Hard-won labor rights are well worth protecting

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Nothing is more fundamental to America’s conception of itself than the freedom of speech and assembly. Unions, declared illegal in the early years of the republic, have fought for those rights for three centuries. But unionists have still not entirely won the most basic right: to organize at the workplace and to protest bad conditions by refusing to work.

Ever since President Reagan terminated 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, existing unions have been under attack and workers organizing on the job have faced harassment and firing. The worker’s right to freedom of speech and action, won in the Wagner Act of 1935, has been nearly shredded.

The new political context makes the weakening of labor rights even more alarming. After 20 years of smashing unions and massive profit taking by CEOs, followed by tax cutting that has turned government surpluses into deficits, workers are fighting back. But we will now undoubtedly be told that some unions are too strong and we can’t afford their demands.

Most worrisome, the Bush administration seems to have the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, and perhaps other unions, in its sights. Not since Reagan has anyone threatened such a bold attack on unions as we are hearing about during ILWU negotiations for a new contract with shippers. Abrogating the right to strike through federal intervention, breaking up the unified bargaining pattern of ILWU contracts or simply making unionists work at the point of a gun all seem to be government options if ILWU workers are locked out by employers or go on strike.

The administration’s threat to use the law or troops to abort a longshore strike before it even happens -- justified, as is everything else, in the name of “homeland security” -- effectively undercuts collective bargaining. It comes in the wake of chilling police violence against people protesting the programs of global economic elites in Seattle, Genoa, Washington, D.C., and Toronto.

A successful attack on the ILWU, we can be sure, would be another heavy blow to the entire American labor movement and add a frightening new element to the president’s increasingly anti-democratic “war on terror.”

The struggles of this particular union are especially important. In the 1930s civil war over the battle for worker rights, police shot down longshore workers in San Francisco when they organized and went on strike.

Yet, under the leadership of Harry Bridges, the ILWU turned abused and poverty-stricken workers considered “wharf rats” into proud, well-paid workers.

Its success opened up the right of workers to organize throughout the West Coast region. The ILWU subsequently helped employers modernize the waterfronts, maintained an independent stance toward government and sustained worker democracy within its own ranks. It is a powerful union, and its members do very well as a result.

Those gains can be wiped out, however. The government and even the AFL-CIO itself nearly destroyed the ILWU by persecuting it during the Communist scare and trying for some 20 years to deport Bridges as a subversive. The ILWU not only survived, but also became one of the strongest unions in America. It is too strong for the taste of George Bush.

I don’t speak for unions, only for myself. But I think people today will not be silent in the face of attacks on union rights, as too many were when Reagan destroyed the air controller’s union. Already, thousands of us have joined in demonstrations all over the West Coast to support the ILWU’s right to free collective bargaining without government interference.

In the Pacific Northwest -- home to the free-speech fights of the Industrial Workers of the World ("Wobblies") in Spokane, Centralia and Everett, to the Seattle General Strike of 1919 and to the massive WTO protest of 1999 -- people are especially aware that upholding labor rights is at the heart of maintaining and expanding democracy.
What happens on the waterfront, at Boeing or at any number of other labor hotspots is important to all of us. Whether one belongs to a union or agrees or disagrees with a particular strike, it is in the interest of the great majority of us to protect hard-won labor rights.

Martin Luther King Jr. explained that there is no such thing as partial freedom: Either you have it or you don’t. As he told us, the right to organize is "the right to protest for right."

If the government undercuts that right by chopping down one individual or group, the rest of us will ultimately pay the price in lost liberties. King died to protect labor rights, in a worker’s strike for union recognition and better conditions in Memphis. As we approach Labor Day, we should remember that we can’t afford to lose our labor rights, for without them we may also lose our freedom of thought, speech, political action and other democratic rights.