On Strike at Hormel
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On Strike at Hormel: The Struggle for a Democratic Labor Movement.

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The 1985–86 strike at Geo. A. Hormel & Co. had enormous appeal for a wide range of writers, historians, and labor analysts. For the press, the Austin, Minnesota, strike offered a number of irresistible images: a group of white, small-town men, women, and children standing up in dramatic fashion to a Fortune 500 corporation. On the strikers' side was “labor’s muscleman,” the handsome, garrulous, and ever-optimistic labor strategist Ray Rogers. Opposing them, along with Hormel, was the country’s second-largest International union, the United Food and Commercial Workers.

Industrial-relations academics and labor activists also turned to Austin, wondering whether Local P-9's energies would somehow be translated into a means of reviving the ranks of organized labor, down to under 18 percent of the country's work force. Historians rediscovered a living culture of Austin unionism dating back to the 1930s. Through all of this, quite a number of articles, television programs, and videotapes were generated.

Yet today the Hormel strike remains a blur. Many people who ordinarily follow labor events cannot say for sure whether the strikers won or lost: Did they get their jobs back? Is everything back to normal? What is more, there has been no overall record of the strikers' unusual accomplishments.
Hence this book. It is an insider’s account. As a participant and witness, I was privy to on-the-scene and behind-the-scenes developments. Knowing many of the participants well, I feel that I can describe their motivations and experiences.

At the same time, the strike raised complicated cultural, historical, legal, and strategic issues that require exploration. Part of my account, therefore, is akin to a mystery story: Why did one of the most significant fights against corporate demands for concessions of the 1980s take place at this place and this time? Did the strikers choose the most appropriate tools to achieve their aims? How did the strike change those who took part in it?

I was not acquainted with the non-striker participants during the events of 1985–86. But in the course of preparing this book I have interviewed some of them and reviewed the statements they all made at the time. Though I do not and could not believably claim to be a neutral observer, I have attempted to understand and present the UFCW’s side of the story, along with that of the Hormel company. Along the way, I came to feel that there was real tragedy involved for both of these parties. Lewie Anderson, chief International union opponent of the P-9 cause, has also become a victim of the institutions that made him. As this book went into production, UFCW president William Wynn fired him from the position of Meatpacking Division director, probably because of the on-again, off-again militancy that led Anderson to privately criticize the International’s collusion with low-wage packers such as IBP. Charles Nyberg, senior vice president at Hormel and its chief spokesman, in many ways wanted to do right by Hormel workers but could not see beyond our era’s prevailing corporate truths.

The activities of other non-striker participants have not
been fully known before. Now, documents recently gained under the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act and the federal Freedom of Information Act show that Austin law enforcement officials came to regard all positive developments for the strike as setbacks for law and order. The sentiments and actions of state officials were more ambivalent. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which has not yet turned over its files, admits to keeping tabs on several key participants.

The Austin strike was an exhilarating experience. But this is not an uncritical account. I gained a lot from the strikers and their supporters—and I felt, therefore, that I owed everyone the return favor of taking their efforts seriously. So I have tried to look back at the things we did together and say where I think we were right and where we were wrong.

Contrary to the wisdom of much of labor's leadership, P-9 members demonstrated that union workers are still willing to stand up to corporations that define them as just one of many means to the end of greater profitability. Austin's union members and the tens of thousands of workers across the country who came to their defense showed that there is a living culture that believes in mutual support among workers as a practical and ethical necessity.

This book could not have been written without the help of a great many people, particularly the official and unofficial P-9 archivists Lorraine Fossum, Millie Rios, and Dick Blin. P-9's former officers and members, United Support Group members, attorneys, and a variety of others, including Ray Rogers, UFCW International vice president Lewie Anderson, and Hormel senior vice president Charles Nyberg, made themselves available for many hours of interviews.

Emily Bass oversaw an ambitious freedom-of-information project, pursued under federal law and the laws of Min-
nnesota and several surrounding states. The Austin Police Department regarded this project as undeserving of fee waivers and charged over $2,200 for releasing its voluminous files. Helping to defray these and other freedom-of-information-project costs were Communications Workers of America District 1, CWA Locals 1180, 1150, and 1034, International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 111, the Fund for Open Information and Accountability, and Corporate Campaign Inc. Offering valuable ideas and criticism were Ted Lieverman and Philip Mattera. And countless hours were spent puzzling over what it all meant with Edward Allen.