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**Published on** H-Socialisms (July, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Graeme Pente (Independent Scholar)

**Founding the International Longshore and Warehouse Union**

The result of over thirty years of research and approaching four hundred pages of text, Robert Cherny's *Harry Bridges* is and will likely remain the definitive biography of the larger-than-life labor leader who worked his way across the ocean from Australia, worked on the docks, and ultimately became the most famous maritime labor leader in the history of the United States. The author begins the preface with “There is more than one story about Harry Bridges” (p. iv). Cherny then spends the next few hundred pages waving together hundreds of stories and vignettes about Bridges. The book eclipses previous literature on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) founder through uncovering new sources and by deeply engaging with the relevant historiographies of the IWW, International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), and the CIO, as well as the growing literature on logistics and containerization. The book also offers the best appraisal of Bridges's relationship with the Communist Party.

Although research for the book was begun with the approval of Bridges and family, the book tells the story “warts and all.” Cherny's stories include those critical of Bridges both in his lifetime and since. Cherny presents the information and largely lets readers draw their own conclusions.

Cherny devotes an entire chapter to the question of Communist Party involvement based on evidence from Soviet archives, now known as the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History. A close read of those archives reveals that for a time in the late 1930s, Bridges likely served on or consulted with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the United States, even though there is no evidence that he was a party member. Neither the Central Committee nor any other party apparatus ever exercised discipline over Bridges. The best synergy between political formations and labor struggles has often happened
when leaders of both recognized the need for mutual support with respect and a degree of autonomy. In 1956, Bridges was highly critical of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. But even in the last decades of his life, he still praised the Soviet Union—even if it was no paradise—and he defended a democratic socialist vision for the United States.

My strongest personal interest lies in the first few chapters, and those chapters offered enough “rabbit holes” to keep me occupied for years. The first chapter includes three pages on the waterfront strikes of New Orleans and South Louisiana during Bridges’s IWW days, but the author fails to connect those experiences to later failures to convince ILA locals on the Gulf Coast to join the ILWU/CIO. Another annoyance is that the book is sometimes so granular that I found myself having to reread to clarify which year, local, or person was being discussed.

Most readers will find the middle part of the book, chapters 4-12, most compelling. Within those chapters, Cherny chronicles Bridges’s leadership of the coastwide strike, the break with the ILA and the creation of the ILWU associated with the CIO, and Bridges’s multiple deportation trials. With so many stories about Harry Bridges, everyone will find something of interest in this book. Historians of logistics and technology will follow the introduction of labor-saving machinery, the abolition of the shape-up, the introduction of containerization, and the ILWU’s influence on technological innovations. Historians critical of union bureaucracy will no doubt see signs of Bridges’s softening toward management in his later years. But even in those years, Bridges argued against mergers with both the ILA and Teamsters due to those unions’ lack of internal democracy.

It was not until the epilogue that I had the author’s critical appraisal of Harry Bridges as a leader and his judgment as to whether Bridges’s close relationship to the Communist Party affected his leadership. It is unmistakable that class struggle became Bridges’s North Star, and he always gave credit to the rank and file. His class-struggle unionism was forged early on and cemented in Local 10 with the Albion Group. Bridges and the ILWU received immense practical support from the Communist Party during the 1930s and World War II. This relationship had always been used as ammunition by the bosses, but became an albatross attracting attention from civilian and military intelligence, the FBI, and even the Kennedys during the Cold War era. Bridges repeatedly took the hits for this close relationship, but he remained steadfast to the general cause, even while other labor leaders shifted to become anticommunist Cold Warriors and/or brought their union resources in as a junior party to capital. But, as Cherny notes throughout, the Communist Party neither directed Bridges nor controlled the ILWU. As the book concludes, “the most powerful monument to Bridges ... is the ILWU itself.... The union continues to stand on the left of organized labor in the United States” (p. 344).

Robert Caldwell is an assistant professor and graduate director of Indigenous studies at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). He received a PhD in transatlantic history from the University of Texas at Arlington. He is also a graduate of the UMass Labor Studies MA Program and has an interest in labor and working-class history and the global history of the Left. He worked for a time as a casual longshoreman and maritime clerk at the Port of New Orleans and was a member of ILA Local 3000 and Teamsters Local 270.