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Factors of Humboldt's 1935 Lumber Strike

Nico Sanchez

On June 23rd, 1935, days after one of the bloodiest events in local memory, one man was being buried, eight more wounded in a hospital with two soon to die, and dozens of the 115 people arrested on the 21st still sat in a Eureka jail awaiting bail arrangements and facing charges from rioting to attempted murder. On their way, riding in a limousine, weaving through the historic redwood highway, through towering redwood giants hundreds of years in age, was the legal team that would defend the bulk of them. They were International Labor Defense lawyers Leo Gallagher and George Anderson, along with a legal assistant, part of a group founded by communists and known for representing people in unpopular political and civil rights cases. A few dozen miles from their final location, they came to a forced stop by a group of armed vigilantes and police. With raised hands and guns visible, they gave a visual inspection at their makeshift station, with signs and barricades along the road, right outside the company town of Scotia. They were under orders to prevent communist outsiders from coming into the region to cause any further trouble. They had heard reports that truckloads were on their way. But the men they had stopped were well dressed and in a fancy vehicle, nothing like the communists they were certain lived in the homeless encampment that police had just burned down on the outskirts of Eureka. The lawyers were able to pass through Scotia and continue their way to the Eureka jail to meet their clients.⁷⁶⁰

Humboldt County's 1935 lumber strike had a violent end that would eventually cement the event in local memory. There were many factors, both national and local, influencing the strike and how it was discussed by the various sides. The industry was just beginning to recover from the effects of the Great Depression, and there was federal legislation encouraging improvements for workers in the industry and a federal administration supportive of union organizing. This helped

⁷⁶⁰ "Terror Strikes Behind Eureka 'Law and Order,'" *Western Worker*, July 1, 1935. This introduction anecdote is largely drawn from this personal account.

motivate the Northwest Council of Lumber and Sawmill Workers to call for a strike in the Northwest's lumber industry, adding the Humboldt region as the frontier of the strike's influence. The Humboldt region had its own local influences in the strike; with such an isolated region from the rest of California, the lumber mills had a dominant influence in the press and politics in just about every town and city in the county; especially in towns completely owned and managed by the employers running the lumber operations. The ways in which the strike was reported during and after showcases how the press filtered the events to its audience, and through which lenses it was engaged with. Along with antagonizing forces in the press and industry, there were still groups that supported the strike, community members and other established unions. However, there was national turmoil within the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners that in some ways made the union struggle a battle on two fronts. Ultimately, the local factors in Humboldt created an environment hostile towards union organizing and allowed many of the popular judgements against 1930s union organizers to take hold, while national factors incentivized a strike to take hold which may not have been ready to occur in the region.

Humboldt County

Northern California, along with much of Washington and Oregon, was home to a massive forest of redwood trees, some of which still remains despite generations of intense redwood harvesting done in the previous decades. Like much of the United States, various indigenous groups inhabited the region before being pushed out following the arrival of Europeans. While it was charted by Spanish explorers, the region did not begin to see European logging until the 1850s, when the rush of people from the California Gold Rush brought settlers interested in fishing and fertile land. Direct efforts by the federal government were taken beginning in 1853 to clear the redwood forests of indigenous people, under the guise of mediating conflict between the tribes and the white settlers, resulting in the construction of Fort Humboldt in Eureka.⁷⁶¹ Fort Humboldt would for years continue to be a staging ground for various

⁷⁶¹ Richard Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California's Redwood Timber Wars*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 130.

attacks against indigenous groups.⁷⁶² With the region ready for safe settlement by white men from the east coast of the United States and the British territories to the north in modern day Canada, a new industry began to develop in the area.

The redwood trees found along the Pacific Coast grow to massive heights and can live for up to two thousand years. They can grow to be over 300 feet tall, and the tallest living tree in the world, the Hyperion, stands at 380 feet right in Humboldt County.⁷⁶³ Due to the sheer size and width of the trees, more complex operations for transporting and processing the fallen trees needed to be developed before an industry could be made out of the region. European settlers found the deep Humboldt Bay useful for shipping material from the northern part of California down to San Francisco, at that time the state's largest economic region. Humboldt's first properly successful mill, the Ryan and Duff mill, was built in 1852, after the equipment arrived in the area by the steamboat, *The Santa Clara*.⁷⁶⁴ The deep-water port of Humboldt Bay allowed for a point of access to the region while reliable roads would still be many decades away. The rough terrain and ubiquity of redwood trees made constructing any roads a difficult task. At this port, the city of Eureka formed and would become the focus point for the many logging operations in the region.⁷⁶⁵

Leading into the 1900s, the industry of redwood logging continued to grow in scale and influence. The mills continued to stretch out into new areas of the county. The region was very sparsely populated, with only 27,104 living in the county in 1900, and only 8,500 living in Eureka township, the largest city in the county.⁷⁶⁶ The city of Eureka was nearby the city of Arcata, which also borders the bay. Other small towns and communities dotted the region, while Eureka remained the main focal

⁷⁶² "Indian Troubles in Humboldt County," *Daily National Democrat*, October 14, 1858.

⁷⁶³ Juliana Kim. "People Who Want to Visit the World's Tallest Living Tree Now Risk a \$5,000 Fine." *NPR*, NPR, 1 Aug. 2022, www.npr.org/2022/08/01/1114846960/hyperion-tree-off-limits-fine.

⁷⁶⁴ Hyman Palais, and Earl Roberts. "The History of the Lumber Industry in Humboldt County." *Pacific Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (1950): 2.

⁷⁶⁵ Daniel A. Cornford, *Workers and Dissent in the Redwood Empire*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987, 12.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

point of the county. By the time of the Great Depression, the population of the region had grown, but remained relatively isolated from the rest of the state. Only 43,233 people were listed as living in the entire county in the 1930 census, with 15,752 living in the city of Eureka.⁷⁶⁷ The rest were spread to the various smaller towns.

