

Workers Battle GE Electric Octopus

David Gaynes

1970

147,000 workers at the General Electric Corporation went on strike October 27, 1969. Today, they're still out of work with little hope of any rapid change in their bleak situation. General Electric's (non-) negotiators have refused to budge a comma or penny from their pitiful initial offer of a settlement far below the union's demands.

Rumor has it that GE brass may move from their initial offer some time in April. Determined as they are to uphold their tradition of destroying national union solidarity, playing unions off against each other, and making their initial offers stick—strike or not—they may just sit on their billions as long as they feel they can.

But the workers are determined too.

Everywhere, they have resolved that they are through with the years of GE's exploitation, union-busting, and arbitrary settlements. They have seen their wages eaten up by inflation again and again. They have heard too many lies for too long a time. They are going back to work when they are ready—and they won't be ready until they win.

The public has been denied access to the facts of the strike—and with GE sitting on the media to maintain its virtual news-blackout, most people outside the labor movement don't even know that the situation exists.

The average consumer, long subjected to GE's public-relations campaign to establish the image of GE as a benevolent force striving for progress, the amerikan way, cannot imagine what a monster is afoot in the land.

GE is run by nineteen men—all white—all but one WASP. These men hold more than half the company's voting stock, and hire and fire the chief executives and managers.

These nineteen men are powerful voices in the White House and Pentagon. Four GE directors were at the top of the military establishment when the Vietnam war was being planned. Thomas S. Gates and Neil H. McElroy were Secretaries of Defense under Eisenhower, Robert T. Stevens was Secretary of the Army and Fred J. Borch was a member of the Defense Industry Advisory Board. GE keeps close ties with the Pentagon through the 89 retired colonels and generals it employs.

GE has used its power to influence the military as a means of protecting and expanding its interests.

In 1954 President Eisenhower said that the American military had to intervene in Asia so that the U.S. could control the "tin and the tungsten of Indochina" (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). GE is a heavy tungsten user. One of GE's Directors, Gilbert Humphrey, is also board chairman of Hanna Mining Corporation, which produces a lot of tungsten. So does Utah Mining and Construction Company. Utah's head is none other than GE's Edmund W. Littlefield. His company also built the jet runways in Thailand and Laos that are used for bombing raids on Vietnam. The engines and machine guns of those bombers are GE products. Of course.

A look at the chart with this article, which lays out the connections that GE's top brass have in the capitalist-imperialist power structure, and runs down a partial list of GE's war products, gives the lie to GE's pap about "progress" being their "most important product." As GE workers have long said, "Profit is their [GE's] most important product."

The next time GE-sponsored College Bowl comes on your TV, think about this: In 1931, GE spent millions developing a lightbulb that would burn out twice as fast. This year, GE announced that it is no longer trying to develop an automobile which will not produce pollution. Why?

GE management claims that the costs involved were prohibitive. Yet, during one week in September last year, GE received more research and development (R & D) money for the Mark 12 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile re-entry system, than the total R & D expenses on their electric car project. And we mustn't forget, those ubiquitous nineteen men also run Chrysler Corporation and five oil companies; an electric car would hurt their business.

More progress: the Supersonic Transport (SST) that GE has a contract for represents the zenith of aeronautic "progress" to date, in that it is bigger, faster, etc. ad nauseam, than any plane that has come before it. Trouble is, it will send out a continual shock-wave that will not only break eardrums and windows, but will destroy the reproductive patterns of wildlife. Its exhaust fumes will form a permanent layer of smog at 30,000 feet that may alter world weather patterns and deprive all plant life below of the sunshine needed to grow.

The companies that GE's oligarchy runs are all tied to one another. Whether you inspect bottles at Coca-Cola, blast ore for Hanna, work in a Stevens sweatshop making buttonholes, or stamp out quarter-panels for Chrysler, the profit your time and energy produces slips into the same set of pockets. Every time.

