Westinghouse Wildcat

Pittsburgh Workers Battle Company, Union

Peter Rachleff

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By the beginning of the second shift on Monday July 12, the huge East Pittsburgh Works of the Westinghouse Electric Company was shut tight by a wildcat strike of production workers.

This was the first plant-wide walk-out in twenty years, the last being a six month strike in 1956 which ended in bitter defeat and demoralization. While this re-emergence of mass activity at this central plant (where some 9500 blue collar workers manufacture gigantic turbines) alone makes these events deserving of analysis, the actual unrolling of the strike presents some patterns more than worthy of consideration by those of us who seek the destruction of capitalist society in all of its forms.

Background of the Strike

The first thing that struck me upon arriving at the picket line was the relative youth of the strikers. Few of the several hundred present appeared to be over 35 years old. All were men, and only a handful were black. None of the picketers were surprised by the composition of their ranks.

I was quickly informed that the major division within the work-force at this plant was between the older and the younger workers. Some forty per-cent were over 50, had worked there for many, many years, and were seen by the active strikers as the passive, if not active, supporters of the union.

Because there had been little hiring at the plant in the 1950s, there were few workers between 35 and 50. The majority were under 35, with no buffer between them and the workers over 50. The older workers had experienced the initial organization of the plant by the United Electrical Workers (UE) (which had been tied to the Communist Party), the shift from the UE to the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) (accomplished in part by some skillful red-baiting) in the early 'fifties, and the disastrous strike of 1956.

Those older workers with whom I spoke often referred to that strike as something to be avoided, six months of struggle and deprivation which culminated in the forfeiture of mortgages, the loss of all savings, indebtedness, and the introduction of measured day work, incentive plans, and increased taylorization.

The officers of the union had emerged in the early 'fifties from this social group, and they remained wedded together through years of experiences and social life.

The younger workers, on the other hand, had only second-hand experience of that defeat. Surprisingly few of them came from families which had been part of that strike. Many of them were Vietnam veterans, residents of the many small industrial towns perched along the Monongahela River.

Though they were young, none were new to the plant. Because of lay-offs over the past year, no one with less than three years of seniority was currently employed. Although many had made commitments to a "life" in the plant (through using their veterans' benefits to learn skills which enabled them to move rapidly up the job ladder), and though most of them held "skilled" jobs, few liked their work.

Lateness and Friday absenteeism were frequent, and many of the pickets referred to disciplinary layoffs they had received in the last two years for mouthing off to foremen or for getting caught smoking pot on the job.

The small number of black workers present at first glance was deceiving. Over the course of the week I saw quite a few black pickets, took note of the casualness of their relations with the white pickets, and observed the respect accorded several of them, a respect won in the early hours of Tuesday morning when a group of nearly a thousand white collar employees tried to break through the picket lines and were physically repelled.

I point out the role of the black workers for a particular reason, over and above the inter-racial solidarity it represented. Just a few years ago there were several all-black walk-outs at Westinghouse, protesting varieties of discrimination, but none of the walk-outs were actively supported by their white fellow workers.

There were no women picketers (though later in the week some wives of strikers and friends appeared). I was surprised, for the electrical industry is known as a major employer of women production workers. When I asked where the women were, I was told that very few of the production workers were women, and those that were, were over fifty, worked in an isolated part of the plant, and had had little to do with activity in the plant.

There were a lot of women employees, but they were salaried workers, and they were on the other side of the street every morning, seeking to return to work (more on this later).

No Presence of Union

According to the strikers, the union had had little presence on the shop floor. Each person I spoke with was able to recount his own tale of a grievance filed more than a year before (or even two years in some cases) which had never been resolved. In the past two years, many had stopped filing grievances altogether and had turned to brief protest walk-outs.

These usually involved fewer than a dozen men, who would walk out for any of a variety of reasons, march up the street to the union hall, where more times than not they found no one but the hired secretary present, and then return to the plant where they would receive three-day disciplinary lay-offs. Many complained that they were never able to draw out other workers, those who worked nearby but were not directly affected by the cause of the grievance. Uniformly, the union was seen as a laughing stock, totally irrelevant to their work-place problems, and generally unresponsive to their wage demands at contract time. At one time or another, most had attended a few union meetings, but, often rebuffed in their attempts to speak their piece, few went any more.

In the five days I spent at the plant gates, I heard much more anger directed at the union than at the company. Some workers present also noted this fact, and often criticized other strikers for forgetting that the fight was against the company and not the union. But the vast majority of the pickets saw the strike was against both, and if a line had to be drawn, they were actually angrier against the union.

Anger at the union took many forms, both during the strike and in the years before it. Clearly, the vast majority of workers had simply ceased to participate in the union or to see themselves in it. But there were two "reform" groups within the plant.