Lumber Culture

The isolation of these towns and companies allowed for much of the daily life in these areas to be heavily influenced by the dominant lumber companies. The businessmen of the early 1900s were highly respected in the community, and their wealth was seen as well deserved. Some of this high esteem traces to the founding of the region's premiere industry. Men such as John Dolbeer, John Vance, or William Carson arrived in the region with little means and gained immense wealth by dominating the redwood industry in its early stage.⁷⁶⁸ They got reputations as innovators for developing methods to efficiently log the colossal trees around the region. John Dolbeer, for example, invented the steam donkey, allowing for a machine to do the harsh task of moving heavy logs.⁷⁶⁹ They also had a reputation of giving back to the community. William Carson, owner of the Carson Mill employed off-season workers to construct his four-story mansion, which to this day overlooks much of Eureka, and was known to give generous bonuses to his workers.⁷⁷⁰ William Carson would even serve multiple terms on Eureka's city council.⁷⁷¹ Both of these men died around the turn of the century, but this legacy of the good mill owners lived on.

In such a sparsely populated and isolated region of the state community institutions created close connections. In these tight knit communities, most people had interaction with the timber barons that ran these operations.⁷⁷² While they were revered, they were still seen as

⁷⁶⁷ U.S. Census Bureau; *1930 Census: The Fifteenth Census of the United States*, Population - California, Table 3— Area and Population of Counties:1890 to 1930, 130.

⁷⁶⁸ Widick, *Trouble in the Forest*, 2009, 204.

⁷⁶⁹ H. Brett Melendy. "Two Men and a Mill: John Dolbeer, William Carson, and the Redwood Lumber Industry in California." *California Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1959): 64.

⁷⁷⁰ Widick, *Trouble in the Forest*, 2009, 204.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid, 104.

⁷⁷² Ibid.

members of the community. Social organizations, such as fraternities and clubs, helped to stress these bonds in the community. In 1935, there were at least 30 “secret and fraternal societies” in Eureka.⁷⁷³ These were social clubs that created bonds in the community, normally limited to male membership. They emphasized “mutuality, benefit functions, and male camaraderie.”⁷⁷⁴ The secretive aspects of these societies manifested in that their members and meetings were not public knowledge, and not that they had conspiratorial dealings. The Humboldt Times boldly boasted that “probably no city of its size in the state is as well supplied with secret societies as Eureka.”⁷⁷⁵ Striking would put these people into conflict, with strikers and strike breakers having existing ties with one another.

The community being dominated by the lumber industry affected the type of people that came to the area. Many of these logging and mill companies relied on single men to work for them and provided lodging in bunkhouses and board in cookhouses (and deducted the cost from their paychecks), but this relied often on transient or seasonal workers. Providing housing to workers did bring a more stable and more reliable workforce for many extraction industries, especially in that they brought workers with families.⁷⁷⁶ Company towns became a more common sight in the early 1900s, especially in remote regions supporting extraction industries, such as Humboldt. At its near peak in 1930, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that more than two million Americans were living in company towns.⁷⁷⁷ In this context, a company town is more than a region dominated by one employer, but a town fully owned and run by a single company, without any local government, with all the residents being employed by that same company. The housing would be conditioned on their employment, and the cost often came as a payroll deduction. It is a system that offers companies an immense amount of social control. These towns would even have services or stores, creating

⁷⁷³ Ibid, 193.

⁷⁷⁴ Mary Ann Clawson. “Fraternal Orders and Class Formation in the Nineteenth-Century United States.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27, no. 4 (1985): 677.

⁷⁷⁵ “Fraternity,” *Humboldt Times*, September 14, 1889.

⁷⁷⁶ Margaret Crawford. *Building the Workingman's Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns*. London; New York, Verso, 1995, 55.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid, 2.

a closed economic loop with the employee residents. If fired or retired, employees would normally lose their housing. Humboldt county had a number of these company towns, such as Falk, Krannel, Samoa, and Scotia.

One of the most powerful lumber companies in Humboldt was the Pacific Lumber Company. The Pacific Lumber Company (PALCO) created and operated the company town of Scotia to house its workers at the Scotia Mill. It became one of the most prominent company towns in the region, and even gained national attention in 1951 with a *Saturday Evening Post* article titled *Paradise With a Waiting List*, which described Scotia as a strange but lovely place to live.⁷⁷⁸ Scotia started as a tent city of workers known as Forrestville; the town became more properly developed by PALCO and gained a post office and the new name of Scotia in 1888.⁷⁷⁹ The name of Scotia came to be due to the substantial population of immigrants from the Canadian province Nova Scotia; although the Murphy family that ran the company would trace its roots from the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island.⁷⁸⁰ It remained a fully company owned and controlled town until 2008, when PALCO declared bankruptcy and began the process of selling the town, making it one of the last operating fully company owned towns in the country.⁷⁸¹ The company town system allowed the lumber companies to exert social control over the lives of its employees and especially ensure that union's stayed out of its lumber mills. This was aided in part by the geographic isolation most of these towns had, but also with the culture that they fostered. The hierarchies of the lumber mills were baked into the design of the towns; Scotia had larger, two storied homes built for the managers while workers had one storied homes.⁷⁸² A chief role of an architect of one of these communities would be to create a successful community that drew people in and became a benefit of working at the mill, ensuring a satisfied and loyal workforce.

⁷⁷⁸ Frank J. Taylor, "Paradise With a Waiting List," *Saturday Evening Post*, February 24, 1951.

⁷⁷⁹ Gerald T. Takano, *Scotia Historic Assessment Study* (Daly City: TBA West, Inc, 2007), 5, PDF on file at Scotia Community Services District.

⁷⁸⁰ Frank J. Taylor, "Paradise With a Waiting List," *Saturday Evening Post*, February 24, 1951.

⁷⁸¹ Widick, *Trouble in the Forest*, 2009, 49.

