

Bloody Thursday and the Great West

By Steve Frangos

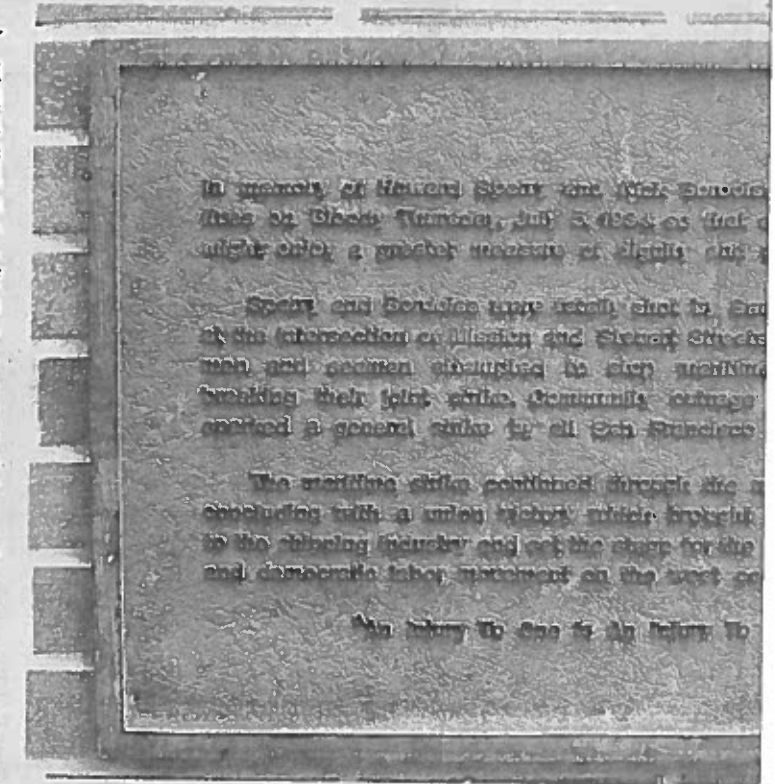
CHICAGO, IL — Greek men and women can be found scattered across the pages of American history virtually from the time Christopher Columbus landed on Caribbean shores. Despite our own fault of not even knowing about them, let alone acknowledging them, many of them — quite fortunately — have champions and historians beyond the Greek community, among the general American population. All we must do to locate them is to read more American history, and as the Greeks would say, with “four eyes.”

The Great West Coast Maritime Strike of 1934 is one of the high points of the American labor movement, and a fitting example of Greek-American chronicles embedded within American historiography. First and foremost, it was a rank-and-file protest, meaning that although union leadership was involved, the bulk of the workers collectively decided what actions were to be taken. Significantly, that 83-day strike occurred during some of the darkest hours of the Great Depression.

Although initially triggered by sailors, it was the longshoremen, who were also protesting against unfair hiring practices, who bore the brunt of the protest. The lack of laws protecting the average worker in 1934 meant those strikers faced the very real possibility of losing their jobs and any means whatsoever of earning a living. It is no exaggeration to say, as eyewitnesses noted at this time, that the strikers and their families literally had no idea where their next meal was going to come from — or even if it would, if the strike were to fail.

Nick Bordoise, a Greek immigrant, is widely acknowledged as a fallen hero of that protest. Curiously, considering his heroic status, not very much is known about Bordoise, not even his correct name. Variations of the Greek name “George Counderakis” are recorded, but it is widely acknowledged that the spelling and even the name itself may be incorrect.

Bordoise was a member of the local #44 Cooks and Waiters Union for about 10 years. He



On “Bloody Thursday,” July 5, 1934 two men were killed in the great Great West Coast Waterfront Strike, including Greek immigrant Nick Bordoise. 109 individuals were also wounded by police gunfire. Top photo: A plaque honoring the memory of the dead. Above and right, scenes on the docks during the strike. Left: The coffins were covered with flowers and the cortege marched up Mission Street. Over 40,000 marchers followed the fallen men.

mentioned by name!

That strike began in San Francisco on May 9, 1934, with union organizers and militants in other ports soon planning to expand the strike to include the

those who actively supported it.

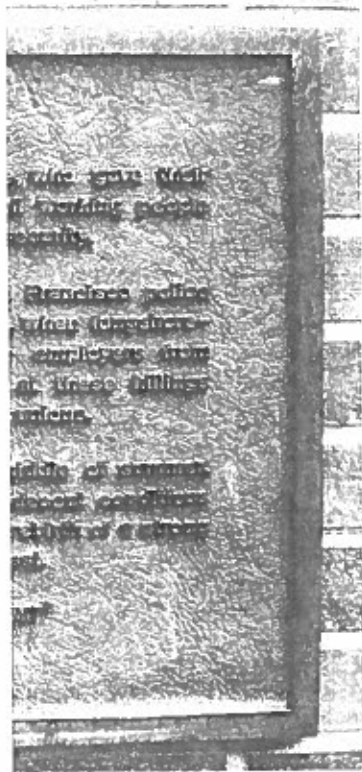
Then, the events that came to be known as “Bloody Thursday” ensued. On July 5, after an especially-gruesome day of police and strikebreaker violence,

