



Guide to the Rene Battaglini Oral History, 1937; 1941-42

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Access Points

Athearn, Fred

Ernst, Hugo

Shelley, John Francis

American Federation of Labor (AFL)

Congress of Industrial Organizations

Cooks Union, Local 44

Hotel & Restaurant employees and Bartenders International Union
Hotels, taverns, etc.--Employees
Industrial Relations--San Francisco
Labor laws & Legislation
Minorities--San Francisco
Pacific Coast Labor Bureau
San Francisco-Hotel Workers Strike, 1941-42
Strikes & Lockouts--San Francisco
Trade-unions
Women in Trade-unions

Born

Grenoble, France, 1905

July 12, 1979

July 19, 1979

July 26, 1979

August 2, 1979

August 21, 1979

September 4, 1979

Lucy Kendall

Seven (7) hours

Scope and Content

Although I had not known Rene Battaglini before meeting him to discuss the pending interviews, I did know some of his history as a union leader of the thirties and early forties. In addition, I am a member of the same International Union. Therefore the preparation was, in some ways, a little less difficult than if I had known nothing of the history of the union and the people involved except through research. The other side of the coin, however, was that this knowledge made it difficult to maintain objectivity. This became obvious as I learned more of Mr. Battaglini's history and his reaction to the situations which confronted him.

The reasons for this interview, and the ones which will hopefully follow, are: As an interviewer for the women in California Collection of California Historical Society I had set up a series of interviews with Bertha Metro, former Secretary-Treasurer of Local #283 of the Hotel & Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union. Ms. Metro was responsible for organizing the maids in San Francisco in nineteen hundred thirty six and thirty seven, and was involved in the nineteen thirty seven and nineteen forty one - forty two hotel strikes. At that time the office workers in the hotels were also organized and the papers indicated the focus of the strike was recognition of those employees, members of Local #283.

Unfortunately Ms. Metro was ill. Both her memory and health were rapidly deteriorating. I had thought, with thorough research and sheer will power, I could get through to her. This was impossible. We stopped the interviews. Subsequently Ms. Metro died.

However, because of interest in the history of culinary unions and because of the difficulties with Ms. Metro, I did two chronologies - one of each strike. In the course of this I was struck by the fact that while other unions were making great forward strides in wages, hours, working conditions, and obtaining closed shop contracts, the results of these two strikes did not parallel the victories won in other industries.

In order to develop this, California Historical Society Library agreed to sponsor a series of interviews on the hotel strikes, with the possibilities of searching out at least one member of each of the six unions involved, a member of the Pacific Coast Labor Bureau, and an official of the CIO, and possibly a member of the Hotel Association.

The Interviewee

To this end, Mr. Battaglini was chosen as the first to be interviewed. These strikes were the spark that launched many of the present leaders of the culinary workers in San Francisco today. Mr. Battaglini could have maintained leadership if he had not been an active and articulate member of a rank and file group.

I had thought of the series of interviews as being short one or two hour sessions. Instead this one lasted seven hours and even then did not develop a complete picture. It is unfortunate we had to limit the interview. Mr. Battaglini's experiences in the O.S.S., his work on the waterfront, his interests and activities, would have brought forth a greater understanding of the man and his philosophy. I feel he is one of the few former labor leaders who has firm ideas based on his experiences, and whose ideas have not been changed over the years precisely because he has not been involved in union leadership, has not had to make compromises, has not had to develop new methods of work. I believe he thinks today as he did during the tumultuous years of his union activity and the resultant problems.

All the interviews were conducted at Mr. Battaglini's small apartment in the downtown district of San Francisco known as the Tenderloin. His work room is cluttered with books, pamphlets mail, and some momentos of his history. He has indeed kept a good deal of material including clippings, honers, pictures, certificates of various kinds from his army and educational forays as well as his union activities. He does not seem to have changed much over the years and looks very much today like the photographs of himself which he donated to the photograph archives of California Historical Society.

He seems to have lost none of his fervor for keeping his mind and body alert. Already conversant in English, French, Italian and some Spanish, he is now studying Russian because It is a difficult language and keeps me thinking.

Preparation for the Interview

Before going into the interview proper, gave Mr. Battaglini copies of the chronologies as well as a brief chronological history of Local #283. Also made a list of some of the questions that might be asked in order to give him a sketchy idea of the line of inquiry. He already had a copy of *Union House, Union Bar* (with which we were both familiar) by Matthew Josepheson, a book written for and sponsored by the International in honor of its president, Hugo Ernst, a man who came from the West Coast Waiters Union.

