On Strike at Hormel

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VII

DISOBEDIENCE

You can question a lot of things about me, but don’t screw around with my integrity.

—UFCW president William Wynn

Was the strike broken? That was the question that reporters, politicians, and labor-watchers repeatedly raised. There was no reason why it had to be. Hormel was a very rich outfit, and, if it felt compelled to, it surely could rehire the 800 “replaced” Austinites and the 500 “fired” others at some compromise wage rate, perhaps transferring “replacements” around to various plants.

Hormel always justified its decisions as “necessitated by business conditions.” Its spokesmen also said that they had a legal obligation to the “permanent replacements.” But did it really make good business sense to throw away so many skilled and experienced workers? The loyal strikers reassured themselves by saying that it didn’t make sense and that the inexperienced scabs couldn’t run the plant. In Darrell Busker’s words:

When the company said they weren’t hiring any more, I said, “Fine—let them see if they can run the plant with that slime.” New hires they’d rejected before. People
who'd been abusing the workers' comp system, claiming to be disabled. And 30- to 40-year people who went back just to finish up and get their retirement. It wasn't a dedicated work force. My mom and dad had over 50 years in with the company, and young workers like myself could have really given something to them. But I vowed not to go back till every one of us went back. ³

It seemed there must be some unknown reason for Hormel's intransigence. Some strikers said that the company now was fighting for the industry as a whole, possibly with material backing from the Meat Institute or some such industry organization.

Others strikers said no; at this point the company was fighting on behalf of the UFCW, whose leaders could not survive a P-9 victory.

Far from the ice patch where such topsy-turvy logic seemed plausible, the elected leadership of the American working class prepared to hold its annual winter executive council meeting. For decades AFL, then AFL-CIO, leaders had repaired to southern Florida for a couple of mid-winter weeks of sun and speechifying. Just as ritualistically, a corps of reporters trailed after them, unoptimistic but eager for some printworthy tidbit. This year the AFL-CIO intended to spoon-feed them lots of information on how it was revitalizing the labor movement, in accord with a superficial but much-advertised plan adopted the previous year, "The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions."

The UFCW's national officers saw the Bal Harbour meeting as a chance to slam the door on the strike. The gathering would be a rare opportunity to promote the UFCW's version of events among the heads of other unions, who would all be there, and with the press corps. Thus, Al Zack and other
union staff labored for some weeks before the gathering to put together a definitive "Special Report" on the Austin situation, "UFCW Local P-9 Strikes Hormel: The International Union's Perspective." They planned to circulate thousands of copies of the report at the meeting, and to back it up with press conferences featuring Anderson and Wynn.

Word of these plans also reached Austin, Minnesota. Reporters who admired P-9's spirit—and who hated the thought of wasting time at another AFL-CIO meeting where nothing happened—urged the local to send representatives to stand up to what would otherwise be an unchallenged UFCW media blitz.

I pressed Guyette and Rogers, and reluctantly they agreed to go. After looking over Anderson's "Fact Book on Local P-9/Hormel," we hastily put together our own special report, "The Controlled Retreat: The Crisis of Leadership at the United Food and Commercial Workers Union." We arranged for a meeting room at the Seaview Hotel, only a block away from the Sheraton Bal Harbour, where the convention was taking place, and announced that a press conference would take place on February 19.

Florida was indeed another world of sunlight and warmth, as the three of us realized as soon as we arrived at the lush Miami airport on the 18th. The next morning, prior to our press conference, Guyette would go on the nationally televised "CBS Morning News" for another debate with Anderson, who stressed the International's new theme of attack: P-9's "irresponsible" loss of over a thousand union jobs.4 (The UFCW's "Special Report" said that P-9's "gallant members" had "become cannon fodder for a self-proclaimed 'master strategist' bent on attaining symbolic victory or glorious defeat at the expense of hundreds of workers' jobs, divided families, a broken community, and labor soli-
Meanwhile, Rogers and I went on to the Sheraton to make sure that members of the press had really gotten word of our press conference.

There was no problem about that. Virtually every member of the press who was in town to cover the convention turned up, along with several local television crews who gravitated to the display of intra-union conflict, as rare at an AFL-CIO convention as sharecroppers at the Sheraton Bal Harbour. Also in the room were Victor Kamber, a public relations consultant on retainer to the International, and UFCW representatives, who handed out notices of a press conference to be held by Anderson as soon as ours ended.

Before the press conference opened, I urged Guyette and Rogers not to take on the whole labor establishment. Let's say that the UFCW leaders are out of step, but not the whole of AFL-CIO officialdom, I said. Follow your own advice, I told Rogers: divide your opponents; don't provide the rhetoric that will cause them to unite behind Wynn.

This was the approach of our position paper, “The Controlled Retreat.” It focused on the UFCW's double-dealing and attacks on P-9 and allowed officials from other unions to dissociate themselves from the situation.

But it didn't matter what I said. Guyette reported that Federation president Lane Kirkland had shown his insensitivity to workers' problems by refusing the local leader's request to address the AFL-CIO's executive council. “We feel confident that we can win this situation with the support of the labor movement that is not down here in Bal Harbour out on the golf course or in the jewelry shops,” Guyette announced, indicting all conventioneers.

“A lot of workers in the labor movement would like to sit before the AFL-CIO leaders and say, ‘Do you really understand what the steel workers are going through, the
auto workers, the secretaries, the hotel workers?” he elaborated.

