

Chapter Twenty-One

"We Called it a 'Work Holiday':" The 1946 Oakland General Strike

Following nearly two decades of sacrifice due to Depression and war, workers expected that the elusive promise of a “middle class” standard of living would finally be realized.

What the post war world should look like was spelled out at the end of the UAW-CIO-sponsored 1944 animated film *Hell Bent for Election*. After the ‘Win the War Special’ had triumphed over the ‘Defeatist Limited,’ the closing sequences of the cartoon featured a catchy song accompanying images of future post-war prosperity, guaranteed by government social insurance programs and a robust economy: “There’ll be a job for everyone, everyone, everyone, there’ll be a job for everyone if we get out and vote.” The CIO’s vision of full employment, high wages and industrial democracy through collaboration among business, labor and government—the “People’s Program”—seemed like a natural extension of the cooperative successes of the war years.

In reality something different happened. Rising levels of unemployment due to layoffs from the war industries and veterans flooding into the labor market created a reserve army of labor that allowed businesses to tighten control over their workplaces and labor costs. Employers denied workers wage increases necessary to keep up with galloping inflation and to offset decreased hours of work. In the year following spring 1945 average real earnings fell by 12% in San Francisco. By the end of 1946, most Bay Area workers found themselves with less purchasing power than they had had in early 1944. Many of the largest employers and their business organizations, emboldened by their wartime recovery and a politically weakened New Deal, declared that they had only put up with unions during the war because they had to. Now that the war had ended, things should return to "normal:" that is, untroubled by unions and the need for collective bargaining with workers' representatives.

Union leaders and activists were mindful of historical parallels with efforts of employers “to break the labor movement and weaken the unions as they did after the close of World

War One,” as a pamphlet distributed by the Alameda County Central Labor Council put it.

In response, the biggest wave of strikes in United States history washed across the country in 1945 and 1946. Workers struck many mass production industries and shut down several cities with general strikes. In the East, these occurred in Hartford and Stamford, Connecticut; Camden, New Jersey; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Rochester, New York. Citywide general strikes are rare in the United States: never before (or since) had so many occurred in one year. The cluster in 1946 demonstrated the widespread anger of workers at their unmet expectations, and also the high level of organizational competence unions had built over the preceding years.

Across the bay from San Francisco, twenty eight stores belonged to the anti-union Retail Merchants Association (RMA). During the fall of 1946, the RMA’s refusal to recognize a union in two stores set off a chain of events that led to a general strike of more than 100,000 workers from 142 AFL unions throughout Alameda County. In the process Oakland city politics, long dominated by conservative, anti-union forces, began a difficult makeover process, assisted by unions and their allies in minority communities. Although the Oakland General Strike of 1946 did not immediately achieve all of its objectives, its long-term effect was to give Oakland working people a substantial voice in running their municipal affairs for the first time.

Kahn’s and Hastings workers organize

Al Kidder came home from the war and got a job selling shoes at Kahn's department store in the downtown Oakland shopping district. He made \$28 a week, but soon found out that at nearby shoe stores, where the salesmen had a union, they were making \$42 a week. His mother had been working, with many other women, out of the Kahn's "ready room." Under this system, women employees without a regular work assignment would come in at 8 o'clock in the morning and wait, hoping to pick up a few hours work if a department was shorthanded. Sometimes they waited in the ready room all day. They only received pay for the time they spent working in a department.

Conditions such as these led workers at Kahns' and at Hastings (a men's clothing store), into a months-long effort to gain union recognition beginning in summer 1946. The stores, located across the street from one another, refused to negotiate with Retail Clerks Local 1265, even after large majorities of the workers had signed union cards. Management at both stores belonged to the Retail Merchants Association (RMA), which demanded that before any store negotiated with the union, all 28 stores in the Association had to be organized. Kahn's and Hastings workers thought the RMA position unfair, and, after one of the women who had signed a union card was fired, the workers at Hastings voted to strike on October 23.

Most of the striking workers were women. A few had picked up jobs in these stores after being laid off at the nearby shipyards when war production wound down. But many of the women had been there for years. The stores also employed some men—nearly all returning veterans. One was Steven Babbit.