Editing

Very little editing was done when transcribing. The final product is the original transcript corrected by Mr. Battaglini.

Because of his strong accent, his effervescent personality, and his method of expressing himself, I feel that, in this case, the tapes should certainly be listened to before reading the transcript. Much of the flavor of the interview is lost in the translation. Although one can't see him, which is a loss in itself, one can at least hear him, find out emphases, etc.

Narrative Account of the Interview

A very brief section of the tape is given to Mr. Battaglini's early life in France and Italy, his schooling, his parents, and his apprenticeship as a cook.

Following his life chronologically, he tells of his joining the Syndicalist trade union movement in France and Brussels; his acquaintance with his mentor, Paul Boulet.

Postponing, for a short period, the French draft, Battaglini shipped out as a cook on around the world trip.

Returning to France he did his stint in the army. When released he received a letter from Paul Boulet who offered a job at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore. They wanted a sous chef. Battaglini took the job. However, he did not like the colonial life; left the Raffles for a job at the Cathay Hotel in Shanghai. Finding this life equally disenchanting he applied for a visa to the United States, was accepted and arrived in San Francisco in nineteen thirty one.

Then follows his joining the Cooks Union, his working in large San Francisco hotels, his involvement in organization of the Cooks, and his recruitment into the rank and file caucus of the Cooks Local.

The strike of 1937 was the turning point in Mr. Battaglini's career as a union activist. He became the head of the Patrol Office. When the strike was over he was placed on the Board of Arbitration to establish the contract.

He then ran for office in the union starting as Recording Secretary and ending up as Secretary-Treasurer and finally President. All this on a rank and file slate which ousted many of the old time officials.

Questions were asked and answered regarding the strike of nineteen thirty seven. It is interesting that many potential questions were answered in the course of the interview without having been asked.

The five year period between strikes was spent organizing, strengthening the union, implementing the contract, and preparing for the time when the contract expired and a new one had to be negotiated.

Then came the 1941 strike and this is gone into in detail.

When the draft law was passed, Mr. Battaglini, who was thirty five, was called up. His membership petitioned that he be released because his presence was needed as a union leader. This was accepted.

However, when Pearl Harbor was bombed, Mr. Battaglini, then thirty-six, when most draftees were in the eighteen to twenty-one bracket, was drafted. He did not object this time saying ..we were against Fascism, against the Nazis. Well, this was the time to show your colors...you put your life on the line where you put your mouth...

Because of his experiences and his abilities he was asked to function in the O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services) and did work behind the enemy lines. One of the tragedies of war is he was injured severely in a serious automobile accident immediately after having returned safely from a foray into enemy territory.

Returning to San Francisco, a disabled veteran, he again became active in the union. (members in the service were kept in good standing). When nominations for office were opened he ran and was re-elected.

The 1947 International Convention of the Culinary Unions saw a development of the cold-war trend in the labor movement with the presentation of an anti-communist resolution on the floor of the convention. Mr. Battaglini along with others, fought against the resolution to no avail. Although he did not get the floor, he asked that his speech be included in the minutes. It was, and a copy is included in the transcript.

As a consequence of this, he and others, were the target of charges, and an attempt to oust them from the union leadership. In the interim the Taft Hartley Law had been passed over President Truman's veto.

The 1939 national convention passed a resolution creating a clause in the constitution (which exists to this day) that no person shall be eligible for, or continue to hold any office in the International Union or any of its subordinates affiliated, or serve as a convention delegate or other representative of an affiliate, if such person associates himself with Communist, Fascist, or similar organizations....

The last time Battaglini ran for office he was defeated. He could not obtain a job in the industry, and discovered his health would not permit him to work as a sous chef on ships, so he attempted to use his G.I. benefits to go to school and become an attorney. This was refused on the basis he had taken a correspondence course in Spanish and had to continue with language only. So he went to France, became a professor. Returning to the United States he was faced with the Levering Act (Loyalty Oath).

He then obtained a permit to work out of Ship Clerks Local #34, ILWU; worked under this card, finally became a full fledged member, and retired a few years ago.

The interview is interspersed with both requested and voluntary opinions on methods of organization, types of union leadership, problems facing labor officials, and philosophical conclusions.

by Lucy Kendall
September 9, 1979
