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Tom Juravich
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Kate Bronfenbrenner
Cornell University, klb23@cornell.edu

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Abstract

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Keywords

collective bargaining, ILR, Cornell University, WTO, trade, union, economic, globalization, economic justice, worker, MNC, USWA, URW, Brigestone/Firestone, job

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Comments

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Out of the Ashes: The Steelworkers' Global Campaign at Bridgestone/Firestone

Tom Juravich and Kate Bronfenbrenner

The demonstrations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle in the fall of 1999 brought together a diverse group of trade unionists, environmentalists, and anticorporate groups in a historic gathering. The size and the intensity of the action, coupled with the news and commentary in the weeks that followed, signaled a new and growing consciousness in the American public about economic globalization and its consequences. Indeed, the Seattle demonstrations marked a recognition that today's Nikes, Microsofts, and General Electrics represent new forms of global corporations fundamentally different from those of the past. The emergence of these megalithic structures has triggered renewed calls for global solidarity, for if the nature of capital has transmogrified in a new global order, then unions, environmental groups, and economic justice organizations can no longer be effective organizing on a national level. Labor and its allies must also build a global network.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how unions and their allies can build global networks in the face of multinational company (MNC) efforts to deny workers their rights to representation and destroy the very unions that represent them. In particular, we examine the strike and the global contract campaign orchestrated by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) against the Japanese-owned Bridgestone/Firestone company. The original strike, called by the United Rubberworkers (URW), had ended disastrously with an unconditional return to work, foreshadowing the deunionization of the entire tire industry. After merging with the Rubberworkers, the USWA mounted the largest and most comprehensive global campaign to date and, with its victory two years later, brought its new members at Bridgestone/Firestone out of the ashes of a certain and devastating defeat back into union jobs. We use this campaign to assess the key elements of a highly successful union strategy and from it to suggest what is becoming an emerging model of union global strategic

campaigns in the face of human resource management and labor relations (HRM/LR) strategies pursued by MNCs to marginalize, if not to destroy, unions.

Our analysis is based largely on face-to-face interviews conducted with more than 50 participants in the Bridgestone/Firestone struggle. The interviewees ranged from top international staff and local officers to rank-and-file activists and community supporters. In addition to the interviews, we examined key union and company documents from the files of the USWA international office and the URW archives, as well as from the four local unions on strike against Bridgestone/Firestone. We also compiled and studied an extensive collection of media coverage of the strike and the subsequent global contract campaign.¹ We begin by tracing the evolution of labor relations at Bridgestone/Firestone, highlighting the HRM/LR and negotiation strategies pursued by the company that set the stage for confrontation with the URW. Second, we describe the birth of a new union global campaign that emerges following the merger of the URW and the USWA. Here, we focus on the essential elements of the USWA strategy; based on research, on constant escalation of external and internal resistance, and on the widespread involvement and mobilization of members, their families and communities, and, importantly, their allies from abroad. We close by summarizing the lessons learned from the USWA victory over Bridgestone/Firestone, suggesting an emerging model of union power in a global economy.

THE EVOLUTION OF LABOR RELATIONS AT BRIDGESTONE/FIRESTONE

Founded in 1900, the Firestone company grew in tandem with the burgeoning auto industry. Bolstered by an increase in wartime production, by 1926 Firestone employed more than 20,000 workers (Firestone, 1926:136). In the postwar era, Firestone would remain among the top tire producers in the United States. During this same period Bridgestone began as a family business in Japan that in 1931 was transformed into the Bridgestone Tire Company by Shorijiro Ishibashi. By the mid-1950s, Bridgestone had become Japan's largest tire manufacturer.

While Bridgestone's profits and production continued to grow rapidly throughout the 1970s, by the end of the decade the U.S. tire industry was in trouble. Aging plants, coupled with the costly changeover to production of radial tires, left companies such as Firestone in serious financial difficulty. Firestone closed a number of its plants and laid off half its workforce. As part of this major reorganization effort, Firestone put its radial tire plant in La Vergne, Tennessee, on the block. The La Vergne plant was quickly purchased by the Bridgestone company, which saw it as an opportunity to move into the U.S. market. This left Firestone with only five plants in the United States: Decatur, Illinois; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Des Moines, Iowa; Noblesville, Indiana; and Akron, Ohio. Firestone continued to struggle and in 1988 was purchased by Bridgestone for U.S.\$2.6 billion.

According to industry expert Mary Walton, "The news was greeted with considerable enthusiasm by most of Firestone's 53,500 employees; exactly

half the 107,000 who had worked for the company as recently as 1979, before all but five North American plants were closed" (Walton, 1990: 197). Despite ambitious plans for the newly merged company, Bridgestone/Firestone struggled in its first years to absorb the debt from the Firestone purchase. The new Bridgestone management was also confronted with the need for extensive modernization of a number of the Firestone plants, which required them to allocate \$1.5 billion for modernization within the first three years after the merger. Making matters worse, General Motors dropped the company as a supplier of automobile tires (Balfour, et al., 1999: 14). After losing more than U.S.\$1 billion between 1989 and 1991, by 1992 Bridgestone/Firestone began to turn the corner, both in profits and in U.S. market share.