Babbit, like Al Kidder, had come home from the war and gone to work at Kahn's. After a few months he had been selected by management to become a supervisor, along with a friend, Johnny Blauer. "To me, getting home from the war," said Babbit, "I thought everything was going to be peaceful from then on. I guess it wasn't." Despite being made supervisors, Babbit and Blauer still belonged to the union "because we believed in it." They thought it was unreasonable for management to refuse to recognize the union, despite a strong majority of the workers voting for the Retail Clerks. "When the strike began, the company began to call in all the managers and supervisors one by one and told us that we all had to cross the picket lines. But," said Babbit, "I looked at the line. A lot of them were little old ladies, as well as younger women. I just couldn't cross that line, I couldn't do it." The company then called Babbit and told him if he didn't come in he'd be fired. "Then they sent me a telegram and told me I *was* fired."

Local 1265 set up picket lines in front of Kahn's at the end of October, a week after picket lines were established at Hastings. Shoe salesman Al Kidder became a picket captain, helping to keep the strikers scheduled for picket line duty. He recollected that at the outset, "seventy five to eighty percent" of the workers struck. The Alameda County Central Labor Council called on AFL unionists to honor the picket lines. Workers belonging to many other unions came by the

picket lines to offer their support. The NAACP also supported the strike. The stores lost a lot of business, but—under heavy pressure from the RMA—refused to negotiate.

On the other side of the battle, aligned with the RMA, were the Oakland City Council and the powerful *Oakland Tribune* newspaper, headed by its wealthy, anti-union owner, Joseph Knowland. The publisher, whose son was a U.S. Senator, treated Oakland as his personal kingdom, in much the same way that Harrison Gray Otis, owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, had done in that city in the early 1900s. The nine-member Oakland City Council had long been filled with Knowland allies. His control extended into all levels of Oakland city government. In addition, Knowland's *Tribune* provided the RMA with one-sided news coverage of the dispute with its members' employees. Utilizing an anti-union tactic rapidly becoming typical in the post-war era, Knowland claimed in his editorials that "Communists" were behind the strike.

One crucial source of strike support came from Teamster drivers, who refused to bring goods to the struck stores. Despite the RMA's anti-union attitude, International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 70 was strong enough to enforce its own closed shop contract with the RMA: only union drivers delivered merchandise to the Association stores. The drivers sympathized with the desire of Kahn's and Hastings workers to unionize and honored the clerks' lines.

As a result, a month into the strike, during peak holiday shopping season, stocks on the stores' shelves dwindled. Alarmed, RMA leaders, Joseph Knowland, the police chief, county sheriff, district attorney and head of the central bank met secretly and decided to use strikebreakers to move a half million dollars worth of goods into the stores. It was the consequences of this action that enraged working people and shortly brought the city to a standstill.

The spark

Before daybreak on Sunday, December 1, escorted by hundreds of Oakland policemen, strikebreakers drove twelve truckloads of merchandise through seventy picketers stationed at six entrances to the stores. The drivers worked for the Veterans Trucking company, a Los Angeles firm established by the Merchants and Manufacturers Association for the express purpose of breaking strikes. Its drivers had traveled four hundred miles to Oakland at the invitation of the

RMA. To make way for them, the police swept the union picket lines off the street, injuring peaceful picketers.

The composition of that group of picketers proved to be of great significance in the events that followed. Although some were striking Kahn's and Hastings' workers, most were officers and staffers of other AFL unions, who had come out that Saturday night and Sunday morning in solidarity with the clerks. They had been alerted that Kahn's and Hastings would attempt to move merchandise into the store.

An officer in the typographical union, Joe Chaudet, had been walking the picket line, and was outraged by what had happened. "They beat us all out of the alleys, pushed us with those billy clubs. I was black and blue for months. They all marched over and pushed all the people, shoving you this way, bumping you, hitting you in the throat, pushed all the labor people out the alley, down the street, and set up a cordon around Kahn's and Hastings. The trucks followed right behind them, went on in, and unloaded."

The union activists had received assurance from the Oakland police chief that they could legally park their cars in loading zones near the stores on the weekends and at night. Nevertheless, police towed away the strikers' cars and those of their supporters as soon as the police officers had removed the picket lines.