Rogers called Wynn “one of the most anti-union people I’ve ever come across” and said he and other labor leaders had become accustomed to a soft life and high pay, acting and dressing like corporate executives. He said the Austin workers were calling Wynn the “Mr. T of the labor movement” because, like the television personality, he wore a number of gaudy gold chains, rings, and a flashy watch.

Next stop: their press conference. There, Anderson again put special emphasis on the “devastating” loss of jobs and the “anti-union” nature of P-9’s activities in the midst of an overall anti-union climate. “Clearly they’ve lost the strike,” he announced. “It’s a colossal failure.”

Guyette stood in the first row, asking questions about Anderson’s statements and pulling out documents from his briefcase in an attempt to refute the charges. Hadn’t the Ottumwa and Fremont workers circulated petitions to urge the International to sanction extended P-9 picketing?

“You know how easily those things can be manipulated, Jim,” inserted Ken Kimbro, the most vocal of three FDL and Hormel rank-and-file workers flown in for the occasion. Kimbro, whose demonstrations of loyalty to UFCW officialdom would pay off in time, was a steward at the FDL plant in Rochelle, Illinois. P-9’s anti-union rhetoric, he said, had “damned near destroyed” a union organizing campaign at IBP in Rock Island, Illinois.

But the Kimbro-Guyette exchange was soon drowned out by a heated shouting match between Rogers and Robert Harbrandt, head of the Federation’s Food and Allied Service Trade Division (FAST). When Rogers insisted that Anderson cite one case of a UFCW campaign that effectively mobilized
workers, Harbrandt, whose office had conducted a number of “coordinated campaigns” for the International, exploded. Rogers, he said, was not only showing his arrogance, but also telling untruths.

Rogers: Are you speaking because you have great respect for what the leadership of this International union is doing, or are you speaking because they are paying a lot of money to FAST?

Harbrandt: You’ve known me long enough to know that nobody, Bill Wynn, Lane Kirkland, George Meany, or anybody else can make me say anything other than the truth.

The exchange went on for 10 minutes while reporters scribbled notes and television cameras whirred. Finally Rogers announced that he had great respect for Harbrandt and his staff. Harbrandt took that as an apology and stomped away.

Serrin wrote in the Times: “People here said nothing like it had occurred at these meetings in a decade and a half, perhaps more. A retired labor leader said he had seen nothing like it in 30 years.”

The press was delighted. P-9 had provided them with a little titillation and something to write about that was not simply culled from official press releases. Among the labor people, genuine emotions were aroused: Many delegates had hoped to be able to ignore the whole Austin affair, and now they were being forced to consider their feelings and even to take sides.

Later that day Wynn held his own press conference. The high point came when the UFCW president announced that the many demonstrations on behalf of P-9 signified nothing. “Demonstrations are like masturbation,” he announced.
“They give you a certain amount of relief, but they don’t accomplish very much.”

Overlooking such obscene gaffes, Al Zack was pleased. According to several reporters, Zack was spreading the word that “we’ve turned it around.” The press, he felt, was beginning to side with the UFCW against the local. Perhaps the UFCW’s headquarters-bound staff never understood: They didn’t simply have a press problem—they had a real problem among rank-and-file members.

Lane Kirkland, on the other hand, understood that there was a real problem and felt that perhaps something could be made of the unusual goings-on. In his letter denying Guyette access to the AFL-CIO executive council, Kirkland had also said that he would be glad to meet with Guyette to “hear your views.” Later that afternoon he agreed to meet in a private session with just Guyette and Wynn.

Afterward, Guyette pooh-poohed the meeting. Kirkland, he said, listened to Wynn and said that the local should have settled on Hormel’s terms. Perhaps more attuned to Kirkland’s designs, Serrin saw something other than support for the International in the meeting. “I was stunned,” he said, that Kirkland agreed to any meeting at all:

But I don’t think Kirkland likes Wynn, his style, or what he stands for. And I think he thought he might be able to do something. He said, “Jim, what can I do for you?” But Jim said, “We want X, Y, Z,” which he saw as the same old thing. He could have said some subtle kind of negotiating thing, like “we’re not trying to make war on the labor movement” or “it’s unfortunate we can’t get along with Mr. Wynn.” He could have said, “Perhaps you could come to Minnesota and help to settle this thing.” Kirkland was trying to make some kind of opening, but
[AFL-CIO Director of Information] Rex Hardesty told me later that Jim wouldn’t respond to Kirkland’s signals. For Kirkland, it was an opportunity to expand the authority and activity of the AFL-CIO into the collective bargaining process of one of its largest affiliates—something with which it did not ordinarily get involved—and to embarrass Wynn in the process. Earlier in the day, Kirkland had noted that such Federation involvement and “ambulance service” had been “the subject of extended discussion.” Perhaps Guyette could have played on Kirkland’s designs to advantage, but instead he had responded to Kirkland’s mouthing of the UFCW line that the local had taken “its own independent course of action . . . breaking solidarity with the rest of the labor movement.”

The following day, the Federation executive council adopted a statement denouncing the “all-or-nothing stances” taken by P-9. “Today’s economic and political climate makes it imperative that unions follow realistic bargaining strategies that will assure gains for workers and protect their jobs,” it read. Henceforth, national union leaders—like Machinists’ union president William Winpisinger, who sent out a letter scoring Rogers’ “scorched earth school of labor relations”—would urge their members to toe the line.

