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Earl George: The Battle for Labor and Civil Rights

Be it socially, politically, or economically, people shape their communities as they themselves are shaped by the communities. Every citizen has the power to step up and make changes. Yet, few find the civic courage to take charge and fight for their values. Standing up on behalf of a community and fighting for a cause while facing personal risks—political, physical, professional, or otherwise—is the mark of civic courage and of civic heroes. On the Seattle waterfront, Earl George was one such hero, combating racial discrimination and championing labor unions. Earl George worked to secure workers' rights even while battling racial, political, and professional prejudice.

At a young age, despite knowing little about socioeconomic classes and politics, George quickly hurled himself into the fight for labor rights. Born in 1894 in Denver, Colorado, George was drafted into the segregated U.S. Army in 1917, then sent to Fort Lewis, a base in Washington State (Wheeler). After being discharged two years later, at the age of twenty-four, George moved to Seattle and participated in the Seattle General Strike of 1919 (Walker). Directly out of the Army, Earl George had been relatively unaware of class structures. However, the General Strike served as his introduction to class conflicts. He learned about the strike through both a union newsletter and word of mouth and decided to join the fight to defend the economic rights of workers (“Oral”). In the General Strike, thirty-five thousand shipyard workers went on strike for five days (Beda). They were joined in solidarity by other workers from a wide variety of industries, including laundry drivers, clerks, and factory workers (“Oral”). In total, sixty-five thousand workers walked off the job (Walker). The striking workers accounted for

nearly one-half of the Seattle workforce and one-fifth of the overall Seattle population at the time (Beda). The city truly shut down. In an interview, George remarked that the city of Seattle was silent as workers struck in solidarity. “Nothing,” he said, “moved but the tide” (“Oral”). No goods flowed through Seattle ports and neither of the negotiating sides resorted to violence, which was notable. For George, the strike was the “beginning of building serious class consciousness” (“Oral”). This early introduction to labor rights spurred a passion that would continue to grow throughout his life.

With his new-found knowledge of class struggles, George began to take on more pivotal roles in his community. As a Black man, he was often excluded from the higher-paying, unionized jobs. However, he soon joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical trade union, as a steward on coastal steamships (Wheeler). In 1938, he switched unions, joining the International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) in Seattle (Walker). Noting the dearth of job opportunities for Black workers, George took matters into his own hands. During the Great Depression, George co-founded the Workers Alliance, fighting to provide collective bargaining rights to non-unionized workers, as well as the Unemployed Citizens League (UCL) (Walker). UCL branches quickly spread throughout Seattle, demanding employment and relief for the unemployed, calling for infrastructure development by unemployed residents, and growing and distributing food throughout their communities (Kelly). What had begun as solely workers’ rights activism spread into social justice. In 1937, he co-built the Washington Pension Union, later helping pass Washington State’s first pension bill (Walker). George participated in another general strike in 1946. Directly after World War II, workers in the ILWU and other unions around the United States demanded higher wages to help mitigate post-war inflation woes. Laborers from maritime, coal, oil, railroad, electrical, meatpacking, telephone, and steel

industries struck as one (Magden 259). The resulting economic freeze was even greater than that of the General Strike of 1919. Earl George soon began to focus on more than just general workers' rights, fighting against racial discrimination in unions and elsewhere. In 1948, he led the successful push to force Safeway and Tradewell grocery stores to hire Black workers (Wheeler). George became the first Black president of ILWU's Seattle Local 9 in 1950 and co-founded the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC) that same year (Walker, "Communism"). The NNLC organized Black workers, fought discrimination, and led to the inclusion of non-discrimination clauses in multiple union contracts (Walker). Earl George quickly rose to prominence in the fight for workers' rights, particularly those of Black workers, extending his reach far beyond the waterfront.

