

HAROLD S.Y. HEE

The Tachibana Incident

MARCH 1, 1954 was a fateful day for both Haruo Tachibana and Hutchinson Sugar Company. On that day, Tachibana became agitated over what he thought was the severity of the punishment imposed on him by the company for failing to turn out to work on the previous workday. When he lost his temper and tried to pick a fight with his bosses and failed, and then coaxed his fellow mill workers to walk off from their jobs, the penalty of a one-day suspension was extended to a full discharge the next day, March 2. That was not the end of the Tachibana Incident. What was to follow was a near calamitous strike at the company, the longest ever in the history of the relationship between the International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union (the ILWU) and the sugar companies.

Nā'ālehu in 1954 was a remote, small and quiet sugar plantation village in the Ka'u District on the southernmost part of the island of Hawai'i. It sits on the lower slope of Mauna Loa, some 670 feet in elevation and was home to about 1700 residents. It was a friendly and pretty town, a model for its harmonious and cooperative spirit on the Big Island. As union leader William Silva from the neighboring plan-

Harold S.Y. Hee was vice president of industrial relations at C. Brewer before retiring in 1987 after nearly 36 years of service with the company in various capacities. He began his employment in 1951 as a management trainee following completion of his undergraduate studies at Cornell University. He was first assigned to Hutchinson Sugar Company, a C. Brewer affiliated company, in December 1951, and became acquainted with all of the individuals (both union and company personnel) mentioned in "The Tachibana Incident," but he left before the conflict occurred, having been assigned in 1953 to Paaauhau Sugar Company. "The Tachibana Incident" is a chapter from a book he is writing on labor relations in the sugar industry. This piece is his first contribution to the Journal.

The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 39 (2005)

tation town of Pāhala said, "Here, everybody seems to pitch in at the same time on a community project. In Pahala, it's more like you wait for the other fellow to go ahead. This [Naalehu] is a nice town."¹ There had not been a labor walkout or any dispute of the least magnitude at Hutchinson since the industry-wide sugar strike of 1946. How then could this strike have ever happened in this peaceful and quiet town? And why did it last so long?

PROFILE OF TACHIBANA WHO FELT UNJUSTLY TREATED

Haruo Tachibana was a local boy of Japanese ancestry from a family of six children. Of slender and medium build, he was regarded in the community as a leader and "generally well thought of as a person."² To some, however, he was a contentious person who was inclined to be defiant towards plantation authority and even arrogant.³ He was known for his occasional, tempestuous run-ins with management and others. A good friend and a retired electrical supervisor, Tokuichi Nakano, grew up living next door to the Tachibanas in the Honu'apo upper camp before all the outlying camps were consolidated into a single camp in Nā'ālehu sometime in the late 1940's.⁴ The two attended the Naalehu Elementary & Intermediate School where they completed the 8th grade, then the highest grade taught there. Tachibana was always fighting in school and the only way Nakano remembered gaining his respect was by beating him in a fight one day. Nakano also recalled how Tachibana went after Nakano's brother with a hammer and ended up with a black eye instead. Yet, Nakano had only kind words for Tachibana as a person. He was "a good friend and he had a good heart."

Tachibana went to work for Hutchinson in 1934 right out of school. During World War II he served with the famed 442nd Regiment Combat Team having joined as a volunteer, along with his older brother, Harry, also from Nā'ālehu. He earned two Purple Heart awards in combat in the European theater as a member of "M" Heavy Weapons Company, 3d Battalion.⁵ When he was discharged from the army, he had attained the rank of staff sergeant, a sign that his leadership attributes were recognized in the military. He returned to Nā'ālehu and his job at Hutchinson as a shop machinist. In 1954, together with his years in the military, he had been employed for 20

years with the same company. He was 35 years old and married with two children.

A penalty of a one-day suspension was not by any means a harsh form of punishment. In reality it was the typical measure of discipline meted out by most sugar firms for an infraction such as an unauthorized absence. It was strange for Tachibana to have felt that he should have been treated otherwise, unless he thought there were mitigating circumstances. After all, he had absented himself for a legitimate union activity and had given the company advance notice of his absence. That he was denied permission by the company didn't seem to be a big thing. In an interview with Jack Burby of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, dated June 6, 1954, Tachibana explained that he was angry because he felt that a one-day suspension for his absence was too steep for a man with 20 years of service. Besides, he explained, on the day he was absent the mill was closed and it was raining. (The mill did not grind that day, but the shop in which he was working was functioning and the mechanics were busy doing repairs.) He recalled the times he had been awakened from bed by calls from the mill to fix machinery. Of the two machinists in the shop, he was recognized as the more skillful, and thus was relied on more heavily for emergency repairs. Had his remarks stopped there, it would have been an explainable defense of his behavior. But his darker side was revealed when Burby quoted him saying, "I told them if this is the way you folks are going to treat me after all that time, let's go out on the road and settle this. Some haoles think they can push us around, but they pick on the wrong guy."

The incident had its origin on Thursday, February 25, 1954 when Tachibana asked for two days off from work to attend an island-wide ILWU caucus of union leaders on Friday and Saturday, February 26 and 27. The ILWU represented sugar workers at 26 companies in Hawai'i. The only unorganized plantations were Waimea Sugar and family-owned Gay & Robinson, both on Kaua'i and both small. Tachibana wanted to attend the meeting as one of the representatives of the Hutchinson unit to listen to a briefing on the progress of the industry-wide sugar negotiations then ongoing in Honolulu. At the same time, Tachibana asked that Robert Kamakura, the only other machinist, be excused for the Saturday meeting. The chief engineer said he couldn't allow both of them to be off on the same day, sug-

gesting one go one day and the other the next day. Tachibana told his boss that he could excuse Kamakura on the 27th but he, Tachibana, would not show up.⁶ The chief engineer warned him that an unauthorized absence was grounds for disciplinary action. Tachibana took off from work and went to the meeting on both days anyway.

