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## THE 1984 SAN FRANCISCO RESTAURANT STRIKE

The current strike of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, Local 2, San Francisco, against the Golden Gate Restaurant Association (GGRA) is a response to the extension of employer demands for concessions into sectors of the economy where labor has traditionally been strong, and where economic conditions do not warrant extensive union concessions. Under more customary collective bargaining practice, the strike would not have occurred, since employer revenues were rising and the union proposals were modest. Yet the current national tendency to challenge unions prevailed over the logic compelling a settlement—even in an area where the union has been building its strength ever since the General Strike of 1934. The restaurant owners made concessionary demands which the union could not possibly have met without folding up and, in effect if not in fact, allowing the industry to operate on a non-union basis.

**Background of the Strike**—Most U.S. cities have few unionized restaurants, but since the mid-1930s Local 2 (and its predecessor organizations) have come to represent more than 5,000 workers in hundreds of San Francisco restaurants. Many long-time Local 2 members have worked exclusively in union contract restaurants for their entire working lives. They fought for and obtained reasonable working hours, with guarantees of decent income and enough job stability to permit them to become vested in the union's pension plan. They developed a major investment in their jobs, and it was clear before the 1984 strike began that they had the incentive and the motivation to fight hard to keep the industry unionized in this area. Also officials of Local 2 had enough successful experience in tough bargaining and strike situations in recent years to make it clear that they would mount a good fight if the employer demands forced them to strike action.

In addition, there has been no "ability to pay" issue for the GGRA restaurants which the union is striking—especially for those located on Fisherman's Wharf and in the expensive downtown and Nob Hill sections of San Francisco. These are the best-known and the finest and often the largest restaurants in the city. Including Ernie's, Blue Fox, L'Etoile, and other \$100 a dinner houses, they dominate the posh end of San Francisco's restaurant industry, and they do not face serious competition from the non-union sector of the industry. Neither do they claim inability to pay what the union has proposed; in fact, some of them would admit that they were having record years, before the strike. The main issue is not economic; instead, the owners appear to be influenced primarily by the current anti-union climate which has been aided and abetted, if not actively fostered by, the Reagan Administration.

**Issues in the Strike**—The union's bargaining position has been modest. Local 2 sought to retain the pre-strike GGRA contract, and to maintain the existing level of health benefits. The union's wage proposal was more than modest: an increase in the second and third contract years of 3% for food servers (who usually have income from tips), and an increase in all three contract years of 4½% for all other restaurant workers.

The employers' position has been to seek major concessions. First, the GGRA wants to cut eligibility for health benefits so that fewer workers can receive them. The pre-strike health plan covered restaurant pensioners as well as active workers; the GGRA proposal would cut off pensioners' health benefits entirely. Second, GGRA is proposing a two-tier wage structure that would pay new hires (and current employees who transfer to other jobs) 40% less than "old" employees. Under this proposal, older employees would soon find themselves working with many others receiving nearly half their wage, and management would clearly have an economic incentive to seek to replace older workers.

Third, the owners want to schedule split shifts for all crafts (cooks, bartenders, dishwashers) as well as waiters and waitresses who already have split shifts. But split shifts can consume 12 to 14 hours of the worker's day. The 2 to 4 hour gap between shifts is personally useless to most restaurant workers, and

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can result in the employee's time at work running from before lunch (which may be scheduled from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., for example), until after the dinner schedule (which frequently runs from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m.).

Fourth, the GGRA proposes to eliminate regular and steady income for its workers. Before the strike, union restaurant workers had a guaranteed schedule of hours per week—like most other workers. For example, if a waiter were regularly scheduled for five lunch periods a week, he knew he would be paid for at least 15 hours a week. Now the employers propose to put every worker “on call,” so that, if the usual or expected number of customers did not come in during a particular day, workers could be sent home without pay for the remainder of their shifts. In this situation, workers would have no idea what their weekly, monthly or annual income would be, and they would have to live from week to week like migrant workers.

Fifth, the traditional distinctions between the restaurant crafts would be completely abolished under the proposal, so that cooks could be required to wash dishes between orders, or waitresses could be assigned to clean toilets when there was a lull in table service. Sixth, there would be no seniority in selection of waiter or waitress stations, under the GGRA proposal. Stations are key to the tip income of food servers. If a waiter were put in a station without business, his tip income would be eliminated. The option to assign stations by favoritism would give management absolute power over the food servers.

Finally, the employers' proposal would change the rules for subcontracting so that parts of the restaurant could be subcontracted to non-union operators until there was no union work left. With proposals such as those noted above and many others not listed, Local 2 workers had little choice but to strike.

**Conduct of the Strike**—Local 2's restaurant strikers are displaying persistence in their struggle. At this writing, the strike is entering its eleventh week. The strike has expanded to 36 restaurants, and 1,700 workers are now on strike. The union estimates that, with a few exceptions, the struck restaurants have lost more than 60% of their business. Since many of the restaurants are not owned by corporations but by individuals or families, there have undoubtedly been some severe strike losses accruing from the employers' strategy.

The conduct of the strike is characteristic of Local 2's major strikes: active and effective picketlines; courage in the face of attempted intimidation by management personnel; a strike kitchen feeding the strikers; regular, well-attended rallies; local political support; and, generally, a hard-fought strike tapping the energy and talents of its rank-and-file. Two months into the strike, the union put the issue of continuing the strike to a vote of the strikers. A large turn-out voted 95% to keep fighting. Even after two months of picketing, the resolve of the Local 2 strikers had, if anything, increased. Many strikers feel that they might as well work in a non-union house and save the monthly union dues, than accept the employers' proposal. But most would rather fight than work in what, from their point of view, would be a non-union industry.

The owners' ranks may not be as united as Local 2's. Reports have reached the local press that a number of GGRA owners consider the association's demands “Irresponsible,” and that some owners believe they stand to lose more than they can gain, even through a strike settlement favorable to management.

**Conclusion**—The increasingly aggressive attacks by employers against the past gains of union employees may have reached their limit in situations like the San Francisco restaurant strike. Management may extract some concessions, but only at a considerable cost to itself. Union setbacks of the past few years do not establish an irreversible trend. Unions will not be dislodged from their historic strongholds. Local 2 is determined to fight for a decent contract in the San Francisco restaurant industry, for as long as it takes to establish the terms and conditions of a decent contract.

—Ramon Castellblanch

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