

Longshoremen to march in memory of slain workers

The event will pay tribute to two men killed during a 1934 strike. A statue honoring International Longshore and Warehouse Union founder Harry Bridges also will be unveiled in San Pedro.

By Louis Sahagun

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Ever since the 1930s, when Harry Bridges founded the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the legendary labor leader's name has conjured images of dockworker walkouts and bloody clashes with police on the picket lines in the hardworking port communities of Wilmington and San Pedro.

Friday, the union will mark the 75th anniversary of the deaths of two members who were killed during the waterfront strike of 1934 with a march and memorial service, and the unveiling of a bronze and granite Harry Bridges Monument in downtown San Pedro's John S. Gibson Jr. Park.

"For us, this is hallowed ground. It's for the guys who got killed -- and died on the job -- and for Harry," union Pensioners President Al Perisho said Thursday as he admired the gleaming \$130,000, 8-foot-tall monument installed at 5th Street and Harbor Boulevard.

"Of course, Harry wouldn't have liked all the attention -- he was too modest," Perisho, 77, added with a smile. "Our goal here is to keep ILWU history alive, and cement a connection between the current generation and the struggles and sacrifices of union brothers and sisters of previous generations."

The bust was sculpted by California artists Eugene Daub of San Pedro and Rob Firmin of Emeryville.

Polishing the figure's lapels and short-brimmed cap with a handkerchief, Daub said: "Harry was a tough old bird. He had a hawkish nose and a gaunt face that reflected vision, compassion and leadership. It also had a sometimes foreboding, grim look that was tempered by hints of humor."

Perisho, who worked as a union negotiator with Bridges in the 1970s, could vouch for that. "When he lost on a race at the track, we'd josh: 'Hey, Harry, what happened?' He'd say: 'Well, the newspaper picked him, the Racing Form picked him, and I picked him. But no one told the horse.' "

The Australian-born seaman came into prominence in the dockers' walkout that plunged West Coast ports from San Diego to Seattle into a violent general strike in 1934 that ultimately claimed the lives of six union members.

Among the first to die were Dickie Parker, 21, of San Pedro, and John Knudsen, 51, of Long Beach, who were shot to death on May 15, 1934, by guards hired by shipping lines.

After that, the union's rank and file grew and prospered. Bridges, who survived several attempts by federal authorities to have him deported as an undesirable alien, was elected and reelected president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union for the next 40 years until his retirement in 1977.

The day after Bridges died of emphysema on March 30, 1990, 9,000 members along the coast walked off the job.

"I'm just a working stiff," Bridges liked to say. "I just happened to be around at the right time and place and nobody else wanted the job."

Now, the union's 20,000-member workforce includes some of the highest paid hourly workers in the nation.

Friday's march is to begin at 10 a.m. at Harry Bridges Boulevard and Neptune Avenue in Wilmington.

The march will conclude with a noon memorial service at the new Harry Bridges Monument.