FROM A MINOR SUSPENSION TO OUTRIGHT DISMISSAL

When he reported to work on Monday, March 1, Tachibana was greeted by his immediate supervisor, Benigno Salvador, who told him he was suspended for the day and handed him the written suspension notice. Tachibana was beside himself as he raced to talk to the mill engineer, Bob Wilkinson, a young, mainland, college-trained engineer who had been at the company for only a short time, to complain about the suspension. When told that the suspension was not going to be withdrawn, he swore at Wilkinson and is alleged to have laid his hands on Wilkinson (while the original statements by the company included this charge, in subsequent statements the company did not repeat this allegation) and in anger, he asked Wilkinson to step outside to settle the matter. Wilkinson, a much larger person and a boxer in college, declined. Tachibana then rushed into the office of the mill superintendent to confront John Jarman about the suspension. Jarman, a small and wiry person of Scottish origin, was an experienced sugar factory head of the old school. After an exchange, Tachibana flung the suspension notice on Jarman's desk, swore at him and challenged Jarman to go outside and fight. When Jarman refused, Tachibana stomped out of the office and went to talk to his co-workers. Shortly afterwards, they all walked off the job. The mill was shut down for the remainder of the day when the mill employees for the other two shifts failed to show up for work.

Tachibana was fired for his actions the next day, March 2. The mill workers returned to work that same day and all company operations returned to normal. On that afternoon, the ILWU Hawaii Island division director, George Martin, drove in from Hilo to meet with the manager of Hutchinson Sugar Company, James S. Beatty. Martin, 29, was a local boy raised in Hilo, an intelligent and a smooth-talking union leader. In the short time he had been the island director he developed a haughty bearing. Those who had dealt with him stated

that he was arrogant about the power he and his union wielded over management, and that he had no compunction in showing it. So Beatty's remarks about the conversation he had with Martin had to be given some credence. "Beatty said that Martin told him that unless Tachibana was taken back, the workers might not ratify the industry-wide contract now being negotiated and he intimated that there might be a strike."⁷ The report continued, "Martin denies a strike threat. He says his remarks were in more general terms about recognizing workers' rights or there would be a strike."

PROFILE OF THE MANAGER WHO STOOD HIS GROUND

James S. Beatty, 57, was an experienced sugar manager. Born in Rochester, Minnesota of Irish and German descent, he completed his high school education in Vancouver, Washington. He worked as an ice delivery man, and in Portland, Oregon as a lineman. Seeking adventure, he came to Hawai'i at age 19, along with a friend. Instead of a short stay as intended, he remained in Hawai'i for the rest of his life. He became a lineman with the electric company in Honolulu, went to Laupāhoehoe on the island of Hawai'i for a short time, and joined the army during World War I, where he was assigned to lineman duty. After finishing his service in 1919, he returned to Laupāhoehoe Sugar Company. He was restored to his job as a field *luna* or overseer and later moved to Hutchinson where he worked himself up over the years to become manager, first at Paauhau Sugar Company for a year, then back to Hutchinson, both subsidiary companies of C. Brewer. When he was confronted with the Tachibana case, he had been in the sugar business for 35 years and had been manager at Hutchinson for nearly 17 years.

Beatty was a tall, trim, and big man, who always wore a white shirt and a tie tucked into it. The cuffs of his khaki pants were rolled into the high leather boots he wore daily. On top of his mane of gray hair he wore a straw hat. With dark glasses, which he often did not remove inside his office, he had a stern appearance. He spoke with a firm, but modulated, voice, never raising it even when his ire was raised. He looked like a manager. Kazuo Ikeda, who was then the principal at Naalehu School, described him 50 years later as "a regular sugar plantation manager" and "human," but he added, with his workers

he was “quite a boss.”⁸ In short he was fair and tough, a no-nonsense manager. Most people in the community thought he was friendly and a good manager. A former resident, a woman now living in Honolulu who spent her childhood days in Nā‘ālehu, remembered Beatty thusly, “he was a good and nice man.” Her father was a union member.⁹ A life-long resident of Nā‘ālehu said Beatty knew the family members of the workers, calling them by their names even when she, for example, as a young woman was recognized and greeted by him in Honolulu.¹⁰ A former Hawaiian Agricultural Company supervisor remembered him as “a good and fair manager, although a stern disciplinarian.”¹¹ These comments reinforced reporter Jack Burby’s observation of Beatty:

He is an austere man, aloof, but not the haughty whip-cracker that has been painted in the ILWU’s stories of ‘Beattyism’. He demands a job be done right. He believes that only one man can run a plantation at a time. He is a plantation manager up from the old school, but he is no martinet.¹²

Beatty turned down Martin’s request to reinstate Tachibana.

