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The workers kept coming, streaming in rivulets of protest. These men—they were mostly men—were predominantly of indigenous Hawaiian, Filipino, and Japanese origin and were departing angrily from the docks of pleasant Honolulu and balmy Hilo and the plantations of Kaua‘i and Lana‘i. It was in the early afternoon in mid-June 1953, roughly three years after the United States had embarked on a bloody war on the Korean peninsula and Hawai‘i had become a primary point of departure for supplying the battlefield of this anticommmunist conflict. Yet these men who numbered in the thousands were protesting, since their union leadership and the Communist Party leadership, which were thought by their adversaries to be equivalent, had been convicted on anticommmunist grounds of violating the notorious Smith Act. The docks, usually a beehive of activity in light of the jolt provided by war contracts, were strangely silent, as if the men had been summoned by a modern Pied Piper. Though closer to Osaka than Boston and considered relatively isolated, the ports of Hawai‘i were among the most efficient in the world when it came to handling cargo, and with harbor entrances directly facing the Pacific Ocean, their importance increased as military tensions waxed in Korea—then Vietnam—and tensions rose accordingly.

In protest of the conviction of the seven leftist leaders, and, most particularly, their leader—Jack Hall—stevedores voted quickly to virtually double their wage demands in current contract negotiations. Ships were being stranded in port, and sugarcane and pineapple began to decompose in the field. This was not the first time that Hawai‘i workers had gone on strike in reaction to a slight against a presumed Communist. The same thing occurred in August 1950 after the jailing of these workers’ union leader, the Australian-born Harry Bridges, head of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), based in San Francisco. Then about 10,000 workers went on strike; this time the workers decided to up the ante, as 20,000 walked out.

Bridges, who was widely thought to be a Communist—or Red, as Communists were known colloquially—should not have felt bad about the smaller number of strikers in 1950, for in September 1952, when a federal appeals court ruling upheld his perjury conviction, 20,000 workers went on strike in Hawai‘i. This response was extraordinary and totally unlike the reaction to any other
trial and conviction of leaders of the beleaguered Communist Party USA on the mainland, where if demonstrations erupted in response, they often were in celebration of the jailing of Reds. How and why was Hawai‘i different?6

In contemporary US parlance, Hawai‘i is probably the bluest of the blue states, a dependable vote for Democratic Party presidential candidates. Republicans wishing to survive in this island chain in the Pacific must minimally appear to be “Democrat lite,” as the kind of conservatism that is derigueur on the mainland is a nonstarter in Hawai‘i. This state is second only to New York in terms of union members as a percentage of workers—a typically reliable measure of progressivism—weighing in at 25.8 percent, a nose behind the Empire State’s 26.1 percent.7 But it was Hawai‘i, not New York, that instituted the first negative income tax for the poor. It was Hawai‘i that was the first state to legalize abortion and to ratify the ultimately failed Equal Rights Amendment. It was Hawai‘i that led in abolishing the death penalty, and it was Hawai‘i that was the first state to mandate prepaid health care for workers. In the most fundamental ways, Hawai‘i has the most progressive politics of any state, with a political coloration—and, not unconnected, a demographic makeup—as distant from the mainland as the thousands of miles of ocean that separate it from the nation to which it ostensibly belongs.8

This is not a recent trend.9 In 1966, ILWU leader David Thompson stated proudly that agricultural workers in Hawai‘i enjoyed the world’s highest farm wages; it was the first state—and then the only one—in which all the workers in large-scale agriculture belonged to a union. It was the only state in which agricultural workers had decent wages, comprehensive medical plans, dental plans, pensions, paid vacations and holidays, sick leave, severance pay, and the like,10 all the result of labor’s struggle.11 Robert Hasegawa, Hawai‘i’s director of labor and industrial relations, claimed in 1966 that his state had the “best labor laws in America” in terms of “minimum wage, unemployment compensation, workmen’s compensation, temporary disability insurance, and a pioneering Fair Employment Practices Act.”12 Given that the majority of Hawai‘i’s population is made up of “minorities”—mostly of Asian-Pacific descent—this state may hold lessons for the nation as a whole as it evolves in this direction, particularly since historically Euro-Americans have been the bulwark of conservatism in the United States.13

The transformation of Hawai‘i was a dramatic turnabout from relatively recent times. In 1947, speaking of Ni‘ihau, “‘the Forbidden Island,’” a correspondent informed Senator J. Howard McGrath of Rhode Island, a Democratic Party leader and crony of President Harry S. Truman’s, that its entire “72 square miles is owned by the Robinson family,” that “no one can visit the island,” and that “so-called real Hawaiians who elect to work on the island for the Robinson Family cannot leave without special permission.” This family was “the dictator”; its word was law.14 Ten years earlier, things were probably worse
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on Ni‘ihau. It was a “feudal isle,” said one journalist, and the “owners of this island are holding their workers in practical peonage”; the owners were “deliberately violating the educational law of the territory which states that children must attend school up to the age of 16 years,” while “nothing but Republican ballots have been allowed to be distributed” in elections.15 Visiting Hawai‘i in March 1937, Edward J. Eagen, regional director of the newly minted National Labor Relations Board, was astonished by what he saw. “A number of the laborers are more like slaves than free people,” he thought. “I have seen them remove their hats when officers of the “Big Five” [corporations] pass. They live from hand to mouth. Surrounded by 2,000 miles of water, they have no chance to change their jobs or to get away from their present environment. They speak in mumble[s] [and] in undertones.” A congressional visitor concluded three years later that “if there is any truer picture of fascism anywhere in the world than in the Hawaiian islands, then I do not know the definition of it”; there was “close cooperation between the Army and Navy intelligence units and the ‘Big Five’” corporations that dominated the local economy.17

