

GE Has a Better Idea

Liberation News Service

1970

NEW YORK (LNS) — The three month old strike of 147,000 General Electric workers has been settled.

J. Curtis Counts, the federal mediator in the strike, called it “a triumph for voluntary collective bargaining.” Albert J. Fitzgerald, president of the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) called it “the first negotiated settlement with GE in 20 years.” And the Wall Street Journal said, “The agreement contains enough concessions for both sides to claim victory.”

But in industrial war, as in any war, both sides can't claim victory. And not all the strikers thought they had won. In Syracuse, Schenectady and Johnson City, New York, and in Ontario and Oakland, California, the union members voted against the settlement.

The unions won a number of important points: the right to keep the national union, a three year contract commitment in cents rather than percentage from the company, (percentage increases favor the higher paid skilled workers and hurt the majority of the workers who are semi-skilled or unskilled) and a cost of living adjustment to help keep up with inflation.

But the company also won some important points: 20 cents an hour increase for the first year (this was their original offer and it doesn't even make up for the 30 cents an hour that the workers lost to inflation since the last contract), the right to keep an open shop (where non-union people can work), and no change in the present grievance procedures.

Two of the most important issues brought out in the Strike were sacrificed by the unions: equal pay for equal work—which would have eliminated pay discrimination between men and women, whites and blacks, and North and South, and factory conditions.

Speed-ups, harassment by foremen, and the degradation of factory work weren't changed by this settlement. But it is conditions like these that the union workers must face when they go back to work.

The strike itself was far more significant than the settlement. It was the first nationwide strike against General Electric since 1946. At that time the UE was attacked for being communist and the IUE was formed to split it. This is the first time the two unions have united to strike.

More importantly, this GE strike is the largest and longest strike ever against a major American defense contractor during wartime. (GE is the second largest defense contractor in the country.) By comparison, the settlement is anticlimactic.

Collective bargaining recognizes the “fairness” of the company's interests, it supports the company's right to make \$350 million profit a year. Before 1935 when there was no collective bargaining, the workers were in even worse shape—their interests were not recognized at all. But present day collective bargaining doesn't eliminate the need for workers to strike and lose three months worth of wages to force the company to make small concessions.

“Workers don't particularly see it to be unfair that the boss owns the plant and they work,” said Don Tormey, organizer for UE. “They don't recognize the historic, gigantic unfairness of that to themselves and to the whole working class and to the whole population.”

GE got in the last word anyway. A week after the settlement, on February 6, it announced a 3% price increase on all its major appliances.

fifth Estate

Liberation News Service
GE Has a Better Idea
1970

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/99-february-19-march-4-1970/ge-has-a-better-idea>
Fifth Estate #99, February 19-March 4, 1970

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)