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM

For the next seven weeks, like the proverbial lull before the storm, everything seemed normal in Nā‘ālehu. Work progressed as if nothing had happened. There was some grumbling when Tachibana was fired, but not too much.¹³ Yet, if there was no tension in this peaceful town, there were misgivings about the probability of some form of concerted action by the workers, since there was no process in place for the resolution of the Tachibana discharge. He remained fired, did not file a grievance, and started collecting his unemployment compensation payments. And he left his tool box and tools at the workshop. No meetings were held between the company and the union. In Honolulu, negotiators were wrestling over a new industry-wide labor contract when Jack Hall, the regional director of the ILWU, after being advised of the discharge, passed the word along to Dwight Steele, lead industry spokesman, that there was some trouble brewing at Hutchinson involving, “this union leader who was recognized as a

hothead, but he has 17 years and the union would try to do something about him."¹⁴ Agreement on the sugar contract was reached on March 21. The contract was ratified by all of the sugar units except at Hutchinson, where according to a union official then, a vote was taken at a union meeting and ratification lost out.¹⁵

A union business agent, Elias Domingo, out of the Hilo office was assigned to Nā'ālehu to interview workers for the purpose of gathering information on past unresolved grievances, ostensibly to prove the union's allegation that union-management relations had been strained in the past and that the Tachibana incident brought management's bad attitude to the forefront.¹⁶

On April 20, seven weeks from the day of the discharge, Beatty, sensing renewed activity by the union, sent a letter to his employees:

We have heard that some of your union leaders have said there will be a strike of all employees if Tachibana is not taken back. Threats of a strike certainly won't help this situation and a strike won't get Tachibana back. We feel sure that all of you will think this over carefully before taking any action that may hurt you and the company.

The letter had no effect. Two days later, on April 22, the strike began.

WHY WAS START OF STRIKE DELAYED?

When the strike started the town was not surprised. Most had already gotten word that it would take place. But why was there such a long delay of seven weeks before the strike was called? The answer is open to conjecture. No one would give a rational explanation, at least not in 2003, almost 50 years later when the author revisited Nā'ālehu. A few reasons come to mind.

As previously mentioned, the ILWU leadership, whose authorization for a strike was required, was preoccupied in industry-wide contract negotiations in Honolulu and could not attend to this local issue.

Tachibana was not "a highly popular rallying point for a strike." While he had been a loyal union leader, he was not an elected union official. No immediate groundswell developed over his discharge.

Too many members considered him “cocky” or “hot tempered” and something of “a troublemaker.”¹⁷

The field workers, comprised largely of Filipinos, were not interested in the politics of the situation. Long after the strike, in an interview conducted in 2003, an active Filipino union leader said, “it was a stupid thing to go on strike for one man,” a man who was not well liked. Why then did they go on strike, he was asked? “The majority voted for it. After all, the union’s motto was ‘An injury to one is an injury to all.’”¹⁸

The Hutchinson unit did not and never had strong leadership. Whether this was due to its remote location, or due to the dominant leadership of its manager, who had served as manager there for more than 16 years and made the unit leadership look impotent, the perception held by the island and local ILWU leadership was that it was weak. Because potentially capable leaders (and that included Tachibana) were not eager to assume the unit chairmanship, the job was passed on to whoever wanted it. The then-current leader was George Beck, Jr., a small and quiet person, not given to union militancy. He was a truck driver in the harvesting department; the more aggressive union members were found in the shops.

While the final decision to wage a strike rested with the international offices in Honolulu and San Francisco, speculation was that Martin, the Hawaii Island division director, played a key role in making a strong plea to get Tachibana reinstated. Martin was known for his style of intimidating management with strike threats, as he surely did with Beatty on the day Tachibana was fired. Despite Martin’s denial, the words expressed by him at the meeting with the manager at Hutchinson, as reported by Beatty, were characteristic of Martin’s nature in harassing employers. No one in sugar management underestimated the power and sway he held over them. Martin may have felt that to permit a company to fire a militant union leader with impunity would undercut the power he had so relentlessly built up for himself.

Hall’s approval had to be obtained before a strike could be called and he needed the time to make that decision. It is not clear who in the San Francisco office had authorized this action, but if it was not Harry Bridges, the head of the ILWU, he was informed before it hap-

pened. Both were influenced by Martin's strong plea to engage in a strike to undo the discharge of a rabid union leader. By pushing for the strike, Martin's aggressive and very successful tactics on the Big Island would continue to weigh heavily on management.

COMMENCEMENT OF THE STRIKE, APRIL 22

It was the garage employees who led the work stoppage on April 22nd. The 19 workers from the automotive garage department on that morning demanded at a meeting with H. Alfred Hansen, the company industrial relations superintendent, that the company drop its employee testing program, which had been ongoing for over a year. The employees received the expected "no" as the answer, asked for a caucus, and failed to return to work at the garage. The mill employees followed with a walkout. Later all of the shifts of both the garage and mill workers failed to turn out. All told, 56 employees went on strike on that day. The company shut down the harvesting operations immediately. On the following day no work was offered to the cultivation and other employees. With the strike in full swing there were in all 277 workers who were out.¹⁹

On the next day the union, led by Martin, held two meetings with company officials at Nā'ālehu. At each meeting the company told the union that it was willing to skip the lower steps of the grievance procedure and have the Tachibana grievance submitted directly to arbitration, provided the employees returned to work. Each time, the union spurned the offer, replying that Tachibana was not the only issue, but the testing program was, along with other matters.²⁰

One day later, Saturday, April 24, Jack Hall, flew in from Honolulu to meet with Beatty. He asked Beatty whether all of the matters, including the Tachibana discharge, the testing program, and other matters that the union had brought up, could be mediated instead. Hall said an arbitrator could only deal with Tachibana's firing, but a mediator could dig into Hutchinson's labor-management history and find the root of the trouble. Mediation had the merit of having an outside third-party intervene, using his persuasive powers to resolve the differences between the two sides in dispute, but not possessing the authority to make a binding ruling. One side in the process could

walk away from a proposed settlement offered by the mediator. The union was fearful of a binding arbitration ruling that would not reinstate Tachibana. Most observers felt that the facts of the case would more likely result in an award upholding management. On the other hand, the union felt that with a skillful mediator, the company could be moved to compromise on the issue with only a suspension, not a discharge.