The island of Lana‘i was wholly owned by the Hawaiian Pineapple Company for a good deal of its modern history, and its employees were treated harshly.19 Yet with all this quotidien repression, one analyst was not far wrong when he suggested that the archipelago’s “wartime government”—with certain regimes in the Deep South conspicuously excepted—was “the only true fascism which has ever existed on American soil,” in that there was martial law, arbitrary detentions, gross restrictions on unions, strictly enforced curfews, and the like.20

This cruel repression contributed to pent-up resentment that burst forth at the war’s conclusion with the efflorescence of labor organizing, notably by the ILWU, a union that was not hostile to Communist Party (CP) participation. The year of the 1953 walkout, Hawai‘i had a population of about 500,000, and the ILWU membership was about 24,000, including the stevedores—so important for the unloading of merchandise in the island chain that was 2,400 miles from North America.21 Because of the varied influences of seafarers who frequently visited these islands and stevedores influenced by the ILWU, Hawai‘i long had developed a justified reputation for working-class consciousness,22 which the union was able to parlay into major gains. Indeed, Harry Bridges, who led the group for decades, was friendly toward the Soviet Union, considered himself a Marxist, and acknowledged that he had access to the highest levels of CP decision making. In November 1992, scholars Harvey Klehr and John Haynes claimed that they had located a document in recently released files in Moscow that established that Bridges was also a member of the Central Committee of the US Communist Party as early as 1936—a point vigorously denied by Bridges over the years and, as well, a point flyspecked relentlessly by courts that were seeking to deport
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him.21 Still, his first wife—Agnes Brown—testified in 1945 that Bridges was indeed a Red and kept his CP card hidden under the linoleum in their home. (They divorced during that same tumultuous year.)24

Despite such explosive charges, which customarily destabilized leaders on the mainland, the ascetic Bridges inspired loyalty among those he led, not only because his union delivered real benefits but also because of the personal example he set. His son recalled later, “He always stayed in cheap hotels, he traveled on weekends to save money. There was nothing extravagant about him”; he “never made a lot of money [and] made a point of making as much”—and no more—“as the highest paid longshoreman,” in stark contrast to fellow labor leaders.25 Despite—or perhaps because of—this asceticism, Bridges was hounded by the US authorities. In 1941 some of Bridges’ confederates decided to reverse the usual pattern and spy on the FBI. They were rewarded as they watched through their spyglasses while government agents wearing earphones and wielding recording equipment engaged in close surveillance of Bridges whenever he entered a Manhattan hotel room.26

The influence of figures like Bridges caused Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, who took a keen interest in the territory’s affairs, to claim in 1956 that “the power of the Communists in Hawaii is a thousand times stronger than it is in the continental United States.”27 This was an exaggeration but not a gross one.28

The left in Hawai‘i faced off against a major regional economic powerhouse, given that the Bank of Hawaii and Bishop National Bank were among the 100 largest commercial banks under the US flag and, as of 1953, there were 7 Hawai‘i firms among the 1,000 largest within the federal government’s jurisdiction.29 Hawai‘i’s representative in Washington, D.C., observed more than seven decades ago that “in 1936 Hawaii purchased more products from the rest of the United States, than were purchased by any but five foreign countries,” just behind Britain, Canada, Japan, France, and Germany and ahead of Cuba, South Africa, Mexico, Australia, and Italy.30

What was undeniable was the deep sense of grievance in the islands, particularly among indigenes, who even today are about 20 percent of the population, and among those of Japanese origin, who are now the plurality of Hawai‘i and were specifically invited to reside there by the Hawaiian Kingdom precisely as a bulwark against US imperialism, which was to seize power as the twentieth century was dawning.31 “They had lost the islands to the missionaries and to the haoles [Euro-Americans],” recalled ILWU leader Louis Goldblatt, “and they wanted them back. They saw the union as the first effective fighting organization to come along.”32 Attorney Grover Johnson reported that when he visited Hawai‘i in 1934, “all the while . . . I was besieged by natives who claimed to have been defrauded of their land and wanted to bring suit to get it back.” It was “much the same situation as the
Indians at Wounded Knee.”33 During the summer of 2005, a visiting journalist in the islands found a “deep sense of dispossession among native Hawaiians, who make up about 20 percent of the population.”34

