On Strike at Hormel

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FOREWORD TO THE REISSUED EDITION

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Hormel Strike a Key Event in Our Nation’s Labor History

From the late summer of 1985 into the early spring of 1986, the small town of Austin, Minnesota, figured prominently in the national news. The dramatic themes and issues, twists and turns, of a labor conflict there captured the national imagination. This interest was not merely passive; more than 30 support committees formed across the U.S. and aid for the strikers came from 19 countries. This strike touched a raw, deep nerve.

In August 1985, 1700 meatpacking workers, members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local P-9, struck the flagship plant of George A. Hormel and Company in Austin, Minnesota. They had taken a wage freeze in 1977 as part of a bargain to get Hormel to build a planned state-of-the-art plant in Austin, which had been the center of their operations since the 1920s. Corporations made so many threats in the later 1970s and 1980s to relocate production facilities—and followed through on many of them—that the best-selling labor books of the era carried titles like Capital Flight and The Deindustrialization of America. Local and state governments, as well as workers and unions, were challenged by such threats, and they often responded with tax breaks and infrastructure development along with the pay and benefit cuts or freezes that workers provided. Despite
these concessions, millions of manufacturing jobs were exported from the U.S., relocated by corporate employers to low-wage, minimally regulated sites from Mexico and Central America to China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore.

In the case of Hormel in Austin, the company received new exit and entrance ramps to I-90, new service roads into and around the plant, tax breaks, and that wage freeze. Workers had also agreed to shift the structure of their wage payments away from a system which, since 1933, had provided them with stable earnings in a notoriously seasonal industry, to a more conventional hourly wage system. This shift also undermined the controls that workers had long exercised over the pace of production. On the basis of these concessions, Hormel built its new plant in Austin.

But workers were in for a very rude awakening. When the new plant opened in 1982, work was reorganized, production lines were sped up, and injury rates skyrocketed. Workers’ complaints were rebuffed by management. Then, when contract negotiations opened in the fall of 1984, citing changes in the industry such as the closing of major competitors’ plants, mergers, buy-outs, ownership changes, and the imposition of wage cuts, Hormel management demanded a 23% wage cut. For workers who felt that they and their families had given generations of loyal labor to this company, in exchange for which they had received respect and decent compensation, this was adding insult to injury.

Despite the advice of the international union and its packinghouse division to accept management’s demands, the local, under leadership elected after the new plant agreement of 1977, made plans for their first strike since the one that had established the union in 1933. This new leadership built a thick internal network of committees responsible for a range of activities, mobilized their retirees, reached out to UFCW locals at other Hormel plants, solicited the support of union activists in the Twin Cities and across the country, and hired consultant Ray Rogers, founder of Corporate Campaign, Inc. With Rogers, they developed a strategy that emphasized the economic links between Hormel
and key regional banks, sought a very visible public presence, and put their members forward as their greatest resource, not just as picketers but as public speakers, artists, toy makers, cooks, and strategists.

The ensuing strike galvanized the attention of a labor movement reeling from Ronald Reagan’s firing of the air traffic controllers in the summer of 1981, the closing of factories and the export of jobs abroad, employers’ demands for concessions, and the government’s weakening of its enforcement of labor laws ranging from the right to organize to workplace health and safety regulations. A new breed of management consultants, union-busting lawyers, and private security companies signaled a new determination by corporate employers to manage their workplaces without “interference” from unions. When Hormel workers stood up for themselves in a very public and creative way, they inspired other workers who were facing—or fearing—similar threats, demands, and pressures. And when the strikers, receiving meager strike benefits of $45 a week, asked for support—at first to make car and mortgage payments, to keep the heat and lights on, to buy groceries; later to join picket lines, participate in rallies, and boycott Hormel products—what they received was unprecedented. It not only enabled them to survive materially for months, it inspired them to stand firm and know that they were fighting for more than themselves.

Local P-9 was ultimately defeated by an array of powerful forces: corporate obstinacy; an ability to shift production to other plants; support from other business interests including those regional banks; a series of hostile court decisions and injunctions; the intervention of the Minnesota National Guard, under orders from Governor Rudy Perpich; an unsympathetic media; and its own international union, which was supported by a labor bureaucracy at the highest levels of the state’s and the nation’s unions. It is sobering to realize how much power could be marshaled to defeat this one local union, even as it is inspiring to realize how valiantly they stood up for themselves and for all working people.