Beatty said no, the grievance was to go through the procedure as provided by the labor contract. The meeting broke off and the status of the new labor contract at Hutchinson remained in doubt. Hall was quoted in the newspaper that the contract, "was neither ratified nor unratiated."²¹ The company said the old agreement remained in effect until the contract expired on August 31, 1954, acknowledging that while the August 1953 contract opening had been exercised and resulted in a settlement for all the companies in the industry, that settlement had not been ratified by Hutchinson nor the local union.

Recognizing that the strike could be protracted, the company decided on Monday, April 26, to salvage the cane on the ground that had been cut before the strike began. Supervisors drove four haul cane trucks into the field and, with the field crane, also operated by a supervisor, loaded the cut cane stalks into the truck beds. They brought the 300 tons of cane into the mill yard where the mill, also run by supervisors, processed it. The union did not interfere with the recovery operation. After this salvage operation was completed, the company said it planned no further attempt to operate the mill.

Three days later, in a *Honolulu Advertiser* news item dated April 29, 1954, Beatty said, "the trouble was stirred up by ILWU leaders who don't live in Naalehu." Beatty said that most of his workers were against the strike. It was true that outside union leaders had come to Nā'ālehu to abet the strike. Yoshito Takamine, an experienced business agent from Honoka'a, (later to become an elected representative in the legislature) spent almost full time in Nā'ālehu helping to organize the strike activities. Yasuki Arakaki, a radical union leader from Olaa Sugar Company, was also a frequent visitor who worked to shore up the spirit of the strikers.

Jack Hall said that Beatty and his supervisors had been trying to undercut the union since the first contract was signed in 1946. Beatty replied,

The record of Hutchinson grievances speaks for itself. There are personality clashes, certainly between militant union leaders and management representatives everywhere. It's quite normal. But if Hutchinson had a conflict in this sphere, there certainly would have been a flood of work stoppages and grievances. No grievance in Hutchinson's history has ever had to go to arbitration. It should be remembered that there has not been a single picket, there has been no violence, no threats, no heated tempers, no indication whatsoever that feelings are running high. The company's operations of the mill went off without the appearance of a single picket and without a protest by the union. There is no better indication that this dispute is unpopular with the vast majority of the rank and file, and that it is rather an artificial dispute engineered by union leadership outside Naalehu.²²

HARRY BRIDGES TRIES TO INTERVENE AT THE TOP

Two more weeks went by without any movement by either side. In fact, during this time, the ILWU had begun a behind-the-scenes attempt to settle the dispute. According to Sanford Zalburg, author of a biography of Jack Hall, *A Spark is Struck*, Harry Bridges, head of the ILWU in San Francisco, secretly contacted James Blaisdell, the former president of the Hawaii Employers Council, who after leaving the Council in 1947 had started his own law firm in Honolulu, to propose that the matters in dispute be mediated. Blaisdell, in turn got in touch with Alan Davis, CEO of C. Brewer & Company, the parent company of Hutchinson, to convey Bridges' concern that the strike could intensify unless something could be worked out, perhaps through mediation. Davis did not budge, supporting his manager, Beatty. His answer was that the company's stand was based on the right of management to manage the company. If the union felt that the company had violated its labor agreement, the contract provided redress: arbitration. To Davis, adherence to the labor contract was a matter of principle.

By the time Davis issued a statement to the stockholders of Hutchinson Sugar Company on May 12, the strike had gone on for three weeks. In it he said that the walkout was a test of "vital principle" which could not be compromised. He reasserted his belief that it was "management's right under the contract to discharge an employee for cause without the approval of the union leaders." He accused the ILWU officials of calling the strike at Nā'ālehu to force rehiring of

Tachibana because he was a strong union man. He continued his statement,

Numerous indirect approaches were made to your company by top union officials to reinstate the discharged employee. These officials at first threatened to withhold ratification for Hutchinson of the industry agreement when concluded and later added the threat of a strike. In an attempt to divert attention from the real issue, union leaders hastily sought to attribute the walkout to grievances which they alleged to exist between the company and its employees. Since then, their tactics have taken a new turn and they are presently engaged in a personal attack directed against J.S. Beatty, manager of your company.

These leaders have been told that your company will not bow to their threats of force and surrender to them the right to manage. I am confident that you will agree with me that this vital principle cannot be compromised. The situation is developing into a very serious one. A prolonged strike can produce nothing but dire results. The very existence of a peaceful little community of some 1700 people depends upon a return to work and a fair and impartial settlement of this dispute in accordance with this contract. For these union leaders to recklessly destroy an enterprise that has taken the better part of a century to build and for them to deliberately create suffering and hardship for so many people seems incredible. Should the action of the leaders preclude the ultimate resumption of operations at Hutchinson, the responsibility will rest squarely upon the leadership of the ILWU.²³

Davis was referring to the campaign to impugn the character of Beatty. It was Robert McElrath who coined the term "Beattyism" in his attack against the manager. McElrath was the public relations spokesman for the ILWU. He said,

Beattyism is a whistle or a roar instead of courteously calling a person. Beattyism is an 'I'm the boss' attitude,' and 'You'll watch your step if you want to keep your job around here.' Beattyism is a militaristic approach to labor relations.²⁴

McElrath also called Beatty the "King of Naalehu." In fact, every manager of a sugar plantation was like a mayor, if not a king. He arranged for rubbish pickup in the community; he usually ran a plantation store where workers shopped on credit; he paved the roads on which

workers traveled; he fixed the houses that the workers rented from the plantation; he provided a water and sewage system for the workers in the community; he provided the use of the only assembly rooms and halls in the community without charge; he provided the workers and their families the use of the only athletic fields for recreation; he provided medical services for the worker and his family. But plantation workers were not subjects; they were all members of an active union. So the title "king" did not reflect adversely on Beatty; his response to the charges was that they were "not worth answering."

