

Workers Struggles: US & Canada

7 August 2002

Power workers strike Dominion Virginia Power

Some 3,700 workers struck Dominion Virginia Power August 2 after the utility company and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 50 failed to reach an agreement. Dominion provides power to five Eastern states and some 3.9 million customers.

The contract calls for a 16.5 percent wage increase over a five-year period, with differentials for certain shifts and employees working under the higher cost of living in northern Virginia. Pension and medical benefits also contained some increases.

However the union objects to the low quality of benefits received by retirees and the company's withdrawal of a profit or success sharing plan that would have amounted to \$15 million for union members.

The two sides first began negotiating in January. The last negotiations were in 1995 when the two sides concluded a three-year agreement which was twice extended for two two-year periods. The contract covers electricians, meter readers and power plant workers.

Union at Boeing appeals to company to rehire machinists

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) announced a proposal to the Boeing Company last week that it should consider hiring laid-off workers to replace retiring workers.

With the opening of contract talks between the IAM and Boeing, the union has placed job security as the number one issue in the current negotiations. Tens of thousands of machinists have lost their jobs at Boeing—some 14,600 in the Puget Sound area alone since December of last year.

The union points to the fact that the Boeing pension fund is over-funded by \$3 billion, yet IAM members currently retire with benefits less than half the income they received while working. Presently, some 3,500 machinists are eligible to retire. But their reluctance to do so is presumably due to the small pensions.

The proposal to hire laid-off workers would appear to be a no-brainer. It came, however, in the wake of a statement by Boeing Commercial Airplanes President Alan Mulally, who told the *Chicago Tribune* that the IAM was "aligned and attuned" to the fact that most of the 30,000 laid-off union members would never be rehired.

IAM chief negotiator Dick Schneider expressed "deep concern" over the statement from the standpoint that it exposed the labor bureaucracy's policy of class-collaboration. But in a public statement Schneider himself has added to the revelation: "Our union has helped Boeing save millions of dollars since 1995 when we first formed a joint labor-management committee to slow the rise in health care costs. Yet, our members hear constant hints from Boeing that our families should pay more and more money for a lower quality of health care."

Boeing's head of human resources has responded that job security is the result of sales and productivity. "The reality is that Boeing cannot artificially guarantee our place in the market. We create and support jobs by winning sales."

Michigan company locks out workers

Graphic Packaging Corporation (GPC) of Kalamazoo, Michigan locked out workers from its mill and carton manufacturing operations after negotiations passed the July 28 contract extension date.

The 400 members of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy

Workers (PACE) Local 1010, which represents workers at GPC's two facilities, rejected a contract and had given strike authorization when the contract originally expired on July 23. Negotiations under an extension failed to improve the proposal.

GPC was demanding mandatory overtime up to 20 hours a week, a requirement to work all holidays, a two-tier pension system and revisions of the attendance policy.

The GPC is continuing production with management personnel. The company is owned by the Coors family which is associated with beer processing. There are another 17 GPC plants staffed by 4,200 workers in the US.

Arkansas sawmill workers strike

Over 250 mill workers in Warren and Bradley, Arkansas struck the Potlatch Corporation July 31 after union negotiators failed to reach an agreement with the company over economic issues.

The old contract agreement expired in May. But the International Association of Machinists (IAM) extended the agreement through July as the union searched for a basis of agreement. On July 23 talks broke down for the last time and the IAM informed the company that workers would not come to work at the beginning of August. The company continues with a low level of production based on a handful of workers who did not strike.

Mozart orchestra strikes Lincoln Center

Members of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra struck Lincoln Center over contract language involving the dismissal of orchestra members for artistic reasons. Lincoln Center management reacted by canceling the 42-member orchestra's 17 summer concerts that are renowned for performances of the eighteenth century Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Both management and Musician's Union Local 802 had already agreed on pensions, wages and health insurance. But Lincoln Center management wanted a clause that would allow the Center's music director final say in the dismissal of orchestra members with no chance of a rehire.

Local 802 President Bill Moriarty told *Newsday*, "We think somebody might come in and, as a show of power, fire 10 or 15 people. That's been our experience at other orchestras."

Under previous contracts, orchestra members could have appealed a dismissal through an outside arbitrator. In response to management's demand for final control to be in the hands of a music director, musicians' negotiators called for a peer review panel comprised of orchestra members or members of other outside ensembles to be able to reverse management's decision.

NLRB orders trucking company to rehire victimized workers

An NLRB judge ordered Overnite Transportation Company to rehire and pay lost wages plus interest to eight pro-union workers who were victims of a company conspiracy to thwart a Teamsters organizing drive.

The ruling stems from evidence given by a former company supervisor Dale Watson who testified of "hit lists" of Overnite workers who supported unionization. Among executives the practice was known as getting the "bad apples" out of the company. Watson testified that hundreds of workers had been targeted and were illegally fired for fabricated infractions.