It was always extremely unlikely that P-9 could have broken the council’s natural solidarity with itself. But we might have done a better job of introducing divisions into the group. Had we not come, the council would have adopted the same resolution condemning P-9. Our presence had not persuaded anyone to speak out on our behalf or generated enough discomfort about the UFCW’s actions to prevent adoption. Instead, we had only found another forum to address the broad mass of working people and to lodge a pro-
test—albeit a virtually unprecedented one—about the council's complicity with the UFCW.

Back in the Midwest, Perpich ordered the remaining 200 Guardsmen out of Austin on February 18 after two weeks of quiet, during which P-9 was concentrating on activities elsewhere. State Commissioner of Public Safety Paul Tschida said, though, that he recognized that the "cat-and-mouse" games would likely continue between the strikers and the company and local law enforcement.¹¹

From now on, the governor and state officials would attempt to remain on the sidelines and out of sight. Earlier in the month of February, Perpich met once with each side of the dispute—telling the union board that it should encourage members to accept the fact-finder's report and "live to fight another day"—and made a number of phone calls to Guyette and Knowlton. He got together with various Minnesota labor leaders, including AFL-CIO head Dan Gustafson and representatives from the Teamsters, the Steelworkers, and the UAW, whom he urged to press for a settlement. He also met with Austin law enforcement chiefs to discuss the troop withdrawal. In late February, he told delegates at a Minnesota AFL-CIO legislative conference, where he defended his use of the Guard as doing "what he had to do under the Constitution," that no governor had ever spent as much time trying to resolve a labor dispute as he had in this case.

Neither P-9 nor the company was much impressed. In our interview, Nyberg told me that Perpich had never made any practical suggestions: "Mainly it was, 'Gee, I wish you could get together and get this resolved.'" Nor, according to Nyberg, did Perpich offer to personally mediate the dispute,
as he may have privately claimed to some DFL legislators. P-9 executive board member Skinny Weis said there were conflicting reports about what actions Perpich took, but he added, “I can’t see any way he helped us.”

The picket line stayed up in Fremont, ignored by the vast majority of workers who crossed and went in to work each day. “It was terrible cold,” recalled Rod Huinker, who pulled several stints in Fremont.

We had 40- to 50-below wind chills that never let up. The Nebraska Highway Patrol were very intimidating: They wouldn’t let people warm up in their vehicles or take a break, and they watched everything, so we had to guard against breaking any minor law. Only a few honored the line, the rest just walked in every day. It was discouraging: They wouldn’t talk to you a lot. They knew the truth, but the way the company was doing things, they were just scared of losing their jobs.

Austin kept at least a dozen people in Fremont. They picketed around the clock in three-hour shifts and slept on the floor and on cots in a mobile home. From time to time, the pickets and a P-9 executive board member would hold a meeting to discuss what was happening, but these were primarily attended by the few Fremonters who were already observing the picket.

In Ottumwa, where the plant remained mostly closed, P-9 vice president Lynn Huston decided to pull the pickets after five weeks. The organizing team sent in by the International union had convinced the community and businesspeople that everyone was suffering solely because of the picket line. Huston talked with a number of the “radical crew” that supported P-9, and all agreed that it was time. “So we decided to put the burden on the UFCW, who’d told everybody straight
out that if the picket line came down, they'd get everyone's job back tomorrow," Huston said.

We pulled the picket line the next day. A number of people down there and up in Austin didn’t agree, but I knew that we were going to become the villains real fast if we didn’t. That morning, Louie DeFrieze said, “We don’t want Lynn Huston anywhere around—I’m your leader and should be the one to lead everybody back.” I said no, we oughta do it right. I put the picket line up, and I’m gonna take it down. And the man who’s going to walk down there with me is the mayor, Jerry Parker.

The 500 workers started down the street in mass. We had about twenty flags, and everyone was wearing Local 431 red hats and jackets. Louie tried to hold them back so he could be the leader, and they almost ran him over. When we got down to the plant and pulled the line, we found a big lock on the gate, preventing anyone from returning. So Louie went in to the office to talk to company executives.

Meanwhile, with all the media gathered around I kept announcing, “You got a lockout here . . . just look at that lock.” Finally, Louie came back out and said, “It’s not a lockout, there’s just a dispute, and there will be an arbitration.” The company continued to partially operate with about 200 scabs, and the UFCW had “expedited” arbitration that took almost a year to get resolved.14

After the lockout, Ottumwa members filed for unemployment and, arguing that the lockout represented an unfair labor practice, set up their own pickets and engaged openly in other strike activities.

On the second day of the “mystery ride” picketing in Dubuque, only about 80 FDL workers honored P-9’s picket, and
the picketers returned to Austin. Merrell Evans later told me, "The first day enough stayed out to shut the plant down and keep it shut until the afternoon shift. Then the militant half saw that the other half wouldn't support them." 15

And in Austin, Hormel executives led reporters on a tour of the reopened flagship plant, where company spokesmen said 1,045 people were working: 453 P-9 crossovers and 592 new hires. 16

The picket line would remain in Fremont until May, and potential picketers stayed out near the western plants in Washington and California, ready to try again on command. The Fremont picket line could not be removed without jeopardizing the jobs of those who had honored it. Besides, as Rogers said, one never knew when some injury or incident in the plant might spark a walkout. But, in fact, the tactic of extending P-9 pickets had gone as far as it was going to go without International sanction.

The action shifted inexorably homeward.