Central to Bridgestone's integration of the Firestone facilities and workers into its larger corporate structure and the return to profitability was the introduction of a new management philosophy, with an emphasis on employee involvement and new work systems. One of the Bridgestone/Firestone local union leaders described the changes:

Bridgestone came on board and in 1988 negotiations they introduced us to their new theme of cooperative management. We were introduced to Quality Circles, Employee Participation Teams, limited self supervision and other soothing, honey-coated programs. They talked of "life-time employment," never any layoffs, etc. and we bought into these ideas because, quite frankly, the majority of our workers thought aloud "it's worth a try" and "what have we got to lose?" And after all, they said we would no longer be referred to as employees, now we would be "ASSOCIATES." For the next couple of years we have a scramble of employees (oops!—ASSOCIATES) standing in line to become Team members and Team leaders. (Lessin, 1988: 9)

According to Lessin, the range of activities in these areas was dizzying:

Bridgestone/Firestone put employees through hours of training on "Total Quality Control" (TQC) with specific sections on TQC Problem Solving, brainstorming, the "PDCA cycle" (plan, do, check, act); Decision-making Prioritizing Checklist; Idea Growers and Idea Killers; Deming's 5W's and 1H: (who, what, where, when, why, how); Pareto Diagrams; Fishbone Diagrams; Problem Causation; Histograms; Flow charts; and Problem-solving exercises. (Lessin, 1998: 11)

Much of the activity centered on the Partnership for Involvement program. This program was discussed as part of bargaining in 1991 and was included in a Memorandum of Understanding in the final contract. The language is fairly typical of these kinds of efforts:

[The] Partnership for Involvement Mission Statement recognizes that our employees are our most important resource, our mission is to promote the safety, standard of living and quality of work life of all employees. Together we shall strive to insure continuous improvement in the quality of our products, better service to our customers and increased profitability of our company. ("Memorandum of Understanding," 1991: 1-2)

The agreement was seen as a model of cooperation for the entire industry and received the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service Director's Award for Excellence in Industrial Relations ("Bridgestone/Firestone Fact Sheet," 1995). Bridgestone was back in the black, its market share was

increasing, and it was building a stronger and more productive relationship with its workers and their union, the URW, through employee involvement and new work systems. The future appeared bright.

While these changes were taking place on the shop floor, Yoichiro Kaizaki moved into the top management position at Bridgestone/Firestone. Balfour, et al., describe the changes:

According to one industry analyst, Kaizaki, a 30-year Bridgestone veteran, was "sent as the agent of change." Armed with his reputation as the "ichiban" (number one) tough member of Bridgestone's hierarchy developed from his aggressive termination of losing operations and his relentless cost cutting ability, Kaizaki's presence would soon be felt by all. According to a 1992 interview, Kaizaki explained, through his translator, "of the four Ms, material, machine, method, and man, only this last one is different from our Japanese factories. We must focus on that." (Balfour, et al., 1999: 13)

During the same period that the company was touting cooperation on the shop floor, in the 1993 negotiations with the La Vergne local, the company, under Kaizaki's leadership, pushed for major concessions, threatening to close the plant if labor costs could not be lowered significantly. The local union struck for more than two weeks. Management's response to the strike proved that Bridgestone/Firestone's new Japanese management was no stranger to the kinds of aggressive antiunion tactics that had become so pervasive in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States. Former URW president, Ken Coss, remembers: "They put up guns on top of buildings, sandbags around. I mean, here's a place where they're supposed to have this cooperative joint-venture type of a location, and one of the first things is they [have] armed people roaming around in the plant. They had sandbags, they had gun emplacement on top of buildings" (Ken Coss interview, 1999:p. 9).

As the company prepared for the major negotiations in 1994, what it had begun in La Vergne continued. Much of the focus was on merging the master agreement and local supplemental agreements into one master contract. Decatur local president Roger Gates recalls, "They just went through our agreement and just ripped page after page out of it. They literally wiped out all the local language. And then of course from that they went on to work on the master language. So they just raped the agreement" (Roger Gates interview, 1999: 5-6).

Many might see this as the kind of hard bargaining that is a common occurrence in contract negotiations, especially with an industrial company struggling to get back on its feet. As in all negotiations, there would still be plenty of room for the company to move later in the bargaining process. The information that the Rubberworkers were receiving from their union contacts in other tire plants warned them that Bridgestone/Firestone's intentions went beyond traditional hard bargaining. The union quickly came to understand that Bridgestone/Firestone was using these demands to force a strike as part of an industry-wide effort to break pattern bargaining in the tire industry and severely weaken the URW's power and influence in the process. La Vergne local president Tommy Powell describes one of these reports:

We got word from Goodyear's corporate people. They contacted us, which they had always been great to work with, negotiate within the Rubberworkers' contracts in their chain. They called and said, "Look, Bridgestone's out beating the bushes. Want some of us to form a pact. They're willing to take you on at the International, to strike you, and they want us to help supply tires to them in addition to what they're going to supply to help keep their customers going while they destroy you all. We want you to know that we're not going to be a part of that." So they refused to be a part of it. (Powell interview, 1999: 14-15)

Despite Bridgestone/Firestone's failure to gain the full support of the tire industry giants, it pressed on with its campaign against the union in what in industry circles had already been secretly dubbed the "War of 94" (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998: 21).

