

873 Broadway
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New York, N.Y. 10003
March 25, 1970

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND NC MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

The attached letters are being sent for your information. They are not for general membership distribution at this time.

Comradely,


Jack Barnes
Organization Secretary

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Madison, Wisconsin

March 10, 1970

Editor, The Militant

Comrade Ring,

The General Electric workers were sold down the river again with the approval of the union "leadership." This fact is in direct contradiction to the victory proclaimed by the Militant (2/13/70). Perhaps the article was written in haste, however this cannot be an excuse. The workers still had something to say. The biggest locals had large no votes. Numerous wildcats continued after the contract was ratified. Why? Because the more militant workers, even though they had been on strike for 113 days, realized that they had the bosses where it hurts -- by the pocketbook. They also realized that they had something to win -- a decent contract.

No worker goes on strike because he wants to. He goes out because he is forced to. It was and is The Militant's duty to point out the role of the bureaucrats, not give them undue praise. Analysis of future strikes must be more coincidental with reality, otherwise it is not even worthwhile to pick up the pen.

Comradely,

s/ Mark Lobato, Debby Pope,
Jim Wysocki (Organizer,
Madison YSA), Peter Manti,
W.M., Jeff Meisner

March 18, 1970

Jim Wysocki, YSA organizer,
and comrades of the YSA.

MADISON

Dear Comrades,

Your letter of March 10 about our appraisal of the GE strike settlement raises some important questions about the class struggle and about working-class organizations.

Of course, as you know, industrial strikes are not the only form the class struggle takes. The rise of Black nationalism, for example, is an expression of the class struggle and has already found a variety of organizational forms... including the all-Black caucus in some unions.

The working class devises many different forms of organization and methods of struggle: producers cooperatives, housewives' committees to control prices, consumers' unions, tenants strikes against high rents. We have seen the local emergence of all these forms, and they will re-appear.

Workers will organize factory committees to conduct and coordinate strike actions. They will organize, as they have in the past, their own defense squads for protection against police and extra-legal gangs organized by the employing class. The organization of a labor party, based on the existing unions and appealing on the electoral arena to all the poor and dispossessed, will be an expression of the class struggle at a particular stage.

The very existence of our Socialist Workers Party, the revolutionary party of the working class, at its present stage of development is a reflection of the class struggle and of the relation of class forces in this country today. I mention these several organizational forms only as a reminder that we must try to understand all social development as the manifold expression of the class struggle. While unions are not the only forms of the working class organization, they are the most elemental and very powerful.

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We had a chance to witness an open battle in the class struggle, a direct confrontation between powerful sections of the employing class and the working class, as the GE strike unfolded last winter.

This was no ordinary strike. We recognized from the beginning that it was different, that it was a test of class

forces. This is the way we reported every stage of it. The Militant carried an article each week, from the beginning on October 27, 1969 to the date of the settlement, February 5, 1970. We did not write as much as other papers, but we tried to report the meaning of the strike at each turning point during the entire 102 days. In addition, we were anxious to help mobilize support for the strike, especially from the antiwar students.

I will not review what we wrote and did, but you may want to return to the files for another look at the strike in retrospect.

If you seek a comparison, bearing in mind the disparity in proportions, I think the attitude and aims of the General Electric Company at the beginning of the recent strike was the same as those of a much broader section of the ruling class at the end of World War II when, in 1946, they sought to back the unions into a corner and use the returning veterans to re-establish open-shop conditions in industry. This is what the employing class did successfully at the end of World War I. They hoped to repeat it at the end of World War II, but failed.

There is no doubt that unions are weaker today than in 1946. Anti-labor legislation, beginning with enactment of the Taft-Hartley law in 1947, combined with the drain of the McCarthy era of the 1950's, has had a debilitating effect on unions. During this period the labor bureaucracy has become entrenched, looks upon itself as an accepted arbiter in the disputes between workers and management.

General Electric, during these past 20 years, has had a different relation with the unions than the other industrial giants. The unions were badly split-up and much weaker in the electrical industry than in most others. Consequently, GE management was able to operate in a very cavalier manner with the several unions in the industry, dictating wages and working conditions, tolerating union representation of the workers but denying the substance of such representation, and in the end refusing to allow union spokesmen any meaningful part in the bargaining process. This practice came to be known as "Boulwarism," about which much has been written. But in essence it is simply an arrogant industrial management taking advantage of weak and dispirited unions, playing off one against others in mock "union struggles" designed and staged to convince the workers that unions are no good.

General Electric was so successful over the years that some sectors of the ruling class, including GE management, became convinced that Boulwarism was a general formula that ought to be applied throughout all industry to further check the power of the unions and hold down wages. Some even came to regard GE as an ideological leader of the ruling class in the field of labor-management relations. This was the situation when the major union contracts with GE expired last October.

The Company was out to prove what it could do. It dictated the wage scale of a new one-year agreement, and handed this to the unions on the customary take-it-or-leave-it basis. It announced that it would not sign a national contract with any union, all contracts to be signed locally by the different plants in the GE complex. And it declared that under no conditions would it agree to a wage scale for more than one year because of the uncertainties of the economic future and its desire to head off runaway inflation.

So sure was GE that it could get away with this totally unacceptable wage package that it prompted the entire chain-of-command in its management structure, right down to the shop foreman in all its plants, that any strike called by any of the unions would be broken within one month by a gigantic back-to-work movement of "loyal GE employees."

Important sections of the employing class, including the Nixon administration, were watching and hoping that the GE plan would succeed. It would set the stage for the very important 1970 round of negotiations in such key industries as auto, rail and trucking.

