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In-Plant Strategies: "Running the Plant Backwards" in UAW Region 5

Abstract

[Excerpt] Besides the Boilermakers, few unions have accumulated much experience with "in-plant strategies." United Autoworkers Region 5, however, has piled up an impressive record of victories using tactics similar to those described in Tom Balanoff's article.

In fact, the modern use of this strategy (so far as we can determine) begins with UAW Local 282's well-known victory at the Moog auto parts plant in St. Louis in 1982. Since then, other locals in UAW Region 5 have successfully used the strategy to win contracts at a Schwitzer cooling-fan plant in Rolla, Missouri, (1983) and at Bell Helicopter in Texas (1984). And this summer UAW Local 848 finally won a no-concessions contract after 15 months of in-plant struggle at LTV-Vought's aerospace defense systems plant in Grand Prairie, Texas.

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Keywords

Boilermakers, UAW, in-plant strategies, strategy



Solidarity

Aerospace workers rally behind UAW Local 848's struggle to win a contract at LTV-Vought in Dallas-Fort Worth.

“Running the Plant Backwards” in UAW Region 5

▪ Jack Metzgar

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The premises of UAW Region 5’s use of this concept appear to

be similar to the cement workers:

1) Quality and productivity in a production process depend on the ingenuity, imagination and extra effort of the workers. If workers simply work "normally," strictly following legitimate management direction but no more, quality and productivity will suffer. In all four situations in UAW 5, for example, the unified refusal to work overtime was key to denying management the "extra effort" that can be the margin of difference between a successful or a faltering operation.

2) Orderly procedures for processing grievances benefit management. Without a contract, these procedures no longer exist and workers have to police conditions spontaneously on a day-to-day basis, relying on the NLR's "concerted activity" protection. At Bell Helicopter, for example, referee's whistles were used to summon all workers in an area to the site of a dispute with management. Also, when their union, or contract is under attack by management, workers are likely to be less tolerant of safety and health violations and less creative in "working around" or "patching over" non-serious, but less-than-ideal conditions.

3) Local union leadership can be greatly expanded and membership participation strengthened through the formation of Solidarity Committees (SCs). SCs coordinate activities like informational picketing, break and lunch-time rallies and public marches, and generally keep everybody informed and unified about what the union is doing. These committees can be quite large: At Moog, for example, 100 workers in a workforce of 500 constituted the SC; at LTV-Vought, the SC grew from 300 to 400 as the workforce expanded over a year's time from 3,200 to 4,500.

The Moog & Schwitzer Victories

"Running the plant backwards" was invented at UAW Local 282 at Moog Automotive in St. Louis. In Fall 1981 the local faced concessions demands amounting to \$3-an-hour. With high unemployment in the St. Louis area, 3,000 applications on file for Moog's 500 jobs, and known union-busting attorneys advising management—Local 282 started looking for an alternative to striking.

Julius Frazer, then Assistant Region 5 Director, remembered a successful in-plant campaign a UAW local in Kansas City had run against Westinghouse in the mid-1950s. Frazer told local leaders and Jerry Tucker, the local's staff rep at the time, how it had worked, and they devised the "new" strategy.

When the contract expired September 26, 1981, Local 282 had its Solidarity Committee in place and began its in-plant activities.

When Dan Napier, a tool-machine operator (at Moog) received a suspension and written reprimand for allegedly turning off his machine two minutes before quitting time, he taped his reprimand to the back of his shirt.

That angered his supervisor. "He tells me, 'You can't do that,' " Napier says, "but I tell him, 'it's my shirt.' 'I know,' says he, 'but it's company tape.' The next thing I know, 70% of the people in my department have taped reprimand forms to their shirts. The foreman says he is going to fire me, but if he'd have fired me, he would have had to fire 70% of the department. Next day, the foreman gets transferred."

—from Solidarity, June 1982

As they experimented with various kinds of activities, many of them similar to those described in Tom Balanoff's article above, membership participation and commitment deepened. Over the six months of the campaign, SC and general membership meetings steadily increased in size and frequency.

