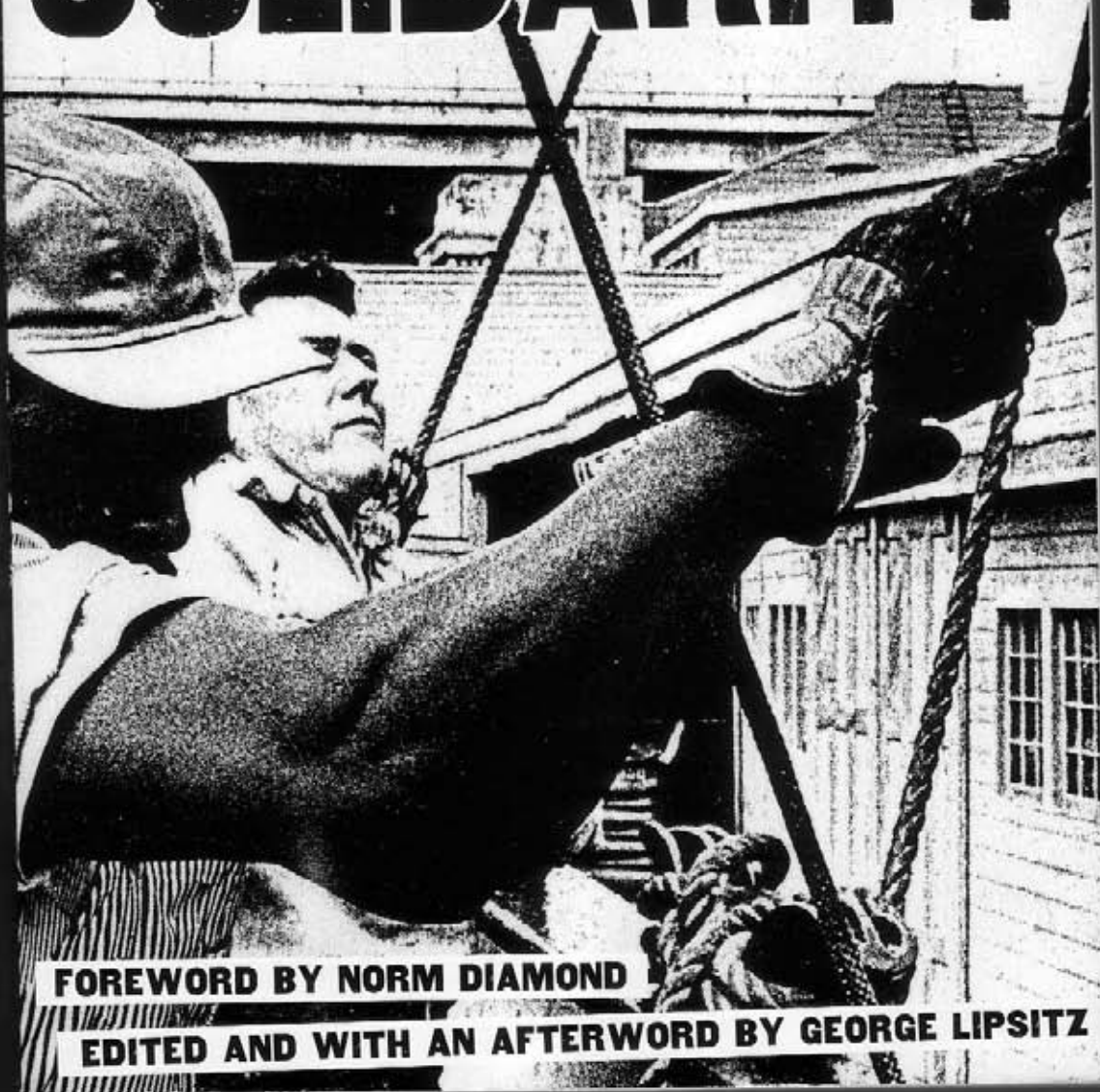


STAN WEIR SINGLEJACK SOLIDARITY



FOREWORD BY NORM DIAMOND

EDITED AND WITH AN AFTERWORD BY GEORGE LIPSITZ

One Monday morning I arrived downtown on the streetcar, and our motorman and conductor got off. They were standing in the still-dark street talking to other car men, local bus drivers, the drivers of big trucks, and San Francisco Bridge trainmen. I got down off the streetcar with several other passengers to figure out what was happening.