⁷⁸² Gerald T. Takano, *Scotia Historic Assessment Study* (Daly City: TBA West, Inc, 2007), 24.

The Great Depression

The economic fallout from the Great Depression put the lumber industry in a steep decline in the beginning of the 1930s, resulting in many workers, especially the seasonal ones, to leave the region. In Humboldt County, only the Pacific Lumber, Hammond-Little River, and Dolbeer & Carson mills were able to operate continuously and keep their workers employed during the depression; industry wide, employees had a 10% wage cut.⁷⁸³ The other 17 mills had been shut down during 1932-1933 and lost workers, with some never opening again. In this period, many of the mills were purchased by the larger ones in the region, resulting in a further consolidation in the industry. With these great economic changes came a reckoning in politics. Before the Great Depression, California had voted solidly Republican in every election since 1852. In the 1928 presidential election, Republican Herbert Hoover won 64.7% of the state's popular vote, and in Humboldt County, he got 69.8% of the popular vote.⁷⁸⁴ After the crisis began in 1929, Hoover became unpopular, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt arose as the Democratic Party's challenger, promising a "new deal" to help American people of the economic depression. FDR defeated incumbent candidate Hoover with 58% of the California vote.⁷⁸⁵ Only 6 US states voted for Herbert Hoover. Humboldt county would also see this large flip to the New Deal Democratic party, with 56.2% of Humboldt votes being cast for FDR.⁷⁸⁶ This was the first time Humboldt County had voted for the Democratic Party since 1860. With a new administration being sworn in in 1933, there would be a sense of hope at things getting better despite the mass unemployment. This flip in voting also proved that the Great Depression has changed the outlooks of many in the county.

During this period of economic crisis, President FDR's administration introduced new sweeping legislation to help the American economy recover. Passed in 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) introduced Codes of Fair Competition, which set things such as

⁷⁸³ Widick, *Trouble in the Forest*, 2009, 222.

⁷⁸⁴ Richard M. Scammon, *America at the Polls: A Handbook of American Presidential Election Statistics 1920-1964*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965, 58.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid.

minimum wages, maximum hours worked, and maximum prices for products in major industries in the form of self-regulation for major industries.⁷⁸⁷ It would be struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court sixteen days after the 1935 lumber strike began in Humboldt, but these codes gave the strikers a sense of federal support for asking more from their employers. For the lumber industry, the NIRA was set to a minimum wage of 35 cents an hour.⁷⁸⁸ This wage lifted what some in the Humboldt region were getting paid when the Great Depression hit and established a bottom for workers to start negotiating from. The NIRA also established the right for workers to collectively bargain, and the administration passed the Wagner Act in July of 1935 to require companies to negotiate with unions in good faith.⁷⁸⁹ With federal legislation in overt support of worker unionization, there was a motivation to make bold steps to organize.

Life for lumber workers leading up to the strike was difficult and filled with uncertainty. Many lumber jobs varied based on the need, leading to lengthy periods of unemployment for many workers. Many workers had families in larger cities such as Eureka but had to live in company lodging near timber sites for long periods of time. A personal account from Clara St. Peter, a school teacher and wife of a Hammond lumber worker, in 1934 noted that she heard a worker “was paid 48¢ an hour but had to pay back so much in room and board, transportation, hospital and insurance fees that there was but \$20 a month left for his family at home.”⁷⁹⁰ Clara described her husband, Everett St. Peter, as having to work shifts of up to 19 hours when other workers were ill, due to short staffing.⁷⁹¹ Everett would go on to join Eureka’s 1935 lumber strike and become the Financial Secretary of the Arcata branch of the union.⁷⁹² Clara St. Peter joined the effort by editing the Redwood Strike

⁷⁸⁷ National Archives. “National Industrial Recovery Act (1933).” *National Archives*, 21 Sept. 2021, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/national-industrial-recovery-act.

⁷⁸⁸ Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris, *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Las Vegas, NV: Lychgate Press, 2019, 17.

⁷⁸⁹ National Archives. “National Industrial Recovery Act (1933).” *National Archives*, 21 Sept. 2021.

⁷⁹⁰ Clara St. Peter, “Unfinished Manuscript,” in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 11.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷⁹² *Ibid*, 144.

News union bulletin; in her words, “the matter had been a personal one.”⁷⁹³ The lives of lumber workers were made difficult by the Great Depression, and it would be a motivating factor to make a strike likely to happen in the region.

National Union Battles

Lumber industry efforts against strikes were well established leading into 1935. Methods used in previous years were deployed in 1935, such as accusing union leadership of being radicals and having ties to larger organizations such as the IWW, and therefore not truly having the local workers interest in mind. This tactic had resonance. For example, in a 1920 strike in Humboldt County, a number of striking workers tore up their union cards in protest when some of the allegations of IWW ties turned out to be true, saying the strike was started under “false promises and deceptive representations.”⁷⁹⁴ The IWW was a general union, founded in Chicago in 1905, aimed at organizing workers of all kinds from around the world to create “one big union” and bring an end to capitalism.⁷⁹⁵ Their emphasis on organizing with unskilled workers was a reaction to another major labor organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL was a federation of skilled workers unions founded in 1886. They kept themselves apolitical, and were opposed to industrial unionization, the idea that all workers of an industry should be unionized together, regardless of skill. In many craft unions there was the idea that the skilled workers did not have commonality with the unskilled, and many also worried about providing “political radicals” a foothold in union organization.⁷⁹⁶ With the passage of new federal legislation incentivizing these industrial unions, the AFL would accept unskilled workers into their unions, fearing a split in the organization if they did not.⁷⁹⁷ The debate would be so contentious that the committee formed in 1935 to manage industrial unions, the Committee for Industrial

⁷⁹³ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 15.

⁷⁹⁴ “Woodsmen Quit I.U.T. Tearing Up Membership.” *The Humboldt Times*, January 1, 1920.