TOWARD A MODEL OF UNION POWER IN A GLOBAL MARKET

The events at Bridgestone/Firestone provide an important opportunity to examine how unions function in the new global economy. Many have suggested that to gain power and restrain employers from moving production overseas or engaging in aggressive antiunion practices, unions and their members must prove that they are indispensable through a full commitment to new, more cooperative and productive work practices (e.g., see Cohen-Rosenfeld and Burton, 1987; Kochan and Osterman, 1994; Hecksher, 1996, 1998; Appelbaum et al., 2000). Heckscher provides the basic tenets of this approach:

First, institutions of worker representation cannot survive unless they are widely perceived as contributing to economic growth as well as economic justice. Second—and related—unions can succeed only if they essentially contribute to good management—not if they fundamentally undermine it. In fact, by making deals which are in the long-term interests of management as well as employees, they force management to act in its own interests. (Heckscher, 1998: 4)

As Lazes and Savage further explain, under this model of "new unionism,"

Unions must bargain for compensation tied to contributions that unions and workers make. These contributions may be in the form of improved business results, reduced total costs, reduced time to market, or the successful application of technology. Through strategic alliances, unions must fundamentally change the work systems of their workplaces, including work structure, decision-making and the use of technology. (Lazes and Savage, 1997: 185)

This model appears to advocate a form of enterprise unionism, with labor organizations more closely allied with company interests than those of their larger union (Juravich, 1998). It is based on the notion that the major avenue for power for workers and their unions in a global marketplace is primarily through the employer, not union power through the withholding of labor, building of solidarity, and other activities associated with a more traditional model of collective bargaining. What is strikingly absent from these discussions of "new unionism" is the development or growth of union power independent of the employer.

This mutual gains model is based on several assumptions about employer behavior. First and most important, it assumes that businesses act in rational ways to maximize their own self-interest. As a corollary, it also assumes that there is an alignment of human resource policy and practices with business strategies (Schuler and Jackson, 1987; Wright and McMahan, 1992). So not only does the firm as a whole act rationally, but the actions of its individual units are consistent across the firm.

The Rubberworkers were clearly operating under this model of "new unionism" at Bridgestone/Firestone. They assumed that through their active participation in the Partnership for Involvement program and the myriad of other new work schemes that were being introduced at the various Bridgestone/Firestone plants, they were securing their future with the company. Because many of the programs arose from the Japanese side of the firm, workers were especially convinced that this alignment with the larger corporation would assure them a strong future with Bridgestone/Firestone.

Yet, the Rubberworkers and their members found that these HRM/LR strategies and activities on the shop floor at Bridgestone/Firestone were entirely independent of the company's larger business practices. At the same time that the company was pursuing a cooperative strategy partnering with the workforce on the shop floor, it was developing a national tire industry strategy to completely undermine the union and the pattern agreement. Mike O'Connor, now president of the Akron Bridgestone/Firestone local, was one of the URW's most ardent supporters in the early days of the Employee Incentive Program. But it soon became apparent to O'Connor and others like him that the "emperor had no clothes":

I was actually one of the instructors in what they called TQC. We taught the Deming and Kaitan theories. I was the only hourly person—I was an officer of the union too—who was selected to go to the instructor school, and then I would teach a class once a week with a salaried guy. Quite frankly, in the beginning I thought this was kind of a neat concept. I really got kind of involved in it. I was all for it. But then, they never employed it. It was all smoke and mirrors. They'd put it together about halfway and then dropped it. I mean, this TQC was a big to-do, then after negotiations in '91 that was the end of that. They backed out and nothing came of it. They left an empty room. They didn't believe any concepts at all. (O'Connor interview, 1999: 2)

As Melman pointed out almost two decades ago, in modern global corporations the goal of maximizing profits is frequently not aligned with rational behavior in the marketplace (Melman, 1983). As we have witnessed in the wreckage of companies such as Eastern Airlines and Simplicity Patterns and whole industries such as footwear and consumer electronics, often profitable companies making quality products were destroyed because it was more profitable to break them up, sell them, or laden them with debt until they collapsed (Barlett and Steele, 1992). As capital has become more global, we should not assume that some invisible hand is guiding it to some higher purpose. Particularly during this era in which the interests of venture capital loom much larger than the long-term profits, productivity, product quality, or the focus on production of specific items, it is a leap of faith to assume that workers and their

unions should place their future in human resources policies and practices. However enlightened, these practices are often inconsequential to the financial wizards of global capital.

Furthermore, it is important to explore the consequences of this enterprise-based unionism. First, as Parker and others have suggested, at the shop-floor level a cooperative approach often blurs lines between the company and union, particularly when key union officials are assigned as team leaders or facilitators reporting to management (Parker, 1985). While this new loyalty to the company may facilitate the success of these kinds of programs, it may also make more confrontational unionism less possible or effective. Similarly, a focus on company-based issues may also isolate one or more local unions from the larger national unions. Particularly when formal or informal pattern agreements are involved, this overemphasis on the enterprise may strain relationships and diminish the capacity of the larger national union organization (Juravich, 1998). Confronted with the failure of this type of cooperative model, the Rubberworkers and later the Steelworkers with which they merged were determined to employ a very different approach to gaining power in the global marketplace.