Among the Austin ranks, there had always been strong sentiment that P-9 could not expect other Hormel workers to honor their pickets if the local could not keep its own Austin plant closed down. Moreover, since January, Rogers had talked in terms of mass civil disobedience to shut that plant and appeal to the broad public. He had led P-9 members in unlikely chants of "nonviolence . . . nonviolence" and spoken to them of the power of civil disobedience as demonstrated by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King. He had said repeatedly that strikers could not win a violent fight against the National Guard and that violence would turn the public against them.

At first, Rogers now says, he wanted no more than 25 or 50 people to lie down in front of the gates. These would be arrested and face jail or even heavy fines. He hoped to build
on this, ultimately bringing in thousands of men, women, and children from outside Austin to block the gates a few at a time. As each group was arrested, others would replace them. And as those arrested were released, they would return to block the plant again.

Such arrests would place an enormous physical and economic burden on the local authorities who had become Hormel’s first line of defense against the strikers. “I knew the company would have the money to offset the adverse publicity with public relations campaigns and to hold out against the workers,” he told me some months later. “The question would become who could hold out the longest.”

A Twin Cities anti-war organization, Women Against Military Madness, came to Austin and described the nuts and bolts of civil disobedience before P-9 audiences. They held an hours-long training session, with role-playing in which some P-9ers acted the role of police and others the role of demonstrators. The WAMM women discussed arrest experiences they had had and got people to practice locking arms with each other and becoming dead weight so that they would have to be carried away.

Among the members, the basic idea was clear. In the words of Mike Bambrick:

The idea was for many people to get arrested and fill up the jails, and they’d have to quit arresting us and then we’d be able to block the gates. . . . Pretty soon they’d realize that we weren’t afraid to keep getting arrested. It would cost them so much money to keep arresting us that they would quit doing it, and that would allow us to keep blocking the gates. But the bit of being arrested wasn’t as easy as people thought it would be.

On March 10, 122 union members, spouses, and supporters were arrested after they blockaded the Hormel corporate
headquarters near the plant. At least 200 men and women had gathered at the union hall and then, at 3 A.M., gone to the corporate office, where they chained and padlocked the gate. The key was given to one of their number, who drove away to deliver it to Governor Perpich along with a letter stating, “Our civil rights have been denied by you and the Hormel company long enough.” Then protesters sat down in the road, locked arms, and demanded that Hormel officials meet with P-9’s board. Company officials refused to meet “under these circumstances.”

The local police arrested the first P-9er at 7 A.M. The police officers were immediately surrounded by protesters and forced to withdraw. When they returned, they were accompanied by police reinforcements from nearby counties. They gave repeated “final warnings” to disperse. More arrests followed: In each case, a band of six to ten police would push its way into the crowd, seize a protester, and wrestle him or her away to a police van. Demonstrators sang “We Shall Not Be Moved” and chanted, “We want a contract.” Others shouted, “Scabs, get a decent job.” It took the police until 1:30 in the afternoon to clear the drive.

The actions came on the day after defense lawyers filed papers calling for dismissal of the criminal syndicalism charges against Rogers, on the grounds that they involved selective prosecution, that the law was unconstitutional, and that in any case Rogers was not guilty. The new arrests took authorities all day to process and represented the biggest single-day glut of criminal defendants in Mower County history.¹⁹

Those arrested included a large number of strikers’ wives (35 women altogether) and retirees. After being frisked and held for several hours, many, such as Barbara Collette, expected to be released. Instead, they were told that they were being jailed until their court arraignment. “There were 17 of
us in a cell made for 12. We were all together, we were singing, we were talking. Then they started throwing mattresses and pillows at us and told us we were going to be there overnight. Our whole cell went dead quiet.” Carmine Rogers, the wife of a retiree, convinced the authorities that she had to return home to take some medication and to feed her dog. She was driven home in a squad car, and two burly policemen stood over her as she dished out the dog chow.20

Cynthia Bellrichard was arrested around noon and, along with about fifty others, held in a police training room for five hours. Ultimately she and a dozen other women were taken first to a filthy “drunk tank,” then to an equally filthy Cell G, which had six bunks. According to her later account, the floor and un Concealed toilet were foul, and the dirty sink was clogged. In time, they were brought eight more mattresses and “raggy blankets” and six towels. One woman slept on the table and seven others on the floor.21

Serving as women’s matron was the sheriff’s wife, Sandy Goodnature, who that evening stood outside Carmine Rogers’ six-person cell taunting the 13 prisoners inside. “She opened up the little slot so we could see her eating popcorn and said, ‘Doesn’t this smell good, don’t you wish you had some?’ ”22

Afterward, many of those jailed wrote accounts of their experiences. From these narratives, it is clear that the local authorities made no attempt to conceal their hostility toward the protesters, treating them to conditions that Sandy Titus said made her “want to scream and vomit at the same time.” All of the accounts take note of the squalid facilities, of unmet requests that dirty toilets or floors be cleaned, and of rude, “robotic” treatment by the guards.23

But the overcrowding was so severe—80 people were housed in the Austin jail, which had a licensed capacity of
45—that many protesters were sent to other towns, including Preston, Owatonna, Faribault, Albert Lea, and Rochester, where the treatment was much better. "If I ever have to be put behind bars again," wrote Roger Diggins, "I'd definitely request that I be transferred to Preston."

We had a telephone in the cell which we could use at random. . . . They served us ice cream for dessert, we had no restrictions against us. . . . Our personal hygiene was well taken care of. . . . The facilities we had contained a TV room and also a reading room, every visitor could walk around to each cell and visit or play cards.24

Outside Austin, police were very sociable toward the protesters, whom they seemed to regard as curiosities.

