

Detroit Paper Strike Continues

Despite Big Labor March & Court Ruling

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I'm writing this on Labor Day 1997, the third such holiday since five newspaper unions began their strike against the *Detroit News* and *Free Press* in July 1995. The spirits of many of the strikers remain high, their weekly paper continues to publish, and a national AFL-CIO-sponsored march brought out tens of thousands of supporters, yet victory or even a return to work appears more and more distant.

According to many observers, the Detroit newspaper strike was probably lost in late 1995 when labor leaders agreed to the terms of a court injunction limiting picketing following months of intense activity at production and distribution sites (see "The Battle of Detroit," Summer 1996 FE).

Early in the walkout, thousands of strikers and supporters fought late night toe-to-toe battles with hundreds of cops and newspaper security goons at the newspapers' printing plants. These picket line blockades successfully prevented newspapers from leaving the plants for up to eight hours, crippling the paper's important Sunday sales, and were the type of activity which could have brought about victory. However, the threat of heavy fines cowed the timid union leadership into backing down.

From that point on, official activity focused mainly on a relatively successful circulation and advertising boycott which has cost the papers \$250 million. However, Gannett and Knight Ridder, the two media giants which own the dailies, are rich enough to sustain the loss, and are prepared to wait out the strikers, believing time is on their side. Small, admirable actions and constant harassment of scabs and the parent companies' directors have continued unabated, but in themselves aren't enough to win the strike.

On the eve of the Detroit June 21 national labor mobilization called by the AFL-CIO, things definitely looked better. That day, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) declared the papers were responsible for the strike through blatant unfair labor practices and said it would go to court to ask that the locked-out workers be returned to their jobs. This legal vindication came amid an upbeat mood as the city braced for Action Motown '97, as the weekend events were dubbed. With the government taking the workers' side and thousands ready to march in the city, it looked like the strikers might have a chance to beat the intransigent corporations.

A coalition of militant strikers and supporters, however, correctly saw the march as largely symbolic and advocated a return to mass action to stop production as the only way to win the strike. They began preparing a call for blockades at the Papers' two main printing plants, hoping to attract some of the expected 40,000 marchers to more radical activity.

They knew the official AFL apparatus did not approve of direct action, but were unprepared for the union federation's response. Besides intense pressure from union higher-ups, a Teamster lawyer told a coalition leader he was prepared to call the suburban police where one of the plants is located and disown the event. This is what union hacks call "playing hard ball," but to the strikers, cooperation with the hated Sterling Heights cops who had launched violent assaults on them at the *Detroit News* North plant in 1995, and are directly in the pay of the papers, was a betrayal of the first order. Still, the implication was clear; that without official union backing, the cops would have the go-ahead to bust heads and make arrests at any unsanctioned march.

The pressure was too great for newspaper union militants to withstand and they finally agreed to call off the night time marches. Angry, but undeterred, other members of the coalition including Detroit IWW members, knowing they could draw at least a hundred from local and out-of-town anarchists, decided to go ahead with the blockades.

Several thousand leaflets were distributed, but in the end only about 200 people showed up at the Riverfront plant on Friday evening while thousands of unionists from across the country partied at night spots around town. Saturday night's protest was washed out by a torrential rain.

Saturday, June 21 was the big march. Estimates of the number attending were all over the board, from the official union count of 60 to 100,000 to a laughable 7,000 by The Detroit News. The IWW's *Industrial Worker* editor John Bekken vied for last place with the *News* by estimating in his August issue that only a paltry 25,000 marched.

The turnout was probably smaller than the AFL's high number, but larger than what Bekken and the *News* reported.

The strikers, particularly the writers, were highly indignant about the *News*'s obviously politically motivated reporting of the numbers attending and moaned about a "lack of journalistic ethics." Their complaints are understandable, but things were no different when they were the official scribes in the days before the strike and routinely reduced the numbers attending protest demonstrations and misrepresented their message.