⁷⁹⁵ Goldman, Emma. “The Industrial Workers of the World.” *PBS, American Experience*, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldman-industrial-workers-world/.

⁷⁹⁶ Walter Galenson. *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters: The First 100 Years*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, 254.

⁷⁹⁷ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 5.

Unions, would split off from the AFL three years later and become the Committee of Industrial Unions, a separate federation of union organizations.⁷⁹⁸ After its peak in the 1910s, the IWW never had as much influence as it did other than as a specter to fear.

The AFL grew in prominence leading into the 1930s. It began chartering unions of lumber workers in the Pacific Northwest region in 1933, wanting to capitalize on momentum provided by the FDR administration and to avoid other union organizations from rising in influence.⁷⁹⁹ That same year, they organized the Northwest Council of Sawmill and Timber Workers Union to act as a larger organizing body for the region's lumber unions. The AFL had a debate on whether it or another associated organization should have jurisdiction over the new council. Fearing the creation of a rival organization, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC) would agree to take it.⁸⁰⁰ The UBC was a craft union of skilled and semi-skilled woodworkers and had previously been opposed to industrial unionization in AFL meetings. This transfer to the UBC occurred in February of 1935, less than three months before the Pacific Northwest's Lumber Strike would begin. Within the UBC, mill workers were all considered second-class union members; they had to pay the per-capita tax and union dues but could not utilize the retirement benefits or have any voting role in the union.⁸⁰¹ Even within the union, there would be a struggle to gain recognition.

Humboldt Union Efforts

By 1935, Humboldt's redwood extraction industry was only beginning to recover from the slump caused by the Great Depression. At this point, there was no unionization among the lumber mill workers in Humboldt County. Earlier attempts in the early 1900s had failed to gain traction, thanks in part to the efforts of mill owners.⁸⁰² Notably, the International Union of Timber Workers (IUTW) had a strike at the Hammond Lumber

⁷⁹⁸ Galenson. *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters*, 254.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid, 257.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid, 258.

⁸⁰¹ Interview with Albert J. "Mickey" Lima, by Frank Onstine, April 14, 1977. Transcript archived at Humboldt Historical Society.

⁸⁰² Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 3.

mill in 1919, which ended in no concessions to the strikers.⁸⁰³ Attempts would continue to be made to unionize in Humboldt County, but to even less success. In 1922, an International Workers of the World (IWW) organizer involved in mobilizing union efforts in Eureka complained to the IWW's newspaper that "it would take a Sherlock Holmes to find any militancy in these tame apes."⁸⁰⁴

With new federal legislation in support of unions, and harsh conditions for lumber workers, union organization efforts in Humboldt's lumber industry had expanded. The number of lumber workers involved in California strikes in 1933 was 535, which rose to 1,622 the following year, peaking with 2,416 in 1935, according to a report done by the US Department of Labor.⁸⁰⁵ Throughout the state, union activity was rising, bringing organizing forces to Humboldt as well. The union formed to represent these workers was the Timber and Sawmill Workers Union Local 2563, under a charter of AFL in 1934 (transferred to the UBC a year later).⁸⁰⁶ The local union would continue organizing in the area, forming branches at a number of the local mills and logging camps.⁸⁰⁷ In 1934, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union launched a strike of longshoremen along the entire US Pacific coast, from Washington to California, successfully gaining union recognition in every West Coast port, including in Humboldt.⁸⁰⁸ This success not only created a strong union in the area, but also provided momentum to other strike movements in the region.

Outside of Eureka, a larger movement was stirring in the world of lumber labor. On March 23rd, 1935, the Northwest Council of Lumber and Sawmill Workers met in Aberdeen, Washington and set demands for the industry, threatening a strike. Representatives from Washington, Oregon, and Montana were in attendance, although none from California

⁸⁰³ Cornford, *Workers and Dissent in the Redwood Empire*, 1987, 212.

⁸⁰⁴ *Industrial Worker*, July 29, 1922

⁸⁰⁵ Florence Peterson, *Strikes in the United States, 1880-1936* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Labor Bulletin 651, 1938), 95.

⁸⁰⁶ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 5.

⁸⁰⁷ Interview with Albert J. "Mickey" Lima, by Frank Onstine, April 14, 1977.

⁸⁰⁸ William Bigelow and Norman Diamond. "Agitate, Educate, Organize: Portland, 1934." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (1988): 5.

were present.⁸⁰⁹ At this meeting, they demanded a 75 cents an hour wage and a 30 hour work week, a raise from the 40-45 cents an hour being paid in that region.⁸¹⁰ The UBC dispatched board member Abe Muir to lead the lumber workers in the union effort, as the Northwest Council of Lumber and Sawmill Workers now fell under their control, and he traveled around to get local unions to agree to the labor demands that the Northwest Council was asking the industry for.⁸¹¹ On April 21st, Muir came to Eureka to meet with union workers and convinced them to adopt the Council's demands.⁸¹² Prior to this meeting, the Local 2563 union voted on their own, less ambitious demands of 50 cents an hour and a 48 hour work week.⁸¹³ Adopting the council's demands meant asking for more than local leaders originally believed they could get, and raised the stakes for the mill owners in Humboldt. It also ensured that a strike would occur in Humboldt that May.

The Lumber Strike of 1935

For much of the Northwest, the strike began on May 6th, 1935, when an estimated 10,000-15,000 workers went on strike throughout Oregon and Washington, a region that employed 29,000 timber workers.⁸¹⁴ On May 11th, the Local 2563 Union, representing Humboldt County, voted to join the rest Northwest Council of Lumber and Sawmill Workers on strike.⁸¹⁵ Letters were sent to each of the mills, presenting the ultimatum of negotiating, else the union "withdraw the services of our members from your employment."⁸¹⁶ Representatives of the largest lumber companies in the region; Dolber & Carson, California Barrel Company, Holmes-Eureka, and PALCO; all sent their own letters to the union with the exact same response:

⁸⁰⁹ "Expect Strike." *The Seattle Star*, March 30, 1935.