GE is concretely part of Amerika's imperialist tyranny. 100,000 men and women work for GE in twenty-five foreign countries. In Colombia, GE pays 25 cents an hour; in South Africa black workers get 28 cents an hour; GE keeps its operations in Bombay going at 6 to 7 cents an hour.

Most of these branch plants are located in countries run by military dictatorships that depend on military aid from the U.S. By running these plants, GE comes out ahead both ways; they profit from the cheap labor in these countries, and they profit from building the weapons that make the labor cheap.

Here in the mother country, GE runs a game on the people too, but a little more slickly. (After all, this is Amerika.)

In addition to having access to national political power through the positions of GE's official leadership, GE supports company puppets everywhere, on every level.

Ronald Reagan was rescued from a floundering acting career (as the Pat Boone of American Movies) by the GE public relations department. With their help, he went from being \$18,000 in the red to the California statehouse. GE hopes to make him president.

The mayors of GE company towns are well-known company stooges. Even the mayor of Philadelphia has been moved to say "GE makes a policy of political coercion and intimidation of local governments as a weapon for the settlement of strikes...nothing short of political blackmail."

Pigs in Oakland, California, were given orders two weeks before Christmas 1969 to protect scabs at all costs and arrest GE strikers on any pretext. Towns like Waynesboro, Virginia, spend millions subsidizing roads, sewers, and power for GE plants, but refuse to grant welfare to striking or laid-off GE workers.

It takes a local judge ten minutes to grant an injunction against GE strikers. It takes the same judge ten years to hear a worker's claim against the company.

Against this kind of world-wide pimping, 147,000 workers are striking for demands that are, objectively, a pittance.

In 1966, the unions of GE workers negotiated a 13% wage gain. The cost of living has gone up 13.3% since then. While GE managers and supervisors speed the lines up, the workers are now earning less than they did four years ago.

Over the past three years, GE's productivity has gone up 5%. This means that the average worker is now 47.5 cents per product-hour behind his 1966 earnings. GE's ("non-negotiable") offer of an additional 24 cents an hour still leaves the worker behind 1966 wage levels by 23 cents.

The union's demand of 36 cents now and 30 later means that, if GE acquiesced, the workers would still have to work at a 12 cent deficit for a year before they could see any progress made above the real wage provided in the 1966 contract (before that wage was eaten up by the inflation that GE claims to be so strongly against).

In justification of their refusal to aid workers in keeping abreast of living costs, capitalists have done nothing more than oink economic nonsense. A sampling of key businessmen by the Oct. 20 issue of the Wall Street Journal reported that these men almost eagerly received the somber economic predictions for the future: "A recession might just be what it takes to shake workers into more diligence about their jobs as well as to moderate union wage demands," one said.

In Hot Springs, Virginia, the Business Council meeting being held by Amerika's 100 largest corporations expressed the same thought. As the opening [and "final" (more on that later)] negotiations of the GE strike were being held, the meeting's significance was clear. A recession and more unemployment were necessary, as these "captains of industry" saw it, to combat inflation. This approach was chosen as a way to make the unions easier to control, cut the wage expectancies of workers, and generally give more "backbone" to employers against "unreasonable" and "super-inflationary" unions.

President Nixon summed it up like this: "It is in the interest of every union leader and working man to avoid wage demands that will reduce the purchasing power of his dollar and reduce the number of job opportunities (sic)."

Very interesting. Perhaps tricky-dick Nixon thinks that workers control the "purchasing power" of their dollars. Perhaps GE really thinks that the workers create the inflation which GE uses as a tool against reasonable and necessary wage demands in their "inflation fighting" policy.

In addition GE hopes to fight inflation by raising their prices 6 to 7%, after realizing an 11% profit increase last year over the year before.

GE has always fought the unions in an effort to screw the working man. Any means GE has seen of destroying the union's power that unions can give the worker has been utilized. The history of GE's relations with its unions is a record of unparalleled chicanery.