More unsettling were the mobster-like tactics used against union supporters. The judge's 56-page ruling cites incidents such as workers being threatened with knives on the job, with no action taken by the company to curb such behavior.

The Teamsters represent some 2,500 out of 8,000 drivers and warehouse workers at Overnite terminals. During 1999-2000 the Teamsters called a strike that failed to solidify the union bureaucracy's support among Overnite workers.

Sweatshop defies order to rehire victimized worker

A Brooklyn garment factory refused to reinstate a worker in spite of a court order instructing the company to rehire her. Maria Arriaga, a sewing machine operator at Danmar Finishing Corporation, was fired some three months ago after protesting against the company's policy of forcing employees to work overtime while not clocked in.

When Arriaga attempted to return to work last week she was blocked from entering the factory. The company then incited six former coworkers to go outside and taunt her, warning her not to return.

Danmar regularly had employees punch out after 40 hours and then forced them to continue working. Arriaga was one of twelve employees who refused to sign statements that they were compensated for all working hours.

The Labor Department has indicated it would seek to find Danmar in contempt of court for defying the temporary restraining order that sought reinstatement for Arriaga.

Report documents incidence of mental disorders in US workforce

A report by Pfizer Pharmaceuticals Group finds that 25 percent of the American workforce suffers from at least one yearly occurrence of a mental disorder or substance abuse.

Among the most common disorders among workers between the ages of 18 to 54 are alcohol abuse (9 percent), major depression (8 percent) and social phobia (7 percent). Besides the personal costs, the report found mental illness and addictions resulted in \$17 billion a year in "unproductive" wages. Some \$5 billion of that amount results from missed work and the other \$12 billion is due to lost productivity.

Of the 28 million US workers who suffer from mental disorders, 66 percent had not been diagnosed. Only 14 percent of affected workers had been treated in the past year.

Toronto hotel unions hobble job actions

Despite being in a legal strike position since May, workers at several major hotels in Toronto continue on the job, with only minimum disruptions, while their union limits job action to one-day walkouts and slowdowns.

Last Friday, hundreds of workers at the downtown Toronto Hilton took part in a four-hour union "study session," which followed a similar action on Thursday by workers at the Sheraton Hotel. Even these actions were only taken after talks broke down on Tuesday, when the provincially appointed mediator offered no prospects for a timely settlement. The union spent the next two days attempting unsuccessfully to revive negotiations before taking the meager measures which they promoted as a "clear message" to employers of how serious they are about bargaining.

Along with the Delta Chelsea, the Sheraton and Hilton hotels are counted as the big three in Toronto, with a total of 4,000 rooms and over 1,700 unionized workers. The limited job action was taken prior to the weekend of the Toronto International Carnival (formerly Caribana) which typically draws tens of thousands of visitors to the city. With management taking up the slack, the walkout had virtually no impact on operations at the hotels. In an open challenge to the union leadership, management has threatened to bring in replacement workers in the event of a strike.

The action at the big three follows the settlement of the contract dispute at the prestigious Fairmont Royal York last month, which gave workers minimal gains. The issues in the current dispute are job security and improvements to wages and benefits with the hotels offering a 13 percent

wage increase over five years and the union seeking a three-year contract and wage increases up to 14 percent for non-gratuity workers. The union is also fighting for a common expiration date for contracts which they say will strengthen their bargaining position.

Quebec hotel battles continue but most disputes settled

Sixteen out of twenty-three hotels which were in a strike position in Quebec have settled their disputes, effectively stanching any industry-wide action in that province. The remainder continue either in lock-out or engaged in limited job action.

The agreement at the Laval Hilton, which was signed on July 25, has set the pattern for the other hotels, giving workers a 3 percent wage increase for two years, and a 4 percent raise in the final year of a three-year contract. The mostly low-wage workers—which include doormen, front-desk clerks, laundry workers, waiters and kitchen workers—are represented by a variety of unions including the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux,(CSN), the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), which negotiate separate contracts at each hotel. The CAW is demanding a 15 percent increase for its workers at the Delta Montreal, where workers earn an average of \$14 an hour.

Workers strike at Stelco plant in Quebec

Three hundred thirty unionized workers at the Stelco McMaster mini mill near Montreal walked off the job last Thursday only three days after the company ratified an agreement with its workers at the giant Hilton Works complex in Hamilton, Ontario.

The striking workers, who are represented by the United Steelworkers of America, voted by 98 percent to reject a four-year offer by the company because it fell far short of the deal won by their Hamilton counterparts. That contract included up to a 44 percent increase in monthly pension payments, which the McMaster workers want to match. But the mini-mill operations of Stelco represent only 12 percent of its sales revenue, meaning the company is more willing to endure a strike at those plants. The mini mill at McMaster recycles scrap steel into useable bar products used mostly in construction. The separate settlement at the larger plant has put the Montreal strike in a weakened position, but the union insists that "Stelco employees in Quebec don't deserve to be treated like second-class citizens."



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