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Harry Bridges: One Man, Larger than Life

by [Tula Connell](#), Nov 18, 2006

Harry Bridges, the larger-than-life founder of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), long has deserved a popular treatment that enables the story of this gutsy organizer to be told in union halls and community gathering places across the nation.

In a tribute to the fiery union leader who made his name on the San Francisco docks after emigrating from his native Australia, Ian Ruskin gives Bridges his due. Ruskin starred as Bridges in a one-man performance Friday at the AFL-CIO building in Washington, D.C.

The show, "From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks," was sponsored by the International Labor Communications Association (ILCA), which is holding its annual meeting here. The creation of **The Harry Bridges Project**, spearheaded by Ruskin from his fascination with the great labor organizer, "Wharf Rats" is a traveling performance affordable for many union events.

As Ruskin takes the audience from Bridges' Irish Catholic-British Protestant upbringing through his years as a sailor and later as lead organizer in the 1934 San Francisco dock strike, his performance is enhanced with music and video documentation of the actual events.

In a moving re-telling of the funeral of two dockworkers killed in the strike—in which 15,000 longshore workers marched while 50,000 others stood silently by—Ruskin illustrates how that moment led to San Francisco's three-day general strike, one that involved 63 unions and resulted in an end

to the dockworkers' company union. With the backing of the area's unions, the dockworkers won a six-hour day, control of their hiring hall and improved wages.

Or, as Bridges said:

We went out as wharf rats. We came back as the lord of the docks.

Ruskin also explores how Bridges, dogged for years by charges of membership in the Communist Party, fought relentless efforts by the U.S. government to deport or jail him. Ruskin reads some of the more amusing testimony and court rulings, offering insight into the skewed evidence and twisted contortions of prosecutors unsuccessfully seeking to prove what Bridges always denied.

Ruskin's portrayal of Bridges as a pragmatic, but committed union organizer, highlights the strains of such dedication on his personal life. Bridges puts the union above all—and that meant struggling and suffering to ensure working people, white or black, won the respect and equality they deserved on the job.

Writing to his daughter Betty, Bridges summed up his life's philosophy:

Do the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people.

DVDs and other material from the play are available at **The Harry Bridges Project**. To schedule a performance, e-mail **The Harry Bridges Project** at theharrybridgesproject@comcast.net.

For related information, see *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era*, by Michael Kazin, available at **The Union Shop**.

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