⁸¹⁰ "Sawmill Men Talk of Strike." *The Spokesman-Review*, March 31, 1935.

⁸¹¹ Galenson. *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters*, 258.

⁸¹² "Workers Attend Labor Meetings" *The Humboldt Standard*, April 23, 1935.

⁸¹³ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 17.

⁸¹⁴ "Mill Strike Closes Plants in the Northwest," *The Bend Bulletin*, May 6, 1935.

⁸¹⁵ "Strike Vote Ordered by Union Here," *The Humboldt Standard*, May 11, 1935.

⁸¹⁶ "Draft copy of a May 11th Letter from Local 2563 to all major companies in the Redwood Association" in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 274.

Gentlemen:

We beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of May 11, 1935, and also a copy of proposed agreement between this Company and The Sawmill and Timberworkers Union No. 2563.

When you can show us that you or your organization are authorized by a majority of the employees of this Company to bargain collectively on their behalf, we will be pleased to meet you for the purpose of negotiation. Until such a time there is nothing that we care to discuss with you.⁸¹⁷

General Manager of the California Barrel Factory J.J. Krohn replied further, responding to the union's assertion that they represented 51% of the factory's workers by claiming the union was using coercion to gain members.⁸¹⁸ Without negotiation, the union members went on strike on May 15th.

As the strike began in Humboldt, the support was not as strong as union leadership would have hoped. Only about 1/3rd of the workers had been organized in Humboldt, resulting in a weak start to the strike that would only weaken as the strike went on.⁸¹⁹ Albert "Mikey" Lima, president of the sub-local union at the California Barrel Factory during the first phase of the strike, would later recount: "We needed a number of months yet before we were ready to begin to confront the employers and attempt to get contracts [. . .] a large body of workers continued to work."⁸²⁰ The strike would still continue to make an impact for over a month in Humboldt, but narrowed to a dedicated few as more strikers went back to work, with less and less coverage in the press.

The strike received little support from the institutions in Humboldt. Letters were sent to the local unions asking for support in the strike by boycotting of products from the mills under strike, but never got support from the trucking or railroad related unions.⁸²¹ One of the places that did

⁸¹⁷ "May 13th response from Holmes-Eureka Vice President" in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 275.

⁸¹⁸ "Initial Relief Calls Made in Timber Strike," *The Humboldt Standard*, May 17, 1935.

⁸¹⁹ Interview with Albert J. "Mickey" Lima, by Frank Onstine, April 14, 1977.

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

⁸²¹ "May 14th letter from Local 2563 asking unions to support the strike" in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 280.

support the strike was the Longshoreman's union. The local Longshoremen's Union declared that they would not load any lumber produced in striked mills in Eureka.⁸²² The support of this union proved strong and provided pressure for an industry reliant on shipping the wood out to more populated areas of the state and markets across the world. The strikers also had locations of support in the community, in the forms of labor halls that were providing food for the workers on the picket line. One of the notable locations would be the Finnish Federation Hall; Finnish immigrants were split between two non-fraternizing groups, the “red” more radical Finns and “white” conservative Finns, due to the 1918 Finland Civil War.⁸²³ “Red Finns” were known locally and within the union as being instrumental to the strike; in a letter thanking the San Francisco Finnish Brotherhood for donated funds, Union Recording Secretary Everett St. Peter stated that “Finnish workers in Eureka are the bulwark of our union.”⁸²⁴ While they lacked the membership to substantially shut down the local lumber industry, there was still enough disruption to cause a stir.

Nationally, this Pacific Northwest lumber strike movement fared similar treatment as workers did in Eureka. It shared the same national leadership, but strike movements in many Washington and Oregon communities had stronger union organization at the start of the strike. The mills in Washington state and around the Portland area of Oregon were shut down completely by the strikes, some for over a month.⁸²⁵ Other unions found a similarly unsympathetic local press which pushed for the creation of striker’s newsletters, such as *The Timber Worker* in Aberdeen, Washington.⁸²⁶ In both Portland and Washington communities, local press was dismissive of the strikes if not outright critical. Negative press came especially as the continuing strikes caused

⁸²² “40,000 Now Out In North West Lumber Strike,” *Western Worker*, May 27, 1935

⁸²³ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 87.

⁸²⁴ Everett St. Peter to the Finnish Brotherhood, August 10 1935, in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 88.

⁸²⁵ Cain Allen. “The Lumber Strike Wanes.” *oregonhistoryproject.org*, Oregon Historical Society, 2006, www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/the-lumber-strike-wanes/#.ZBpA5rTMJAc.

⁸²⁶ Gerardine Carrol, and Micheal Moe. “Timber Worker (Newspaper) Aberdeen and Seattle, 1935-1942.” *University of Washington*, 2001, depts.washington.edu/labhist/laborpress/TimberWorker.htm.

harm to the local economies.⁸²⁷ The hostility of the local institutions of power was not a unique experience to Humboldt.

Soon after the strike began, a major conflict would emerge within the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. With UBC appointed Abe Muir leading the strike, he settled the strikes for individual mills, as opposed to the desire of many local leaders to have the whole strike hold out until the demands are sufficiently met, industry-wide.⁸²⁸ Many of these locals would consider Muir a sellout, a claim seen often in communists press reporting on the strikes. These settlement deals would also be worked out by the national leadership and then voted on by the local unions.⁸²⁹ On June 5th, a number of local unions launched a failed attempt to oust Abe Muir as their national representative.⁸³⁰ That same day, after an agreement was reached for strikers at the massive Longview Mill in Longview, Washington to return, the mill was once again shut down by strikers dissatisfied by the terms of the deal.⁸³¹ Abe Muir would refer to these local efforts to go against him as “Communists bent on making trouble. They are moving mill to mill and trying to upset union agreements with employers.”⁸³² His statement puts the blame of the union movements' internal conflicts on the same people that the various newspaper publishers would blame during the strike: out of town communists with ulterior motives. The idea of an out-of-town communist proved an easy scapegoat for people on both sides of the strike movement. This news of conflict within the union would make its way to strikers in Eureka and may have lessened the morale of those on strike; the Redwood Strike News would express disappointment that they had to fight attacks from “false leaders” as well as the lumber companies.⁸³³

⁸²⁷ Gerardine Carrol, and Micheal Moe. “Timber Worker (Newspaper) Aberdeen and Seattle, 1935-1942.” *University of Washington*, 2001.