Prior to 1946, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine workers of America (UE) ranked with the UAW and the United Steelworkers as a union able to deliver relatively good pay and benefits. In '46, the UE held a successful strike against GE. As a result GE was determined that such a thing would never happen again.

GE and the CIO cooperated in red-baiting the UE. With the Cold War going full blast and other unions raiding UE at GE's encouragement, over eighty unions had split the spoils of the leftist-led UE by the time it was all over.

The new CIO-sponsored International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) replaced the UE as the industry's largest union. Who benefited? GE.

In the weakness precipitated by this union infighting, GE's now-infamous policy of Boulwarism arose. Initiated in 1949 by GE's vice president Lemuel Boulware, it is basically the policy of making sure that a single, non-negotiable offer stands, strike or not. GE has long been admired in -corporate circles for this policy.

The U.S. Court of Appeals recently found GE's approach to bargaining, "take it or leave it," contrary to the National Labor Relations Act, in a case stemming from the 1960 negotiations. The Unions have hailed this as the "death of Boulwarism" but the decision will have to be tested and clarified before its effect on union-management relations can be determined, and at present GE is still employing Boulwarism as a weapon against the workers.

GE will use any ruse necessary to break up a strike and discredit the strikers. As is always the case with big-business, GE is an inveterate flag-waver. But GE's behavior in the past gives their patriotic protestations a rather hollow ring.

From 1928 to 1940, GE worked with Germany's Krupp Corporation to fix the price of certain strategic metals at more than ten times their market value. Krupp was Germany's largest manufacturer of armaments and a chief backer of Adolph Hitler. Although convicted of conspiracy by a U.S. court, GE got off with a mere \$36,000 fine. Compared with the ransoms set on political prisoners today, this is petty cash—and for GE, a sneeze, a blink of the eye.

In 1961, a Philadelphia grand jury discovered that GE had been conspiring with other major electrical manufacturers to fix the prices of heavy equipment sold to the government. This fraud cost the public hundreds of millions in taxes.

Later, in 1966 and '67, after claiming for ten years that it had to keep wages down in the States to meet "foreign competition" GE set up branch plants in Hong Kong, South Korea and the Philippines. There, behind the lines of the Pacific war, GE pays people about 25 cents a day to make cheap transistor radios and tape recorders. After years of haranguing Americans to "buy Amerikan," GE is the "foreign competition."

GE's patriotism is the patriotism the ruling class always throws at the people. When in trouble, leaders hide behind whatever rag is handy. The only flag they really salute is the dollar bill.

The situation at GE is one of prime importance for the labor movement and the nation. It is the first of a wave of major strikes that is expected this year, as union contracts expire in the meat packing, trucking, rubber and automobile industries.

The workers at GE are strong in their solidarity and determination not to go back to work until their demands are met.

They know that their bosses are handing them a pile of shit.

- in several GE plants, supervisors are now watching workers every second of their shifts with closed-circuit TVs. These punks sit in their armchairs and expect the screen to bristle with robot-like activity.
- at GE in Ashland, Massachusetts, three-fourths of the production workers are women. Rather than being paid hourly, they are forced to settle for piecework wages. The company controls the speed of the machines, and the machines control the workers—and the wages.
- GE supports and commits racism and male supremacy.

A UE spokesman, Charlie Kerns, said “Obviously, blacks have the worst jobs, are the last hired and first fired.” GE is a long time contributor to and supporter of the Southern States Industrial Council, a group which lures industry to the South by keeping the country divided into a so-called high-wage North and cheap-labor South. GE refuses to offer national wage parity to its workers.

Women suffer too. In GE’s motor plant in San Jose, California, a woman spot-welder with 22 years seniority was judged by the management as being overloaded with work. They provided a new man as her assistant—and paid him more. It is estimated that GE’s women workers average 80 cents an hour less than men.