Many of the Filipinos had experience in one of the more sophisticated guerrilla operations in this planet’s history—the fabled Huk Rebellion35—and Tokyo had long been the site of vigorous and thriving socialist and Communist movements that dwarfed their counterparts in the United States. When the Hawai‘i Communist leadership was placed on trial in 1952, the prosecution introduced an article penned by the legendary Sen Katayama, who had been a founder of the Communist Party in the United States in addition to being a leader of the party in Japan. In the article, he termed Hawai‘i as “the strategic knot of the Pacific” and “the most important strategic point in the Pacific Ocean”; given that fact, he was elated to note, “Among the Japanese workers in Hawaii there was a group which was long under the influence of the Japanese revolutionary movement. The members of this group came chiefly from the Japanese islands of Riu-Kiu [Ryukyus], where, at one time, the Japanese Workers and Peasants Party (which supported the CP [of] Japan and was dissolved by the government in 1928) had a strong influence.”36

An article retained by Senator Hugh Butler of Nebraska spoke dramatically of a “Japanese Communist Master Plan” in pursuit of the “Japanization of Hawaii.” This scheme “progressed so well,” said the writer, “that a notable Communist, Hozumi Ozaki, succeeded in penetrating to become an unofficial advisor to the Japanese Cabinet on the eve of Pearl Harbor. He was a trusted intimate of Prince Fumimaro Konoye, the Premier.” As he saw things, it was the CP in Tokyo—not Moscow—that “threatens the entire world.”37 Weeks before war erupted on the Korean peninsula, Senator Butler received from Hawaiian attorney James Coke a picture with a caption he found disturbing: “200,000 ... in the Imperial Plaza in Tokyo to hear Japan’s Communist Party leader, Sanzo Nozaka, deliver his May Day Address.”38

Many of the most militant workers in Hawai‘i hailed from the radical region singled out by Katayama. “I’m an Okinawan,” said Yasuki Arakaki, one of the more dedicated of ILWU members during its pre-statehood heyday. “As I was growing up, I knew I was not Japanese. I was not treated as Japanese.” Like minorities worldwide who felt a deep sense of grievance—including African-Americans on the mainland—this helped to generate within him a fierce progressivism. “So when a person is discriminated [against] ... , you have a feeling of fighting back, you know.” Thus, he continued reflectively in a 1991 interview, “if you see today, many of the business people on the Big Island [Hawai‘i], the Kaneshiro family, the Food Fair, and many of the merchants in Honolulu, the Star Market, many of the markets [are owned by] Okinawans. And Okinawans[,] because they are discriminated [against], they stick together and help each other out.” Once he had a would-be sweetheart whose mother compelled
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her to reject him, “because you’re an Okinawan,” he was informed curtly. He was “deeply hurt[,] naturally,” as he felt like a “low-class Japanese.” But dialectically, he said, “that gave me some impetus to prove that I’m not a leper. I’m going to prove to her and others that I’m equal or better”—which he did by becoming one of the leading unionists in the archipelago, as did other similarly situated Okinawans.

In sum, many of those who resided in Hawai‘i had roots in Japan, not only a nation whose radical movement was more widespread than its counterpart in North America but also a nation less profoundly influenced by anticommunism. Thus, the de facto leader of Hawaiian Communists at the time of the Smith Act trial (designed to eradicate alleged subversion)—and one of the key defendants—was Jack Kimoto, who had been born in Ewa, Hawai‘i, in 1908 but had studied in Japan and was bilingual. He worked as a reporter, a translator, and a cab driver and lived in his ancestral home from 1914 to 1916. From 1931 to 1938 he resided in Los Angeles, where he joined the Communist Party. Rather small and with bespectacled brown eyes, he blinked rapidly as he claimed, “I got interested in the left-wing movement—the one in Japan,” he recalled in a 1974 interview, “because their publications would come to Hawaii.” In other words, his knowledge of another language meant that he could escape the hegemony of English reporting, in which—because of the conservatism of the United States and Great Britain—radicalism and Marxism were overwhelmingly and disproportionately portrayed as unfavorable.

Another Smith Act defendant was Koji Ariyoshi, a stevedore, journalist, and founder of the archipelago’s leading and most widely read left-wing journal, the Honolulu Record; its popularity has yet to be equaled since and whose very success was a key reason that led to the 1952 trial. This man of Japanese ancestry, the son of an impoverished Kona coffee farmer, attended the University of Hawai‘i for two years and then the University of Georgia before joining the US military. While in the service, he wound up as an adviser to Mao Zedong in the caves of Yenan, before decamping to Manhattan, where he worked as a translator of Chinese. He was also a dedicated Communist, arguing that the ILWU—which had rescued Hawai‘i—would not have been organized but for the CP, which was the “basic fibre . . . the starch . . . the brains” behind it.