THE WAR OF 94: THE URW RESPONDS

In the wake of the bitter negotiations with the La Vergne local, contract negotiations for the five major locals of Bridgestone/Firestone began on March 21, 1994. The company came with a comprehensive proposal overflowing with concession demands. Their proposal began by radically altering the compensation system with a performance-based pay system linking wage increases to specified productivity targets. Balfour, et al., explain: "The company also wanted to eliminate paid union time; implement a considerably lower base wage rate; eliminate daily overtime payment and double-time payment for work on Sunday; impose a four crew/twelve hour fixed/seven day continuous operations schedule; implement major take-a-ways in health care coverage; and subject employees to a no-fault attendance program" (Balfour et al., 1999: 17).

That spring, the union and company met more than 40 times in bargaining sessions, but little progress was made. When the contract expired April 23, 1994, the union continued working without a contract, still hoping that, if it just kept bargaining, Bridgestone/Firestone would eventually move and it could reach a fair agreement. But no matter how many times the union attempted to work through the major issues, the company held firm to its original comprehensive proposal. Former URW president Ken Coss describes the process:

We couldn't get them to put forth any priorities. They had proposals, and they were such drastic proposals for the industry. It would have taken all of the uniform things that we had and just destroyed all of them. When we had the meeting, I said, "Chuck, if there's something in there that makes the difference whether you're going to survive or not we'll take a look at it location by location, you have to set priorities." He said, "We don't have

any priorities. We want all of it." And I said, "But you know that that's not something that can happen. We want to avoid a strike." And he said, "Well, nobody likes the idea, but we think we're going to have to have one so the people will hurt badly enough that they're willing to give us what we want." (Coss interview, 1999: 7)

That June, the union reached the first tire industry agreement, settling with Goodyear for a package that included a 16 percent wage increase over three years. The union designated the Goodyear agreement as the pattern for the industry, but as it promised, Bridgestone/Firestone, along with three smaller companies, Pirelli, Yokohama, and Sumitomo, rejected the pattern.

After continuing negotiations through the summer, the union finally gave the company a five-day strike notice on July 7. No progress was made, and on July 12, 1994, more than 4,000 Bridgestone/Firestone workers from five URW locals in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, and Oklahoma went out on strike. A full complement of replacement workers was quickly brought in and management and salaried workers were reassigned to production jobs. Bridgestone/Firestone also imported tires from its Japanese plant to fill orders. On August 18, 1994, the company declared an impasse and implemented its final offer.

Unlike the Steelworkers and many other national unions that have established strike support structures and systems to assist local unions that go out on strike, the URW had little more to offer than \$100 per week in strike benefits. Each of the locals had already made traditional strike preparations, organizing picket captains and cautioning its membership to build up their savings. But now it was up to the locals to establish whatever support systems they could to hold the striking workers and their families together, from discount groceries and family support groups to rallies and demonstrations outside the plants.

While the bargaining teams met sporadically over the fall, sometimes under the supervision of a federal mediator, no progress was made. On December 27, 1994, Bridgestone/Firestone's president Kaizaki announced that "he can crush" the now six-month-old strike, firing and permanently replacing more than 2,000 of the striking workers (Balfour et al., 1999: 36). In a devastating blow to the struggle, Local 7 in Akron broke ranks and returned to work, as did many of its counterparts at the other plants. Fearing the permanent loss of their jobs, by the end of the year more than one-fifth of the strikers had crossed the picket lines and returned to work.

The strike was quickly draining the financial reserves of the Rubberworkers, which was also coordinating strikes at Pirelli, Armstrong, Dunlop, and Yokohama Tire. Fully 10 percent of their membership was on strike and, after paying out more than U.S.\$12 million in strike funds, the Rubberworkers were near financial ruin. As a stopgap measure, a special convention approved a dues increase to keep the union solvent.

In addition to trying to get bargaining back on track, the Rubberworkers and their members attempted to bring pressure on the company through a boycott effort. Early targets were Sears, a major retailer of Firestone tires, and the MasterCare Centers, which are directly owned by

Bridgestone/Firestone. Yet clearly, the union was unable to mount a more comprehensive campaign necessary to bring Bridgestone/Firestone back to the table. As Doug Niehouse, former staffer from the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO, suggests, "The reality was that the Rubberworkers just didn't have the resources or the people that were capable of doing the work" (Niehouse interview, 1999: 1).

The union was forced to borrow heavily from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) to keep the strike going, but its prospects for success, nonetheless, remained dim. By late spring 1995, it was becoming clear that labor's traditional model of bargaining in good faith and waiting for the courts and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to deliver justice, which the URW and other industrial unions had relied on for decades, was no longer effective in the global economy. With members crossing the picket lines and returning to work, the Rubberworkers needed new ideas and different strategies, else the strike and most likely the entire union would be lost.

