

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

P-9 strike: labor's nightmare

The strike of United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9 in Austin, Minnesota is more than a bitter labor struggle.

The strike of United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9 in Austin, Minnesota entered its ninth month in May, further from settlement than ever. The strike, by more than 1,000 Hormel Meat Co. workers, has become the cause célèbre among radical trade unions and the left, attracting attention like flies from the same groups that buzzed around farmworkers organizer Cesar Chavez at the height of his nationwide boycott. Among those vying for control of the strike are Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, and FBI-controlled neo-Nazi networks involved in radical farm layers in the Midwest.

In an action indicative of the bitterness of the strike, on May 6 Local P-9 filed suit in federal court in Washington, D.C., seeking \$13 million and an injunction to prevent the international union from seizing control of the local by placing it into receivership. In mid-March, after seven desperate months of the strike, UFCW International President William Wynn ordered the strike halted, saying, "The strike is called off as of now," and threatening receivership for the local. Forty dollars a week of strike benefits were also cut.

This strike has become the symbol of two key issues facing the labor movement in the United States, faced with a decline in the organized work force from 1-in-3, 30 years ago, to under 20%—1-in-5—today.

The first issue is whether labor negotiations should be oriented to

concession bargaining, conceding the severe nature of the economic crisis. This is the AFL-CIO's current strategy, under the mis-leadership of Trilateral Commission agent Lane Kirkland. The P-9 strike stands for an end to concessions, replacing conciliation with simple militancy. As Ray Rogers, the professional agitator whom P-9 hired to run its "corporate campaign," says, "You can create a moment in history, so people can turn to Austin and say, 'That's where they turned back the onslaught against the labor movement.'"

The second, more long-term issue, is what degree of control national union leadership should exercise over local affiliates. Kirkland wants more top-down control; P-9 wants independence of action. Both issues will be on the table at the August executive board meeting of the AFL-CIO, when Kirkland will unveil his plan for coping with the ongoing collapse of American trade unions.

The P-9 strike also epitomizes the real nature of the depression in this country. The strike is not only over a wage level of \$10.69 per hour, itself hardly a living wage. It is over whether Hormel will spend the capital to reduce safety hazards in the plant, something they are unwilling to do in face of cutthroat competition from such non-union shops as Armand Hammer's Iowa Beef. P-9 President Jim Guyette calls the "flagship" plant a "walking infirmary." In 1985, over one-third of the workers were off with

a major injury; for 1986, the company projects that 36% of the Austin plant's workers will be disabled due to injury.

Ultimately, the issue confronting trade unions today is the same that confronted those who started trade unions and fought to win union wages and working conditions for the whole work force at the end of the 1930s. Then, too, the question was posed in the context of a pie too small to go around, necessitating "sacrifice" from workers lucky enough to have jobs. Then, too, communists and populists swarmed around and, indeed, often led strikes, with their own ends.

The union movement won, to the extent that it forged an alliance between labor and industry based on a shared commitment to save the nation from the threat posed by fascist takeover of Europe, and an equal commitment to making America a proud industrial nation following World War II.

It took battles, most far bloodier than what P-9 has faced, to forge that alliance.

Today's unions, mere skeletal remains of the unions forged in the battles of the 1930s and '40s, must find a similar solution, shunning both the Jesse Jackson-style empty militancy and Lane Kirkland's capitulationism. That solution lies singularly with the political movement growing daily around the LaRouche presidential campaign and its hundreds of associated candidates.

It has been reliably reported that Jim Guyette voted for Lyndon LaRouche for President in 1980. A man with the intelligence to do that surely can muster sufficient courage to act on his better instincts now, to stop the P-9 struggle from becoming the plaything of the Trilateral-run liberals. This strike could be the rallying point for a real battle against the phony alternatives posed by Kirkland and Jackson.