Still, the man often given principal credit for the strength of the union, which also built the Democratic Party into the hegemonic force it is today, was Jack Hall, who was born about 1915 in Wisconsin and joined the CP in 1936. A ferocious imbiber of alcohol beverages, an aficionado of jazz, a brilliant mathematician and reader of balance sheets, a man who did not know how to drive a car (perhaps a good thing, since he didn’t see very well)—Hall was a mass of contradictions. He was well over six feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds, and his great friend, according to his admiring biographer, was “named Jack Daniel and then he made the acquaintance of Jim Beam.” Eventually, his
dissolute living was to leave him with diabetes, prostate problems, high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, gout, and Parkinson’s disease. He was an expert poker player, which helped make him an adroit negotiator with management.44 An excellent cook, he exhibited a good deal of imagination in the kitchen—fungible skills that allowed him to concoct delicious recipes for higher wages and better working conditions for his membership. He steered clear of tobacco and complained that the smoke from this weed bothered his already beleaguered eyes. He was an excellent typist too, and his influence was later magnified when his daughter married into the politically influential family of John and Phillip Burton in San Francisco.45 Most of all, he was a tireless worker; his colleague David Thompson found him to be “brilliant,” saying that he “works like a goddamn mule; gets more work done than any other 6 guys put together—and he’s a damn rare thing, he’s a great strike leader.”446

Nevertheless, as Thompson also put it, Louis Goldblatt, the university-educated ILWU leader based in San Francisco, “was the general and Hall the lieutenant in the field.”47 John F. Murphy, an executive at the major island firm Castle and Cooke, recalled that, during negotiations, Hall often “had been running them” and then would be “displaced” by Goldblatt, a “clever” man in Murphy’s estimation. Goldblatt was a “better negotiator” than Hall, he thought. Goldblatt realized, said Murphy, that while business was monolithic, a union was not. “The president of a company gives a directive” and minions salute and execute, but a union was different. “It is full of mavericks,” Murphy said. “It’s a political entity.” And Goldblatt, he felt, recognized this more than most.48

Goldblatt grew up in the Bronx and received a Berkeley degree in 1931 and did two years of graduate work before becoming an organizer of Hollywood labor and then moving to San Francisco. There he threw in his lot with the newly organized ILWU, which had just spearheaded a weighty General Strike.49 According to someone who knew him, he was a piano player, a sports fan, and a devotee of sculpture, painting, philosophy, and the history of art. Yet while Goldblatt provided direction to Hall, O. Vincent Esposito, a graduate of Harvard Law School who was Speaker of the House in the Hawai‘i legislature in the 1957–1958 term, asserts that Hall during that period was the most powerful man in the territory. “I was the Speaker,” Esposito averred, and “he was a much stronger person than I was—by far, when I was the Speaker,” adding that Hall was “one of the most important men in the history of Hawaii, in my judgment.”50

Governor John Burns, a founding father of statehood in Hawai‘i, frequently sought to make surreptitious visits to Hall’s home, leery of how his tête-à-tête with the isles’ resident radical might be viewed by some. “He’d drive in a ramshackle car,” perhaps so as to camouflage his presence, “but of course,” said Yoshiko Hall, his spouse, “the minute” he stopped at their door,
“all the kids in the neighborhood would say, ‘Governor Burns is here. Governor Burns is here!’” The two men also often met at the governor’s place “at 6 o’clock in the morning before Burns went to mass”—and perhaps before nosy reporters were awake.51

Burns acknowledged that Communists gave him his start in politics. “If you ever look at my papers that were filed in 1948,” said this former cop who once served as the territory’s representative in Washington, D.C., “you’ll find all those names [of Reds.] Jack Hall, Jack Kawano, down the line. I wasn’t even around when the papers were filed.”52

Yet if Hall was the lieutenant and Goldblatt the general, then—according to Ariyoshi—Bridges was the political commissar, for “the line came from [him].”53 Well-born in Melbourne, Bridges was struck by the writings of Jack London, which inspired him to go to sea. Then he wound up in San Francisco, where he led the General Strike and organized a union he headed for decades. A man with a resonant Aussie accent, Bridges was a consummate leader of workers, and the federal government sought to deport or imprison him more than once. He was a thin and dapper man and sharp—sharp of face, sharp of nose, sharp of dress, sharp of manner, sharp of speech, sharp of gesture. Even his mouth was a thin, tight-lipped—and sharp—line. His face was a sharp triangle, with the sharp apex not at the chin but at the long, thin, sharp nose. His high, sloping forehead was topped with wiry hair, rapidly graying. His cheekbones were high and sharp. He was well-barbered, well-manicured, and so adeptly tailored that he resembled a courtroom version of a man of distinction—a man who, it was suggested, could have been played in the movies by the actor George Raft. But of all his embodiment of sharpness, it was his sharp mind that allowed him to remain a radical of alien birth in a nation determined to jail or deport him.54

Bridges’ sterling qualities notwithstanding, it must be stressed that the very nature of his industry allowed him to flourish. Dockworkers, along with miners and seafarers, lost more workdays to labor disputes than other workers. Stevedores globally knew that their well-being depended on collective action, since otherwise the oversupply of brawny men with strong backs who were desperate for a job that provided decent—and not starvation—wages, seemed to generate a kind of labor solidarity that served to propel a man like Bridges, who knew how to speak to this concern.55 Dockers knew that the ILWU—unlike their New York–based competitor56—sought not to collaborate with management to their detriment but instead to spearhead fierce class struggles. Before the advent of the ILWU in the islands, the notorious “shape-up system” prevailed, whereby in the morning and/or afternoon, stevedores seeking labor went to a pier and stood in a circle and a hiring boss stood in the middle and selected the men he wanted to work that day. There might be 200 or so in the circle—but only a lucky dozen or so were chosen
and the remainder were left to drift away. Eventually, these workers learned that if they promised the hiring boss a kickback, their chances for work were greater—which opened the door to racketeering, internal squabbling among workers, and all manner of ills. Strapped workers often felt compelled to steal cargo, not necessarily for themselves but for gangsters, a practice that led inexorably to double crosses—and then, perhaps, murder. But in the San Francisco–based ILWU, workers were hired through a hiring hall, jointly supported and controlled by the employers and the union.57