The larger and more established was the "Members for Democracy", modeled after the movement ("MFD") which had propelled Arnold Miller to the presidency of the United Mine Workers (UMW). They were young, mainly veterans of the war, employed in the plant for 7 to 15 years, and seen as "radicals" by many of the other strikers. From all accounts they had distinguished themselves in the past by shop-floor militancy, numerous small walkouts, and more than their proportionate share of disciplinary lay-offs.

Some three years ago they organized the "MFD", their main formal activity being the running of opposition candidates in shop steward elections. An "MFD" activist explained to me that they had not done terribly well in the elections, even though they had carefully selected candidates according to "electability". The "MFD" had no clear program to offer save for more "democracy" in the union and a more militant profile inside the shop.

Many of the strikers were suspicious of the "MFD", though most got along well with individual members. The group had no particular presence on the picket line, and played no leadership role in the strike itself.

The second, but smaller group, was the "Membership Group" which had been formed three years earlier, breaking away from the "MFD". The "Membership Group" had been begun by a few workers who wanted to run for stew-

ard on the "MFD" slate but were turned down, largely for reasons of personality conflicts. They then decided to run anyway, and organized the "Membership Group" to support their won candidacy. The "reform vote" was thus split, enabling the official union slate to win most of the steward positions.

Each group had some success, however, electing a few stewards, who now, three years later, had become indistinguishable from the other stewards in the plant. Both groups saw pitfalls in their activity but neither had any ideas about what to do.

They were dutifully preparing for the upcoming fall union elections, in which they now hoped to oust the established union officials.

Other strikers did have some ideas about what they might do. Some circulated petitions to decertify the union and talked of switching to the UE (one striker said: "I heard they used to pull the whole plant on grievances, taking everyone down to the ball field until it was resolved") or even the Teamsters ("Now there's a militant union" said another striker). While some hoped that the union would make the strike official, others said that they would go fishing rather than picket once the strike received union sanction. A few thought that they might make a go of it without an official union at all, but most felt that the rank and file were so internally divided that this could never happen.

A final area which must be covered in this discussion of the background to the strike is the position and role of the white collar workers. They are in a separate union, open only to salaried employees of Westinghouse (seen as a company union by many of the blue collar workers).

They are a very heterogenous group, from female secretaries to male industrial engineers, with a huge number and variety of occupations in between. Many of them (especially the women) are related to the production workers (mothers, wives, sisters, cousins). They had never engaged in any actions independent of their union or independent of the blue collar workers' union. The strikers felt that they had it easy, working in air-conditioned offices and receiving raises every time the blue collar workers did.

The widespread original hostility was heightened during the strike, as masses of salaried employees lined up across the street from the main gate each day, looking for a chance to get through the lines. Interestingly enough, although the majority of salaried workers were women, the vast majority of those who appeared every day were men. As the strike wore on, it was this group which was to become the lightning rod for the strikers' hostilities.

The Strike

Following months of negotiation, the contract between Westinghouse and the several unions representing its employees expired at midnight on Sunday, July 11. Earlier that day, members of I.U.E. local 601 had voted in a mass meeting that there should be no extensions granted to the company. The union officers agreed with the sentiments expressed and stated that they would abide by the strike vote.

Westinghouse workers well remembered that three years earlier they had worked for weeks under a day-to-day extension, and then, had been screwed out of retroactive pay increases. They were thus determined not to let it happen again.

To their surprise, newscasts on local TV and radio stations at 11 p.m. that night announced that a day-to-day extension had been agreed to by both the I.U.E. and the U.E. The union released statements informing their members that they were to report for work as usual on Monday morning. Most everyone did report as ordered, but few worked.

After two hours of discussion, the men in the tool room decided to walk out. They went into the maintenance department (which was next to them) where a similar decision had been made. At 10 a.m. the workers from both departments walked out of the plant and marched to the union hall. There they were told to return to work. After all, they represented only a minority of the Work force, and the union represented everyone.

The men returned to the plant, but not to work. They spread out and talked to other workers, most of whom were also discussing the situation rather than working. Within an hour some 800 angry workers left the plant and made the trek up the hill to the union hall. They too were told that there was nothing to do, that they should return to work. Furious, they went back to the plant, arriving just as everyone was breaking for lunch.

Roaming throughout the cafeteria, they managed to pull out the majority of the second shift. Picket signs were drawn up, and when the second shift arrived at 2:30 several hundred picketers stood at the front gate. No one tried to cross. Some stayed to join in the picketing and discussions. For the first time in 20 years, strikers had succeeded in shutting down the entire complex.

While it is not surprising that the initial impulse came from the tool room and the maintenance departments (both departments are characterized by work that brings them into contact with many other workers in the course of a day, and both departments had had several small wildcats of their own in the past months), they were to play no particular role in the rest of the strike. While they had started it they were not to lead it. In fact, no one (or everyone, depending on-your perspective) led the strike, though some tried. There were no spokesmen, no picket captains, no leaders. People came to picket when they felt it was most needed and when they felt like it. Workers met workers from other shifts whom they might never have met otherwise. Spirits were high. One picket told me Tuesday morning, "You should have seen us last night, we owned the town!" Most were amazed at what they had done. Few knew what to do next. Many had some ideas, but there was little agreement and no meetings to work out plans.

