

[Bonus] AFD Ep 361 Links and Notes - 1923 San Pedro Maritime Strike [Bill/Rachel] - Recording March 23

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1923_San_Pedro_maritime_strike
- [Bill] This week on the bonus episode we're talking about another unsuccessful early 20th century US labor action including a failed general strike call. It's the 1923 San Pedro Maritime Strike at the Port of Los Angeles in California.
- [Bill] The IWW led this strike (or walkout), which occurred not long after the First Red Scare and the anti-syndicalist/anti-socialist legislation we discussed in our summer 2019 IWW mega-episode <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2019/08/13/lend-lease-10-american-anarchy-part-1-syndicalist-theory-and-iww-practice/>], one of which was the California "criminal syndicalism" law. Typically, according to the 1935 analysis "Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States" by Eldridge Dowell, these laws, which had been passed in 15 states and 2 territories often unchanged in each, ranged from restrictions on the use of public grounds for assembly to restrictions on ballot eligibility to bans on red flags to literature distribution bans to various laws against industrial sabotage intended to achieve industrial/political objectives. Penalties nearly always included hefty fines and a decade of prison time. (Incredibly, the California law was not formally repealed until 1991, although the US Supreme Court had explicitly nullified it inside a 1969 ruling on a case in Ohio: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Criminal_Syndicalism_Act For reasons that will become ironic as we progress through this episode, it should be noted that the Ohio ruling was actually upholding the right of a Klansman to engage in inflammatory hate speech and public demonstrations, for which he was being prosecuted under the Criminal Syndicalism law on the books in Ohio. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brandenburg_v._Ohio)
- What happened in the strike:
 - [Rachel]The 1923 strike in San Pedro followed the brief, failed May 1916 port strike which the LAPD suppressed by literally hiring out its police to work protection details for the port ownership's scab workers. There was also another brief attempted strike in late 1919 when the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce announced an agreement by all companies on the waterfront that they would be "open shop" (i.e. union membership would not be required anywhere). The IWW's national leadership decided to order all port worker members on the entire US West coast to relocate to Los Angeles to build up density to begin organizing serious opposition to the open shop policy and to try to strengthen their defenses against the criminal syndicalism law in California.
 - The open shop policy basically pushed out the less radical labor organizations like the AFL, leaving the IWW to pick up support from any workers still interested in fighting back against management. They organized them into the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union Local 510. In early 1923, they staged some little wildcat strikes on or around individual ships to keep them from operating on time. And they had been staging small street protests in the face of police crackdowns since back in November of the previous year.
 - On April 25, 1923, the IWW launched an attempted port-wide strike or walkout of their members and supporters in response to a state Grand Jury hearing on alleged violations of the Criminal Syndicalism Act. Their demands, bolstered by IWW members in other trades on the West Coast as well as several thousand East Coast IWW port workers, was the immediate release of all political prisoners, state and federal, held under criminal syndicalism and sedition laws.
 - Altogether only several thousand (or perhaps low tens of thousands of) workers in the entire country walked out to join the strike. (A contemporary NY Times

article says 15,000 lumbermen in the Pacific Northwest, half affiliated to or half merely supporting the IWW, had walked out on April 25 as well.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1923/05/14/archives/lumbermens-strike-ends-iww-calls-it-off-in-northwest-3000-san-pedro.html>) Other West Coast ports continued to operate without serious interruption (maybe because the IWW had recalled their members to LA?) and the Sailors Union of the Pacific refused to participate because they already had an ongoing labor action in progress (centered on a work slowdown) and didn't want to throw out their strategy, which they felt was getting them results.

- Around 90 ships in Los Angeles were initially tied up by the strike action by possibly as many as 3,000 strikers, but the ships got under way gradually as the LAPD began arresting IWW organizers and members. Not much more materialized on May Day when the IWW called for a general strike of all workers in Los Angeles. The employers kept maneuvering whenever possible to try to cut side deals with various labor clusters in Los Angeles who were sympathetic to the IWW strike and were threatening to join them, which kept sympathy walkouts relatively minimal in size.
- [Bill] By mid-May, the LAPD had arrested and was still holding around 600 strikers. On May 15, Upton Sinclair (who had already run for Congress twice as a Socialist and was eventually going to run for Governor 3 times) was arrested for reading the First Amendment while leading a protest on Liberty Hill in Los Angeles. Allegedly the arresting officer said "We'll have none of that Constitution stuff." The LAPD continued mass arrests for a few more days until it became untenable. The arrest of Sinclair, nationally famous for his pivotal work on labor safety in food production in the 1906 novel "The Jungle," was so shocking to the public that the LAPD was forced to release and withdraw charges against nearly all of the 600 IWW members or supporters they had arrested up to this point. There was no police action against him a week later when he returned to Liberty Hill to address a crowd of 5,000.
<https://ufcw324.org/uppity-sinclair-and-the-battle-of-liberty-hill/>
 - One of Sinclair's conditions to drop a civil lawsuit against the city for violating his rights was the resignation of the LAPD chief, which did happen, particularly because the chief had been quoted multiple times mentioning Sinclair by name in a way that made pretty clear Sinclair was being specifically targeted unfairly above and beyond anyone else:
https://depts.washington.edu/iww/liberty_hill.shtml The experience spurred Sinclair to launch the ACLU of Southern California and eventually to begin his 3 attempts to win the governorship including the 1934 race as the Democratic nominee where he was defeated but won nearly 38%.
 - Photos of the event here:
<https://archive.iww.org/history/campaigns/sanpedro/images/>
 - Since 1998, there is a 9 foot tall stone monolith with commemorative bronze plaques on the site today to mark the events:
<https://www.californiahistoricallandmarks.com/landmarks/chl-1021>
 - Sinclair's 1928 Broadway play "The Singing Jailbirds" is inspired by the mass jailing of the 1923 strikers. It was inexplicably revived as a musical in San Pedro in 2009 by a guy who thought the original play had too much "socialist propaganda" in it, including literally writing new lyrics to use over traditional labor songs, interspersed with 1920s jazz music. The production drafted men from a nearby residential addiction recovery program to play the longshoremen singers.