As daylight broke on Sunday morning, December 1, the small crowd of striking clerks and supporters regrouped, facing the line of 250 police posted in front of the stores. The police roped off six square blocks surrounding the stores in the center of downtown and, at 7:30 a.m., herded the twelve trucks to Kahn's and Hastings' loading docks. The union leaders were disgusted that their own tax money as citizens was being used to run them off public streets and protect strikebreakers. Chaudet later said he believed that the Oakland General Strike was born at that moment, in the bruises and indignant feelings of union leaders who had been lied to, physically assaulted and found their own tax-supported police force used against them.

When the first Key System streetcar rolled up to the police blockade early Sunday morning, police tried to move it through the gathering crowd. But the driver, Al Brown, an officer in the Carmen's and Drivers' Union, learned from the strikers what had happened. He removed the controls from the streetcar and left his vehicle standing in the middle of the street. Next Brown convinced the drivers of the streetcars behind him to do the same. Bus drivers passing through the area also halted their vehicles. They all joined the picket lines, which by now swelled with union sympathizers. A police three wheeler ran over one streetcar driver, Newton Selvidge. He had to be taken to the hospital.

After the merchandise had been unloaded and the police left the area, streetcar and bus services resumed. Management at the two stores was jubilant. But Kahn's and Hastings picketers returned. The battle was just beginning.

The General Strike

Meetings of workers in many unions took place all Monday. Sentiment clearly was in favor of a general strike. That evening, at an emergency meeting of five hundred union leaders, the Labor Council called for a county-wide "work holiday" to protest the police violence, support the Kahn's and Hastings strikers, and demand that police never again escort strikebreakers. The Council created a strike steering committee and set up subcommittees to deal with communication among strikers, coordinate food distribution to participants, and keep essential services going in the city.

Union members in 142 AFL unions received notice of the Council's decision by telephone, telegram, and radio reports. The word spread far beyond the retail and trade unions at the heart of the dispute. Musician Earl Watkins, working at a popular nightclub in East Oakland, Slim Jenkins' place, remembered receiving the word from his union's business agent that no one would be playing until the strike was over.

The next day, Tuesday, December 3, 1946, the city of Oakland came to a stop. Hundreds of buses and streetcars sat empty in their yards, resulting in massive traffic jams on the Bay Bridge. Remembering the furious anti-union propaganda produced by San Francisco newspapers during

the 1934 General Strike, Oakland strike leaders made sure to halt the printing presses at Oakland's three daily newspapers, including Knowland's *Tribune*. Most places of businesses closed or were staffed with skeleton management crews. Only vital services, such as hospitals, stayed in operation. Strikers directed traffic.

Contrary to inflammatory San Francisco newspaper accounts portraying the General Strike as "violent" and "Communist-inspired," only minor incidents of violence occurred during three days while up to 130,000 workers took a "holiday." There were tense moments when the police attempted to escort strikebreakers into struck businesses. But most of the time the Oakland General strike remained remarkably peaceful, with union picket captains keeping the more boisterous strikers in line. Teamsters patrolled the streets to make sure that altercations didn't escalate, because, as Dan Breault, a warehouse clerk, recalled, when the police came they only arrested strikers, no matter who might have been at fault.

Harry Lundeberg, president of the Sailors Union of the Pacific (SUP)—part of the Seamen's International Union—sent his members, mostly Hawaiians from ships docked in San Francisco, to create "flying squads" of picketers to patrol against strikebreaking activities. They issued large white "SIU-SUP Brotherhood of the Sea" buttons to all seamen or people on the street they knew.

Tuesday evening, December 3, over 10,000 workers attended a mass meeting in the Oakland Auditorium and, outside in the rain, 5,000 more listened by loudspeakers. To a wildly enthusiastic reception, Lundeberg gave a fiery speech denouncing the police-scab escorts. The SUP president reflected the sentiments of the assembly when he told them, "The ordinary finks were the strikebreaking finks. The super finks were in the city hall!"

So high were spirits that evening that Bob Ash, Labor Council Secretary, recalled years later that if he'd asked the crowd to march to city hall with him, "I think they'd have taken that City Hall apart, brick by brick."