The following day, many of the women and men had to appear before the judge in their underwear, as their clothes had been confiscated but the Law Enforcement Center had run out of coveralls. The majority were released without bail, after being charged with obstructing the legal process and unlawful assembly, misdemeanors carrying possible penalties of 90 days in jail and $700 fines.25

There were several simultaneous developments. On the day of the arraignments, Judge Stone lifted his February 14 order that allowed no more than three pickets and six protesters within sight of the plant because local authorities had failed to ask for an extension. (The original injunction limiting the number of pickets to three and prohibiting any blockage of the roads remained in force.) In Minneapolis, the local was again called before the NLRB, this time to face unfair-labor-practice charges that members had harassed and restrained replacement workers.

And during the evening that protesters were languishing in jail, the local membership began voting on a resolution
that called for the executive board to settle its differences with the International and present a unified contract demand to the company. If approved by secret ballot, the motion would “release our executive board from all conditions placed on them to bargain a contract.”

The intent of the resolution was to allow union negotiators “leeway” to move away from previous sticking points such as the guaranteed annual wage and restoration of all jobs. Its author, Charlie Peterson, was a faithful backer of the local’s campaign who had gotten the idea that the local could still resolve its differences with the UFCW, and perhaps the two could come up with a settlement slightly better than the mediators’ proposal. He told reporters that the resolution was not intended as a vote of no confidence in P-9’s officers, though Guyette had spoken against the proposal.

According to Margaret Winter, who was on hand for a meeting where the resolution was discussed:

It was very heated. Peterson presented his resolution as a neutral thing. But those opposing it, like Buck Heegard, argued that there was no way that it would not be used against the local’s leadership, to support the claim that Guyette was a Svengali who’d led members down the garden path. There was a lot of haggling over the precise language. And, finally, the majority were persuaded by Peterson that it wouldn’t be misinterpreted, that it would be a way to get Anderson or some UFCW person there to ask some hard questions and tell him a thing or two.

It also seems likely that many members reasoned that anything was worth a try. So a majority approved the resolution. The next day, March 15, UFCW president William Wynn seized upon the resolution to order an end to the strike and cut off strike benefits.
The move had been coming for some time. The "organizing team" was doing its work across the region, discouraging other Hormel workers from honoring P-9 pickets, bad-mouthing the renegade local, and spying on its activities. In late February, International officials Wynn, Hansen, Anderson, Foreman, and Dority met in Washington to consider desanctioning the strike; their ruminations were openly reported in the press. Picking up on the cue, Nyberg had publicly urged the local to "resolve its differences with the UFCW," saying that P-9 members could be put on a preferential rehire list or perhaps get jobs at other company plants.

Thus the minute the local members' peace overture arrived—with its tacit recognition of the International's strength and authority—Wynn proceeded as though it were a rank-and-file demand that he break the strike. When a reporter asked what authority the UFCW had to end the strike, Wynn replied that the members "asked me to."

"Continuing the local leadership's failed strategy for one additional day, or one more month, or an additional year is not going to change the facts," the UFCW president said at a press conference where he announced his edict. The $40-a-week strike benefits would be ended, but the UFCW would instead pay $40 "post-strike benefits" to those who ended their picketing and halted an "unauthorized boycott" of Hormel products.

Wynn also said that he would personally begin negotiations with Hormel, adding that he did not believe the company's claim that it did not need additional employees. And, blaming Rogers for the "doomed" effort, he said that he had "a strong feeling that Mr. Rogers will not be retained by any other labor organization."
In Minneapolis, Joe Hansen said that the UFCW hoped its directive would allow remaining strikers to return to work without the stigma of crossing a picket line, make it easier to negotiate a contract preserving some jobs, allow strikers to apply for unemployment benefits, and help keep the plant under UFCW representation.32

Local members in Austin were aghast. "If we're on a 'suicide mission,' they're committing murder," said one. Winkels told an afternoon press conference attended by 150 loyalists, "They've turned their backs on the membership and on unionism as a whole."33 More than a little grumbling was aimed in the direction of Charlie Peterson.

Guyette was in New York when the announcement came. There, over a thousand people turned out on a cold and rainy night to champion the local's anti-concession stand and fill UAW District 65's two auditoriums, connected by a public address system. Hundreds more crammed the entranceway downstairs. Speakers included Teamsters such as Bill Nuchow and Dan Kane, who had previously journeyed to Austin, and TWA flight attendants, who were then waist-deep in their own strike.

Conscious of the UFCW directive, District 65's longtime president David Livingston announced, "The Hormel strikers are part of the family of labor, and we will go with them as far as is necessary." Farm Labor Organizing Committee leader Baldemar Velasquez told how his union's corporate campaign had led to a victory over Campbell Soup Co., in spite of active hostility from the AFL-CIO and the UFCW, which represented that company's production workers. Velasquez volunteered his 11,000 boycott activists to aid the Hormel boycott cause. And Jan Pierce said he wanted to thank Hormel and TWA: "They're giving us a reason to coalesce. They are revitalizing the rank and file. And they are making us a movement again."
Rogers again invoked Gandhi and King, urging people from across the country to “come to those plant gates and close them down.” And Guyette told the crowd that in spite of Wynn’s ruling, the fight would go on. “As far as we’re concerned, nothing’s changed,” he said.  

