

Anatomy of a Strike

Dena Clamage

1969

A green pickup truck with living space for ten or twelve if you squeeze together. Rain-soaked, faded picket signs barely readable: RECOGNIZE OUR UNION, WSU USES STUDENTS FOR CHEAP LABOR, WSU IS ANTI-LABOR.

A leaky makeshift tent made out of clear plastic and freight skids. Finally replaced with a luxurious water-proof boy scout tent.

Gifts of food. A medical fraternity member bringing a CARE package of bread, eggs, orange juice, milk, cigarettes, sugarless gum. A janitor with a gift of home-baked chocolate cake, shared by all. And Ripple wine—ubiquitous, warming on a cold rainy night under a makeshift plastic tent.

It began as a one-day walkout of Wayne State student assistants in an effort to secure a union. This was accompanied by a picket line to block the mail and receiving rooms and the Wayne Press, the three departments on strike, all located in the Administrative Services Building (ASB), Cass and Antoinette.

A simple demand, but one still not readily granted by the employer, even if the employer is a university with a “union” bureaucrat on its Board of Governors.

It ended in a 24-hour-a-day picket line complete with tent, truck, Ripple, all set up in the narrow driveway beside the ASB leading into the three departments.

It ended blocking almost all deliveries and mail services to and from the university for two weeks.

The picket line was not limited to the ASB driveway. The strike extended beyond the simple issue of union recognition. A struggle is a process; it does not always end where it begins, with the same issues, the same tactics, the same consciousness.

Student workers went on strike. The university administration countered with the threat of an injunction to be signed by Leonard Woodcock, UAW Vice-President and member of the Wayne Board of Governors. The students escalated, taking the initiative, carrying the struggle to a higher plane.

On Sunday, June 8, sixty people picketed Solidarity House, headquarters of the UAW and of International Vice-President Woodcock, marching in a heavy downpour, people sang old union songs, reminiscent of the days when organizations like the UAW really fought for the workers. SOLIDARITY FOREVER, LEONARD? read the picket signs.

The bureaucrats become old. They become co-opted into the system they are supposed to fight. The loyal opposition. People learn this through the course of their own struggles. No one could have told them half as effectively.

Toward the end of the strike, mail began to trickle out all over campus from a number of different sources. This mail was delivered by the university Security Police. As the student assistants found this out, their conception of the police began changing.

A leaflet was distributed: “When the security police first came to Wayne we were told they were here to serve the students’ welfare. It is now clear that they serve only the welfare of the administration and the business interests it represents...We have information that many individuals in the Public Safety Department support our strike. However, these men work for an institution which always has and always will suppress the just struggles of the working people.”

The police had been caught scabbing before. Before the establishment of the 24-hour picket line, Walter Smith, supervisor of the mail room, had been seen moving mail at 2:30 one morning. The mail truck was traced down later in the day and found parked behind the office of the Wayne police. Two people were arrested trying to block this truck as it pulled out to deliver the mail.

Students reacted immediately. After a rally, about 150 students marched up to the offices of two of Wayne's super-bureaucrats, Duncan Sell, Vice-President of Student Affairs, and George Gullen, Vice-President of Labor Relations. Students held these men hostage for several hours until the two people arrested earlier were released. A prisoner for a prisoner.

Struggles also teach audacity. They expose false legitimacy. You learn that you don't have to call a bureaucrat "mister."

The bureaucrats have forgotten the feeling of a union, but the people remember it. The bureaucrats of WSU refused to recognize the union, even though it was supported by 100% of the people in the three striking departments. As if they have the right to "recognize" anything.

The bureaucrats refused to even talk with the representatives of the union. "They want to believe our union doesn't exist. They want to wish us away. As though we would just disappear!" said a striker.

Leonard Woodcock, veteran of the old UAW struggles, was part of an attempt to break the union through the very tactics used against the UAW so often in the past. The bureaucrats forget their own pasts. The bureaucrats forget that it is the working people who pay their salaries.

But the working people know and remember. Not a single worker crossed the picket line of the student assistants. On the first day of the strike, people expected to be ineffective. They did not have a sense of their own power as workers. They did not expect help from other workers.

Students are told two things about workers. Workers are stupid, selfish people who are interested only in getting their paycheck, going out to the suburbs in their big, fancy cars, opening a can of beer, and sitting in an undershirt in front of a TV, hypnotized, desensitized.

Also, students are told they are different from workers. There is a barrier between the two groups, socially, culturally, economically, in terms of music, dress, intelligence. It cannot be bridged. Students are privileged. Students and workers are enemies.

With this in mind, striking student assistants watched trucks pull up to make deliveries at WSU receiving. They watched truck-drivers read their signs, see their line. And they watched truck drivers without hesitation drive past the drive-way, often flashing a v-for-victory or raising their fists in solidarity.

Truck after truck, driver after driver—even the full-time WSU workers responded to the sense of union. "We don't have to feel weak, to feel powerless. That is what they didn't want us to find out."

But the alliance was not based on words alone or theory. It was not based on missionary attitudes or selflessness. It was based on a common experience which workers have known for many years, but which students are just beginning to find out. Only when students saw themselves clearly as workers, saw the way their institution treated them as workers, could a real alliance, a real solidarity be built.

The strikers have called an end to their picketing with the end of the spring term, but promise to be back after a summer of organizing and preparing for a fall struggle.

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