Moog management countered Local 282's concerted-activity grievance procedures by firing 7 workers, suspending 43 and issuing 231 written reprimands. This merely deepened Moog workers' commitment to their struggle. On several occasions they walked out in mid-shift over health and safety problems, daring management to fire them all.

After six months of increasingly unified and disciplined in-plant activity, Moog management agreed to a contract rather different from what they had originally in mind. In late March 1982—as the wave of concessions contracts began to cascade onto unions throughout the country—Local 282 agreed to a 36% increase in compensation over 40 months. All firings and suspensions were rescinded with full back pay and all reprimands were removed from workers' files.

Workers at the Schwitzer cooling-fan plant about 90 miles away in Rolla, Missouri, were faced with a similar situation in Fall 1983.

Schwitzer thought it wanted a \$2-an-hour cut and when the contract expired September 13, 1983, the company imposed it. Again with the assistance of Jerry Tucker, UAW Local 1760 was ready with its Solidarity Committee on September 14. Production at the plant rapidly plummeted to less than 30% of its pre-September level.

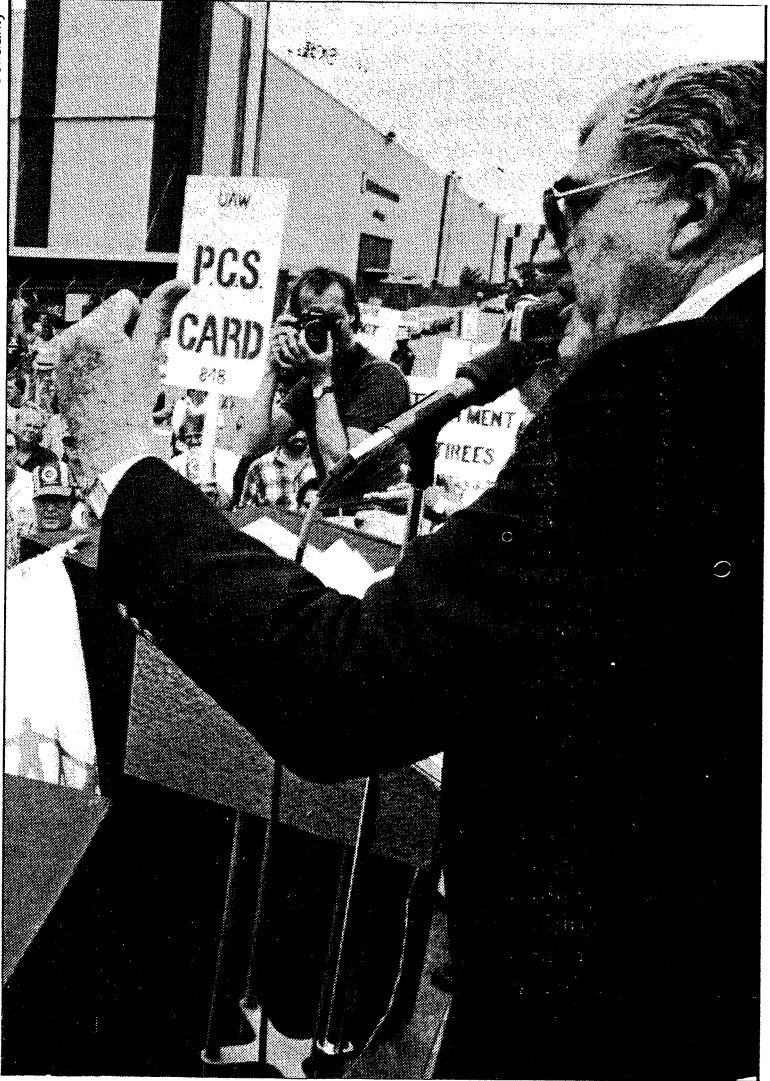
In a workforce of about 160, the company fired 35. But that didn't seem to improve production. According to Jerry Livesay, SC leader then and Local 1760 president now, "It was just like an honor to be fired." After two months of this, Schwitzer agreed to a contract that preserved COLA and increased wages by 3% a year, among other contract improvements. All those fired were restored to their jobs with full back pay.