Guyette’s presence in New York and at a 400-strong San Francisco rally two days earlier was part of a coordinated effort involving many local board members and rank-and-filers. Following the February rally in Austin, spokespeople were sent out to major cities across the country with the task of building the boycott and making direct appeals for the Adopt-A-Family program. These emissaries would attend hundreds of local union meetings and large rallies to tell their story, urge backing for the boycott, pass the hat, and describe how unions and other organizations might adopt strikers.

Executive board member Skinny Weis was in charge of West Coast activities. In January he, fellow board member Jim Retterath, and several rank-and-filers went to Seattle with the intention of picketing the Renton plant. The morning they went to the plant, they found all 150 workers already inside by 6 A.M. The local UFCW business agent had anticipated their coming, and he encouraged the P-9ers to leave town. Instead, Skinny, Bud Miller, and Merle and Madeline Kruger began a tour of the area, speaking before 13 unions, including five Machinists locals at the immense Boeing works there, two central labor councils, and a gathering of 160 officers from union locals over the next two weeks.

Passing the hat at 30 meetings from San Jose to San Francisco, Weis and his colleagues collected over $1,500. The San Francisco Chronicle reported that “for militant unionists in San Francisco, Skinny and Bud bring memories of the general
strike of 1934. The two strikers have been so popular in the Bay Area that they extended their stay by a week.” IAM Lodge 1327 business agent John Moran said, “They come across like here’s your Mom and Dad come to town and they need help.”

In time, Buck Heegard took over in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Weis went on to Los Angeles. Some months later Heegard recalled:

I flew into San Francisco with a one-way ticket and $40. Three union people met me at the airport, took me home, and put me up. The next day I went to an AFSCME [state, county, and municipal employees] local meeting of about 40 people. After I got through, they passed the hat and it came back with $186. I thought, “I can do this.”

I spoke before high school students, church groups, anti-apartheid and Central America solidarity groups. I did a couple of labor television programs, four or five radio interviews, and a Los Angeles Times interview. I went to Watsonville [site of a bitter cannery strike] seven or eight times to walk their picket line. And every place I went they said, “You’re really giving us an education.”

Frequently, Heegard was barred from union gatherings after UFCW officials telephoned the sponsors. He was only allowed to speak before the Marin County Labor Council as part of a debate with a UFCW field representative. But the UFCW man’s assertion that the local’s leaders had led its members blindly to ruin could not hold up against the presence of the well-spoken rank-and-filer, out alone on the road. Thereafter, Heegard was sometimes barred from speaking because unions were unable to get the UFCW to send anyone to speak against him. Nevertheless, he did address both the California Federation of Teachers’ statewide convention—
which endorsed a pro—P-9 resolution and passed the hat just after national president Albert Shanker spoke—and the Postal Workers’ national convention, where he shared the stage with Lane Kirkland and Mine Workers president Richard Trumka. To promote speaking engagements, he even had a business card printed up that read “Buck Heegard, Local P-9 Striker” and listed a West Coast Office phone number.

Heegard and four others, including Ottumwans Frank Vit and “Bear” Martsching, also shut down an Oakland dock one day because of a “hot cargo” of Hormel products.

We knew from the president of Longshoremen’s Local 6 when a truck of Hormel products from Fremont was arriving. He told us that since machinery had been moved from Austin to Fremont, the strike situs was extended and that we had the right to put up a picket line. So that’s what we did one Tuesday at 5:30 A.M. After about 15 minutes, this guy in a suit came out and ordered the truck to leave. The Teamsters, Warehousemen, Longshoremen, Machinists, none of them would cross our line.

At 10 o’clock, they had a hearing with an arbitrator right there. I testified about the extended strike situs. The truck driver testified that things had gotten a lot busier in Fremont since the strike. But at 1:30 the mediator ruled that we couldn’t prove the goods were from an extended strike situs. So we pulled the line after calling the radio stations and holding a press conference at which we said we’d proved our point that we could stop the shipment of Hormel products any place, any time.36

Martsching also made a tour of labor meetings in St. Louis, Missouri, with P-9er Dan Petersen.

There were further sizable rallies in Oakland, Cleveland, and Detroit. The last of these drew around a thousand to hear
Guyette and Ottumwan Bill Cook, along with Watsonville striker Maria Rosario Morono. That rally clearly demonstrated the breadth of UAW support for P-9's strike: It was sponsored by the Autoworkers local at the historic Ford Rouge plant, attended by contingents from seven UAW locals, and addressed by elected leaders of three of the city's most important locals.

Over the next few months, P-9 speakers went to meetings of every description in Baltimore, Chicago, San Diego, San Jose, Cincinnati, Birmingham, Atlanta, and Miami and across New Jersey, Alabama, North Carolina, Texas, Utah, New Mexico, and Massachusetts. 37

None of this would have been possible without the support groups that developed in cities from coast to coast. The Twin Cities group, of course, had been an integral part of P-9 activities since before the strike. But in California Weis and Heegard built their own support groups with the help of a few key backers who had good connections, such as the Machinists' newspaper editor Dan McCoslin.

Much of the legwork of arranging meetings in Seattle, San Francisco, and San Jose was performed by members of the Socialist Workers Party. In Los Angeles, Longshoremen’s union and NRFAC leader David Arian was instrumental in helping Weis set up a support group with over forty members, just as NRFAC leaders Marsha Mickens and Bob Brown were key in establishing Detroit and Philadelphia support groups.