The workers started preparing for the eventuality of a long strike. But there was only a handful of people in the community who predicted that the strike would endure that long—129 days, the longest strike ever directed at a sugar company by the ILWU. (It even surpassed the length of an industry strike that would come later. In 1958 the union would strike all of the sugar companies for 126 days.) Without monthly paychecks and store credit, the workers formed a committee to establish a soup kitchen. Canvas tops, wooden supports for tent posts, tables and benches normally used for the annual Nā'ālehu 4th of July carnival, were all used to set up an outdoor kitchen and dining tables where workers and families could get their meals. Hunting and fishing parties were organized to obtain wild game and fish to be turned into meals. Vegetable gardens were planted. Union committees were formed to go "bumming," that is, asking for donations of produce from sympathetic owners of shops and markets. Women volunteers helped in the mobile kitchen to prepare each meal. Monetary donations were sought from the treasuries of supporting ILWU units and from local merchants and business firms on the island that had been patronized regularly by the workers.

House rental payments were deferred and the company made no attempt to collect them from the workers during the strike. But most employees prepaid their medical plan premiums to be certain of continued medical services, alleviating the fear that the company would suspend services for non-paying workers. (Medical services under the plan were provided directly by a company-hired physician and staff, and hospital costs were billed to and paid for by the company. The sugar companies never discontinued medical or hospital services in any work stoppage, although on occasion, when strikes were of long duration, such as in the 1958 strike, they threatened the workers of

that eventuality because the companies subsidized the major portion of the cost.)

Union and management rhetoric escalated. The union attack was pointed at Beatty. Caricatures of the manager drawn by the union cartoonist in union and affiliated publications depicted him as a Simon Legree using his whip on his workers. The company responded with its own bulletins to refute the claims made by McElrath. Beatty told his employees they were being shuffled around like checkers on a checkerboard. It was a foolish strike that could only hurt them, he said. And for what?

Ask yourself this question: will I get more wages, or benefits or anything else when the strike is over? Is the strike for more wages? No. Is the strike for more benefits? No. Is the strike for better working conditions? No. Is the strike for any reason that will help me? No.²⁵

A STRIKE ABOUT PRINCIPLE AND POWER

There would be no winners at the end of this strike. At least, not economically. The workers in the end gave up over \$300,000 in lost wages.²⁶ The company lost at least that much financially. From the beginning each party knew that the goal was not increased wages or benefits, nor was it to resolve alleged gripes and grievances. While it was about the reinstatement of Tachibana, it was about something more than that. Simply put, the strike was about the struggle for power. Could the union place restraints on management's ability to manage its workforce to the extent it could dismiss with impunity a militant union leader for misconduct? Would the union lose its power not only at Hutchinson, but at all the other sugar companies, that it had successfully accreted and harnessed for itself in the few short years since 1945 when it organized the sugar industry in Hawai'i? Did the union have the power to whittle away management rights that were agreed to in the labor contract through threats of, or actual acts of, an illegal job action?

In 1953 Waialua Sugar Company had established a wage incentive program for cane haul drivers operating the newly purchased Tour-na haulers, mammoth truck trailers, with which the union did not agree. The union preferred a group-wide incentive to include not

only the drivers but the crew members in one inclusive gang incentive. The harvesting crew began a slowdown that ultimately ended up as a company lockout that ran for over 100 days. Waialua finally capitulated when it became too costly to continue the strike, although Waialua explained that an unfavorable arbitration ruling at another company, Oahu Sugar Company, on a similar issue, was the reason it gave in and agreed to withdraw the incentive plan.

The history of the ILWU and the sugar industry relationship was replete with such illegal job actions. From the advent of unionization with the first industry-wide contract in 1945, until 1954 there were 19 recorded instances when the union engaged in illegal work stoppages. The length of the strikes ranged from 1 day to 129 days.²⁷ The union usually won out with rare exceptions to that rule. These job actions were illegal when engaged in during the term of the contract because they were banned by a clause agreed to by the company and the union. Between contracts, the union could *legally* exert economic pressure by engaging in a strike in order to gain better contract terms, but once a contract had been agreed to, such concerted activity was banned by the no-strike clause.²⁸

THE STRIKE ENTERS THE FOURTH MONTH

There was no open line of communications between the union and management as the Hutchinson strike entered the fourth month. Wives were feeling the pinch of the loss of income. Meals continued to be eaten at the union's soup kitchen in the ball park. The striking workers showed their dismay at the prospect of a strike with no end in sight and with no economic gain. The sugar company was counting its loss of cash revenues and found that loss to be threatening its future survival. Clearly both sides wanted a solution to this dispute. Both wanted to see an end to the strike. But a compromise did not appear possible. The union sought nothing less than the rehiring of Tachibana. Management, on the other hand, would not countenance his return to the job. Even the company's offer of arbitration as a means of resolving the dispute was no longer on the table.