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You know what happened. The 13-union coalition paralyzed the entire GE complex.

No one was more surprised than GE management when the strike extended past the 30-day limit GE had set, and then went on to 60 days, and through the holiday season, on past 100 days. The striking unions held firm throughout. Not one among the 13-union coalition cracked. This is the more remarkable in view of the history of these unions in this industry. Most of them were recognized by the company in the course of bitter jurisdictional and organizational squabbles among themselves.

The coalition in practice included not only AFL-CIO affiliates, but teamsters and locals of the UAW, as well as the United Electrical Workers union which was the original CIO affiliate that had represented all GE workers before the witch-hunt of the 1950's.

How was it possible that these unions were able to maintain their united front? The company undoubtedly sought soft spots and tried to pry them apart. But the main strategy of the company depended upon a successful back-to-work movement in enough areas to allow it to resume operations without altering its original proposal on wages and working conditions.

The back-to-work strategy which had worked well in the past failed this time. General Electric was unable to resume operations. This is testimony to the will and determination of the rank-and-file strikers, the members of all unions.

In the end GE was forced to back down. It had to come to terms with the unions in order to re-open its plants.

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What was the result so far as the GE worker was concerned? You say the settlement was a sell-out, that the wage settlement was not much better than the original offer, that many strikers were opposed to returning to work and demanded more, that "it was and is The Militant's duty to point out the role of the bureaucrats, not give them undue praise."

Even though there was a large vote against accepting the contract, a majority of the strikers were willing to return on the basis of what was negotiated. Those who wanted to hold out for more considered the final settlement a genuine victory, although they had sought more. They went back into the shops as a result of their own actions, this time under union conditions. Back in the shops the relationship between the workers and the bosses is changed. The conditions of work are different now. The workers are united as they had not been before the strike. They feel a new power. Even though they did not win the wage gains they had hoped for, they won more than the company had offered -- considerably more in the form of an escalator clause despite its limitations -- and they now have real bargaining rights which before were only token. They know they did not get everything this time, but they are now in a position to continue the fight which goes on continuously.

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You know the IAM -- Machinists Union (AFL-CIO) -- which represents most workers at GE's Utica, N.Y. plant -- held out for clarification of the contract. GE was forced to concede the following: 1) calling back all employees who were on the payroll on October 27, 1969, the day the strike began; 2) giving strikers preference to their old jobs over any strikebreakers that might have been hired; 3) laying off by seniority if any layoffs should come; 4) dropping all disciplinary or civil actions against strikers.

It is not in the GE tradition to grant such concessions. This is a measure of the changed relationship of forces. The strike did this.

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My personal opinion was that the article in the Militant by Marvel Schell was accurate in her cautious appraisal of the strike as a victory at that time. It now appears clear that the proportions of the victory are greater than we had known. The fact is that as a result of the GE strike, the entire labor movement now stands on higher ground. Unions everywhere have taken courage from the outcome of the GE strike. I doubt if any of the strikes that have followed, including the most recent in San Francisco, would have been undertaken in the same way (if at all) or could have developed the same militancy had the GE strike failed.

I notice that UE News reports the following about the February 28 agreement at Westinghouse: "When the Westinghouse workers settled their strike in 1946 with the 18-cent-an-hour wage increase, the company refused to apply the 10 % night bonus on that wage increase. Ever since then the UE has tried to get this condition changed. This year the company agreed to apply the night turn bonus on that old wage increase."

This reflects a new relation between the union and Westinghouse (second largest corporation in the electrical industry), undoubtedly a by-product of the GE strike.

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There is much that can and will be written about the union bureaucrats, nothing good. But it does not help simply to denigrate and denounce them. That is not new, nor very interesting. No one pays much attention to diatribes against union bureaucrats. Our task is to explain how they operate, why they are able to remain in power, what services they perform for the bosses; and counterpose to this our methods of class struggle policy and action.

It is commonly thought that negotiations such as those between GE and the 13-union coalition are conducted by only these two parties, the company spokesmen on one side of the table and on the other side the union representatives. This is not the whole story at all. In most such negotiations there are really four parties present. This was clearly the case in the GE negotiations. On one side of the table sat the GE spokesman and representatives of the government, and on the other side was the union. The great power of the strikers who were out on the picket lines was also present at the bargaining table, although without voice. In the final analysis, it was the strikers' power that determined the outcome of the strike.

You are undoubtedly correct in your opinion that with a better leadership the strikers could have made greater gains, and would now be in a stronger position to continue their struggle on the job. But that is not "coincidental with reality." The reality is that the strikers had to go with the leaders they had, and under the circumstances of this particular strike there was no broad rank-and-file movement to assume leadership. However, as a result of the gains made it is possible that such a movement may develop during the life of the contract. One thing is certain, if the workers had not scored a victory in the strike they would not now be in a position to challenge or even question the union officialdom.

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This letter turned out to be longer than intended, but I'm sending it along anyway. There is more that could be said and probably will be about the GE strike. But we would like to publish your question along with an abbreviated version of this answer.

We would like, for purposes of publication in The Militant, to change the form of your letter somewhat.

The questions you raise are of interest to many readers and deserve careful attention from us. However, it is better to raise them in the form of questions, rather than as statements of fact about what workers are doing and what they want and how they feel.

As you know, we have published letters received about the GE strike from strikers who have wanted to thank us for our support.

Please let us know soon if it is agreeable with you to publish an altered version of your letter along the lines indicated. Or if you prefer, send us questions along the lines raised in your March 10 letter. This was about the right length for our purposes, and the answer will (of necessity) be drastically abbreviated.

Comradely,
s/Frank Lovell