In Hawai‘i the union was also sufficiently perspicacious to notice the split between irrigated and nonirrigated plantations. The former were more prosperous—e.g., Waialua and HC&S—whereas the Hamakua plantation was among those that were more dependent on rainfall and didn’t make as much money as others. Labor could gauge the weather and then strike—or not strike—accordingly, something that management realized.58 The non-irrigated plantations were also not as susceptible to early mechanization as the irrigated segment, a difference that also helped shape union strategy.59

Months before the commencement of the epochal Smith Act trial, leading labor journalist Victor Riesel took on this troika—Bridges, Goldblatt, and Hall. The latter was a “glowering, thick set, full-faced man in silver-rimmed spectacles” who directed Bridges’ “real base of power, the Hawaiian sugar and pineapple workers,” and was guided by Goldblatt, a “crew cut, dirty blond, arrogant little fellow.” Riesel also described Goldblatt as a “Sather Gate orator,” a reference to his halcyon days in Berkeley, and as “an accomplished pianist, a sugary, swaying speaker, a financial genius.” Aghast that this radicalism could occur amidst a Red Scare meant to root out remaining Red influence, Riesel noted that “Bridges’ men control unions in atomic energy installations, electronic, aircraft, jet motor plants, in the copper mining and smelting fields, in auto, tank, gun and agricultural implement factories, on our most strategic docks, in our vital warehouses, on fishing fleets in waters neighboring Soviet Russia, in metal fabricating shops, meat packing houses, and thousands of commercial units.”60

Riesel’s dream that the ILWU would be stripped of representation over many of its members came true, but he was correct in observing that the “real base of power” was the sugar and pineapple workers in Hawai‘i (along with the stevedores there), and they refused resolutely to yield. One reason was that they didn’t have much choice, since conditions for agricultural workers were so abysmal. Speaking before Congress in 1949, Bridges pointed out, “The average wage—and I am only talking about 5 years ago—was 28 cents an hour. No such thing as overtime.” He continued, “Workers out in the field would get up about 4:30 in the morning. They were in the fields at 5 in the morning. At 5:30 they would have breakfast, a bucket of rice and fish. They would scoop it out; 11 o’clock lunch, a little more of the same.”61 Aiko
Reinecke (who was of Japanese origin), was born in Kahuku, O‘ahu, in 1907. Child labor was not unusual then, and she began to toil in the fields at the age of 11, carrying jugs of water. She arrived at 7 in the morning and departed at 3:30 in the afternoon; she was earning a nickel per day and resided with her parents in a camp that was “just a couple of rows of barracks” in which “each family had a room”; there was no running water, electricity, or oil stoves.62

Even after the union gained traction in the islands, the backlog of oppressive conditions proved difficult to extirpate. In the summer of 1956 a journalist found families “living in tents down on the beach,” while others were residing in automobiles. “Thousands of others are today living under inhuman substandard conditions,” the writer lamented; “relatives and friends who have doubled up are not on speaking terms because they have gotten in each other’s way for so long.” It was “not uncommon to find 15 to 20 persons living in a two bedroom unit”; and “in the Punchbowl area [of Honolulu] families were found living under houses, without excavated basements,” as “rats interrupted their sleep.”63 As late as the 1950s in Ewa, where Communist leader Jack Kimoto was born, plantation workers lived in an area with open sewers and complained that rats bit their backsides in dilapidated outhouses in segregated camps termed “Filipino Camp” or “Japanese Camp” or “Korean Camp,” etc.64

There was a consistency of horrible working conditions across the islands, though each one had a certain uniqueness. The Big Island—also known as Hawai‘i, with Hilo as its largest city—was larger in territory than all the other major islands combined; O‘ahu, where Honolulu, the major metropolis, was sited, was the most populous. The largest payroll in the archipelago was that of the military, which provided a counterweight of sorts to the radicalism of labor.65

These abominable conditions provided fertile soil for the rise of radical labor and their complement—astute Communists. Yet the question needs to be posed: how did a nation like the United States, where die-hard white supremacists, Jim Crow devotees, and Dixiecrats of various stripes wielded power in the midst of Red Scare hysteria, find itself in the position of simultaneously entertaining the idea of admitting Hawai‘i—where those of European descent were in a distinct minority and where Reds and radicals were influential—into its hallowed union as a state? In short, statehood for Hawai‘i was concocted when this territory was basically an apartheid state with the GOP as the leading party. It became difficult to ditch statehood even after Communists became powerful and the Democrats roared back into contention, because by this point statehood was being viewed as a referendum on how Washington viewed Hawai‘i—i.e., rejection for statehood of a territory with the largest population of Asian descent under the US flag might be viewed as a racist slight, something to be avoided during the Cold War.