According to union leaders, both Local 282 and Local 1760 experienced a revitalization in their local unions that has continued since their in-plant campaigns. Besides increased participation at regular membership meetings and more and better-attended social events, the local unions are more involved in Community Action programs and legislative concerns. Both locals are also more involved in supporting other unions' struggles. After winning at Moog, Local 282 voted to give the balance of its Solidarity Fund to a striking UAW local in Massachusetts. Local 1760 has provided food, money and moral support to striking USWA lead miners in nearby Salem, Missouri. "It just kind of drew us together like a big knot," Jerry Livesay says.

Aerospace Victories in Texas

The Bell Helicopter and LTV-Vought plants are both in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, only a few miles apart. Management and workers from the two plants often live nearby and are in constant, informal communication. It is not unusual, for example, for families to have members working in both plants. Both plants are in the aerospace industry, heavily reliant on defense contracts. For these reasons the struggles to win contracts at the two plants were linked.

At Vought, UAW Local 848's contract expired in March 1984. At that time other aerospace companies had already won union concessions, and UAW Local 148 was in the midst of a no-win strike against McDonnell-Douglas in California. The Vought local decided not to go on strike, but not to accept a concessions contract either. When bargaining reached impasse, Vought implemented its final offer—which included the elimination of COLA, drastic cuts in health insurance and a permanent two-tier wage for new hires in job classifications covering two-thirds of the plant.



UAW President Owen Bieber addresses joint rally of Bell and Vought workers.

Other aerospace companies—Boeing, Lockheed and McDonnell-Douglas—had tinkered with one or another of these three areas, all three of which were being urged on aerospace companies by Ronald Reagan's Defense Department. LTV-Vought was the first to go for all three at once. In response, Local 848 formed a Solidarity Committee and, with assistance from Jerry Tucker, began to implement its in-plant strategy. On June 30, 1985, Local 848 culminated its 15-month in-plant activities with a strike that lasted less than a day and ended with a settlement that contained none of the onerous provisions the company had tried to impose.

Three months into Local 848's fight with Vought, the contracts of UAW Locals 218 (production and maintenance workers) and 317 (technical and office workers) expired at Bell Helicopter. Bell's demands were less radical than Vought's, union leaders believe, at least in part because it didn't want the kind of trouble Vought was experiencing in its nearby plant. Bell asked "only" for the elimination of COLA.

Bell workers began gearing up their Solidarity Committee well before bargaining reached impasse, and it would have been transformed into a "Strike Action Committee" if the locals had chosen to strike. As it turned out, the locals decided to work without a contract and engage in in-plant activities. After nearly a month of such activities, another month during which they were locked out, and a month of new negotiations, the Bell workers won a contract with COLA in early September 1984.

Vought fired 65 workers during Local 848's campaign, most of them in the first 6 months after the contract had expired. These workers were paid \$100 a week plus health insurance from the International's Strike Fund and another \$90 a week from collections at the plant gates. After January 1985 the fired workers were also compensated from donations made in their behalf by other UAW (and some Machinist) aerospace locals. The fired workers were at the forefront of Solidarity actions, with about 25 of them in constant leadership roles. As at Moog and Schwitzer, all 65 were restored to their jobs as part of the final settlement; they received, on average, about two-thirds of the back pay they had lost and had full pension and seniority credit restored.

At Bell nobody was fired, but the final settlement coincided with the rescinding of all penalties and disciplines the company had doled out during the in-plant actions.

The lockout at Bell needs a closer look. It occurred after more than a month of concerted activities and a nearly solid refusal of the workforce of some 3,400 to work overtime. In an attempt to break up the overtime refusal, management targeted specific

individuals and told them they had to work overtime or they would be fired. Solidarity whistles went off all over the plant, and some 3,000 workers gathered to discuss the situation with management. Management responded by telling workers that if they didn't go back to work, they should leave the plant, which about 3,200 then did. Gathering at the union hall about a half-mile away, workers discussed their options with union leadership and decided to go back to work—which they did by marching five abreast back to the plant. Bell refused to let them back in, and the union declared they had been locked out. During the four weeks they were locked out, the union held various marches and rallies which were well covered by the Dallas and Fort Worth media, and workers received UAW lockout assistance benefits from the International Strike Fund. After Bell ended its lockout, new negotiations were begun which eventually resulted in a contract.