<https://www.pasadenastarnews.com/2009/05/18/singing-jailbirds-pays-tribute-to-upton-sinclair-san-pedro-longshoremen/>

- A quick note from friend of the show John Leavitt: this would be like adapting the Sinclair novel "Oil!" to be about "a curmudgeonly oil man who adopts a child and learns to love" instead of "There Will Be Blood"
- [Rachel] However, the mass arrests had already done their job for port management at the time. A nearly equal number of scab replacement workers had been given permanent employment to replace the arrested strikers during that time. And by May 18, a few days after the Sinclair arrest, the Shipowners' Association announced that they had just experienced the busiest day in San Pedro history, with 85 ships loading or unloading under 2,800 workers. Functionally there was no more strike. Protest actions and mass meetings continued for a few more days beyond that but by May 24, non-IWW workers who could still secure re-employment voted to end the walkout.
- [Rachel] Police had combined with the KKK to suppress the 1923 strike. The LA Klan recruited more members during this time to go stand around on the docks (sometimes not even wearing hoods) to menace potential strikers. I also found one recent source I don't really trust that said American Legion members participated in strikebreaking activities as well, which is definitely plausible, but they didn't cite anything to support this claim, so I'm not linking to it.
 - In March of 1924, a little less than a year later, the Klan gathered members from every direction over hundreds of miles to Los Angeles and marched to the San Pedro waterfront, Liberty Hill, and around an IWW meeting hall with hoods and burning crosses (and a police escort) as a warning to IWW members and sympathizers not to try striking again: <https://archive.iww.org/history/campaigns/sanpedro/klan/> The IWW's official magazine at the time, the Industrial Pioneer, observed that most of the local newspapers [see below also] vastly inflated the number of Klan marchers into the 10,000-15,000 range, while one local newspaper more calmly estimated well under 2,000 Klan members participated, which the IWW correspondent believed was a more accurate estimate, especially after judging the length of the parade wrapped around the IWW meeting hall. The Klan parade was headed up by a local banker as well as the supervisor of the port owners' approved hiring hall, which had been the object of much of the strikers' ire the previous year. A klansman delivered a speech making clear their affiliation to capital as well as their bigotry: "If there are any IWW in the crowd I say to you we are not against you, but we are against bolshevism, anarchy, IWWism or any other doctrine of disloyalty to the constitution. If you are aliens, willing to become good Americans, you will not be molested. If you don't like the country you can go back to where you came from and if you have no country to go to,-- you can go to hell." The IWW correspondent observed that this was followed by a claim "that the Klan was not bigoted nor intolerant but they would brook no interruption of commerce."
 - In another 1924 Klan incident, the KKK and Navy sailors attacked the IWW hall directly, beating a woman to death and severely scalding her young daughter with boiling coffee. They also tarred and feathered IWW members. https://depts.washington.edu/iww/liberty_hill.shtml
- Other background info:
 - Los Angeles annexed San Pedro in 1909. It is home to the Port of Los Angeles.

- [Rachel] This strike occurred about 13 years after the deadly Los Angeles Times Bombing, after which the IWW was violently persecuted, even though they were unconnected to it. The LA Times continued its militantly anti-labor coverage during this period, although publisher Harrison Gray Otis (who also headed the Merchants & Manufacturers Association) had finally died in 1917.
- [Bill] Precursor to the 1934 West Coast waterfront strike we covered in episode 344 in January 2021:
<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/01/25/jan-24-2021-the-1934-west-coast-por-ts-strike-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-344/>
 - The IWW website archives claim the 1923 strike led to recognition of longshoremen's right to organize, but I think this is probably getting confused with other historical events like the 1934 strike on the entire West Coast. <https://archive.iww.org/history/campaigns/sanpedro/>
 - The failure of the 1923 strike may have contributed to the fracturing and long-term decline of the IWW, which was already on the ropes since WW1 as we have discussed: https://depts.washington.edu/iww/liberty_hill.shtml