Local P-9’s stand inspired hundreds of thousands of workers, not just in the U.S. but across the world, who were beginning to feel
the economic and political might that would drive a new corporate
global strategy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
Corporations, governments, and transnational entities have imple-
mented strategies that include free trade, plant closings, capital flight
and the export of jobs, deregulation, privatization, subcontracting,
the reorganization of work, the exploitation of immigrants, collective
bargaining, the welfare state, Keynesian economic practices, and the
tearing apart of the social contract that, in the U.S. at least, had been
embodied in union representation. In place of the panoply of alpha-
bet soup of agencies created by Roosevelt’s New Deal—WPA, CCC,
TVA, FTP—and the new labor organizations affiliated with the CIO,
workers’ lives now take place in the shadows of NAFTA, WTO, IMF,
and the World Bank. The Hormel strike symbolized the fight against
this new corporate agenda, not only because of the injustice of the
corporate demands, but also because of the heroism of the strikers.
A stunning mural appeared on the outside of the Austin union hall,
designed by national labor artist Mike Alewtiz and P-9 rank-and-filer
Denny Mealy, and painted by more than 100 volunteers and included
the banner “IF BLOOD BE THE PRICE OF YOUR CURSED
WEALTH, THEN BY GOD WE HAVE PAID IN FULL.”

This mural was sandblasted off that union hall wall in the late
spring of 1986, after the UFCW international union placed Local P-9
in trusteeship and its appointed trustees negotiated a contract that
accepted most of the company’s demands. Workers who had crossed
the picket line, including hired strike breakers, were allowed to vote
while those who remained on strike could not. The striking work-
ers were placed on a recall list, although many of them were never
recalled. Hormel soon announced that it was building a wall inside its
new plant and leasing the kill-and-cut operations to a new company,
Quality Pork Products (QPP), newly incorporated by the plant man-
ager. The union contract just negotiated not only allowed this subcon-
tracting, it agreed to even lower wages for QPP workers. As months
turned into years, QPP workers quit and were increasingly replaced
by Mexican immigrants. By the time of the NAFTA agreement in the early 1990s, Hormel had become a poster child for the demise of the American Dream, its iconic status ensured by Barbara Koppel’s Oscar-winning documentary of that name.

Not surprisingly, this strike occasioned not only a major documentary film but also a number of books. I even wrote one myself. The National Endowment for the Humanities and Temple University Press are now making it possible for readers to access, for free, one of them—Hardy Green’s *On Strike at Hormel: The Struggle for a Democratic Labor Movement*, which was originally published by Temple in 1990. (See the bibliography for a list of additional books on the iconic strike.)

*On Strike at Hormel* provides both an insider’s and an analyst’s perspective. Green was involved in the strike as a staffer at Ray Rogers’ Corporate Campaign, Inc., which advised Local P-9. He is also a skilled journalist, well versed in both labor economics and labor history. *On Strike at Hormel* places the conflict in its historical context, offers readers a good sense of what was at stake while giving them access to backroom discussions of strategy, and retells the story of the strike itself in clear prose.

Historical hindsight gives us a chance to continuously reconsider the significance of the past. Today, some 35 years after the end of this strike, the state of workers and the clout of unions seems even more dire. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008 to 2009, inequality has grown markedly. More and more jobs are structured through subcontracting and independent contracting, making them precarious, unstable, without benefits, without security. Less than 10% of the American workforce belongs to unions. In the private sector, this has fallen to 7%. Reagan’s firing of the air traffic controllers seems to have ushered in a new era of insecurity for workers. Yet the story of the Hormel strike, told so well by Hardy Green, reminds us that workers have had—and still have—the capacity to stand up for themselves, to build solidarity, to inspire others, and to offer an alternative story of how the future might unfold.
Peter Rachleff taught U.S. History at Macalester College from 1982 to 2012, when he left to co-found, with Beth Cleary, the East Side Freedom Library (http://eastsidefreedomlibrary.org) in St. Paul, Minnesota. From 1985 to 1986, Rachleff served as the chairperson of the Twin Cities Local P-9 Solidarity Committee, and in 1993 he wrote Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