Despite the December weather, participants were in a festive mood. According to Stan Weir, a CIO activist and unemployed autoworker at the time of the strike, the atmosphere was joyous, "almost like a carnival in the streets." People played musical instruments, sang labor songs, and danced to the country-swing hit, *Pistol-packin' Mama, Lay That Pistol Down*, blaring from jukeboxes placed on the sidewalks. Contrary to fearful reports from San Francisco newspapers, the crowds were friendly. People felt a camaraderie; strangers stopped and spoke to one another.

On Wednesday afternoon negotiations took place at the Athens Club between labor leaders and a "citizens committee" consisting of representatives of the RMA, other big business groups and members of the city government. Tribune owner Knowland attended. The AFL unions, led by Labor Council Secretary Bob Ash, restated their willingness to call off the General Strike as soon as they received a promise that the city of Oakland would not in the future use police to escort professional strikebreakers and would "refrain from taking sides in any issues between labor and management."

But even as they were meeting, the seemingly strong position of the unions was being undermined. Despite the solid support given the strike by members and officers of Teamsters Local 70, national Teamster officials were working behind the scenes at cross-purposes with their Oakland members. Relations between International Brotherhood of Teamsters vice-president Dave Beck and the East Bay labor movement—including Beck's Teamsters—had been strained for years. Beck and his ally Charles Real, a high ranking Teamster official who had emerged from Local 70, had tried to send drivers across Labor Council-sanctioned picket lines on more than one previous occasion. Real had even allegedly accepted a bribe from the RMA to do that in an earlier Retail Clerks strike.

Beck, who later went to prison for corruption, publicly called the strike "a lot of foolishness." Bob Ash left the meeting with the "citizens committee" to talk on the phone with Beck, and extracted a promise from him to hold off on ordering the drivers back to work. But when Ash returned to the meeting room, everyone was reading copies of the *San Francisco Chronicle* featuring a front page story in which Beck had already issued the back-to-work order!

Ash and Chaudet felt Beck and Real were closer to the bosses than to their own members. For decades afterward, older East Bay labor leaders got worked up at the mention of the former Teamster officers' names.

Balancing the negative effects of Beck's action was a telegram received at the meeting from the Alameda County CIO Council, pledging to pull all CIO union members off their jobs by Friday. This would have resulted in the city's water, gas, telephones and electricity being shut off, since CIO unions represented workers in those services. The CIO's threat caused the city council to vote emergency powers to the mayor.

Whatever might have resulted either from the exercise of those emergency powers or the CIO's entry into the strike will never be known. Late Wednesday night, City Manager J. F. Hassler issued a verbal assurance to union leaders that the Oakland police would not in the future escort strikebreakers and would remain impartial in labor disputes. On the strength of that statement, Bob Ash and the other strike committee leaders called an end to the General Strike Thursday morning, December 5, at 11 a.m.

Many union members were upset at the decision, figuring that if the CIO unions—representing 30,000 workers at the docks, in heavy industry and at the public utilities—joined them, they would be invincible. But AFL leaders believed they had achieved the main goal of the General Strike. In addition, they feared association with Communists in the CIO leadership, and perhaps feared they might lose direction of the General Strike to the militant CIO if it became involved. AFL leaders were also concerned at the possible effect of Beck's back-to-work order on the crucial support of the Teamster drivers.

CIO officials, while publicly offering to join the strike, had their own reasons to stay out of the fight. The ILWU's Harry Bridges, for instance, had overseen a fifty-two day west coast longshoremen's strike that had ended just two weeks earlier. He was not enthusiastic about jeopardizing his union's fragile relationship with employers by sending his members out on a general strike. In addition, there were bitter feelings between the Bay Area-wide ILWU-CIO

warehouse local and the AFL Retail Clerks, who had recently battled over jurisdictional rights to organize East Bay warehouse workers.

The Oakland General Strike had ended, but the Kahn's and Hastings workers who started it all were still on strike. The immediate result of more than one hundred thousand workers taking to the streets was simply an agreement that the city would no longer allow its police to protect strikebreakers. Yet, almost immediately, police were again escorting strikebreakers through the picket lines at Kahn's and Hastings. Although angry at this violation of the agreement, AFL union leaders were nonetheless not about to call another General Strike. What they *did* do was quite effective, however, in its own way.