⁸²⁸ “Lumber Strike Grows Rapidly, 30,000 Now Out,” *Western Worker*, May 16, 1935.

⁸²⁹ Galenson. *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters*, 258.

⁸³⁰ *Ibid*, 259

⁸³¹ “Huge Longview Lumber Mills Shut Down,” *The Bellingham Herald*, June 5, 1935.

⁸³² *Ibid*.

⁸³³ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 87.

Reaction of the Press

When the strike was first announced in Humboldt, it immediately became headline news in the local papers. On May 11th, the day the strike was called, The Humboldt Standard uncritically reprinted a letter from the President of the Dolbeer-Carson Lumber company, J.M. Carson. The letter showed a renouncement of the union's representation of the workers along with the signature of every mill worker, putting trust in their "president and friend;" Carson wrote at the end of the letter that "this list of names was unsolicited by me and represents 100 per cent of the Bay Mill employees. None of the head men [. . .] knew anything about it until the list was presented to be [sic] this morning."⁸³⁴ The Carson Mill was known for paying its employees five cents more than the area's average of 35 cents an hour, and it was one of two mills said to not have made any union movement inside, with the other being the isolated company town of Scotia.⁸³⁵ Due to its reputation, it is not a stretch to believe that there would be so much support for the company. However, getting the letter to the press in time to be printed the same day the press announces the strike shows an effort by management to ensure that it was read by Humboldt's population. On two of the three days following that letter, similar letters of loyalty were reported on by the press at other area mills. According to the press, PALCO's Scotia mill, the Hammond and Little River Redwood Company, the Holmes-Eureka Company, and the California Barrel Company all had overwhelming employee support for their management by May 14th, the third day of the strike in Eureka.⁸³⁶ This would provide a strong momentum against the strike in the press for the integral days building up to the actual walkout. The local papers never reprinted any of the union's letters or statements in the same ways that these companies were given the space. The lumber companies were able to have a voice with the community at large through The Humboldt Times and could quickly attempt to counteract any progress the union would make.

Outside of the paper's closeness with the lumber companies, they also quickly ran critical editorials once the strike was called. On May

⁸³⁴ "All Workers Loyal to Owner." *The Humboldt Standard*, May 11, 1935

⁸³⁵ Interview with Albert J. "Mickey" Lima, by Frank Onstine, April 14, 1977.

⁸³⁶ "Holmes, Arcata, and Hammond Men Pledge," *The Humboldt Standard*, May 14, 1935

12th, the day after the strike was called, an editorial was published in *The Humboldt Standard*, a daily newspaper based in Eureka, criticizing the strike, arguing that “to go on strike at this time in the lumber industry of Humboldt would be little sort of criminal,” as well as questioning how much the union actually represented Humboldt’s lumber workers.⁸³⁷ The other daily Eureka paper, *The Humboldt Times*, gave a very similar, but slightly more sympathetic message, stating that it was not a good time for a lumber strike, despite valid issues the workers may have.⁸³⁸ This very editorial appeared alongside the reprinted letter of support that J. M. Carson received from his workers. In an editorial about Eureka Mayor Frank Sweasey’s response to the strike, the *Humboldt Standard* stressed that the strike leaders must be made aware that “the strike is being conducted by but 5 per cent of the lumber workers, and that it has no general public sympathy or support.”⁸³⁹ This immediate show of support for the lumber companies emphasizes that the reporters of this strike were invested in the status quo of the lumber industry.

Union leadership quickly criticized this reporting by the press. The union newsletter, *The Redwood Strike News*, asserted that “The Redwood Association is making a well-planned attack on the Lumber & Sawmill Workers’ Union through the daily press.”⁸⁴⁰ They didn’t offer any proof other than commenting on the timing that many articles against the strike would be published, in particular the loyalty lists of workers against the strike that came out “one at a time” and was made frontpage, headline news each day. On the cover of the same issue, the union ran a cartoon depicting a large, well-dressed man labeled “Redwood Association” hiding behind a large copy of *The Humboldt Times* yelling phrases such as “Lies! Lies! Lies,” “No strike in Humboldt,” and “Everyone satisfied!” at a striking worker who retorts “Baloney!”⁸⁴¹ The union reflected the feeling that the local press was under the control of the dominant industry and the only way they felt their voice could be heard during the strike was their own publication.

⁸³⁷ “Halt the Lumber Worker’s Strike.” *The Humboldt Standard*, May 13, 1935

⁸³⁸ “Lumber Workers Think This Over.” *The Humboldt Times*, May 12, 1935.

⁸³⁹ “The Mayor and the Strike,” *The Humboldt Standard*, May 20, 1935.

