Harry Bridges is born in 1901 in Melbourne, Australia, in an apartment above a shop, to an Irish Catholic Mother and English Protestant Father.

When Harry was 3 years old they moved to the end of the block into a larger apartment above the corner shop.

Harry always claimed to be a “working stiff” but his Father was becoming a successful real estate agent, and the family moved a block away into their first detached house.

When Harry was 14 he left home to become a sailor. This was the large house that was the family home by then, another sign of the family's middle-class status.

Harry sailed between Australia and nearby islands. Then he signed on to a ship for the long haul across the Pacific Ocean.

He was headed to San Francisco, the city of his favorite writer, Jack London. He only planned to stay a few months and “do a bit of sightseeing”. He would live there for the next 70 years.
Harry joined the I. W. W., the Industrial Workers of the World, the Wobblies. They believed in a single union that would shut down the entire world and completely change the system. They were beaten, arrested and lynched. Harry was only a member briefly, but their philosophy influenced him for the rest of his life.

He started working as a longshoreman, unloading ships. The work was hard. A banana “stem” could weigh 100 pounds. A sack of coffee 140 pounds.

Different kinds of hooks were used to pick up different kinds of cargo and “slingloads” were used to unload everything by hand.
The stock market crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression, which lasted for 10 years. At one point 25% of Americans were unemployed, and millions lined up for food handed out at soup kitchens.

There was great corruption on the waterfront. Men had to “shape-up” for a day's work and the bosses expected “kickbacks” if you were lucky enough to be chosen to work. The men burned the Blue Books handed out by the company union and were throw off the ships.

So in 1934, despite the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression, the dockworkers had reached their limit, and, for the first time, they went out on a coast wide strike.

Police responded with tear gas grenades, riot guns and revolvers. There were running battles between strikers and police. 1000s were beaten and arrested, and the newspapers called it a “communist plot”. Scabs, strikebreakers, where trying to unload the ships, and the longshoremen were trying to stop them.
Then in San Francisco on July 5th two men, Howard Sperry and Nick Bordoiše, were killed. Both men were shot in the back. It became known as “Bloody Thursday”

Then 6000 National Guard were ordered in to San Francisco. They arrived with tanks and armored cars. They set up machine gun nests at the end of every pier with orders to shoot to kill. The ship-owners thought that they had broken the strike.

The longshoremen organized a funeral march with 15,000 men in dark suits and bare heads marching eight abreast, in silence. 50,000 people watched, in silence. This led to a three day General Strike in the whole San Francisco Bay area. Everything came to a standstill. Some people roller-skated to work. In the Arbitration that followed the longshoremen won all their demands. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the ILWU, was formed. Bloody Thursday is still remembered today. All West Coast ports close down every July 5th in memory of the two men killed, others who died up and down the coast, and the epic struggle of 1934.
Harry then went through 21 years of trials and hearings starting in 1934, accused of being a communist. There were five trials and hearings, and two of the cases went to the Supreme Court. He was jailed three times and some of his lawyers went to jail as well!

In 1955 the government finally gave up, and Harry was sworn in as an American citizen, with his daughter Betty by his side. It was the longest attempt in American history to deport an individual.

The 1960s saw the coming of mechanization on the waterfront – containers. There were fierce debates in local ILWU union halls and many union members resisted the idea. Harry supported it and was often shouted down, “getting my rear end chewed out on a regular basis”. It took three years to convince 65% of the membership to vote yes. It has brought huge gains in productivity and some of the highest blue-collar wages in America. Members still argue about it!

Harry retired in 1977 after 40 years as President of the ILWU. He became an elder statesman of the labor movement, a San Francisco Port Commissioner, and an advocate for senior citizens’ rights. He was married three times and had four children. He died in 1990 in San Francisco.
Perhaps his most lasting impact is the globalization that runs the world's economies today. Without his fight for the ILWU to accept mechanization on the waterfront it certainly would have been a longer and bitterer fight for everyone involved to make such a dramatic change. Harry liked to say, “it seems to me, and I might be wrong, but I don’t think so...”