It was unbelievable. The Oakland police had been escorting scabs and merchandise into Oakland for delivery at Kahns and Hastings, the two department stores where retail clerks had been on strike for many weeks. The union drivers of streetcars, buses, and trucks refused to watch two strikes being broken. By stranding thousands of work-bound people in the heart of the city, they had called the Oakland general strike. It was December 2, 1946. No officials had announced or were leading it. It was just that we were all unable to get to work.

Our block began to organize within the next hour. The same was happening in other blocks we could see across Telegraph Avenue. Bars could stay open if they served only beer and turned up their jukeboxes. The prescription counters inside drugstores were open. Hamburger stands and coffee shops would remain open, but large restaurants were encouraged to close. Dancing in the streets started slowly because there were more men than women standing around. It was in full swing a short while later as women convinced the men that they knew how to dance.

By nine o'clock there were still no union leaders in sight. We were laughing about a comment from somewhere in the crowd on the sidewalk: "If some of you don't get serious, some of them are going to come and get us." I called Harry Lundeberg from a pay phone and told him what was happening. Within an hour a carload of Hawaiian SUP members found me, said "Hello Red Weir," and gave me a paper bag with several hundred large buttons that read "SIU-SUP Brotherhood of the Sea." They drove off laughing. I knew only one of them and never saw any of them again. The buttons were gone in minutes, used on hats as decorations and as badges of authority when downtown was cordoned off before noon. Anyone could leave town, but an active union card was needed to get in.

Later in the day I saw a Chevy worker called "Cousin Bill," an ex-SUP friend. He said he was going to sleep downtown and had already found a place. I told Bill I would go to work the next morning because our plant would probably be shut down, and a lot of us could then come back downtown. At 7:12 a.m. I was spray painting hoods and fenders again. No committeeman came near our department or, I later found out, any other.

Nor did our Local 76 president make contact with the plant. I was back in downtown Oakland by 5 p.m. Word was out that the officials of several unions planned to put out a strike call and that there might be a mass meeting that night at the Oakland Auditorium. Laughter spread with receipt of the news. No one had yet seen any of the official leaders. Their absence no longer created uneasiness. At the same time everyone was planning to attend the meeting.

Some of us ate tacos that we bought from a street vendor as we walked toward the meeting. We arrived to find the Oakland Auditorium surrounded by thousands of strikers. All the seats inside had been filled for over an hour. A public address system piped the speeches being made out to the crowd surrounding the auditorium.

All but one of the speakers had trouble addressing the audience. Harry Lundeberg alone spoke with the anger and boldness befitting a general strike. He called the city councilmen "super finks," who had ordered the use of the city police as "scab herders." In a heavy Norwegian accent he said they had been "taking lessons from Stalin and Hitler." Lundeberg ended by promising that the three ships at the army base would not get crews to sail them while the strike was on. (He didn't mention that longshoremen in the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union had walked off those ships the night before only to find that their union immediately sent new gangs to replace them.)

But none of the officials, including Lundeberg, had any plan of action that would use the power of the general strike to improve the conditions of employment of the people represented in the audience or to win the long strike of the women at the Kahns and Hastings department stores.

The mass meeting was adjourned, and the strikers left without instructions for protecting themselves and their occupation of Oakland's core area. The radio commentator Gabriel Heater had said twenty-four hours earlier, "Well, Oakland's a ghost town tonight." We knew that all official authority wanted us to quit the downtown area. If union officers had honestly offered to lead us, they would have lost their bit of sovereignty in their "working relationship with the employers." But they knew that if they did not lead us, they would lose our respect. Because of their dilemma, they did not tell us either to leave or to stay.

Ideas about what to do passed among us. The process was at work during the walk back to our midtown blocks. Some would spend the night and others would relieve them the following morning on Wednesday, the third day of the strike.