Heegard accepted assistance from a variety of leftists so long as all understood that he was in charge. (At one point, though, he disbanded a San Jose support group that he felt had “attracted every radical from the Bay Area,” each with a separate agenda.) As a result of his attitude that “a drowning
man doesn't ask who is extending him a helping hand," he was often the object of red-baiting. Generally, he tried to use humor to deflect it:

At a Machinists meeting, this guy came up to me and said, "Buck, can I ask you a personal question? Are you a member of the Communist Party?" I told him I'd spent 35 years getting adjusted to the fact that I was the only Lutheran in a Catholic household. Now you want me to be the only Communist among a bunch of Democrats? He just turned around and walked away. I just got to the stage where I was able to deal with it. I was a little more concerned about the people who were threatening: I'd get calls telling me how this might be my last trip out there.38

Though red-baiting and UFCW-fomented rumors that Local P-9 was communist may have kept some supporters away, on balance the involvement of left-wing organizations had positive results for the local. For as long as it made any difference, NRFAC's "controllers" were energetic and helpful. (Later, in keeping with their desire to rise to the top of the labor movement, they cut ties with P-9 and attempted to make amends with the labor bureaucracy.) All NRFAC wanted in exchange was to grab the spotlight, occasionally shoving others aside. But no one complained much during the most crucial months.

The Socialist Workers Party was, in leftist argot, almost completely "tailist": Whatever strike tactics P-9's leaders chose, the SWP supported. A Los Angeles SWP member, for example, told The Militant that it was time to "get bolder" in strike support. But she did not mean to suggest an independent course of action. Rather, her new boldness consisted of "inviting speakers to union meetings, plant-gate collections,
going to Austin to see the strike first hand, getting locals to support the boycott, and participating in the Adopt-A-Family program”—all activities encouraged by P-9. 39

Again, all the SWP wanted was to associate its members with the militant strike, and to put some of its people into positions of responsibility in coordinating the out-of-town networking.

Those were the left groups with the most significant presence in P-9 support activities. As stated earlier, the Communist Party U.S.A. had little to do with the strike, though for many months its newspaper, the Daily World, took a quietly supportive position, often writing as though the strikers had the wholehearted support of the AFL-CIO. In early February 1986, though, the CP could straddle the widening chasm no longer. The World’s primary labor writer, Bill Dennison, cast the party’s lot with the bureaucracy in an article that repeated the old charges about “breaking with the chain” while curiously endorsing a Hormel boycott at the same time. Later that month Dennison described the events of the AFL-CIO meeting in Miami, unfavorably contrasting Guyette’s “outrageous charges” against the International with the polished restraint shown by the UFCW’s imported rank-and-filers. It was the most favorable coverage that Lewie Anderson’s press conference received. 40

Aside from representatives of organized left organizations, two other types of supporters came to P-9’s side in spite of the UFCW’s denunciations and edict: union members and staff, including many who were already active in other union and international solidarity efforts; and mid-rank union officials, motivated by some combination of the old union spirit and opportunistic desire to make a show of militancy.
East Coast support activities illustrate the backing from these other quarters. In New York, left organizations' connec­tions were relatively unimportant. The support group there was pulled together by Corporate Campaign staffer Susan Hibbard, had the blessing of Jan Pierce and a number of local and regional union officials, and was mostly composed of low-ranking but active union officers and staff people. Aside from building the rally, the group focused on handbilling for the boycott.

Hibbard was also able to get an impressive list of black elected officials—including two congressmen—ministers, civil rights leaders, and unionists to oppose the company's targeting of black consumers and add their names to Amsterdam News and City Sun advertisements endorsing the boycott. Afterward the New York City Council also passed a resolution endorsing the strike and boycott, though UFCW speakers said that it should not. And, in a surprise move, William McGowan, president of the state's largest union, the 220,000-member Civil Service Employees Association, and far from a leading light of progressive unionism, published a statement of support in that union's newspaper.\textsuperscript{41}

In Boston, a support group was built largely around a network established to prevent the closing of the Dorchester meatpacker Colonial Provision Co. Brian Lang, chief steward at that plant, had met Guyette at a UFCW meeting in 1985 and had spent time in Austin before the strike, including attending a June P-9 rally. But most of his efforts during the winter were directed toward prodding the city of Boston to employ the right of eminent domain to thwart the closing, which was announced in mid-December, after the purchase of Colonial by Thorne Apple Valley Inc.
The Colonial workers built powerful opposition to the plant closing as a community issue in Dorchester, utilizing boycott activities and rallies. With media attention and the support of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, they won city council backing for a plan to have the city buy the plant on the grounds that it provided needed jobs in a blighted area—an approach used earlier to prevent the closing of Morse Cutting Tool in New Bedford. Ultimately, though, Boston’s corporation counsel ruled that the purchase would be illegal. As Lang recalls:

December through March was a whirlwind of activity. We built a core group of 30 people to run the Colonial activities. The Colonial fight created tremendous respect for us from labor officials who had good intentions, people who wanted to be a part of it, who thought we would win. So we kicked off the Hormel boycott by piggy-backing it on the Colonial boycott. Our leaflets said, “Boycott Colonial and Hormel.” With our credibility, we were able to open a lot of doors for P-9, especially among the Building Trades. When Colonial closed, we had a rally outside the plant where Pete Winkels and Terry Ahrens spoke. Two days later, we were able to hold a major rally for P-9 at the IBEW [electrical workers’] hall in Dorchester.42

Through Lang, the P-9ers won the important support of Domenic Bozzotto, president of a large Hotel and Restaurant Workers local, and Massachusetts Building Trades president Tom Evers.