In Bloomington Indiana, shop stewards may not talk to people on company time without company permission, and workers cannot see the steward without permission from their supervisor. Shop stewards tend to be cut out of overtime so that they are not on the line when the worst speedups and heaviest production pressure comes down.

As one man at the Oakland, California transformer plant summed it up: “Working for GE is like being in San Quentin, except they let you out at night.”

Sidebar: Who rules GE

GE Board of Directors

J. Paul Austin, President, Coca-Cola; Director, Morgan Guaranty Trust

W.H. Demier, CIA agent

Fred B. Dent, President, Mayfair Mills

Thomas S. Gates, Chairman, Executive Committee, Morgan Guaranty Trust

Edwin D. Harrison, President, Georgia Institute of Technology; Director, J.P. Stevens & Company

Fred L. Houde, President, Purdue University; Director, Inland Steel

Gilbert W. Humphrey, Chairman, Hanna Mining Company; Director, Texaco

John E. Lawrence, Partner, James Lawrence Company, Boston; Chairman, Board of Trustees, Massachusetts

General Hospital

Ralph Lazarus, Chairman, Federated Department Stores; Director, Chase Manhattan Bank

Edmund W. Littlefield, President and Director, Utah Mining & Construction; Trustee, Stanford University

George H. Love, Chairman of Board, Consolidated Coal Company; Chairman of Board, Chrysler Corporation

Neil H. McElroy, Chairman of Board, Procter & Gamble; Director, Chrysler Corporation

Dean A. McGee, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Kerr-McGee Corporation

Henry S. Morgan, Partner, Morgan Stanley Company

J.S. Parker, GE Vice President, Executive Trustee, Rensselaer Polytechnical Institute

Gilbert H. Scribner, President, Scribner & Company

Robert T. Stevens, President & Director, J.P. Stevens & Co., Director, Morgan Guaranty Trust

H.L. Weiss, Chairman, GE Credit Corporation
Walter B. Wriston, President & Director, First National City Bank, N.Y.; President & Director, International Banking Corporation
Fred J. Borch, President & Chief Executive Officer, GE Member of Board, Council for Latin America

Sidebar: GE and the Military

- GE IS THE SECOND LARGEST MILITARY CONTRACTOR IN THE U.S.
- GE'S MILITARY CONTRACTS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE ALONE TOTALED ONE BILLION FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY-NINE MILLION DOLLARS IN 1968.
- IN 1969 GE WAS FIFTH NATIONALLY IN CONTRACTS WITH THE NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION (\$191 MILLION). THESE CONTRACTS WERE PRIMARILY FOR ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION FACILITIES DEALING WITH THE PRODUCTION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS.
- TWENTY PERCENT OF ALL BUSINESS DONE BY GE IS IN THE MILITARY SECTOR.

Item, Approximate Annual Sales

20-mm X35 armament systems \$50,000,000

XM12 armament pod

XM18E1 aircraft armament pods

XM163 and XM167 weapons systems

7.62 aircraft machine gun and pod, \$35,000,000

CH 53 D helicopter engines \$20,000,000

F-4 fighter aircraft engines and machine guns \$200,000,000 to \$250,000,000

Enemy defense penetration equipment for IC missiles \$50,000,000

M5 40-mm grenade launcher system \$20,000,000

People sniffer (developed in conjunction with Chemical Warfare Division of the Army) unknown

Armament sub systems for Huey-Cobra helicopters \$10,000,000

Electronic countermeasure canisters for aircraft \$10,000,000

Components for T-64 engine series \$25,000,000

Sentinel missile (ABM) electronic gear \$60,000,000

Total Sales, Fiscal Year 1969

Defense \$1,620,000,000

Defense and Space \$1,810,000,000

Total, Vietnam War, 1969 (directly) \$500,000,000

fifth Estate

David Gaynes
Workers Battle GE Electric Octopus
1970

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/96-january-8-21-1970/workers-battle-ge-electric-octopus>
Fifth Estate #96, January 8-21, 1970

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net