bridges’ formidable experience as a worker-leader in the early 1930s and his reputation as a socialist militant gave him a certain cover for his class collaborationist role during World War II and the Vietnam War. Biden, Pelosi, and their like would wish very much for figures such as Shawn Fain of the UAW and Sean O’Brien of the Teamsters to play this role today. Unfortunately for them, Fain and O’Brien have none of Bridges’ history—they are “pure and simple” creatures of the bureaucracy. But this does not stop pseudo-left publications such as *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* from raising hymns in their names.

Cherny’s book is worth reading, but it must be read with the critical eye that its author lacked. The lesson for rank-and-file workers today is to not believe what allegedly “progressive” union officials and their public relations allies say about themselves—no matter how “left” they talk—but to seek to understand what class forces they actually represent. Fain wears a thinner disguise than Bridges. But when Fain speaks of reviving American factories as “an arsenal for democracy,” this is code for the subordination of the working class to imperialist war, inflation, and austerity, a dark art that Harry Bridges knew well.



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