On the morning of the second day of the strike there was quite a battle between picketers and some male salaried employees who tried to cross the lines. They were knocked to the ground, and the white collar employees on the other side of the street were pelted with eggs. (Picketers developed the tactic of waiting until a bus or big truck passed between them and the salaried employees, and them tossed eggs —

over its top).

Later that morning, a group of twenty or so left the lines, got in cars, and went to the union hall:. They made no appeals to the union officers. Rather they walked in, announced that the officers had better get out, 'helped' along those who were too slow in clearing out, locked the door, put up a hand-scrawled sign reading "union hall closed", and put a picket line around the building. Two car-loads returned to the main gate, blowing their horns and shaking their fists. Aloud cheer greeted their announcement of what they had done.

Meanwhile a group of stewards and activists sought to "organize" the strike. In the basement of a nearby bar, members of "MFD", the "Membership Group", and stewards who had been the official union candidates sat together and, mapped Out a strategy. First of all, they needed a picket captain for every gate at every shift. No one asked why this was needed. A list of names was rattled off, some of whom were men who had yet to show on the picket line at all. Secondly, picketing would have to be arranged by shift, with strikers reporting to picket on the shifts they normally worked. Thirdly, a command center would be set up, which would remain in contact with all the gates via CB radios. Finally, the picketing of the union hall would have to stop.

After all, the point had been made, the protest had been registered. Here obviously was the union-to-be, working out its plans, burying the hatchet, readying itself to take over.

The next morning when I arrived at the picket lines I was surprised to find no captains. What, I asked, had happened? One striker told me that there had been a mass meeting the night before where it had been decided by an overwhelming majority that there was no need for picket captains. A show of hands demonstrated more than ample picket strength for each gate. Many feared that an injunction would be granted (which it was), and they felt that if there were no leaders the cops would never be able to figure out how to serve the injunction (and they were right). The plans of the "organizers" had been thwarted. While the strikers still couldn't (and never really did) articulate what it was that they wanted, they had a good idea of what they didn't want.

Bitterness grew over the next few days, replacing the elation of the first two days as the spirit of the picket line. More eggs were thrown at the white collar employees. Eggs were also thrown at members of the NCLC and IS who showed up to peddle their newspapers. (While a few strikers were suspicious of me and my friends, most were very open when we explained why we were there.) Newsmen from channel 2, the local Westinghouse Broadcasting Station, were also chased away.

Each day there were questions about what was happening elsewhere in the strike, as the wildcat had spread throughout the industry, hitting U.E. as well as I.U.E. shops. But no one suggested (let alone went) that people should visit the lines at the other Westinghouse plants, many of which were within a few hours drive at the most. No one suggested crossing the street to talk to the white collar workers.

On Friday an attempt to serve an injunction met with utter failure. No one budged, and the cops failed to back up their words with action. This refusal to yield brought out the only cheer heard on the line after the closing of the union offices. Clearly, the mood had changed. The strikers became pessimistic. Some said that the contract had actually been signed, and the union was just waiting for the opportune moment to announce it. Others said that the strike would be made official on Saturday, and then they could go home.

Few recognized the objective accomplishments of their own actions—they had shut the most important Westinghouse plant, they had closed the plant for the first time in twenty years, other Westinghouse workers all over the state and the region were following their example—they had taken a giant step, which looked like a baby step in light of the uphill battle they felt they faced. After all, they reasoned, sooner or later they would have To go back to work, and until they straightened out all this funny business with "their" union they couldn't really expect anything to change.

And so it was. On Saturday, the union made the strike official, new pickets appeared, new signs appeared, the old hand-painted signs disappeared. On Tuesday the company and the union announced that the strike had been settled. And the next day the men began to return to work.

Conclusion

Was the end of the strike a conclusion? Was it a beginning? Neither, I think. Rather, it was part of a long-term struggle, growing out of dissatisfaction, boredom, anger, and the series of short wildcats which had punctuated the recent past. At an opportune moment (the termination of a contract), these emotions and activities came to the surface publicly.

The wildcat was a new step, for it reached the whole plan and all three shifts. The struggle will return to the shop floor, perhaps encouraged by the wildcat. Perhaps the balance of power will shift ever so slightly, maybe in the direction of those who will challenge the union's slate of officers in the fall.

For most, little will have changed, though each will have had a little taste of that power which is theirs alone—to bring production to a halt once and for all, and to begin to experiment and seek out new ways to make the maximum use of our daily lives. Until that time, we all will continue to dance to others' tunes, to punch their time clocks, to follow their directions. For a week, a large group of men in East Pittsburgh said no. Their activity encouraged others to say no. They didn't turn the world upside down, but they did start a small tremor.

Who knows when and where it will next erupt?

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