This road to statehood was complicated further when in 1954, in direct reaction to the creeping Red Scare as evidenced by the Smith Act trials
(interpreted widely as an assault on the ILWU), the GOP lost its firm grip on Hawai‘i for the first time in 50 years—since the US annexation. This altered the calculus for those who were in favor of statehood as long as it seemed that it would produce two Republican senators or at least legislators akin to the moderate white men who routinely represented the islands in Washington.

Part of the answer as to why statehood was granted in 1959 rests also with the white supremacists’ being overtaken by events; that is, when they began trumpeting the idea of Hawai‘i joining the union, this territory seemed to be firmly within the ambit of unalloyed racism and, thus, a decent fit for the United States. As late as 1948, for example, W. K. Bassett—the top aide to Honolulu’s popular mayor—complained that no “bride of Chinese ancestry, Japanese ancestry, Filipino ancestry or Puerto Rican ancestry is permitted to have her picture appear in any one of the first five pages of the ‘Honolulu Advertiser’s’ Sunday social section”; in the metropolis’ most widely read periodical, “pictures of whites appear there exclusively.”66 In 1949 passengers departing for the mainland on the American President Lines were segregated: Euro-American Communist Stephen Murin and his spouse discovered this when they were refused the cheaper third-class accommodations, which were reserved only for so-called non-haoles (i.e., those not deemed to be “white”).67 Thus, there was a persistent practice of “wage differentials for haoles and non-haoles in various Big Five [corporations] and their subsidiary establishments,” the progressive Honolulu Record editorialized in 1951, also noting that “haoles go up fast in promotions and in many offices” —a reality that the mainstream press ignored persistently.68 Strikingly, in 1952 on the police forces on Maui and the island of Hawai‘i (as opposed to the entire island chain), there were “more Caucasians,” as one journalist put it, “than any other ethnic group”; of course, the “police commissioners” were “practically all Caucasian,” as this was deemed necessary to make sure that white supremacist diktats were enforced ruthlessly.69 There was also a sizeable number of unwarranted sterilizations of “non-haole” women and vasectomies of “non-haole” men.70

One reporter acknowledged in late 1952 that African-Americans, whose numbers in Hawai‘i were quite small, were the most discriminated against, with Puerto Ricans—who had been brought to the islands in the wake of the overthrow of the kingdom—a close second; then Filipinos, then indigenes, followed by Chinese and Japanese. Since the latter hailed from a power that was scorned because of the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, and since they appeared to present the stiffest challenge to white supremacy and, besides, were more numerous than the other groupings, they were a special recipient of bigotry.71

Contemporary Euro-American writer Susanna Moore, who grew up in pre-statehood Hawai‘i, has asserted that in Hawai‘i “there was a fairly unconscious racism all around us” and also quite a bit of this bile that was
“institutionalized” in the form of “restrictions and bylaws that kept non-haoles not only from private clubs, but from certain neighborhoods.” In that era this praxis was largely “unquestioned”—at least by the white minority.72

Just as in today’s United States, when those who seek to raise the issue of bias against minorities are accused of “playing the race card,” there was something similar at play in pre-statehood Hawai‘i. During the Smith Act trial when the defense lawyers sought to point out the racist conditions that had given rise to both unionism and leftism—and to jury pools, e.g., in the case at hand, in which whites were overrepresented—the prosecution reacted sharply asserting, “They are trying to stir up racial hatred here.”73

Inevitably, white supremacy unleashed a strong counterreaction. Smith Act defendant John Reinecke, whose persecution by the authorities in 1948 was the opening shot in an anticommunist purge, remarked in that pivotal year that when he arrived in Honolulu in the 1930s “haoles . . . comprised less than 10 percent of the population” but “haole hating,” a “quite accepted local term,” was highly “prevalent.” In fact, he said “it is still one of the problems here” and was a “problem in the labor unions,” an ironic situation. Although these bodies with their stress on class struggle and the class ethos were a major antidote to racial antipathy, they had an uphill climb.74

Senator Butler of Nebraska discovered this when he began his post–World War II assessment of whether Hawai‘i should become a state. Lucile Paterson, a resident of Honolulu informed him that the “much bruited racial integration and mutual respect” was “largely a myth”; she perceived an “undercurrent of hostility against the haoles or whites by the mixed Oriental population.” As she saw it, the “numerous ‘hoodlum attacks’” then capturing headlines were symptomatic of “Orientals vs. haoles” since the latter were targeted in her eyes. “My son is an excellent barometer,” she said with regret. “He came here totally unaware of ‘race’ as such [but] he has already acquired a wary manner in his dealing with Orientals of his own age and has finally accepted the fact that he is a ‘damn haole.’”75

When Senator Butler held confidential hearings in 1948 in Honolulu on the prospects for statehood, he was greeted with an outpouring of nervous sentiment from whites who, despite their privileged position, complained repeatedly about racial harassment. Like many of the witnesses, Francis D. Houston opposed statehood—if Hawai‘i, why not Fiji? he asked querulously—and asserted that white sailors and soldiers were special victims of physical attacks, as if, to non-haoles, they were symbols of the colonial status that Hawai‘i endured. “Non-haoles [would] catch a haole sailor alone and beat him up. That exists today,” he cried, “and it exists to a pronounced degree.”76