Political mobilization

Out of the Oakland General Strike grew a grassroots political mobilization. Working people had developed a greater sense of solidarity with one another, and these feelings in several cases led to personal and collective action. Elizabeth Mackin, for example, an Oakland grocery store employee and activist in another Retail Clerks local, sent a letter to Kahn's management in February, 1947, explaining why she no longer shopped at Kahn's:

"Kahn's has always been my favorite department store and it was a great disappointment to me that your executives did not have the foresight or vision to sit down with chosen representatives of your clerks to work out a satisfactory solution to your mutual problems...I wish you to close out my account until you have a happier relationship with those who work for you."

More dramatically, AFL and CIO unions finally recognized the necessity of united action. They formed a joint political action committee and ran labor candidates for the five open seats (out of nine) in the Oakland City Council elections of May 1947. They helped create a coalition, the Oakland Voters League (OVL), which brought labor together with community and small business groups dedicated to end conservative control over city government. The OVL, in turn, inspired the formation of the United Negro Labor Committee by black trade unionists, which registered voters and got them out to vote on Election Day in African-American neighborhoods.

The OVL's platform, adopted by the five labor-backed candidates, included proposals for public works projects to build parks, playgrounds, swimming pools and other recreational facilities. It called for rent control and a fair tax structure, enlarged public health services, and more schools. It also specified that the city council would stay out of labor disputes, and promised an investigation of police brutality cases against African-Americans.

The spirited 1947 campaign unleashed great energy and political involvement in working class communities, capped by a mass torchlight parade down Broadway just before the election. Thousands of individuals carried mops and brooms to symbolize the need for political "housecleaning." A float created by the United Negro Labor Committee featured AFL and CIO pallbearers putting a coffin labeled "The Machine" into its grave. A hand-drawn sign next to this tableau showed two fists labeled "Oakland Voters"—one black, one white—pulverizing the *Oakland Tribune* tower, long-time symbol of anti-union politics in the East Bay.

A record number of voters turned out. After the votes had been counted, the people of Oakland, infused with the memory of their brief control of the city in December, had elected their candidates to four of the five open Council seats. The only defeated labor candidate, a former Richmond shipyard worker, lost narrowly. He probably would have won but the confusing election ballot layout made it appear his opponent was the labor candidate. Anti-semitism also undoubtedly contributed to his defeat (his name was Goldfarb). As a result, the labor candidates held only four out of nine Council seats. They could not enact their full pro-worker legislative program, but the formerly invincible Knowland machine had been dealt a blow, and workers' voices could no longer be ignored in the halls of city government.

The week after the election, the RMA and Retail Clerks Local 1265 announced they had reached agreement that the union would be recognized as the exclusive bargaining agent for workers in the 27 member stores. Although the agreement did not grant a union shop, the RMA agreed not to interfere with union recruitment of salespeople. Hastings had reached a separate agreement earlier in the year with the union, one that did include a union shop clause. The store had been forced out of the RMA immediately.

As a result of the solidarity of AFL unions, the RMA was compelled to engage in collective bargaining with Retail Clerks Local 1265 on behalf of thousands of Oakland retail workers. The old Oakland, run by Knowland, the RMA, and their friends, was on the way out.

Unfortunately, the Oakland Voters League shortly fell prey to renewed AFL and CIO sectarian infighting. Red-baiting and racism extracted their tolls from the coalition as well; the OVL dissolved after a desultory and unsuccessful 1949 city council campaign.

Unlike the San Francisco General Strike a dozen years earlier, the Oakland General Strike did not usher in a new era for working people. Rather, the 1946 strike wave, including what happened in Oakland, might better be understood as a late expression of the mass militancy of the pre-war period, but without the politicizing environment of an economy in collapse. The differences between the two Bay Area citywide general strikes reflect the moments in which they took place. The events and elements of 1934—massive employer and police violence, the desperate and radicalized workforce, a relative vacuum where labor laws should have been—were not replicated in 1946, which featured a battle fought over different stakes—to maintain recognition for the rights of workers to organize, and continued respect and status for union leaders—by a larger, more stable labor movement seeking its place in the postwar order. The two strikes were very different bookends for the most dynamic period of growth in working class consciousness and power in California history.