Life in the village went on, but it was humdrum. A few workers would picket the company's main office and garage facilities. But picketing was not essential since the company had made no attempt

to resume operations and there were few visitors to inform of the strike. The union was unhappy over the salaried employees who showed up daily at the company office. Many of the women who worked at the office, and who were paid in full throughout the strike, as was the entire management staff, had spouses or family members who belonged to the union. A decision was made by the union to coerce (by management sources) or to invite (by union sources) the office workers to walk the picket line for a week. These clerks were in a quandary. They summoned enough courage to ask their department head (Archibald Johnson, office superintendent) what they should do. One remembered that Johnson was not happy about this turn of events, but said that if she must, then the company would not stand in her way. She joined the picket line reluctantly for a full week. She was surprised and pleased that the company continued her pay during the week she was absent picketing against her company.²⁹

BEGINNING OF THE END

Sometime in early August it was surmised that Bridges and Hall, as had happened in past strikes that seem to go on interminably, concluded that the union had to cut its losses. The strike was not winnable.³⁰ Certainly, talk on ending the strike did not emanate from the local unit, which lacked the leadership to initiate action. Likewise, the decision to begin the strike four months before had not been made by the local unit. Talks between the top leadership of the union and the C. Brewer corporate office commenced over a return-to-work settlement. Off-the-record meetings were held in Honolulu between the principals of the two parties. Beatty and Martin also joined in the talks. But the meetings broke off without any meeting of the minds. Then, "Hutchinson announced it had lost so much money that it would have to withdraw its offer to sign on the same terms as the industry-wide contract now in effect for the rest of the industry unless the dispute were settled by August 31."³¹

In the fourth week of August, talks were resumed with Tachibana in attendance. Progress was made in the second round of negotiations and soon a settlement was announced on August 26. The membership at Nā'ālehu voted in favor of the settlement the following

day. About 200 workers took part in the vote and the unofficial tally as given by the union was about five to one in favor of accepting the terms. After 129 days, the strike was over. Joy was subdued in Nā'ā-lehu at the end of the strike. The patience of the community had been tried and found wanting as the dispute dragged on so long. A calm prevailed with little or no excitement generated among the residents. Full resumption of work ensued after a weekend of work by small crews to start up the long unused boilers in the factory, and to do the preparatory maintenance of the idle trucks and tractors parked in the garage or left in the fields.

TACHIBANA DID NOT GET HIS JOB BACK

As part of the settlement the two parties agreed to the terms of the industry-wide agreement that was arrived at in March 1954. All employees on the payroll as of April 21, 1954 would be put back to work, which excluded Tachibana. All grievances raised by the union were dropped, except in one case where the employee involved would be permitted to process it in accordance with the contract. The complaint about providing an ambulance to the hospital in case of emergency was settled by a company pledge to work out arrangements for such transportation when it was ordered by the doctor. Employees would be permitted a reasonable time to work off their debts to the store or the company. And the parties signed on to a policy that upheld the employee testing program with specified guidelines on its application in filling job vacancies and promoting within the trades.

The union conceded Tachibana's dismissal as final. Some alluded to an unstated *quid pro quo* in the final settlement. The speculation was that Alfred Hansen, the industrial relations superintendent, who, along with Beatty, bore much of the brunt of the union's attack for the mishandling of grievances, would be retired after he returned from a three-month vacation. Dwight Steele, president of the Hawaii Employers Council, in a memo to member companies, categorically denied any such agreement had been made, stating that Hansen would return to his job after he completed his vacation. The company announced "the hiring of an assistant to Hansen, filling a vacancy created [about a year ago] by the promotion of Harold Hee to the

position of industrial relations superintendent at Paauhau Sugar Co.” He was Roy Replogle, who succeeded Hansen after the latter’s retirement the following year.

Beatty sent a memo to the employees at Hutchinson in which he urged the employees to work together and to do all they could to make Nā‘ālehu a pleasant, happy place to live. “I know all of us are glad that we are going to work and earn our wages. It is a very happy thing to be working again.”³²

Davis issued a statement on behalf of the company,

The long costly strike at Naalehu is now ended. It would have been avoided if the union had followed the regular, lawful procedures provided for in our collective bargaining contract. The position taken by the company in upholding the observance of contractual obligations and refusing to submit to pressure or to bow to expediency has been vindicated.³³

The union offered no official statement. Hall said in response to Davis’ remarks, however, that “vindication came pretty high for Hutchinson.”³⁴ It was abundantly clear that the union had lost the strike, but in doing so, it had inflicted severe financial strains on the company. This was the lesson the union wanted to bring home to any sugar plantation that dared in the future to discharge a militant union leader, or to challenge the union during the period a contract was in effect. But unstated was the price paid by the workers at Hutchinson Sugar who went without a paycheck for over four months. At a Honolulu meeting of the heads of the industrial relations departments of the Big Five firms, C. Brewer’s Howard Babbitt was congratulated by the rest of the companies for the way the strike wound up.³⁵

POST-STRIKE NĀ‘ĀLEHU

The cooperative spirit which marked the Nā‘ālehu town never diminished. Any rancor arising from the disastrous strike that might have lingered for a while between individuals could not be detected a few months later. Nā‘ālehu once again assumed its neat, friendly, small town status. People on both sides in the community remained friendly with one another.

At the plantation level, the relationship between the union and management was unchanged and remained good. Kuniyoshi Arakaki, then the ILWU unit secretary, noted that the attitude on the part of management was improved, citing as an example, how under Replogle, the new industrial relations superintendent, union-management relations seemed to be better than before the strike. Hansen was criticized by many for being too one-sided and not balanced in resolving employee complaints. Another claimed that he gave the union a bad time. Hansen had been a field department head before being assigned the personnel position, a job he probably felt uncomfortable at and unsuited for.