THE MERGER OF THE URW AND USWA: THE BIRTH OF A NEW CAMPAIGN

It is no accident that the URW looked to the USWA as a candidate for merger. Like the Rubberworkers, the Steelworkers had lost almost half of their membership during the 1970s and 1980s. The Steelworkers had also been one of the early industrial unions to jump on board with cooperative programs and new management initiatives, with their Labor Management Participation Teams (Camens, 1985). Just as the URW had experienced at Bridgestone/Firestone, the labor-management programs in steel did little to stop the hemorrhaging of jobs in the industry.

By the time of the Bridgestone/Firestone strike, the Steelworkers had stabilized their ranks and were building their comeback using a very different model. The approach began in 1986 with the strike at USX but became full-blown in a campaign in a small town in West Virginia. The aluminum plant in Ravenswood, West Virginia, had been spun off from Kaiser Aluminum and purchased through a leveraged buyout by a group of investors that included a former plant manager. As safety conditions worsened in the plant, where jobs were being speeded up and combined, the company essentially refused to bargain with the union, forcing a lockout on October 30, 1990. Three months later, with injunctions preventing little more than symbolic picketing and the plant running near capacity with a full complement of replacement workers, it looked like another long-drawn-out defeat for labor.

However, the Steelworkers, under the leadership of then vice president George Becker, turned the campaign around and developed a strategic campaign of unprecedented scope and intensity against Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation. This was not just a simple corporate campaign or a boycott but a multifaceted strategy based on extensive research that slowly unraveled a complex global ownership network of bankers, investors, and financiers. For

the next 17 months, the Steelworkers, their members, and trade unionists across the globe mounted a spirited campaign that ultimately brought a decent contract for all 1,700 of their members.

On July 1, 1995 the Rubberworker/Steelworker merger was approved at a special convention in Pittsburgh. The more than 100,000 members of the URW, a significant number of them currently on strike, were now part of the USWA. Unlike many union mergers, where each of the former entities keeps its structure intact, the USWA knew that it would need to integrate the Rubberworkers more closely if it had any chance of winning at Bridgestone/Firestone. Jim English, assistant to the president of the USWA, describes what happened:

We've created an RPIC (Rubber and Plastics Industry Council) division. The RPIC division has responsibilities for coordinating bargaining, holding conferences, but the servicing all takes place within the context of the geographic districts of the union. I think that's significant in terms of Bridgestone/Firestone because what it meant was that the Bridgestone/Firestone locals were attending all of the same conferences that the Steelworkers' locals were during that period of time. They were very much brought into the life of the union. Had they remained as a separate entity, I don't think you would have had quite the same enthusiasm and commitment. (English interview, 1999: 21)

As part of the merger talks, the URW and the USWA had decided in late May to make an unconditional offer to return to work. Amid fear of decertification, the Decatur local had voted earlier in the month to return to work. More than one-quarter of its members had already closed the line and returned to work. After the return to work offer, however, only 153 of the remaining 2,400 workers were called back to work. In the wake of their huge victory at Ravenswood, the Steelworkers were not ready to admit defeat. But, to win, the USWA knew that it would have to take the campaign to the next level.

The Campaign Goes Global

The Steelworkers had learned four important lessons from Ravenswood and the campaigns that followed (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998). First was the importance of research in understanding how power flowed in a corporation and, in turn, for identifying as many vulnerabilities as possible. Second, in the words of George Becker, the emphasis must be on constant "escalation":

The last thing I wanted that company to think about before [they] went to bed at night, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, is all the problems and difficulties we caused them that day. And the first thing I wanted them to think of when they woke up is, oh, Christ, I've got to go out and face them sons of bitches again. We had to get them thinking about the Steelworkers continually, every day. If we let an hour go by that our name didn't cross their minds for some reason or another, then we were failing. (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, 1999: 132)

Third, the union could not run a campaign of the scope and scale necessary to win by relying on existing staff and resources. A comprehensive global campaign like the one that they were beginning at Bridgestone/Firestone

would take money, staff, and the involvement of thousands of their members, their families, and their allies. Fourth and finally, these campaigns could not be won by strategy and resources alone. They also depended on the determination, militancy, and solidarity of the strikers, their families, and their communities.

Following a model that the union had utilized in the Ravenswood campaign, Becker assembled a strategy team to coordinate the research and to use what they found in the research to develop both short-term tactics and a long-term strategy. The team included key leaders and staff from both the USWA and the former URW, as well as the Industrial Union Department (IUD) of the AFL-CIO. Jerry Fernandez, who had played a leading role in the Ravenswood international campaign, was appointed the overall USWA coordinator.

In June 1995, in perhaps the largest commitment of an American union in a strategic campaign, the USWA hired more than 50 boycott coordinators from each of the USWA districts. Rather than having boycott activities added to a long list of duties, their full-time job was to organize the boycott. For the first time since July 1994, the boycott would have dedicated staff support. This decentralized strategy of tapping already existing leadership in their communities also allowed the Steelworkers to involve a great number of their members.

In addition, as in the Ravenswood campaign, the union filed a massive list of health and safety, environmental, and NLRB charges. But unlike at Ravenswood, at Bridgestone/Firestone 1,000 union members had returned to work inside the struck plants (under conditions that some described as a "living hell"), and thousands of other USWA/URW members were working under extended contracts at Bridgestone/Firestone plants not part of the strike. Hence, in addition to the external campaign, the union launched a full-scale in-plant campaign, replete with solidarity days, mass grievances, phone and fax jamming of corporate offices, and escalating work-to-rule actions and slowdowns.