was also a member of the International Labor Defense and, unashamedly, a member of the Communist Party. Records indicate that he was married to a woman identified as "Julia Bordoise." Other Greek immigrants involved in that strike included Peter Makridis, Emanuel Relioudakis, a Greek simply known as Kallybaris, and Bordoise's brother who, outside is not even

entire western coast. The Franklin Roosevelt Administration tried to head off the strike by appointing a mediation board to oversee negotiations, yet in the end neither side accepted compromise. During that wider cycle of events Bordoise had volunteered to work in the kitchen preparing and serving strikers food, gathered and contributed both by those in the strike and

those groups made a coordinated raid on the union mess hall at the corner of Steuart and Mission Streets. As spectators watched from nearby Rincon Hill, the police shot tear gas canisters into the crowd and then followed with a charge by mounted police. Picketers threw the canisters at the police in return, but they charged again, sending the picketers into re-

t Coast Maritime Strike of 1934



flowers and drove off the picketers minutes later. Once the police left, the strikers returned, replaced the flowers, and stood guard over that spot. Though Sperry and Bordoise had been shot several blocks apart, the spot became synonymous with the memory of the two slain men and "Bloody Thursday." As strikers carried wounded picketers into the union hall, police fired on the hall and lobbed tear gas canisters. At that point someone called the union hall to ask: "are you willing to arbitrate now?" In the end, a total of 109 individuals were wounded by police gunfire as well, including a number of innocent bystanders as the ensuing battle quickly spilled into the nearby Downtown area.

Elaine Black Yoneda, dubbed the "Red Angel" by the Hearst newspapers during the strike, identified Bordoise's body in the hospital and told her fellow protesters: "I had seen people with gunshot wounds, broken limbs,

two coffins to Cypress Lawn Cemetery in Colma.

Some sort of contingent of Greek communists accompanied Bordoise's coffin. Thousands watched from the sidewalks. As per earlier agreements, not a single policeman was in sight. Musicians from the local Musician's Union led the procession playing a funeral march attributed to Beethoven. The music was heard for blocks across the cityscape since the marchers maintained a silent vigil as they accompanied the two fallen heroes. As one eyewitness reported: "it was one of the strangest and most dramatic spectacles that had ever moved along Mission Street." Bordoise was buried immediately in front of the International Longshoremen's Association obelisk, at lot 381, in grave 182.

Community outrage at the killings sparked a four-day general strike, July 16-19. A general strike means that all unions in San Francisco (and in that particular case elsewhere up and down the West Coast) also went on strike, totaling over 100,000. The maritime strike continued through the middle of summer, concluding with a union victory that brought decent conditions to the shipping industry and set the stage for the birth of a strong and democratic labor movement on the West Coast. This waterfront strike is also recognized as an important catalyst in the rise of industrial unionism across the United States in the 1930s.

As a direct consequence, organized labor has not forgotten Bordoise's sacrifice as demonstrated by commemorative events such as marches, work holidays, and other observances year after year since 1934. Another means to judge how the average American worker continues to feel about Nick Bordoise is the placement of a memorial plaque on Steuart Street near Mission Street. The dedication reads: "In memory of Howard Sperry and Nick Bordoise, who gave their lives on Bloody Thursday, July 5, 1934, so that all working people might enjoy a greater measure of dignity and security." Scholars and even documentary filmmakers also continue to deepen our understandings of Bordoise's role in this strike and the complicated and extended events that



treat.

Eyewitness accounts differ on exactly what transpired next. Some saw a group of strikers first surround a police car attempting to tip it over, which caused police to fire shotguns in the air and then revolvers at the crowd. Others reported that one of the policemen fired a gun into the crowd, striking three men at the intersection of Steuart and Mission Streets. One of the men, Howard Sperry, a striking sailor, later died from his wounds. Another man,

and with slit heads, but I had never really seen a cadaver...someone who had been murdered in the line of action...with a bullet in his back. There was no other mark of violence on him; he was shot in the back."

Bordoise's and Sperry's bodies lay in state at the International Longshoremen's Association Union Hall at 113 Steuart Street for three days as a steady stream of mourners filed past the open coffins. After extended exchanges with the police, fu-

Charles Olsen, was also shot but recovered. Bordoise was shot, too, but managed to drag himself around the corner, collapsing in front of 124 Spear Street. Like Sperry, he died at the hospital.

Strikers immediately cordoned off the general area on Steuart Street where Sperry and Olsen had fallen, laying flowers and wreaths. Police removed the

funeral arrangements were decided. On July 9, the coffins were placed on two separate flatbed trucks, each coffin smothered in floral arrangements. The cortege marched up Mission Street to Dugan's Funeral Parlor. The funeral procession extended the entire length of Mission Street from the Ferry Building to Valencia. Over 40,000 marchers followed the

Union for about 101 miles followed.
A phrase coined during that seminal strike - "An Injury To One Is An Injury To All" - has been adopted by subsequent generations of protesters seeking social justice. Clearly, a Greek-Immigrant with the odd name of Nick Bordoise ultimately gave more back to the society he lived in than he had ever received.