The June Mobilization was supposed to energize the strike, but instead protest activity fell off significantly in the days following. It was assumed that since the NLRB had requested an injunction ordering the papers to take the strikers back to work, it was a done deal since government board rulings usually prevail. However, to the surprise of only the strikers, a gutless liberal Clinton-appointed federal judge refused the request and denied the injunction leaving the shocked workers still out on the street.

The unions had counted heavily on a court ordered callback as a justification for offering a so-called unconditional return to work in February. To many this looked like the surrender the papers had called for, but the company had no intention of displacing their docile staff of strikebreakers who had produced their paper for so long. Management has thus far only rehired about ten percent of the strikers, while the judge's decision is on appeal.

The newspaper strikers led the massive Detroit Labor Day march for the third year and again pledged to struggle until victory. The holiday itself, tucked conveniently away from international labor celebrations on May 1, brought out throngs of festive unionists, maybe as many as 200,000. They marched down Woodward Ave. accompanied by marching bands, old cars, clowns, and patriotic displays. Their numbers, if mobilized to militantly confront the papers instead of for a self-congratulatory parade through a deserted downtown, could easily win the newspaper strike.

However, it's clear the union heads have no intention of doing this. Even with the announcement that a "new," reinvigorated labor movement has been fielded, historically, union struggles have rarely challenged capital's prerogatives and there is nothing in this current mini-wave of militancy to suggest things will be different now. Liberals and leftists continue the desperate hope that unions will at least function militantly within capital; but even this is something those clanking bureaucracies are probably incapable of.

Still, something different is definitely happening in this period. Decidedly, a growth economy produces an upward pressure for wage increases and the fact that they've been depressed for so long could very easily usher in a period of heightened militancy and successful union organizing. Until recently, only leftist journals dared to point out that corporate profits and the stock market are skyrocketing while wages are falling or have remained stagnant for decades. Now, this notion is common coin even in the mainstream media.

The fact that these statistics of greed and misery appear on the front page of papers like *The New York Times*, along side relatively sympathetic articles about unions is a signal from the progressive sector—of the ruling class. In opposition to the conservative wing of the capitalists, the liberal rulers think there should be a limit on profit extraction. This sector realizes that a system with no boundaries on greed can have negative results.

According to them, too high a proportion of accumulated wealth is being transferred into speculative capital in Wall Street high stakes gambles and mergers, and too little into authentic capital expansion. Also, continued suppression of wages in an expanding economy reduces the commodity consumption capacity of the middle and working classes, although obviously not entirely, as can be seen by expanding retail sales. However, this too can be a problem.

Much of consumption is obscenely fueled by the wealthy loaning money, in the form of credit card debt, at usurious interest rates to the classes below them. Thus, the rich profit from both commodity sales and debt collection. Although the rich are getting richer at the expense of those farther down the pyramid, the progressive capitalists worry that the mountain of personal debt, stagnant wages, a growing disdain for the political system and other signs of disaffection from official institutions contain a potential for economic instability and political rage. They hope sharing the wealth just a little more will bring these glitches under control, hence their tepid support for unions in this period.

However, the largess of the rulers has limits as does the willingness of unions to fight for their members. Immediately following the recent Teamster victory in the UPS strike, the company announced it would go ahead with layoffs of as many as 15,000 workers to compensate for strike losses.

The union, caught up in new corruption charges, compliantly accepted this without protest, as well as the fate of 50 workers fired outright during the strike for picket line militancy.

Leftists endlessly declare it is union bureaucrats who are holding back labor struggles and class consciousness, but brokering labor to capital and then disciplining its administration has been the function of unions since their inception. The bureaucrats running the labor racket sabotage strikes and militancy, but they've been doing this for 100 years. Any strike worth remembering not only had to take on the company, cops and courts, but the unions as well.

The nature of the beast is fixed both by function and by law and no amount of organizing or haranguing workers by socialists is going to alter this. One would think that after a century of failed strategies to transform the nature of unions, they'd give up.

Even though the call for blockades in June was a flop, autonomous organizing outside of the official union apparatus is the only path which holds any hope. The strikers' independent coalition has geared up again for more action against company and scab targets and appears to have no intention to relent. Who knows; maybe the new atmosphere will recreate the context for mass struggle against the newspapers even at this late date.

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