Puzzlement was the condition of the people downtown on Wednesday. The number of strikers was down. There was nothing real to do. The fun of Monday was gone. The 300 bus and streetcar men wearing their Eisenhower jackets as work uniforms who had marched on city hall in close order drill, demanding to speak with the mayor, were still present but as individuals.

Somewhere the union officials were meeting with the employers and city government. Representatives from several blocks regularly went to Kahns and Hastings department stores throughout the day to talk with the striking retail clerks. The clerks were still being told they had to be patient.

Late Thursday morning a sound truck hired by the AFL Central Labor Council of Oakland drove up and down our blocks telling everyone to go back to work. "The strike is officially over," it blared. We heard that Oakland's city council and mayor had agreed that there would be no more scab herding by the Oakland police. There was an agreement to arbitrate the differences in the retail clerks' long strike.

I got to Kahns early that evening. The picket line was still going. Demonstrators, many truck drivers among them, continued to march with the betrayed women. I was told that many of the women wept at the morning's announcement. I listened to one woman while she sat on a folding chair to put on clean sweat socks and air her white tennis shoes. She told a handful of us non-clerks that if the unions' leaders couldn't get a good contract for them with a general strike, then what they had gotten to end the strike wasn't any good either. There were almost a dozen clerks, standing nearby, who nodded their heads before she finished.

The woman with the white tennis shoes was right. She, her friends, and all the other retail clerks of Local 1265 had to stay out another five months, until May 13, 1947. Even then they did not win but went back out of exhaustion and demoralization. The contract negotiated for them had a grievance procedure so weak that it was useless. The AFL officials of Oakland, Alameda County, and the entire Bay Area were embarrassed by their failure in the retail clerks' strike.

Looking back, I must also note that at no point during the strike did any of us downtown Oakland strikers—political radicals included—climb up on a parked car and express the ideas that were already kicking around among us: "We can lead this strike ourselves." "Let's send out a dozen committees from one block to the other blocks to say this out in the open." "Our leadership will be the representative committees from every

central downtown block." "Their meetings will be out in the open for all of us to see and hear, and clap or boo, as we agree or disagree in reaction to their ideas."

Eighteen years later, students at the University of California at Berkeley embraced versions of these ideas adapted to their time and circumstances. Mario Savio, who became the best known of the student leaders, was part of the crowd that held captive a police car containing a student under arrest, Jack Weinberg. When Savio jumped up onto the car's roof and called for a strike organization independent of absent student body officers, the free speech movement was born. It spread to campuses across the nation and remains an inspiration for initiatives from below.

The shame of the CIO unions was just as great. Not long after the general strike, I was elected delegate from UAW Local 76 to the state CIO convention in Santa Cruz. On the last day of the gathering, I took the floor and identified myself by name and local union, explaining that the Chevrolet Fisher Body units of my local represented the largest single group of industrial workers in the East Bay, over three thousand persons. There was also a Ford assembly plant in Richmond, an International Harvester plant in Emeryville, and many more, none of them over a half-hour drive from downtown Oakland. I asked, "Where were you during the Oakland general strike?" There was a quick silence. Chairperson Dick Linden recognized Paul Schlipf, secretary of the state CIO and director of its Political Action Committee. Schlipf, who was a delegate from the Fisher Body section of Local 76, answered, "It wasn't a general strike. We weren't in it." Dave Jenkins, the majority whip, gave the signal, and there was applause. Linden hit the podium with his gavel to close discussion and go to the next matter on the agenda.

The union bureaucracies have put a good deal of effort into writing about the Oakland general strike. Time has been on their side. The rank and file of their unions do not often write books. Students and professors have difficulty finding rank-and-file participants in the strike and tend to rely on union officials and people to whom the officials direct them.

Paul Schlipf himself has written about the strike.⁷ He stresses the Oakland Voters' League formed by the AFL and CIO in the immediate post-strike period. He states correctly that four out of five labor candidates of the League were elected to the nine-member Oakland City Council. What he does not say is that the successful candidates were no more bold or effective in community politics than the union officials who selected them had been as strike leaders and collective bargainers.