Despite his success, George faced great risks in his activism. Racial discrimination restricted the jobs and union memberships available to him. Even the strikes, which were union power plays, exposed job insecurity and uncertainties regarding the strength of the unions. When he and his union went on strike, many feared they would lose their jobs. For example, in the strike of 1946, corporations hired strikebreakers, or non-unionized laborers, who would keep factories and ports running while unions were on strike. Workers like George were livid at those "scabs" who "crossed the picket lines," but were unable to stop corporations from hiring the strikebreakers (Magden 273, 275). In addition, George's actions and political beliefs were not universally popular. During the Red Scare in the 1950's, Earl George and his wife, Vivian, were subpoenaed by the House of Representatives' House Un-American Activities Committee in an attempt to discredit them (Walker). Like many prominent labor rights activists, they had been branded as communists and were brought before the House of Representatives to testify. At the time, being called into these trials was enough to cause job loss or public condemnation, even

when people were not communists. However, George actually was a communist and an active member of the Washington Commonwealth Federation. He, therefore, faced an even greater risk to his professional standing. Under interrogation, he pleaded the Fifth Amendment and subsequently left the hearing (Walker). George described the committee as “so self-righteous. They were going to save the world from dangerous folks like me” (Walker). Professionally, George faced pushback and difficulties. Despite the great potential risks to himself, Earl George left lasting impacts on both the Seattle waterfront community and the civil rights movement.

After retiring from the ILWU in 1961, George remained politically active. He joined the Seattle Pensioners, serving terms as the Secretary, Secretary-Treasurer, and as a trustee (Walker). George also continued fighting for social justice and civil rights. Through his years as a photographer, he took pictures of protests, marches, rallies, and picket lines (Walker). In 1966, as part of the boycotts against segregation, he organized Freedom Schools (Walker). Freedom Schools were summer schools that aimed to better educate Black children, teaching them math, history, reading, writing, and social studies. The goal was to provide children with the tools to become politically active, emphasizing the importance of voting, politics, and the roles that oppression played in the sharecropper South and around the country. The schools provided alternatives to “sharecropper education” (Menkart). George passed away in 1985, leaving a rich legacy of both civil and labor rights activism in his adopted home of Washington.

Earl George truly demonstrated civic courage. Local heroes, ordinary people without superpowers, nevertheless find the strength to impact their chosen communities and demonstrate civic courage. These civic heroes take a leap into the risk-filled unknown, fighting for a better world in which to live. Despite knowing little about labor movements and class struggles, George had participated in the 1919 Seattle General Strike. He founded unions, committees, and

social support organizations. He ran campaigns to promote equality and opportunity for the Black community. Though singled out for his political beliefs as a member of the Communist Party, he continued to advocate for civil and workers' rights. He staunchly supported labor rights, organizing workers and those in his community. Due to George's actions, there are more work safety measures and fair wages for union workers. There are increased opportunities for Black people in Seattle-area industries. Even in the face of resistance and persecution, Earl George strove to improve working and living quality for unions and their members.

Workers such as Earl George and those in his labor unions tend to be overlooked. Today, manufactured goods and food from countries around the world are “magically” delivered to consumers' doorsteps, with little recognition of the people who make this possible. Shirts with tags that proclaim, “Made in Bangladesh” or “Made in China” find their way to American consumers via container ships, shipyards, trucks, trains, boats, and planes. They pass their way through the hands of countless workers toiling to ensure that the flow of goods remains steady. Longshore, shipyard, and other transportation workers are crucial to society and to the economy. Their work is dangerous and often physically demanding. People with family members and friends in these industries are able to see, often more clearly than others, how truly essential waterfront jobs and unions are.

I have grown up surrounded by unions. My father has worked in the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen (BRC), and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). Currently, he is a member of the ILWU—the same union as Earl George. Working at the Seattle Public Library, my co-workers are members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). My teachers are members of the Seattle Education Association (SEA). I

have been raised, educated, and nurtured by union members. Earl George's fight for union rights shaped all the unions in my life, particularly the ILWU. George was a crucial actor in the growth of union power and in fighting racial discrimination. He helped increase diversity in Seattle industries while defending pensions and unemployment benefits. Despite his relative anonymity, even among union families, Earl George's civic courage was integral to the growth and vitality of Seattle unions, their workers, and the surrounding community.

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