In so many words, this sentiment was echoed again and again.77 Though historians have cast serious doubt on the alleged disloyalty of Japanese-Americans during the Pacific War, many whites disagreed vehemently.
Martin E. Alan, who told Senator Butler of his wonderment as to why so many white Communist men—including Smith Act defendants Jack Hall and John Reinecke and, ultimately, Bridges himself—were married to women of Japanese origin also claimed that farmers of Japanese origin in Hawai‘i had stopped growing vegetables after 7 December 1941 in order to sabotage the war effort. Alan also declared that “from 1920 to 1940 an average of $1,200,000.00 annually was sent to Japan by the nationals here, in the form of gold and silver coin.” As he recalled things, “Planes and submarines made regular and periodic visits here [from Japan] until the very end of the war in 1945. It’s all hogwash about the loyalty of the Niseis [Japanese-Americans] and the aliens,” as there “were acts of sabotage, plenty of them.” But now, he asserted, those of Japanese origin had shifted from allegiance to Tokyo to allegiance to Moscow, for “Communism is working through the Orientals,” as certain matrimonial tendencies supposedly suggested.78

This fear that “non-haoles” generally might be disloyal to a state that, after all, treated them like rubbish may shed light on why, when the “Major Disaster Council” of Maui met in emergency session at “10:40 A.M. following receipt of word via radio and telephone from Honolulu that O‘ahu had been attacked” on 7 December 1941, only one of the 22 people present had an Asian surname.79 Then an investigator from the US Navy opined that those of Japanese ancestry in Hawai‘i might assist Japanese invaders.80 Of course, such sentiments could have been motivated, as much as anything else, by guilty fear as to what white supremacy might have induced.

Unsurprisingly, after receiving an earful from whites, Senator Butler was in no mood to push for statehood in a territory where reputed Communists might be able to elect two US senators and where his racial compatriots were complaining about a veritable state of siege. This sentiment was held most dearly by Dixiecrats. Senator Olin Johnston of South Carolina, who was opposed adamantly to statehood, stressed that the “non-haole peoples are taking Hawai‘i just as surely as a lava flow over-runs a volcanic region,” for “non-haole births were 9 times as [many] as haoles and the Japanese alone nearly 4 times as great.”81 His comrade in arms and the epitome of white supremacy, Senator J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, proclaimed proudly, “I do not believe there is anyone in the Senate who is more opposed to the admission of Hawaii to statehood than I”—though many of his fellow Dixiecrats dispassionately disagreed.82 Daniel Inouye, a chief beneficiary of the historic Democratic Party landslide that swept the GOP aside in Hawai‘i in response to the Red Scare and the Smith Act convictions, recalled after statehood that one senator during the time of these passionate debates had asked wonderingly, “How would you like to be sitting next to a fellow named Yamamoto?”83

US elites had to decide whether it would be easier to contain the Left as a colony or a state—and the latter option was chosen. As then Vice President
Richard M. Nixon put it in early 1959, “Hawaii will be less susceptible to any control by Communists as a State than it is as a Territory.”84 The wily Nixon may have been listening to the likes of the powerful Henry A. White, president of the Dole Hawaiian Pineapple Company, who as early as 1946 recognized that statehood provided more leverage to otherwise grossly outnumbered white elites and was yet another lever to circumvent domination by the overwhelming majority.85

As it turned out, these sensitive senators had to sit next to counterparts named Inouye and Fong and Akaka after the granting of statehood in 1959 and did not appear to be any the worse for it. Hawai’i was transformed in the process from a feudal outpost in the Pacific to a state that plays the fortunate role of injecting a jolt of progressivism into an otherwise conservative United States, and for this the ILWU and the CP are largely responsible. Ray Jerome Baker, a left-leaning photographer—and a white—who arrived in Honolulu on a visit in 1908 and began residing there in 1910,86 mused in 1952 as the Smith Act trial was launched, “I have seen the feudal conditions” abolished in Hawai’i, as “wages increased from about $20 per month to $10 per day.”87 This spectacular rise in wages was largely due to the energetic activism of an ILWU that was led by radicals.

Still, it would be a mistake to leave it at that, for there are still lessons to be learned about this experience that it would be ill-advised to ignore. These concerns reside in two profound areas—the matter of racism and the very question of statehood. On the former matter, Bridges—who often clashed with the eminent union leader Hall—recalled subsequently that he had wanted “some local people who were non-haole” in leadership of the union. “I promised those guys years ago that we were at the end of importing mainlanders. It was like an imperialist domain down there,” he said, speaking of the strongest branch of the union he headed. It was “colonial,” said Bridges; it was “paternalism, this patronizing [attitude that] because the poor people are uneducated [and] they’re non-white, [they] need smart people to lead them around by the hand and to take care of them like this.” Bridges’ close ally in union leadership, J. R. Robertson—who also crossed swords with Hall—said that Hall had failed because “he failed to develop leadership,” while relying heavily on whites from the mainland.88