Union officials seek to hide the evidence of the intelligence, organizational skills, and solidarity shown by regular hourly working people. The officials of business unions find it necessary to believe that their members are meek at heart and incapable of thinking through anything other than simple problems. This belief justifies union representatives when they lie to and manipulate members who pay their bills. One of the most bitter aspects of this mythmaking is to be found in the claim that the Oakland general strike began not on December 2, 1946, the Monday morning when all transportation halted without instruction from union officials, but on December 3. In 1991 the Labor Studies Program of Laney College in Oakland held a celebration of the 1946 Oakland general strike. A proclamation by Oakland's Mayor Elihu M. Harris on that occasion declared that the strike took place "from December 3 to 5, 1946" and was "called by the American Federation of Labor Central Labor Council," with support from other organizations, including the CIO.

I phoned Big John a few weeks after the Oakland general strike ended. He was thinking of moving to Florida for a job painting bridges. No one I ever knew was better working high in the air. I told him some of my thoughts about the strike, and the discussion that followed took us back to the SS *Hanapepe*. We recalled that the bosun, Chips, and the baker blamed union officials themselves for becoming bureaucrats. But now, because of what we were seeing on jobs ashore, John and I were starting to blame the vertical form of union structure that the AFL and CIO introduced. Rank-and-file workers like us were electing union officials who were then taken out of the workplace and put in offices where they had little contact with us. They were more often around employers, government bureaucrats, and lawyers. John told me it was the same or worse in the building trades.

Big John is now dead. I never got to tell him what I learned from the historian Lorin Lee Cary: that in 1936 General Motors rank and filers wanted to build a semi-autonomous stewards' council and then got pressured out of it by Adolph Germer, John L. Lewis's lieutenant in the UAW.⁸ The papers Germer left to the Wisconsin State Historical Society show that the new CIO leaders fought all rank-and-file attempts to build new industrial unions on a horizontal rather than the old vertical model, in which local unions had to go to top officials for permission even on many routine matters.

John and I knew differently. We experienced it on the *Hanapepe* in 1943 and on several more ships during the next three years. I experienced it

again in the Oakland general strike; again in 1982, when I attended the Sixth Congress of the rebel European Harbor Workers in Aarhus, Denmark, and encountered the Spanish longshoremen's new union, La Coordinadora; and yet again in the formation of rank-and-file "coordinations" during the Air France strike of 1993 by union and nonunion workers acting together.⁹ There can be unions run by regular working people on the job. There have to be.

There have to be unions with leaders who stay on the job because the scandal of the Oakland general strike has been repeated too many times. Union members use their power to develop a victory over employers, but union officials refuse to accept or act on the victory. Instead, they give away what was never theirs. Once in office full-time, officials are no longer a living part of the industry.

There have to be unions run by hourly paid people on the job because Hector Soromenho and Chips Costello were right in believing that union bureaucrats cannot go back. Top union officers build cliques among their members and keep themselves in office by means of favors. They give concessions to employers and get help from the corporations in return. They build first-name relationships with politicians. All bridges are thus burned. Any attempt at reform by the head of a bureaucratic union organization would be seen as a betrayal by his or her supporters inside and outside the union.

The isolated individuals at the top of union bureaucracies are attracted by the kind of personal peace to be bought by making deals. The deals are made in places where union members cannot go.

My own difficulty in accepting what the bosun said about union bureaucracy spotlights the problem. I and others had the advantage of a special education from older peers. Yet when I was stranded in downtown Oakland as the general strike began, my first thought was to get it an official leader. I phoned Harry Lundeberg and asked him to become involved. It may be that I was not the first one to call him, but excuses are beside the point. I made the call, risking possible injury to the strike, because I feared that "leaderless workers" downtown that early morning might be unable to handle the strike by themselves.

Experience proved otherwise. It is true that Lundeberg was the only leader with a ready rhetoric and the courage to use it standing before a crowd. But the result of his appearance was to leave the audience with the impression that at least there was someone among the officials capable of leading.