

no separate peace

A news-magazine for construction workers.

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4,000 Plumbers and Steamfitters On Strike!

Almost eight weeks have passed since the strike against the Mechanical Contractors Association of Washington (MCA) began by United Association Local #32 members. More than 1400 plumbers and steamfitters from the Seattle area local are on strike, joining another 2500 striking plumbers and fitters in Southeastern Washington.

During what is considered as the busiest part of the year, strikers and their families have demonstrated over this period that they are willing to sacrifice for stronger and more meaningful contract provisions.

GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES, EMPLOYER RECOGNITION, FRINGE BENEFITS & MORE MONEY are the major issues of the strike... but, WHAT DO THEY ALL MEAN? As the strike enters its third month there is still much confusion among the workers about the strike issues. Therefore we must explain the significance of the issues for everyone's benefit.

GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE

The central issue in the strike is the grievance procedure. The expired agreement provides for arbitration if disputes cannot be settled between union and employer. When a dispute is arbitrated, a third "neutral" party hears the arguments of both sides and then decides how an issue should be resolved.

These decisions, however, are not binding. Except for instances where both employer and union agree with the arbitrator, the expired grievance procedure has usually resulted in litigation, a costly and slow solution. On top of the time and money lost by workers thru arbitration, arbitration procedures are in effect, beneficial to employers because the orderly and "profitable" process of business is not interrupted.

In place of arbitration, the unions are demanding the "Right To Strike" during a contract period when grievances cannot be settled through the normal labor-management procedures. With the Right To Strike, instead losing time from work while arbitration goes on, grieved workers can strike immediately to win back more secure, safer, and better jobs.

We all know of more examples than we care to recall, of disputes that were forced through an invisible procedure called "arbitration" where any settlement depended on the terms the employers were willing to concede to rather than meaningful terms won through a unified effort. And how many times have we almost wobbled to gain our rights, before the mention of some anti-worker law snuffed out that strategy? Obviously, the employers recognize the threat represented in a union's ability to strike and they have shown they are willing to concede to most any other demand.

EMPLOYER RECOGNITION

Each day of our working lives, we learn more and more of the need for a strong union to represent us, as our employers ask us to produce more. They have us work in unsafe conditions with unsafe equipment, and they even lay us off or fire us as they please with little fear of retaliation from our unions. We have learned that for us to fight back and resist these moves by the employers, it is necessary to tighten our ranks to consolidate our strength. The Employer Recognition clause is a tool sought by the MCA employers to tighten their ranks.

Employer Recognition means that MCA will not allow non-MCA members to pay into our health and welfare programs. MCA seeks an employer contribution of \$.08 per hour worked by only MCA members. Obviously, if non-MCA members are not allowed to pay into our fund, we will not work for them. And certainly with an Employer Recognition clause in our agreement, many non-MCA employers will join their ranks. Any employer not wishing to join MCA, will seek to terminate their agreement with the local, thereby promoting the use of non-union labor.



We must refuse the Employer Recognition clause, so we can stop MCA's effort to consolidate their strength. A consolidated MCA means a stronger more organized employer group, creating greater resistance to struggles, such as the current strike, for more meaningful contract provisions.

MORE MONEY TO COMPETE WITH INFLATION

As early as June 3rd, one day after the strike began, the Seattle Times (a local newspaper) announced that although there are still major disagreements in the negotiations between the MCA and Local #32 concerning "contract language", an agreement was reached regarding the monetary package, and in fact was really never an issue.

A total increase of 1.25 per hour effective June 1, 1976, with an additional \$.65 increase in June '77, although once agreed upon by MCA, has been used as a tool to break the prolonged strike of United Association members. Another article in the Seattle Times on June 16th reported that MCA was threatening to withdraw their monetary offer if striking workers did not agree to a settlement immediately. Several weeks later, in a recent negotiating session, the MCA finally withdrew their monetary offer and instead of continuing the negotiations, got up and left the bargaining table.

FRINGE BENEFITS

The question of control is the primary dispute concerning the Fringe Benefit Package. The MCA proposes that they alone control the pension trust, the health and welfare trusts, the vacation fund, and the training trust. Presently, there are trustees from both management and labor responsible for the programs. (See No Separate Peace, May, Vol.2, No.1.) "Pensions Our Future Security," and Vol. 2, No. 2 "How to Improve Your Pensions")

Although MCA has agreed to continue the fringe benefits at their present rate, they want total control. This would allow MCA to invest the money in these trusts as they alone saw fit... often conflicting with worker's interests and always creating more profit for themselves. In fact, it has been shown that this money gets used to keep employers solvent.

The money paid into these trusts amounts to several million dollars per year. Workers' pension money, about \$180 billion, represents the largest investable block of money in this country and is the reason the employers seek greater control.

We shouldn't overlook here the significance of worker controlled fringe benefit programs. Not only can we avoid supporting the employers' businesses, but we can also dramatically improve our pension, medical, dental, vacation, and other programs.

Needless to say, there are other issues still unresolved in the negotiations, most of which are results of the employers seeking to make themselves more "productive" and "competitive". But because they do not serve the interests of striking plumbers and steamfitters, we will not give them mention.

WHAT ARE THE TACTICS OF THE EMPLOYERS?

The employers, realizing the significances of the Right to Strike, control of fringe benefit money, and the potential represented in a unified rank and file, have sought to misrepresent the issues as they affect us, creating confusion and thereby dividing us when we should be united.

A majority of striking plumbers and fitters have not received accurate and up to date information about the strike issues and tactics from the union and have had to rely on the Seattle Times or letters from the MCA for information.

Each of the employers, including the MCA itself, have been sending to every plumber and steamfitter, up to date reports on the strike issues. Of course, these reports reflect the employers interests rather than those of workers. In a letter to strikers from George Allen, President of the McKinstry Company, Mr. Allen defined Employer Recognition as "...a blank check at the bargaining table..." In a letter from J.P. Francis & Associates, Inc., Employer Responsibility is represented as meaning "The Employers... turning over control of their business to the Union..." If striking workers rely on this source of information, no wonder there is so much confusion!

The tactics of the employers include having workers connect their interests with survival of the employers. Again from J.P. Francis, "the employers realize the serious harm being done by this strike, but simply cannot afford to agree to contract language that would drive us out of business and jeopardize your jobs." George Allen, calling for a settlement asks the rank and file to "...put the heat on the guys responsible and get back to work before the public goes elsewhere to get their jobs done." (Where could they go?)

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