Outside of some name-calling and a single incident where an outside agitator allegedly punched or tried to punch Beatty during the strike, things remained calm in the main. There were no nasty confrontations or violence committed by either side. Except for engaging in aerial fertilizing through a service contractor, the company had not tried to work the fields or the factory during the strike; it did not provoke the strikers with some overt action, such as demanding rental payments or collection of overdue payment of store debt. The rhetoric expressed in bulletins churned out by the union and management might have appeared inflammatory, but neither party was so offended as to take the matter to another level. Each took to the written (or in the case of the union, in addition, the over-the-air spoken) medium to respond. Both the company and the union had suffered too much from the strike to want to create a situation that could restart another confrontation. Both sides were eager to get back to work.

Tachibana was gone, never to return to his hometown. He was appointed an ILWU official, representing the east side of the Big Island. Tachibana's tenure with the union was short. By then he was disillusioned and felt betrayed by the union leadership for not backing him up to the end.³⁶ After a brief stint as a salesman of cemetery plots in Hilo, he left for Honolulu where he became an independent sales agent for a line of pots and pans, a job at which he reportedly was highly successful.

Beatty retired from Hutchinson in 1962 at age 65 and moved to Honolulu as well. Both he and Tachibana passed away in the 1990's. There are a couple of anecdotes that circulate today among the

survivors of the strike in Nā'ālehu. One involves an incident in which the outside "agitator," Yasu Arakaki from Ōla'a, allegedly struck Beatty with his fist when they met in the village camp during the strike. This account was widely talked about during the strike and aroused some community members in Nā'ālehu to retaliate against Arakaki.³⁷ The other involved an alleged post-strike visit by Tachibana to Beatty, while the latter was convalescing at a Hilo hospital, to apologize for having caused the turmoil at the plantation. Those who knew Tachibana well said that this could have taken place because "he was a nice guy inside."³⁸ Both dramatic events, if true, demonstrated the stress and pathos that the record-long strike had evoked.

There is no more sugar in Nā'ālehu. Its last cane was milled in 1996 when Ka'u Sugar Company ceased production. Hutchinson had merged with its neighboring sugar plantation, Hawaiian Agricultural Company, to form Ka'u Sugar Company in 1973. Today the ILWU represents the workers in the macadamia orchards located in Pāhala. The monkeypod trees are still found along the *mauka* or mountain-side, of the highway through the town, but now there are banyan trees as well. There is a fence in place of the stone wall that fronts the Nā'ālehu School. Large plots of untended and uneven cane growth are visible from the highway. The homes with the corrugated iron roofs are still there, but a number of them have new tenants/owners. A few of the younger families have left for other places with more job opportunities. Those who remain find work at Oceanview or in Kona. Most of the company retirees still live in the homes they had purchased from the sugar company. A few new houses have been built since the strike. The plantation manager's home, with an addition, is now the site of the Sea Mountain Punaluu Bake Shop and Visitors' Center. The Naalehu Coffee Shop, a short distance from the highway on Ka'alāiki Road, is still ensconced in the original building, though newly renovated. Churches line the main street where department heads had their homes. And the rutted road that once channeled flood waters from the upper cane fields to the front of Tommy's Service Station, now called B&E Union 76, is paved with asphalt and there is a flood control drainage ditch. There are fewer residents in the town, estimated now at about 1200 and even fewer, if the 2000 U.S. Census figure of 919 residents is accepted as the count, down from about 1700 in 1954.

In 1953, Nā'ālehu celebrated Independence Day with a parade/rodeo/carnival, a three-day festive affair. It was the 13th annual observance and by far the largest according to police reports. An estimated crowd of 10,000 people traveling from all parts of the Big Island attended the event. The rodeo even attracted some cowboys from O'ahu. Cars lined the highway early in the morning to secure vantage parking spaces. The event was annually sponsored by the Naalehu Community Association, and through the help of all of its resident-members and the support of the sugar company, derived revenues in 1953 of about \$8000. Independence Day in 1954 found the community in the throes of a strike and the association cancelled that year's observance. On the 4th of July 1955, the event was resumed, although on a smaller scale. That it was continued at all the year following the strike and the ensuing years, reflects the resiliency of the residents of this community and their ability to bounce back after an adversity. The rodeo/carnival lost much of its grandeur with the merger change in 1973 which reduced the company support, and the ultimate abandonment of all sugar operations in Ka'u in 1996. Yet, today, Nā'ālehu still observes the 4th of July and holds a rodeo two to three times a year. Nā'ālehu, the "southernmost community of the United States," remains the remote and tranquil country village it was in 1954. To its present residents, it still is the most friendly and harmonious place to live. Most residents have not heard of the Tachibana Incident, and those few who do remember, don't dwell on him or the incident.

NOTES

- ¹ Jack Burby, "Labor Row Splits Little Town of Naalehu in Two," *HA*, 6 June 1954.
- ² Iwao Yonemitsu, retired crop control superintendent of Ka'u Sugar Co., in an interview at Nā'ālehu, March 2003.
- ³ Jack Acojido, former factory maintenance man at Hutchinson Sugar Co., and former chairman of union membership services committee, in an interview at Nā'ālehu, March 2003.
- ⁴ Tokuichi Nakano, retired machine shop & electrical supervisor of Ka'u Sugar Co., in an interview at Nā'ālehu, March 2003.
- ⁵ 442nd Regimental Combat Team Museum.
- ⁶ *Naalehu News*, a monthly house organ publication of Hutchinson Sugar Co., May 1954.

