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Stumptown on Strike with Garrett Palmer

Garrett Palmer

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Garrett Palmer

I'm Garrett Palmer, a recent graduate from Portland State University's History Department.

In 1934, Portland waterfront workers known as longshoremen, went on strike. The ensuing event was aptly titled the 1934 Portland waterfront strike, which was the largest strike in Oregon's history. It lasted 82 days, constant estimated 50,000 Oregonians to lose their jobs and was ultimately a success. Longshoremen secured better pay and safer working conditions.

Most accounts of the strike portray Portland centric and static. And what I mean by static is that the strike was between workers and city officials and occurred at the hiring halls and the docks. And while that's all technically correct, it's missing the scope in scale of the event and how Portland and Oregon beyond were involved with and transformed by the strike.

In the city of Portland itself, strikers frequently met in public parks, including Pier Park, where they had a permanent base throughout the strike. Other parks, including the Park Blocks, were home to meetings, picnics and fundraisers, where strikers would coordinate and plan. Strikers routinely went to restaurants, grocers, and even private residences where they asked for spare or leftover food that they would bring back to Pier park.

There were reports of strikers and their families foraging throughout the city, including underneath the Burnside bridge, where they fished, gathered muscles and even hunted pigeons to put into stews with whatever vegetables they found. Abandoned warehouses and buildings across the city served as impromptu barracks where some strikers, Portland's homeless, and members of the communist party lived and organized together.

And some of Portland's brothels sex workers made sandwiches, which they then passed to cabbies who delivered them to the picket lines for absolutely no charge. In many of Portland's bars, sympathetic owners would point out scabs that strikers would throw out and fight in the street. It was common to encounter late night brawls.

During these 82 days, churches routinely hosted fundraisers where labor organizers raised money and recruited new allies. These church fundraisers occurred both in Portland and the state beyond, so the strike recruited urban and rural supporters, which was largely successful. Farmers, hunters, and fishermen

from Astoria to Klamath falls, sent vegetables, grains, dairy products, fish, clams, and even an alive pig on one occasion to feed the strikers. Without this alliance between longshoreman and Portland and people throughout the state, the strike would have failed.

This event, wasn't just the story of longshoreman in Portland. It's the story of Oregonians banding together to support each other. This was a fluid and dynamic event and a static history undermines the farmers, fishermen, sex workers, cabbies, parishes, homeless, and other groups of people who played key roles in its success.