This nationwide activity, and the involvement of left organizations, did not go unnoticed by the federal authorities. Lang was visited at his home by FBI agents, who asked about his trips to Austin. And a federal Freedom of Information Act request, now slowly working its way through the federal
bureaucracy, has established that the FBI was involved in at least five investigations into strike activities, and that the strike was mentioned in the files of six other individuals or organizations. The Bureau has acknowledged having references in the files to Guyette, Heegard, Lang, Lenoch, Retterath, Rogers, and Weis.43

On March 16, local members voted to ignore the International’s order and continue all strike activities. Lynn Huston announced that unionists from across the country had been telephoning all day long to say, “If P-9 is still in the fight, we’re with you.” Over by the plant, pickets tore the letters “UFCW” off their picket signs.

At the same local meeting, the 800 members attending (out of an estimated 900 still out on strike) also voted to sue the UFCW for “the irreparable harm” it had done to the local. Among the goals of the suit was to get an accounting of funds sent to Region 13—up to $100,000 that unions around the country said they had sent in checks that remained uncashed and unacknowledged.44

On March 20, the local barricaded Hormel again, this time shutting the plant down for several hours for the first time since the National Guard left. Several hundred strikers, around 50 Twin Cities supporters, miners from the Mesabi range, and meatpackers from the Albert Lea Farmstead plant gathered at the hall at 4 A.M., then used cars to blockade the plant gate. Signs at the gate read, “Go home scab, the plant is closed.” And at 5 A.M., the local radio station announced that the facility was shut.

At 7 A.M. police arrived and announced that the crowd was violating the December injunction. One hundred strikers locked arms and grouped in front of the plant gate, singing
“Solidarity Forever.” Across the street, a much larger crowd, including many who had been arrested on March 10, stood and taunted the cops.

As on March 10, groups of police would single out a demonstrator, who would then be pulled from the crowd and carried to a police van. In this fashion they arrested 16, including executive board members Skinny Weis and Carl Pontius, enough to fill two vans. When they brought up the third van, the crowd from across the street linked arms and blocked the path to the demonstrators. Police formed a wedge to push through the crowd, which held them off for a bit, then pulled away. By 10:30, 24 had been arrested, and the plant gate was clear.

Around noon, 100 more demonstrators briefly blocked the corporate headquarters but were pushed aside by policemen who formed a cordon to escort Hormel officials back inside.45

Weis and Pontius became the first executive board members to be arrested. “There was only supposed to be one of us arrested,” recalled Carl Pontius, “and that was me.”

There had been a hundred and something people arrested already, none of them executive board members, which didn’t look good. I had no past arrests, not even a speeding ticket. So I sat down in front of the gate in the front row, the sixth one in line. Skinny was in a zone where he wasn’t supposed to be arrested, but they arrested him anyway.

At the station, the deputy sheriff was talking to me, and he said, “I suppose like last time there’s going to be quite lot of people arrested.” I said, “Yeah, there are bus-loads coming in from all over the country, and it’s going to go on all day long. When you carry people from the gate, more people will fill in.” They were frantic: After
they arrested Skinny, I could hear him telling them the same story. They shipped us right down to Preston, because they were looking for a ton of people to get arrested.$^46$

It didn’t happen that way, in part because once the police broke through the demonstration and opened the gate, they decided not to arrest any more demonstrators. Strikers and supporters were unable to get past police to block the gate again, and the demonstration at the corporate office proved ineffective. Although some plant gate demonstrators tried to turn over a police van while morning arrests were going on, most protesters were nonviolent. Some crossovers and corporate office workers, on the other hand, reported to work carrying weapons, and one P-9er was threatened with a shotgun.$^47$

Weis and Pontius were released by 3 P.M., so they were able to travel to Chicago for a meeting with the UFCW the following day. Others were arraigned, charged with obstructing the legal process and unlawful assembly, and released on $300 bail each.

On Friday the 21st, a hundred demonstrators gathered at the north gate at 5:30 A.M. but did not attempt to block the road. They jeered at scabs entering the plant, then demonstrated at the corporate headquarters. No one was arrested.

The Chicago meeting held the same day was allegedly to determine whether the Austin local was going to comply with Wynn’s directive—something it had already announced it was not going to do. For 90 minutes, the local and International officials discussed “a hundred different areas,” according to Weis.

I don’t know what we went down there for. I think they were trying to force us to obey the directive. We knew
what was going to happen: They were going to put us into trusteeship. Anyway, instead of letting them take off on us, we took off on them—it was round robin, each one of us hitting on a different area. I had Lewie backed into a corner, and he was admitting that he had been dealing with Schaefer and talking to not only our scabs but new scabs, prior to them going in.

Then Jay Foreman said, “Lynn, are you taping this meeting?” Huston said, “Yes,” and Foreman exploded. They had to find an excuse to get out of there because they were getting hammered.

The International called the meeting off because of Huston’s attempt to tape the meeting with a concealed recorder. “They didn’t have the common decency to notify us or to ask permission,” complained Al Zack.48

Five days later, the UFCW announced that it would hold hearings beginning April 7 to determine if the local should be placed in trusteeship. This would mean P-9's officers would be replaced by a trustee named by the International, who would then control all local union assets, including its treasury, hall, and newspaper.49