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ON STRIKE FOR YOUR FUTURE AND MINE -- LOCAL P-9

4 by William Segal

The conflict between Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and the UFCW international leadership entered a new phase when the international announced on March 14, 1986 that it was cutting off the \$40 a week strike benefits it had been paying 900 members of P-9, on strike since August 17, 1985 against Hormel's Austin, Minnesota meatpacking plant. The international also revoked its official sanction of the strike. Two days later, the local voted 800-15 to continue the walkout.

The action by the UFCW international is the most recent development in a history of bitterness between the international and the local. The international opposed the strike from the outset, labeling it "mass suicide." Local P-9 feels the strike could be won in two weeks if the international would get behind it.

On Strike for Dignity -- P-9 strikers walked off the job last August in response to the company's demand for concessions that would have forced Austin workers to accept the "rottenest deal in all of Hormel's plants," according to P-9 president Jim Guyette. Hormel demanded "management rights" language that would have enabled it to ignore seniority and hand out overtime, holiday pay and the better jobs among its favorites. In addition, the company insisted on a two-tier wage scale and the right to hire temporary employees without benefits. Furthermore, Hormel wanted the right to fire workers for certain offenses without recourse to the grievance procedure.

Hormel's contract proposal did nothing to improve health and safety, a life and death issue at Austin where the injury rate last year was 202 per 100 workers, compared to an industry average of 33 per 100. The company refused to bring the base wage back up to the \$10.69 level it stood at two years ago, insisting that \$10.00 was as high as it would go.

P-9 workers don't see why they should accept these concessions to further benefit what is already the most profitable company in the entire meatpacking industry. Last year profits increased 31% and Hormel Chairman Richard Knowlton was awarded a salary hike from \$339,000 to \$570,000.

Union Solidarity -- The strike has hurt the company badly. With the Austin plant generating fully half of Hormel's output before the strike began, the company scrambled to shift the struck work to its other plants throughout the Midwest.

P-9 countered the company's "whipsaw" tactics by sending roving pickets to Hormel's other facilities. The Austin strikers received tremendous mass support from Hormel workers in Ottumwa, Iowa, where 505 workers were fired for honoring picket lines. "Bear" Martsching of UFCW Local 431, one of those who lost his job, told the LCR he has no regrets: "I'm glad that P-9 had enough guts to stand up and I'm glad our people had enough guts to stand up for themselves." The threat of mass picketing has meant that production has ground nearly to a standstill at Ottumwa.

Support for the P-9 strikers from Ottumwa, Fremont NB, Atlanta GA, and other Hormel plants around the country has hurt the company and tremendously boosted morale in Austin. Pete Kennedy, staff member of the P-9 newspaper, said "the roving pickets brought people in the chain together for the first time. It gave people a taste of unionism as it's supposed to be."

After all else failed, Hormel tried to re-open with non-union labor under the guns of the National Guard on January 21, 1986. By early February the company had resumed production with about 800 strikebreakers, but only at a fraction of full capacity. Guyette

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told the LCR that as of mid-March, the hog kill was operating at less than 10% of capacity because of the strikebreakers' inexperience.

The P-9 strikers have won tremendous support from some sectors of the labor movement. Unionists from around the country converged in Austin on February 15 when 4,000 supporters packed the high school auditorium for a P-9 support rally. Recent union rallies in New York and San Francisco raised thousands of dollars for the strike. Over one hundred union locals nationally, have joined the local's "Adopt a P-9 Family" campaign.

UFCW International -- Ironically, this enthusiastic support for the P-9 strike is not shared by the UFCW international. "Never in my experience as a union representative has a better group of members been so poorly served by inexperienced, inflexible local union representatives," wrote UFCW president William Wynn in a letter distributed throughout much of the U.S. labor movement.

The international has charged that P-9 is in no position to be calling for union solidarity when it "broke ranks" with other Hormel locals in contract negotiations two years ago. "All the locals except Local P-9 agreed in July [1984] to strike Hormel in September if the chain could not reach an agreement," asserts the international in a recent "special report" on the Austin strike. What is left unclear is how P-9 could have legally struck during the terms of its contract, which did not expire until August 1985.

P-9 members and officials dispute the international's version of events leading up to the strike. While reluctant to criticize the international publicly, they say that the failure of the international to secure common contract expiration dates leaves the locals to fight Hormel with one hand tied behind them, since the company can always shift struck work to other facilities whose contracts have not expired.

At the root of the conflict between P-9 and the international are two different conceptions of how to turn back the big business assault on the U.S. working class and the labor movement. From its annual February meeting in Bal Harbour, Florida, the AFL-CIO executive council threw its weight behind the UFCW international's position, issuing a statement which read in part, "It is important that trade unionists everywhere understand the facts of the situation in Austin so that other union members are not faced with the kind of suffering being endured by the UFCW Hormel strikers and their families. *Today's economic and political climate makes it imperative that unions follow realistic bargaining strategies that will assure gains for workers and protect their jobs--not 'all or nothing' stances that too often leave workers with the nothing, including no job.*" (Emphasis added.)

The Hormel strike poses a challenge to the UFCW and the AFL-CIO executive council. In a recent Bay Area visit, P-9 president Jim Guyette was asked whether his experiences of the last eight months had altered his assessment of the state of the labor movement. His reply, "My assessment is that there are a lot of people that want to fight and they're being held back in many instances by people who are for some reason unwilling to lead their rank and file against the take-backs from companies. Eventually, if the membership leads, the leadership will have to follow. That's what I think the state of the labor movement is today."

As the LCR goes to press, it is not yet clear what will be the impact of the UFCW international's decision. In order to continue the strike, P-9 will have to raise another \$36,000 a week to cover the lost strike benefits. But Hormel has given the union little choice but to stay out on the picket lines, having refused to make a commitment to rehire fired union workers even if they come back at \$10.05 an hour.

P-9 is calling for renewed support from the labor movement. Says Guyette: "What we are talking about is workers' blood, pain, and suffering versus company profits. It's time for the labor movement to stop clutching and start growing." Local P-9 is calling for a boycott of all Hormel products to pressure the company to settle the strike and is asking other unions to support the strike by sending support statements, sending delegations to Austin, or by contributing to the "Adopt a P-9 Family Fund" (UFCW Local P-9, 316 NE 4th Avenue, Austin MN 55912). Contributions to help the fired Ottumwa workers are also sought (Ottumwa Support Group, P.O. Box 1355, Ottumwa, Iowa 52501).

-- William Segal

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