Hall’s reliance on white mainlanders was even more remarkable in that figures like Ariyoshi—who had advised Mao, started a pioneering newspaper, and more—were quite available. Yet as statehood approached, Hall and the union, instead of supporting the collapsing Honolulu Record, started a lighter—less ideologically sharp—version of this journal, and it folded quickly. To the extent that Hawai’i may provide an inkling to the future of a United States where those of European descent are not in the majority, it is troubling that some ILWU leaders seemed to have difficulty in working in equality alongside
“non-haoles.” To give a balanced picture, however, it must be noted that the notoriously insecure Hall also seemed to be wary of any potential challengers. When the Euro-American Communist Stephen Murin arrived in Hawai‘i in 1947, Hall nervously said to him, “I hear you’re a Communist.” Murin replied, “I am,” to which Hall—who may still have been a CP member at that juncture—retorted, “We don’t need Communists from Boston.” Murin went on to become a stalwart of radicalism within labor and on the Left.

At the same time, the ILWU leaders pushed for a kind of affirmative action, repeatedly requesting that leaders of Japanese origin in the union step aside so that Filipinos could be promoted—yet it seemed beyond their comprehension (Bridges and Robertson aside) to view the overrepresentation of white men in the leadership as problematic and to consider asking some of them to step aside. This grievous flaw may have stemmed from the fact that the Communist Party—which had long been a trailblazer in the fight against white supremacy—was in retreat even as the stunning 1953 demonstrations that greeted the Smith Act convictions were unfolding, and this helped to nudge Hawai‘i in a more conservative direction than it might have gone otherwise. Moreover, both the party and the union were born and bathed in the amniotic fluid of the old racist order and could not easily escape this troubled heritage. As thousands of protesters poured into the streets of Honolulu and Hilo in 1953, Communists were virtually underground. Robert McBurney Kempa, a former Red who testified against Communists in 1953, noted that after war commenced in Korea, party cell meetings took place in moving automobiles—which obviously limited participation: “No telephones were to be used, homes were not to be used for meetings, no written records.” The only writing was done on a “magic slate,” i.e., a “black piece of waxed cardboard covered by a piece of wax paper covered by a piece of cellophane” that “could be immediately erased.” The party was the venue where these issues of racism in labor leadership could have been engaged and hashed out more effectively, but this was not easy to do while meeting in cars in busy Honolulu traffic. The union itself found such discussions hard to accomplish, as it too battled for survival and as Hall could easily interpret such discussions as attacks on his otherwise meritorious leadership.

More puzzling is why the party and the union chose to crusade for statehood, though they were more aware than most of the blatant imperialism that led to the deposing of the kingdom and the imposition of rule by Washington, D.C. At the 1948 hearing in which he was castigated for being a reputed Communist, Smith Act defendant John Reinecke spoke eloquently of how “in 1893 the business centers by coup d’état overthrew the established government” and “set up what was openly an oligarchy of small sections of the Caucasian population,” while “Oriental Hawaiians were not allowed to vote at all.” Then, he said, “in 1895 a number of native Hawaiians, abetted by some of the whites rose in
rebellion.” Although he described the rebellion as “futile and anachronistic,” he declared, “But I certainly could not blame them. If I had been living here in Hawaii at that time and had been of an age to join them, I think I would have joined them.” Shockingly for the time, he added, “Looking at it from the vantage point of history now, I should say that they would have done better to have waited for annexation.” He disagreed with the notion that “Hawaii should have its independence,” though he recognized that it was a “colony.”

In a lengthy undated document probably written at the time of the Smith Act trial, the CP too acknowledged the obvious: Hawai‘i was a colony. In a nuanced manner, it noted that the idea of independence—raised by the party early on—had not been bruited of late because it was “too far in advance of the present level of consciousness of the national movement in the country,” although it was “urgently necessary to caution against ruling out for all time this particular slogan.” Statehood “cannot solve the national problem,” and the CP “cannot favor statehood as a solution,” it was said. “Nor should the party make its main point of departure that opposition.”

The ILWU, which contrary to its detractors was independent of the CP, did not adhere to this line, but belatedly in September 1959, after statehood was a reality, union leaders began to grapple with what it actually meant to be a state in an otherwise retrograde United States. Noted was the impending “rapid change in the social and political outlook of our electorate with the influx of tens of thousands of adult conservative Caucasians from the mainland who will tend more and more to ‘Miami-ize’ our islands and bury its real traditions.” Rather tardily, it warned, “We may lose our identity, traditions and liberalism altogether within the next decade.”

It is entirely possible that as the CP was being chased into underground status and Hall failed to renew his membership as a direct result of requirements of the draconian Taft-Hartley legislation, he saw measures to diversify the top ranks of the ILWU and to rethink the union’s support for statehood and the Honolulu Record as all part of letting go of an unrealistic Left turn ill-befitting a mature union that was about to determine the selection of US senators. These flaws notwithstanding, the Communists in the earthly paradise that was Hawai‘i may have had more influence and impact than Reds anywhere else under the US flag. They spearheaded the building of a union, the ILWU, which still thrives and which brought democracy to a virtual despotism as it rescued thousands from the brutal clutches of white supremacy.