⁸⁴⁰ “Redwood Strike News No. 6” (June 2, 1935), in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 283.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid*

In reporting of strikes and union activities, the press stoked fears and worries about outsiders coming into Eureka to cause trouble. Five days into the strike, the mayor of Eureka, Frank R. Sweasey, announced the creation of a “Committee of One Thousand” to ensure that people and property were protected during the strike, noting “If outsiders come in to take over the strike we must be prepared.”⁸⁴² Two days afterward, in an editorial about a communist takeover of a seaman’s union, the paper warned of the presence of communist in any labor unions, stating that “they have been at work in Eureka in advance of the present strike [. . .] There are known members of the Communist Party in Eureka.”⁸⁴³ While they were a popular menace to blame any issues with the strikes, or even the existence of the strikes on, there was a legitimate presence of communist in Eureka in the strike movement. Albert J. Lima, the president of the sub-local union at the California Barrel Factory and Local 2563’s Financial Secretary, was an open communist. He would go on to be state leader of the Communist Party in California during the 1950’s.⁸⁴⁴ In a 1977 Interview, Lima would claim that there were about 30-35 members in Eureka’s Communist Party in 1935.⁸⁴⁵

June 21st, 1935

With the number of strikers continuing to dwindle, their reduced numbers feared that momentum had been completely lost. The local Longshoremen's Union planned to hold a meeting on the 21st to discuss their support for the lumber strike in Humboldt.⁸⁴⁶ That same day, representatives from the AFL and UBC would arrive to see the situation in Humboldt, and decide if there was still a strike to support.⁸⁴⁷ The Redwood Strike News published the headline “Now or Never” on the day before they were due to arrive, urging supporters to show out and create a strong picket line and keep the support of the Longshoremen and

⁸⁴² “Committee of 1000 Will Be Named.” *The Humboldt Standard*, May 18, 1935

⁸⁴³ “Communitic Seamen,” *The Humboldt Standard*, May 20, 1935.

⁸⁴⁴ “Albert J. Lima; Leader in State’s Communist Party,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1989.

⁸⁴⁵ Interview with Albert J. “Mickey” Lima, by Frank Onstine, April 14, 1977.

⁸⁴⁶ “Longshoremen to Hold Meet,” *Humboldt Standard*, June 20, 1935.

⁸⁴⁷ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 43.

the UBC.⁸⁴⁸ Local leadership decided to concentrate their picketing at one mill to attempt a shutdown, and to avoid the location leaking out and allowing police and companies to prepare, the location would be kept secret until the morning of the strike.⁸⁴⁹ About 200 strikers picketed outside the Holmes-Eureka mill on June 21st, with a tense environment knowing that it was “now or never.”⁸⁵⁰

As more police arrived at the strike scene, the situation became much more tense. Police then began to fire tear gas into the crowd to get them to disperse.⁸⁵¹ One striking woman was hit by a canister and knocked unconscious. Per Albert Lima's account, the strikers believed her to be shot by a shotgun and began attacking the police.⁸⁵² Police then fired bullets into the crowd; notably one officer enlisted a Holmes-Eureka employee to operate a submachine gun, which quickly jammed.⁸⁵³ In the end, multiple strikers had to be taken to the hospital. Two strikers were killed by police gunfire; Wilhelm Kaarte, a woods cook, and Harold Edlund, a PALCO tree chopper.⁸⁵⁴ Paul Lampella, a 19-year-old who was observing but was not part of the strike, was also shot and would die on August 7th.⁸⁵⁵ All three killed were Finnish. Five police officers were also wounded in the conflict.⁸⁵⁶ Violence appeared in other locations during the Lumber Strike of 1935, but Eureka was the only place in which people died.

After the deaths of strikers on the last day, there was a different tone taken by the press. There was an immediate reaction to blame outside influences for the violence. The same day that people were killed, Eureka's sizable homeless encampment ‘Jungletown’ was burned to the ground by the fire chief as “part of the police plan to rid the city of subversive elements responsible for the riot.”⁸⁵⁷ The police also shut

⁸⁴⁸ “Redwood Strike News No. 10” (June 20, 1935), in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 283.

⁸⁴⁹ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 45.

⁸⁵⁰ “One Strike Dies Five Shot in Riot,” *Humboldt Standard*, June 21, 1935.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵² Interview with Albert J. “Mickey” Lima, by Frank Onstine, April 14, 1977.

⁸⁵³ “Riot Situation,” *Humboldt Standard*, June 24, 1935.

⁸⁵⁴ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 51.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁶ “Bloody Riot at Mill Gates,” *Humboldt Standard*, June 22, 1935.

⁸⁵⁷ “Eureka's Picturesque ‘Jungles’ Only a Memory,” *Humboldt Times*, June 22, 1935.

down the soup kitchens that had been providing food for the strikers, with the paper reporting that the “government men” in Eureka stated these kitchens “are mainly responsible for keeping many of the reported communist in this city.”⁸⁵⁸ One of these kitchens was the Finnish Federation Hall, and after a raid, police told the press they found “clothes, supposedly for needy radicals who come to the city” and “pistols of many makes, daggers, knives, billy clubs and communistic literature” hidden behind a secret door.⁸⁵⁹ The press even printed a photo of the “weapons” recovered by police, but never printed any correction noting that the clothes for radicals were costumes, and the weapons were all fakes for the plays that the hall put on.⁸⁶⁰

Despite those dying being from the local community, the bloodshed was still pinned on outside radicals by the press and law enforcement. Law enforcement claimed the strike leaders were “communists and agitators imported here from San Francisco.”⁸⁶¹ Despite this, those killed by police were not disparaged as the radicals that the community so feared. In fact, the funeral of Wilhelm Kaarte reportedly drew a crowd of 2,000, with support present from all the local unions.⁸⁶²

The Aftermath

After the bloody events at the Holmes-Eureka mill, many of the factors that made the strike difficult to begin with coalesced to deal final blows to the union efforts in Humboldt. Following the riot, the press circulated rumors that “radical sympathizers from southern Oregon planned an invasion of Eureka as an aftermath of yesterday’s rioting.”⁸⁶³ No such invasion ever came, but Sheriff Arthur Ross pledged to use force to prevent such a thing.⁸⁶⁴ Vigilante groups were organized to help the

⁸⁵⁸ “Bloody Riot at Mill Gates,” *Humboldt Times*, June 22, 1935.

⁸⁵⁹ “Worst Outbreak of Mob Violence in Eureka’s History Early Yesterday,” *Humboldt Times*, June 22, 1935.

⁸⁶⁰ Ensi Wirta to Noel Harris, June 27 1935, in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 57.