Based on their experience, however, Fernandez and the rest of the strategy team understood that the fight could not be won on American shores alone. Once the strategy team was established, they decided to move quickly in sending a delegation of strikers and their families to Japan to meet with labor, religious, and civil rights organizations. Fernandez remembers,

I wanted to put a human face to the strike. I wanted the Japanese to understand the suffering. I wanted the Japanese people and workers and unions to understand that they had essentially fired 2700 people. In these types of things you can't send officials of the union or paid professionals to do that kind of thing. You have to put a face to the struggle. (Fernandez interview, 1999: 5)

The decision having been made, the USWA and IUD realized that they had few connections to the Japanese labor movement. Rengo, the largest labor federation in Japan, did not want to get involved, but the USWA made an important link with a smaller, more militant labor organization, Zenrokyo.

Yet, just as plans for the trip to Japan began to come together, things seemed to unravel. On July 17, during a union protest involving 500 strikers and their supporters outside the Japanese embassy in Washington, a protester

was photographed with a sign bearing the words, "Enola Gay, one more time." Featured in newspapers all over Japan, this display proved too offensive to bear for the Japanese unionists whom the Steelworkers were courting (Balfour et al., 1999: 47). Becker sent a personal apology, and the strategy teams made a commitment to stop the anti-Japanese sentiments that had been simmering below the surface since the strike began.

Despite the initial tensions with the Japanese unions, the visit of 12 strikers and family members in early September 1995 was an impressive success. Although refused a meeting with Kaizaki, they held a number of demonstrations with Japanese trade unionists and received tremendous media coverage. In the aftermath of the embassy debacle, Zenrokyo suggested that the workers' delegation visit Hiroshima and the Peace Park. As Balfour et al. explain, "The visit demonstrated, if in a small way, that the Steelworkers were not narrowly bent on pursuing their agenda to the exclusion of some of the greater issues of the campaign, namely tolerance and solidarity" (Balfour et al., 1999: 51). A second delegation of workers and their families returned in October 1995 to sustain the pressure.

Working with the ICEM (the Brussels-based International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions), the Steelworkers returned to Europe in November 1995. In Brussels they picketed Bridgestone's European regional headquarters and went on from there to meet with Bridgestone union officials and workers in Madrid and Rome. Back at home the big news was that on January 31, 1996, the NLRB issued a formal complaint against Bridgestone/Firestone on eight counts, including illegally discharging strikers by falsely claiming that they were permanently replaced. A week later, a second complaint pushed the company's back-pay liability back to January 1995. The campaign was gaining momentum.

Almost immediately after the board decision, the USWA, ICEM, and the IUD pulled together a "World Conference for the Bridgestone Corporation" just outside Bridgestone/Firestone's lavish headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. Held March 13 and 14, 1996, the conference brought together 65 union delegates from across the world. In the words of USWA's Becker, "We intend to develop a global union workers' action plan to counter this company's growing disregard for its workers' interests, and its exploitation of the economies of both Third World and industrially developed nations" (Balfour et al., 1999: 71). A number of international guests spoke, including representatives from Rengo, who, after the second trip to Japan, were now actively and publicly supporting the Steelworkers' effort. At the conclusion of the conference, delegates were joined by more than 1,000 union members as they marched to Bridgestone/Firestone's headquarters. After the rally, Steelworkers marched across the street and set up what would become Camp Justice.

Originally designed as a short-term media event, Camp Justice developed into a full-fledged campground, occupied and visited by thousands of trade unionists from around the world. Each day, rain or shine, there was a daily march on the plant by rank-and-file Bridgestone/Firestone workers and visiting trade union delegations. That spring, the boycott campaign picked up

steam as well. On May 14, 1996, at a news conference at AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, D.C., USWA president Becker announced that the union was going to escalate its handbilling campaign to target hundreds of tire retailers nationwide, as well as to "black-flag"² Bridgestone/Firestone at the 1996 Indy 500, the Cleveland Grand Prix, and other auto races (Balfour et al., 1999: 79).

In the weeks that followed, USWA locals, under the leadership of the boycott coordinators, picketed and handbilled thousands of MasterCare and Sears tire retailers across the country. Several high-profile successes followed, whereby tire retailers posted announcements that they would no longer sell Firestone tires. The boycott campaign also targeted GM-Saturn and Ford, state and local governments, and pro-labor nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to remove Bridgestone/Firestone tires from their vehicles. The effort paid off when, in July 1996, GM-Saturn announced that customers could have Bridgestone/Firestone tires replaced on new Saturn vehicles, free of charge. Several states and municipalities offered their support, including a strong resolution from the Alabama House of Representatives "in unequivocal support" of the USWA and a commitment from the Atlantic City Council not to purchase Bridgestone/Firestone tires.

The boycott effort, however, was most intense at the auto races, starting with the Indy 500 on May 26. Action started weeks before the race with handbilling, rallies, balloons, marches, and a "black flag" motorcycle brigade. On the day of the race, more than 1,200 Steelworkers were at the race to handbill inside and outside the track and to pass out thousands of "Black Flag Firestone" flags. In the weeks that followed, the USWA black-flagged Bridgestone/Firestone at auto races in Brooklyn, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; and Toronto, Canada.