Local 848's struggle at Vought was more protracted and workers experienced various peaks and valleys during their campaign. The firing of 28 workers in May of 1984 for refusing to work overtime chilled the overtime refusal for a time. But the Bell locals' activities during the summer of 1984 further stiffened Vought workers' resolve.

By Christmas the campaign had weakened again, however. Texas is a Right-to-Work state and the union had lost its dues check-off when the contract expired. The dues collection system relied on union members coming to the union hall, and by late 1984 many members had fallen months behind in their dues. To make matters worse, Vought was expanding production during this period and hiring new workers, few of whom were joining the union, partly because the union did not have a comprehensive system for soliciting them.

Fired workers took the lead in reversing this situation. A computer was obtained and one of the fired workers programmed it to allow the union to keep track of dues collection and new hires in a much more rapid and reliable way. A system of volunteer dues coordinators was established so that there was a coordinator for each 40 bargaining unit workers. These volunteers collected dues and explained the union to new hires on a regular and systematic basis. After March 1985, dues collection and new memberships improved dramatically.

Early in 1985 the union also began to organize external support for its efforts. Through the International, it called a conference of all UAW aerospace locals, and gained moral and financial support from them. It also contacted the Steelworkers, who

represent workers at another LTV subsidiary, LTV Steel, and informed them of LTV-Vought's behavior; USWA President Lynn Williams issued a strong statement at LTV's May 1985 stockholders' meeting demanding that Vought go back to the bargaining table in Texas. UAW Local 848 also established communications with UAW Local 5, which represents workers at AM General, another LTV subsidiary, in South Bend, Indiana.

This external support must have made LTV management nervous because after the May stockholders meeting, they resumed a new set of negotiations. As in-plant activities continued and negotiations dragged on, the union set a June 30 strike deadline to coincide with the expiration of Local 5's contract with AM General. Union research had shown that Vought's Texas plant and AM General's South Bend facility were the top profit centers in LTV, a company that was losing money in most of its other operations.

By midnight Saturday, June 29, Vought had failed to make an acceptable offer and the union went on strike. Within 5 minutes after the plant was cleared, management came up with a new "final offer" and three hours later an agreement was reached. Vought got none of the concessions which it had imposed on its workers for 15 months.

Conclusion

UAW Region 5's experience shows that in-plant strategies can be an effective weapon against union-busting and concessions contracts. They can work at small plants like Moog and Schwitzer, and at large ones like Bell and Vought. And as the cement workers have shown, they can be an effective tool in fighting multi-plant, multi-company efforts at whipsawing industry standards and dividing union workers.

In-plant strategies provide an *alternative* to striking, not a *substitute*. UAW Local 848 culminated its 15-month struggle with a strike. The Boilermakers' cement lodges have made selective use of unfair labor practice strikes. And the Bell locals took advantage of management's ill-considered lockout. Like a pitcher adding a change-up to his fast ball and curve, the addition of this strategy to labor's arsenal will strengthen the strike as labor's ultimate weapon. In-plant strategies allow unions to choose when and how they will employ that weapon, and to avoid being trapped between striking under adverse circumstances or accepting a bad contract.

Equally important, in-plant strategies build stronger local unions by expanding leadership and increasing membership participation. They build the unity, solidarity and discipline which are all too

often absent from unions that haven't been on strike in decades. Workers at Vought had not been on strike for 31 years, for example, and in March 1984 union leaders were not sure they could sustain one. After 15 months of in-plant struggle, however, neither the union nor the company had any doubts.

American labor is on the run. There should be no doubt of that. But those, like *Business Week*, who think unions are going the way of the dinosaurs should take a look at what's happening in the Boilermakers' cement lodges and in UAW Region 5. Union leaders and workers there are forging a weapon that can help put labor back on the offensive. ■

NOTE: Detailed accounts of these situations have been published in Solidarity, the monthly magazine of the International UAW—June 1982, December 1983 and August 1985. For copies write Solidarity, UAW, 8000 E. Jefferson, Detroit, MI 48214.



UAW Locals 848, 218 and 317 rally outside Vought plant.