⁸⁶¹ “1 Dead in Eureka Mill Riot,” *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, June 22, 2023.

⁸⁶² “2000 Attend Funeral of W. Kaarte,” *Humboldt Standard*, June 24, 1935.

⁸⁶³ “Invasion From North To Be Thwarted,” *Humboldt Standard*, June 22, 1935.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

sheriff in closing off roads into the county, to prevent radicals from entering.⁸⁶⁵ This immediate reaction from local government leadership helped prevent any further striking from happening.

Following the carnage at the mill, 114 strikers were arrested.⁸⁶⁶ Requiring legal representation for its strikers, the local union sent a telegram to the International Labor Defense requesting assistance.⁸⁶⁷ The International Labor Defense (ILD) was a legal organization founded by American communists to give aid to those arrested for political and labor activities and had known communists in its ranks. The ILD dispatched attorneys George Anderson and Leo Gallagher.⁸⁶⁸ Leo Gallagher had developed a reputation by this point, representing the defense in several contentious cases throughout California. In 1933, he would take part in an ILD delegation in support of Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov, who had been charged in the famous Reichstag fire trial in Nazi Germany.⁸⁶⁹ However, he would later be excluded from the Reichstag trial and deported as an undesirable alien. Of the 114 strikers arrested, only 55 were brought to trial, charged with rioting.⁸⁷⁰ The defense of the communist aligned ILD would ignite tensions within the local union. The local AFL paid for its own attorney to represent jailed strikers after the local lumber union announced it was taking the ILD's services, and 18 of them chose the AFL's lawyer.⁸⁷¹ Three more chose an ACLU lawyer to represent them, but 32 strikers would continue with the ILD (two strikers would represent themselves with the ILD's aid).⁸⁷² After three trials, all 55 people had their charges dropped or were acquitted. The Humboldt Standard reflected on the case after the last charges were dropped: "The apparent unwillingness of jurors to serve in the trial and the inability to reach a verdict led the county to abandon further prosecution of the

⁸⁶⁵ "Terror Strikes Behind Eureka 'Law and Order,'" *Western Worker*, July 1, 1935.

⁸⁶⁶ "114 Arrested in Riot; One Dead; Many Others Hurt," *Humboldt Times*, June 21, 1935.

⁸⁶⁷ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 67.

⁸⁶⁸ "News of the Month," *Labor Defender*, August 1935, 15.

⁸⁶⁹ "Ex-E. P. Lawyer Scares State," *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 18, 1935.

⁸⁷⁰ "Riot Trials Will Open Monday," *Humboldt Standard*, August 3, 1935.

⁸⁷¹ "ILD Returns to Eureka Despite Faker's Threat," *Western Worker*, July 15, 1935.

⁸⁷² Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 76.

case.”⁸⁷³ No one was ever charged for the murders of the three men at the Holmes-Eureka Mill.

After June 21st, most of Local 2563’s time went to legal defense for the arrested members, effectively ending the strike. Officially, Local 2563 would not declare the strike over until August 30th, but in practicality, it was over after the incident at the Holmes-Eureka Mill. Most of those still on strike had been blacklisted by the local industry, and were largely unable to find work in the region, not to mention had their names printed repeatedly in the press during the trial coverage.⁸⁷⁴ Due to the expenses of the strike, funerals, and legal defenses, the Local 2563 fell three months behind on its per capita tax payments to the UBC.⁸⁷⁵ The UBC also grew upset with the radicals it saw present in the Local 2563 leadership, especially as they were reelected in a local election soon after the union officially ended the strike.⁸⁷⁶ Due to these two factors, the charter for Local 2563 was pulled by the UCB in November.⁸⁷⁷ A new local was immediately chartered, Local 2677, with completely different leadership.⁸⁷⁸ Without employment or even a union to manage, most of the organizers of the strike left the region.

Though a veil of silence fell over the event for years afterwards, the strike is remembered today thanks to local activists who continued to speak of it. Local activists and union leaders met with a Humboldt Times-Standard reporter in 1983 to commemorate the 48th anniversary of the Holmes-Eureka Strike, to emphasize its importance in local history.⁸⁷⁹ None of the companies involved in the strike are still in operation today. The site of the Holmes-Eureka Mill is now occupied by the Bayshore Mall, and in 1995, a plaque was placed between its main entrance doors to remember the strike and honor the fallen strikers.⁸⁸⁰

⁸⁷³ “Entire Slate Dropped by State,” *Humboldt Standard*, September 26, 1935.

⁸⁷⁴ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 89.

⁸⁷⁵ Everett St. Peter to Frank Duffy, September 25 1935, in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 316.

⁸⁷⁶ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 90

⁸⁷⁷ Don Cameron to Mickie Lima, November 5 1935, in *Organize! The Great Lumber Strike of Humboldt County 1935*, Frank Onstine and Rachel Harris (Lychgate Press), 317.

⁸⁷⁸ Onstine and Harris, *Organize!*, 90

⁸⁷⁹ “Union Leaders Commemorate Tragic Holmes-Eureka Strike,” *Times-Standard*, June 21, 1983.

⁸⁸⁰ “The Great Timber Strike of 1935,” *Times-Standard*, September 3, 1995.

The factors influencing the 1935 Lumber Strike in Humboldt were numerous and complex. The 1930s were an active time for union organization due to the Great Depression and FDR's New Deal changes. With these changes came a national movement towards industrial unionization, reluctantly embraced by the more conservative craft unions such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. Locally, union organizers in Humboldt had to fight an uphill battle against the powerful lumber industry and their immense social control and dominance in the region's economy and institutions, especially with Humboldt County's isolation and company towns. All these factors would come together and create a weak but inevitable strike in the county, unfortunately ending in bloodshed. The deaths and following arrests killed what was left of the strike and led to the end of the Local 2563 union itself from the unsympathetic national UBC leadership. For the entirety of the strike, the local organizers had to fight a battle on multiple fronts.