

Strike!

GE workers in Detroit

Alan Gotkin

1970

Three ramshackle, trash-can heated huts on York Avenue between Second and Third stand as mute testimony to a strike against the General Electric Corporation which has gone on in Detroit and across the nation since October 26th of last year.

Inside these cramped quarters GE workers from Detroit local 947 of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) huddle together drinking hot coffee, between stints on the picket line, in an attempt to fight off the chill of subfreezing Michigan winter.

Ed McGivern, president of local 947, his young son Graham, Gil LaPoint, Mike Velkov, and Steve Williams, along with the other members of the local, have been manning the picket lines in front of General Electric's Detroit Service facility since 147,000 GE workers went out on strike against the mammoth corporation eleven weeks ago.

The mass media in Detroit has carried on a virtual news blackout of the workers' struggle against GE, so when David Gaynes and I introduced ourselves as reporters for the Fifth Estate, Ed and Gil invited us inside one of the huts and offered to tell us about their strike.

Offering us some coffee, Ed explained that the issue of the strike, with the exception of differences in local grievances, were essentially the same throughout the country. The cost of living provisions of the old GE contract were so inadequate, Ed told us, that continued inflation had wiped out all wage gains made by the workers for the last three years.

And since the expiration of the old contract GE has not only refused to grant their workers an improved cost-of-living clause, but wants to do away with the escalator clause entirely, leaving workers with no protection at all during a period of increasing inflation. Because of inflation, GE workers, under the old three-year contract which expired last October, actually lost 30 cents an hour in real wages.

GE's response to this was an across-the-board offer of a 20 cent an hour increase above the terms of the 1966 agreement. This is clearly unacceptable to the strikers, Gil explained, because it represents not an increase in wages but a wage cut of 10 cents an hour below the current wage scale.

An additional sore point with the strikers is the GE pension plan. GE pensions are so low that many GE pensioners must go on welfare simply to exist. We were told, for example, that for 1500 retired GE workers the company pension is only \$5.77 a week, and despite the fact that GE workers have contributed millions out of their paychecks to the GE pension fund, which now stands at two billion dollars, GE management absolutely refuses to bargain for improvements in the pension plan.

As part of GE's policy, which Ed described as "Profit is our most important product," the company refuses to grant women equal minimum pay with men and refuses to pay Southern workers as high a wage as their counterparts in the North, thus realizing an even higher profit margin in the Southern states, as GE products sell for the same price throughout the country.

In a very real sense the strikers on York Avenue in Detroit and their fellow GE workers elsewhere in the nation are fighting for their lives. Beyond the bread and butter wage issues, the strikers know that the real reason GE

is refusing to grant their demands is the company's effort to destroy their union and along with it their right to bargain with collective unity as a national union in future strikes against General Electric.

According to John Toth, staff representative for the international union, GE workers are engaged in a "life and death struggle" against the company. This is the case, Toth said, because one of GE's non-negotiable demands is that before the company will negotiate a new contract with the strikers, the UE must scrap its 32 year old national bargaining contract which covers workers in all GE plants the union represents.

"It's a blatant attempt to break the union," Toth stated, "by insisting that the unions negotiate separate local agreements." Toth sees this as the single most important issue in the three-month old strike.

"If we give in," he continued, "we will be reduced to ineffectual small groups with virtually no bargaining power." The strikers on York agree, "Negotiations under those terms would be meaningless," they said.

One problem unique to the GE strikers in Detroit is the fact that the service shop in which they work, now located on Holden and Third in Detroit's inner city, is slated to be moved to new and larger facilities in Riverview near Trenton in suburban Detroit.

It would be of great advantage to GE management and would save the company a great deal of money in terms of working days lost, if the equipment and products now housed in the Third Ave. shop could be transferred to the Riverside plant before the strike is settled. The strikers realize this but thus far have been only able to slow down the transference of the equipment which began on December 17th with the help of the Penn Central Railroad.

It takes a lot of people to stop a train and the small groups of strikers on the lines at the shop can do little to halt the move at this time. An additional hindrance is the threat of a court injunction against the local for interfering with the activities of the Penn Central Railroad.

On December 17 GE, utilizing salaried supervisory personnel and yard detectives from Penn Central, crossed the UE picket line with a diesel locomotive and a number of flatcars and began to haul out the heavy equipment, industrial generators and transformers that are serviced by GE workers at the Holden Ave. shop. Regular Penn Central rail workers had earlier refused to cross the line.

When the strikers attempted to interfere they were told they were trespassing on railroad property and ordered off the premises at gunpoint by one of the Penn Central yard pigs. A Penn Central spur track runs across the picket line up to a loading platform in the GE service shop. A similar incident occurred on January 5 (See accompanying photos).

The workers see a long struggle ahead and it is rumored that management has no intention of doing any serious bargaining before April. The strikers' most pressing need at this time is money.

When the weekly pay check stops for a working man or woman, that worker is in immediate financial trouble. GE workers knew they and their families would face hardships, but they knew they had to take on this fight for their future security. By secret ballot they voted to strike by a 90% majority.

UE spends what funds it has to buy groceries for weekly baskets for those strikers who need them, to see that fuel bills, electric bills and all basic services are maintained. In addition to seeing that no striker nor his family goes hungry or without proper heat and shelter, an enormous amount of money is needed each week to pay legal fees and court costs, as the company gets injunctions, seeks to jail strikers and uses other means in an effort to break the strike and bleed the union.

Contributions to the UE strike fund may be sent to the local headquarters at 1515 Edsel Ford, Detroit 48208 or UE, 11 East 51st St., N.Y., N.Y. 10022.

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