- ⁷ John Griffin, "Shutdown at Naalehu," *HSB*, 16 June 1954.
- ⁸ Kazuo Ikeda, in a phone conversation, Honolulu, December 2002.
- ⁹ Bernice Nakamura, an employee of the C&C of Honolulu Drivers Licensing Bureau, in a conversation, Honolulu, February 2003.
- ¹⁰ Julie Acojido, a homemaker and wife of Jack Acojido, in an interview at Nā'ālehu, March 2003.
- ¹¹ Toshio 'Casey' Fujimoto, retired labor relations director of C. Brewer & Co. and former industrial relations superintendent at Hawaiian Agricultural Co., in an interview at Honolulu, May 2003.
- ¹² Burby, *HA*, 6 June 1954.
- ¹³ Burby, *HA*, 6 June 1954.
- ¹⁴ Minutes, Meeting of Sugar Plantations Negotiating Committee, 2 March 1954, microfilm #7-1975, Hawaii's Employers Council, Honolulu.
- ¹⁵ Kuniyoshi Arakaki, retired garage serviceman of Ka'u Sugar Co., and former unit chairman and unit secretary at Hutchinson, in an interview at Nā'ālehu, March 2003.
- ¹⁶ This activity of canvassing workers for past complaints was a normal tactic for a labor union faced with a grievance that lacked substance and did not call for a strike, but which posed a threat to the union as an institution. To provide a stonger rationale and thus generate greater support for a strike, the union sought, in this instance, a pattern of company misconduct by combining past incidents with the present. But as far as the union leadership was concerned, the matter for redress was the discharge of Tachibana.
- ¹⁷ "Shutdown at Naalehu," Part 3 by Griffin, *HSB*, 18 June 1954, who after getting universal feedback from the workers about Tachibana's ill-tempered conduct, reported that Tachibana seemed a poor rallying point for a strike.
- ¹⁸ Jack Acojido, interview.
- ¹⁹ This number of 277 reported by the *Naalehu News* was the correct number. Press reports referred to the number of strikers at 311 or 315; the discrepancy was due to the press use of total bargaining unit, which overlooked the fact that the total included two unionized groups, including 37 men of the company who remained employed throughout the strike. They were the workers who had to tend to livestock at Kaalualu Ranch and the Naalehu Dairy, operations covered by the labor contract.
- ²⁰ Burby, *HA*, 6 June 1954.
- ²¹ "315 Remain Off Job in Walkout at Hutchinson," *HA*, 29 april 1954.
- ²² Burby, *HA*, 6 June 1954.
- ²³ Letter to the stockholders of Hutchinson Sugar Co. from Alan S. Davis, president of both C. Brewer and Hutchinson, 12 May 1954.
- ²⁴ Sanford Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck! Jack Hall & the ILWU In Hawaii* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1979) 372.
- ²⁵ Zalburg, 372.
- ²⁶ Burby, *HA*, 28 Aug. 1954.
- ²⁷ "Chronology of Strikes," Hawaii Employers Council, Honolulu. This was a running log kept of strikes.

- ²⁸ However, the enforcement of such contract provision was difficult, since the punishment of those engaging in unlawful behavior could not be undertaken lightly by the plantation. Disciplinary suspension of strikers, whether it involved the entire workforce or just a few key employees, merely extended the period of work loss. A long delay in harvesting mature cane could reduce the juice content and quality, affecting the sugar yield of that crop. It also set back the scheduled harvesting of succeeding fields. By stopping irrigation (at companies where irrigation was supplied by ground water, but not at Hutchinson, which depended on natural rainfall to irrigate the cane) or fertilization, or control of weeds, growth of future crops could be severely impaired. Hence, a sugar company was troubled by the need to suspend workers from work, realizing that such punishment only increased its production loss. Such was the character of operating a business involving such a perishable product as sugar cane. At Hutchinson, however, because of its underage cane, the strike helped to offset in the long run some of the losses incurred during the long strike. By adding four months of growth to the standing cane, the yield of Hutchinson's fields rose in three years from 8–9 tons of sugar per acre to about 12 tons, establishing a yield record for a non-irrigated plantation. Agriculurists said that cane in Ka'u did not tassel as much as in other areas. As a result, cane grown in Ka'u could continue its growth as it aged beyond the normal two year growth cycle to as much as 36 months and even longer, adding sugar content along the way.
- ²⁹ Sachiko S. Nakagawa in a phone interview in Honolulu, Dec. 3, 2002.
- ³⁰ In a longshore strike at Port Allen, Kaua'i in 1940, which had run almost 300 days, Bridges bluntly told the unit to return to work because he was concerned about the financial ability of the longshoremen to hold out longer. The strike would not only hurt the union's finances but it would erode its public support. He always felt uneasy about strikes when workers were responding to moves by management, according to Edward Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: A Labor History*, (Honolulu, U of Hawaii Press, 1985) 278–279.
- ³¹ "Sugar Workers will End Hutchinson Strike Today," *HSB*, 27 Aug. 1954.
- ³² Letter to employees of Hutchinson Sugar Co. from J.S. Beatty, manager, on their return to work, 30 Aug. 1954.
- ³³ Burby, "Not Much Excitement in Naalehu as Strike Ends," *HA*, 28 Aug. 1954.
- ³⁴ Burby, *HA*, 28 Aug. 1954.
- ³⁵ Industrial Relations Committee Meeting Minutes, 1 Sept. 1954, Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association.
- ³⁶ Yonemitsu, interview, Mar. 2003.
- ³⁷ Yonemitsu, interview, Mar. 2003.
- ³⁸ Yonemitsu, interview, Mar. 2003.