Days of Outrage

As the two-year anniversary of the strike approached in early July, the USWA escalation strategy was beginning to take its toll on Bridgestone/Firestone on multiple fronts, locally and internationally. Determined to push even harder, the strategy team decided to plan for its "International Days of Outrage" to commemorate the anniversary of the strike. The hope was to have multiple events in Japan, the United States, Latin America, and Europe in the days surrounding the strike anniversary. In Japan, a delegation of workers from Des Moines and Decatur took part in a "Conference for the Solidarity of U.S. Bridgestone/Firestone USWA Workers" with leaders from the ICEM, Rengo and Tekko Roren affiliates. The assembled unions at the conference passed a unanimous resolution in support of the strikers, condemning Bridgestone for "breaking away from pattern bargaining, hiring union-busters, permanently replacing employees, and making unacceptable proposals in bargaining" and calling on the company to "settle a fair contract, and to comply with NLRB rulings by rehiring all strikers and compensating them with back pay" (Balfour et al., 1999: 96-97).

Another worker delegation traveled to Europe, where union leaders from Spain, France, and Italy drafted similarly forceful resolutions condemning Bridgestone/Firestone and pledging their solidarity with the striking workers. In Turkey, a U.S. striker, Pedro DeLeon, was brought into the plant by the Bridgestone union Lastik-Is. "Once inside, the workers stopped production, jumped up on tables, and held an impromptu rally on the shop floor". (Balfour, et al., 1999: 104).

This was followed by a series of solidarity work stoppages and rallies at Goodyear, Pirelli, Michelin, and Bridgestone plants in Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela. Back in the United States the strike anniversary was commemorated through a series of rallies at Bridgestone/Firestone's Nashville headquarters. Around the globe, unions and labor supporters also joined in a "cyberpicket" against Bridgestone/Firestone whereby, through a link on the ICEM Web page, thousands of supporters could pass on their outrage directly to Bridgestone management, flooding the company with E-mail messages.

Settlement

All throughout the summer and fall, the international campaign, the boycott, and the local actions continued. Local union delegations traveled again to Japan and Latin America, and in late August 1996 a delegation of 20 Japanese trade unionists toured the United States in support of the strikers. On October 22, 1996, the USWA released "Running over the American Dream: A Case Study in Corporate Greed and Irresponsibility." Translated into four languages, the report was released worldwide, branding Bridgestone/Firestone as the world's "poster child for corporate irresponsibility." Just a few weeks later, the NLRB unfair labor practice hearing was due to open in Pittsburgh, along with the ever-ticking back-pay time clock, which by then had reached millions of dollars.

Finally, Bridgestone/Firestone had had enough. The scope and impact of the combined internal and external campaign had been staggering:

3.6 million handbills, nearly a million "Don't Buy Bridgestone/Firestone" stickers and bumper stickers, 250,000 campaign buttons, 115,000 small black flags, and 15,000 "Don't Buy" T-shirts were distributed; 63,000 yard signs were displayed. Thousands of separate campaign events involved over 60,000 USWA participants and volunteers; 1,100 separate USWA locals were actively involved. Camp Justice was occupied for 246 days; the campaign reached 86 countries, including 16 visited by replaced Bridgestone/Firestone workers; and 43 foreign workers visited the U.S. to lend their support. ("One Day Longer." 1997: 14)

The company came back to the bargaining table on October 28, 1996, ready to reach an agreement. On November 4, 1996, after 72 hours of uninterrupted bargaining, a tentative agreement was reached on all economic and noneconomic issues. With the exception of maintaining 12-hour shifts and the elimination of paid hours for union health and safety work, the settlement included major gains on almost every issue that had prompted the strike. Moreover, reinstatement was won for all union members, including all but four

of those discharged for strike-related misconduct. Perhaps most significant of all, the new contract would expire simultaneously with other master agreements in the industry. Against the greatest odds possible, the union had truly snatched victory from certain defeat. In the words of University of Akron professor and tire industry expert David Meyer, the union's accomplishment was "drop-dead, jaw-to-the floor amazing" (Lessin, 1998: 68)

AN EMERGING MODEL OF UNION POWER IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While it may not be clear to the general public, over the past several decades American labor has made important strides out of its nationalist and, at times, jingoist past. "Buy American" campaigns and smashing Japanese cars have been replaced by an antisweatshop movement that has not only ignited college campuses but brought the plight of workers in developing countries into America's living rooms and into the consciousness of U.S. union leaders and members. The anticommunist International Labor Institutes of the AFL-CIO, which had isolated the federation from significant portions of the international labor community, have been abandoned, replaced by more workers' rights-oriented Solidarity Centers (Shailor, 1998).

