

# Labor News

Fifth Estate Collective

1971

Motor City Labor News is a regular feature of the *Fifth Estate*. In this column we want to provide a space for people from different parts of the Detroit labor scene to exchange their experiences—experiences of the struggle to gain control over the rate and conditions of work as well as experiences of the fight to regain control over their unions, where these have gotten bogged down in bureaucracy.

We want this column to develop in such a way that it covers service workers as well as factory workers, women as well as men, and black workers as well as white workers. In the end, the column will become what you make it—if you've got some news that you want run, give us a call at 831-6000 or drop by our office at 4403 Second (corner of Second and Canfield).

## Teamsters Local 285

Teamsters local 285 has been on strike for over 100 days. They went out on Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> in one of the longest and most militant strikes this year in Detroit. Seven union men have been sent to the hospital with stab wounds and other injuries resulting from a scab attack on a picket line on Melville St. on the west side.

The strike is between the laundry truck drivers' local and a group of Detroit laundries that have been recently taken over by two larger out-of-town laundry chains, Sanitas Laundry and Workwear Laundry. In spite of the length of the strike, the Teamster spirit is strong. They just passed a unanimous vote to assess non-striking drivers 10% in support of the strike fund.

The issue boils down to whether the drivers will continue to be paid on commission (as they demand) or by the hour (as the companies desire). Being on commission assures them of some cost-of-living security, because they will automatically take a cut on increased company profits.

Strikers on the line are determined to win or break the companies trying. The only weakness in their position is the fact that the companies have hired some new drivers to fill their jobs.

Most of these new drivers are black men who used to work on the inside of the plants before the strike threw them out of work.

When questioned about the people who were working inside the plants (most of whom are black), the strikers say that most have supported the strike. Only a few are scabbing.

When asked about how many black people there are in their union, some of the strikers get a little edgy. "About ten percent...why, there's there's old Jim..."

It isn't certain that having more black workers in the Teamsters would prevent some of those scabs from scabbing anyhow. But one thing is clear. Trying to maintain a militant labor struggle in a city like Detroit when your union is mostly white, means that you're not in the strongest possible position, no matter how much internal solidarity you have.

## Great Lakes Steal

Workers at Great Lakes Steel have been learning what to expect from racist and reactionary union leadership. Working at Great Lakes is like working in hell. The heat inside the buildings gets up well above 100 degrees. The pollution and dust you breathe is so bad that many workers cover their cars with plastic in the parking lots. Safety conditions do not exist. (One young foreman had his arm ripped off up to the shoulder a few weeks ago.)

The union local's leadership belong to a club called "Sons of the South." SOS is linked up with the Klan. They get away with this even though an increasing number of workers at Great Lakes are black, Puerto Rican and Chicano.

Local 1299 has the sort of reactionary leadership that will do anything—from election cheating to terrorism—to preserve its power. When a group of black and brown workers put out a paper, Rank and File, and began challenging the leadership, they started getting harassed by both SOS and the management.

The pig Klansmen began putting stickers on the Rank and File peoples' timecards saying "The Klan is watching you" and one of the black workers had his car shot up while it was parked in front of his home.

Then the company moved in. Six members of Rank and File were fired early last month for allegedly handing out papers. (Two of the six later got their jobs back.) The management came out with a plant memorandum stating that it would fire people for handing out "scurrilous, abusive or insulting" material which might tend to "disrupt order, discipline or production." This is meant to gag both Rank and File and Great Lakes Steal, another paper put out by white workers.

It looks like a heavy struggle, but blacks, whites and Chicanos are starting to draw together to decide what to do about the situation that confronts them.

## Resistance

On March 1<sup>st</sup> a bomb exploded in one wing of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. In the next several days, daily newspapers all over the country ran flipped-out news stories and editorials. The "Weatherman Communication No. 8" claimed credit for the bombing and declared that the bombing was in reprisal for the U.S.-sponsored invasion of Laos.

Resistance, a group of young workers in Detroit, is now putting out a newsletter. The last issue of their newsletter contained this statement on the Capitol bombing:

"Large newspaper headlines, interruptions of regular radio and television broadcasts, and detailed reports on national and local television newsshow recently told of the bombing of the U.S. Capitol. Commentators were quick to condemn this act and news editorials also took the chance to attack student radicals (like Weatherman) who seemed responsible for cracking the plaster in the Presidential Palace.

"Although Resistance believes that the bombing was a mistake, our reasons are not the same.

"First of all, one bomb in the Capitol isn't going to do a thing for anyone. It won't stop inflation, the war, unemployment, wretched health care, unfit housing, poor education, or domestic oppression.

"Second, the bombing has had the effect of irritating a lot of working people who have been turned off by student radicals in general.

"Third, the government will definitely use this as an excuse for further repression of simple, hardworking people who aren't buying what Nixon's trying to put down.

