

This interview is with Joe Breaks, who is a retired longshoreman and former president of ILWU Local 502. The major themes of this interview are Harry Bridges, and some of the critical moments in the history of Local 502, some of which Bridges was involved in.

Interview Date: May 24, 2015

Interviewers: Michelle La and Liam O'Flaherty

Date Range: 1961 to present

Sound Recording Length: 33:47

In 1960, Joe Breaks got his first stint at longshoring at the New Westminster dockyards. He joined his first "gang" in the winter of 1961. He was sworn in as a full ILWU Local 502 member in 1965. From 1972 to 1979 he was the Local 502 President, except for one (unidentified) year in between. He retired in 2006. During Breaks' career the work of longshoring changed significantly as a consequence of increased mechanization, and especially, containerization. This interview is primarily about Harry Bridges, the founder long-time former president of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union based in San Francisco. This interview however also covers other topics.

Section 00:00 – 02:29

- In this section, Joe talks about the time that Harry Bridges "saved his bacon." In an unidentified year while he was the local president, Joe had shut down a ship, without the legal basis for doing so. He was sure the union was going to be sued by the BCMEA. So he headed into the headquarters of the Canadian Area of the ILWU on Hastings Street. He didn't see any Canadian officers there, but Harry Bridges was present. He told Harry about what he had done. Harry did not say anything, and no angry phone call from the employer came. Years later, Craig Pritchett told Joe that Harry Bridges had taken care of it, and had stopped into the BCMEA office to talk to Ed Strang, then the general manager, on his way back to the airport to fly back to San Francisco. So Harry Bridges saved Joe's "bacon."

Section 02:30 – 06:11

- In this section, Joe talks a bit more about Harry Bridges. Joe mentions that Kaiser, the original owner of the Westshore coal terminals, said that he would give the union voluntary recognition, but if they insisted that Westshore go with the BCMEA, the union would be rejected and Kaiser would instead go with the Operating Engineers or another union, or non-union. So Harry Bridges was brought in by Bobby Peebles and the Canadian Area to negotiate directly with Kaiser to secure a contract for the longshoremen of Local 502 who worked at Westshore.

Section 06:12 – 10:54

- In this section, Joe talks about pivotal events that saved Local 502 as a whole. He said there were three main events that saved Local 502. The first was the decision by Local 502 to bring into the union four members of the Teamsters union working Fraser Surrey Docks, thus securing the jurisdiction for the longshoremen. The second was the granting/confirmation of Local 502's jurisdiction over Point Roberts, thus allowing Local 502 to take in Westshore and Deltaport. And third was the decision to accept a separate contract from the BCMEA contract with Kaiser/Westshore. Those three decisions saved the union, Joe argues. He further notes that when PCT was in the process of shutting down in New Westminster the

1980s, the union had “less than 300 members.” The next year it was a thousand. He stated that he does not think Westshore will join the BCMEA voluntarily.

Section 10:55 – 17:24

- In this section, Joe expands on the Harry Bridges story a bit more, and explains what exactly is meant by “shutting down a ship.” In 1969 he points out, a lot of people thought the Canadian Area of the ILWU was “finished”. But Harry Bridges said “No they’ll make it.” Joe said that the federal government was threatening the union, and every vote they took, support for a strike became increasingly weak. Joe suspected that Harry Bridges was pulling strings behind the scenes to resolve the “’69 fiasco.” Shutting down a ship meant stopping work on it, and that could only happen in the event of a legal strike or pursuant to section 703 of the collective agreement at the time, allowing longshoremen to refuse work aboard unsafe ships. If you shut down a ship for a reason outside “703,” as Joe joked, “you’re dead.” He tells a story of a ship being shut down under “703” due to an unsafe ladder, and an unreasonable foreman trying to force longshoremen back to work, resulting in an arbitrator being called in. He also explains the position of “Job Arbitrator,” and how the hiring of one needs to be agreed upon by the union and the employer.

Section 17:25 – 20:24

- In this section, Joe talks a bit more about Kaiser and coal shipping. Kaiser was not anti-union, per se. He really did not want to be a member of the BCMEA. When Westshore was established, it shipped coal from the Kootenays primarily to Japan. The Operating Engineers, who Joe said some in the union feared would end up getting the work at Westshore, were the people who operated equipment at the mines. Since then, the demand for coal has gone up and down with the markets, but overall it has gone up. If coal stops getting shipped from Westshore, Joe believes something else will replace it.

Section 20:25 – 23:55

- In this section, Joe ponders the future of longshoring. Joe eagerly anticipates TSI Terminal 2. He speculates that in the future everything will be “highly automated,” including driverless trucks and a hundred years from now it will be done by robots. He pointed out that driverless CAT forklifts programmed by GPS are already in place. He also suggests that future longshoring work will be in maintenance because industry can “eliminate operators but it can’t eliminate the guys to fix it.” He imagines that there will be one longshoreman for four cranes. He says back when Deltaport was coming on stream, people were saying there would be a need for 170 to 180 longshoremen per shift, and no one believed it, but sure enough they were right.

Section 23:56 – 25:59

- In this section, Joe talks about the Prince Rupert local. It once had 26 members he said, but now has 300. He spoke about the Tahsis Fiasco, whereby longshoremen had an agreement there to do the longshoring but also to work at the mill there in the downtime. Eventually the IWA “had to come in” and the longshoremen in Tahsis wound up getting dispersed to Vancouver, New Westminster and Prince Rupert locals.

Section 26:00 – 27:41

- In this section, Joe talks about the telling the history of the ILWU local 502, and getting young people involved. He spoke highly about the ILWU youth conference, the education committee, the podcast, and the book project. He said back in his day, people got trained informally or not at all, and a lot of people got hurt. He said “Lots of people think it’s always been like heaven here,” but a few times it felt like hell. So there was a lot of struggle that led up to the good times of the present day.

Section 27:42 – 33:47

- In this section, Joe returns to the topic of Harry Bridges and describes his personality, and Bridges’ early history. He was a funny guy who had a good sense of humour and loved to gamble on the horses when he was in Vancouver. He was pleasant, according to Joe, and got along with employers. He was “like Churchill, a man for his time.” Harry, Joe remembers, came along just at the Depression when everything was rough and there were no workers’ rights. He once told Joe that the group that the longshoremen needed to smash the most was not the employer but all the tiny little longshore unions along the Fraser River. Each dock had its own little labour group and when they would go on strike, the employer would smash them and “blackball” them. There was also the shape up system which Joe described as cruel. So Harry had the vision to try for four things according to Joe: eliminate the shape up; implement a coastwise collective agreement; implement a union dispatch; and try to get \$1.00/hr. Of the four, he got the first three and on the latter, he got \$0.60/hr. In 1935, when the strike was at its worse, said Joe, the longshoremen managed to get the Teamsters to agree to not cross the picket line. That helped them with the strike. Bridges was a spellbinding speaker who also was always thinking way ahead, and foresaw that the future was in containers. Joe also remembered Harry as a fierce democrat in that if someone got up and ranted against Harry he would let them have their say. Joe specifically remembered an ILWU convention one time where Jimmy Hoffa (Teamsters) was the keynote speaker. A teamster was sitting next to Joe. One longshoreman got up to speak just before Hoffa’s keynote address, and “he ripped into” Harry Bridges over some issue Joe did not remember. After the longshoreman’s rant against Harry in front of his face, the teamster guy leant over to Joe and said “If that guy was in our union, he’d be in the bay this afternoon.”