At the same time, individual unions that throughout the 1980s were battered by plant closings, downsizing, whipsawing, and union busting have become increasingly sophisticated and aggressive in both organizing and contract campaigns. Central to many of these campaigns has been a global strategy linking workers and unions together across borders. The Communication Workers of America have built ongoing linkages and exchanges with British workers and unions in their efforts to organize the telecommunications industry (Borgers, 1999). Cross-border union coalitions were also an integral component of the Teamsters 1997 strike victory at United Parcel Service (UPS) (Russo and Banks, 1999), and the United Electrical Workers has established important connections to the independent Mexican union, Frente Autentico del Trabajo, for mutual support in organizing and contract struggles in both the United States and Mexico (UE, 2000). Faced by the same kinds of global pressures, the graphical worker unions in Europe have, likewise, embarked on cross-national coordination of union strategies (Chapter 13). But as discussed in the two preceding chapters, much more transnational communication and coordination among unions are called for to strengthen labor's hand in an increasingly integrated global economy.

With their victory at Bridgestone/Firestone, the Steelworkers demonstrated once again that labor can win, even in a highly competitive and uncertain global economy. In this and a string of victories that followed at Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel, Newport News, and Continental Tire in the United States, the Steelworkers proved that these victories were neither exceptional cases nor just lucky victories. These victories came not only against some of the nation's largest industrial employers but also against some of the world's most wealthy and powerful MNCs and financiers. Taken together, the Steelworkers'

victories have provided an important model of unionism and trade union power in the global economy. The new model rejects the model coming from strategic management literature, suggesting that unions will gain power in the global marketplace only by making themselves invaluable and economical to their employers. Given the tremendous wage disparities that exist worldwide, it is difficult to see how American unions could ever gain any real security for themselves through bargaining away work rules and practices with their employers. While there has been a lot of talk about employers' taking the "high road" to economic success in developed economies, in reality, the "low road" strategies continue to dominate (Harrison, 1994).

Rejecting this "new unionism," the Steelworkers have built their power by directly confronting employers, using their members, their families, and community supporters as their allies and government regulation for enforcement of worker rights. But this is not a simple, old-fashioned model of confronting employers on the picket line and in the courts. This model of strategic contract campaigns is based on a thorough understanding of the structure and operation of global capital. Early in the twentieth century, the industrial giants seemed invincible from the viewpoint of trade unionists primarily experienced in dealing with local and regional employers. The CIO, nonetheless, found the leverage points of these new industrial giants and, in turn, became ever more successful in organizing them. Similarly, the victory at Bridgestone/Firestone and the ones that preceded and followed reveal that there are new opportunities for exercising leverage in MNCs, a theme emphasized in Chapter 3. Global companies such as Bridgestone/Firestone often have a very complex structure of management, control, and finances. Unlike privately held domestic firms, all these various players may in some way be vulnerable to union pressure. As the United Auto Workers have discovered with just-in-time production systems, these new corporate structures provide important new points of leverage.

Using this newfound understanding of global corporations, however, was not only about relying on the time-honored practices of the labor movement. The victory by the USWA called for bold new moves to reach across borders, down to their members, and deep inside their own organization, for the will and commitment to stay true to the union's purpose and values. As we have seen, it wasn't easy, and sometimes they faltered.

But in the Bridgestone/Firestone campaign, the Steelworkers left that past behind and created a different kind of new unionism that used the power of coalition. They made bold moves to move beyond the easy and traditional allies, forging relationships with environmental groups, international labor organizations, and even members of the financial community. The USWA's work with environmentalists as part of the Kaiser campaign and the alliances that they are building in the wake of the WTO protests have not only brought the Steelworkers closer to their allies but changed their allies in the process.

This model of strategic campaigns also understands that the work of labor relations is not just about money and simple economic self-interest. While successful strategic campaigns have to bring economic pressure to bear on a variety of players, campaigns are not won by economics alone. In both

Ravenswood and Bridgestone/Firestone, settlements were achieved because the Steelworkers and their worldwide allies made it clear that they would not go away, not ever, no matter how long it took. The commitment of the union, its members, their families, and their communities to win, whatever it would take, took on new meaning in the context of this new global strategic campaign.

As we begin this new millennium, it is not clear how this new global corporate order will evolve. Victories in campaigns such as Bridgestone/Firestone will need to become far more common for workers and their unions to have a just place in the world that is emerging. Victories like this one, however, cannot be reduced to a few winning battles in a losing war. They point to a new model of unionism, one not contingent on allegiance to corporate interests but allied with a broad coalition of workers, unions, environmentalists, and citizens worldwide. That is the real promise of what happened at Bridgestone/Firestone and more broadly in Seattle.

NOTES

1. This project was funded by the USWA, which provided unfettered access to individuals and documents related to the strike and campaign. The analysis presented, herein, is part of a multiyear research project with the USWA documenting contract victories in the 1980s and 1990s that began in 1993 with our research documenting the Steelworkers campaign at Ravenswood Aluminum (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner, 1999). It continued in 1998 with case studies of campaigns at USX, NIPSCO, WCI, Wheeling Pitt, Bayou Steel, and Allegheny Ludlum (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998). These studies provide important context for our analysis of the Bridgestone/Firestone campaign. As part of this project, a longer case study documenting the USWA campaign at Bridgestone/Firestone was compiled by Umass Labor Center students Jeff Balfour and Sue McNeil and Cornell industrial and labor relations students Jen Bloom and Ben Francis-Fallon. We also relied on Nancy Lessin's unpublished report about the Bridgestone/Firestone struggle.

2. In auto racing, a black flag signals disqualification from the race.

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