"The American people, especially those of the working class, are organizing. They are organizing to take what is theirs—the fruits of their labor, the right to be free and unhassled. When the workers' progress is met with violence, they will strike back violently, with their bare hands if that is all they have. But the American worker won't support acts that only serve the needs of the American propaganda machine and further state repression."

## From an Insurance Company

We received this letter a couple of weeks ago:

M/C Labor News

Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you for the much-needed forum for us workers in service industries.

We are employees in the claim department of a monopolist-capitalist insurance company. Primarily, we have accepted such lackey positions to eat and make a buck, both of which are difficult to accomplish, and increasingly so. But besides bread problems, we're up against petty pig-shit repression.

First, the women's status: women have just as much work as men, and theirs is just as "critical" yet much more boring, tedious, and unchallenging. And needless to say they receive pay just above the minimum wage level, and any male-chauvinist-pig gratitude (desired as recognition once in a while) is non-existent. Indeed, I attended the usual segregated meeting of males to hear one liberal type male chauvinist announce to attentive listeners that "The 'girls' were only good in the back seat of a car." What the male workers have that is apparently critically different from the women, is "responsibility." This is pure bullshit, as I can testify. But the company definition means that the male workers are "responsible" for cheating the people out of at least a few bucks: you know, the whole thing of what "claim adjuster" means. Anyway, women's pay is meager, and the absence of gratitude is intensified when occasional segregated "male" functions are paid for by the company, while the once-a-year Xmas thing (segregated for the women) must be paid for by themselves.

Three women (two of which are now fired) have been questioned regarding dope. Dope is the real reason for firing for what is minor absenteeism.

There is only one black woman in the department, however she does not seem to be subject to the overt bigotry that most blacks undergo.

Now, there are certain "benefits" that all men (including myself) are allowed such as occasional free time, flexible hours, and a piece of shit to drive, that are given because of nonexistent "male responsibility." The women do not receive any benefits while their work and responsibility is equal or greater.

A recent confrontation I had with number 2 pig should sum it up. He asked how my conscience would allow me to work for this capitalist company (and in turn the flag). I explained that while feeding my family I can serve the people. He then proceeded to "advise" me that my responsibility to the people is not nearly as important as my responsibility to the stockholders!

Unionizing here is impossible, as the old guys think it's communistic, and besides they don't want to fuck up their meager retirement thing. Of course, if the women organized, I'm sure the boss would act "appropriately."

Again, I realize such problems do not even approach existing miseries and hassles for factory workers. But brothers and sisters must know it all, and service industries will continue to exist after the revolution. So conditions here must be laid on the people.

All Power to All of the People!

Service to the People, Now!

Love,

Some of us

## **FLASH!**

Woodcock crosses picket line! The women clerical employees of the UAW Solidarity House went on strike Friday, March 12<sup>th</sup> in a dispute over wages. The women are hoping to settle as quickly as possible, and they are anxious not to cause Solidarity House any embarrassment. But they also realize that the UAW is big business and they are treating it just like they would any other big business.

## **W.S.U.**

Wayne State University cafeteria workers went on strike Friday, March 12. The immediate cause was the firing of Mrs. Bertha Chastang, a supervisor. But a set of demands was later issued that included the following issues:

1. More help for general relief and to fill certain jobs;
2. No layoffs;
3. An end to racist harassment — employees should be able to eat where they want and leave by whichever door they want (they must leave the building by the back door at present). They also demand the replacement of the manager and the shop steward.

The 130 employees are represented by two locals of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union: one for the food servers and one for the production employees. Approximately 120 of the workers are women; a majority of them are black. But the two union representatives are men.

On Monday there was another meeting and the fate of the strike was uncertain. Many of the employees had returned to their jobs under threat of losing them. Wayne State cops were on hand to make certain that the cafeteria lines flowed smoothly and were not interfered with by those urging a boycott of the food services. The student boycott appeared to be fairly effective, however.

## **Warren Tank Plant**

On March 27<sup>th</sup> at the University of Detroit there will be a planning conference for the April 30<sup>th</sup> march on the Warren Tank Plant. The march itself will be a legal demonstration (permits have already been secured). It will be an opportunity for people to come together to express their determination to end the war in Southeast Asia.

The March 27<sup>th</sup> conference will present some information on what is happening in Southeast Asia and how the war affects the people of this city. At 1:00 PM there will be a showing of the film "Finally Got the News", a film about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. At 2:00 PM the conference will break up into caucuses of youth, women, GIs and vets and working people in order to discuss the demonstration.

The conference will start at 10:00 AM at the Science Building of the University of Detroit. For further information call 831-6800 or 779-7171.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/127-march-18-31-1971/labor-news>  
Fifth Estate #127, March 18-31, 1971

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