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10-Year Anniversary

1999 Carpenters Wildcat 5,000 Workers Strike

In May of 1999 over 5,000 construction workers participated on an illegal, unsanctioned 4-day strike. Most of Northern California's major construction job-sites were closed down. It was set in the background of two colliding elements: a booming economy and a weak contract that was forced on the members of the Carpenters Union by their union leaders.

Over a hundred non-delegate carpenters showed up on Saturday May 15th at the Carpenters Regional Council, a representative body, dominated by full-time appointed staff where delegates were due to vote on the contract. The contract included a small wage gain coupled with no morning coffee break (allowing employers to work you 5-hours without a break) and a no-overtime Saturday in the event of rain during the week.

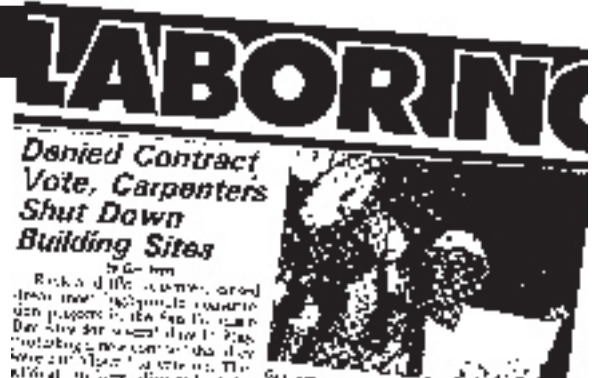
People were pissed. Not being allowed to vote on your own contract was one thing, not being allowed to go into our "rep council" to hear the debate simply enraged people. The general feeling among carpenters was that they've stolen our right to vote, so we will stop this charade any way we can. A group of us passed the word that we were going to rush the door. Enthusiasm for an invasion was pretty unanimous. First one member rushed through, then another, then a flood of about fifty members. We were surrounded by dozens of full-time staff as we continued to yell, "No! No! No!" I remember the utter shock of the delegates, even the rank and file delegates. They had no real idea how pissed off the members were.

Rep Council Invasion

The business of the Council was halted temporarily and then the pushing and shoving began and we were slowly, elbows and shoulders flailing, pushed back to the entrance. We'd made our point and scared the crap out of the machine. The Machine that'd refused us the right to vote on our own contract. The union's Machine that sold us out, with a piss poor contract.

As we re-assembled outside, we knew we had made a mark on events. Nothing like this had happened before. We were keen to ratchet up this fight. Most of the workers from the Airport site were ready to start organizing a strike. "They want to strike at the Airport," we were told. The anger was there. The determination was there. We agreed to meet on Monday after work in the parking lot of Local 713. It was at that tailgate meeting of about 150 workers that we set about the plan to close down all job-sites until we got a better contract or the right to vote this one down.

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Editorial: How Can we Turn Around the Bosses' Offensive

When San Francisco City workers, members of SEIU 1021, rejected a \$38-million concessionary contract this May, the response from their Union officials was that the members "were confused" so they hastily planned to take another concessionary contract back to them. Eventually, workers get worn down and accept what is against their best interests. Today, top Union officials make no effort to conceal such blatant collaboration with the employers. The labor hierarchy nowadays increasingly see themselves as CEOs, and the unions as employment agencies where they collect the revenue (dues) and they supply the Labor power at the best price.

The heroic struggles of the last 25 years, like the Hormel strike, the two Greyhound strikes and the Pittston Miners' strike were all defeated. The decimation of a once proud Union, the UAW, has been accomplished in large part through union-employer cooperation. Where local leaders challenge this collaborative policy, like the leaders of the UAW Local at Freightliner in Cleveland, NC, top officials collaborate with employers to have them fired.

While the massively inflated salaries of top officials and outright corruption exist, these are not the primary reason for this collaboration. The cause of the Labor leaders' collaboration is that they have the same world-view as the employers. They see no alternative to capitalism and accept that workers have to compete to help their individual employers in the marketplace. The Team Concept is a product of this thinking. Mobilizing their members and

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cartoon from the *Working Carpenter*

The Strike that

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Union carpenters stage wildcat strike

Almost 200 workers

gather to organize the strike at the parking lot of Local 713 that Monday. A lefty union official had got on back of our speakers' truck to argue against the strike. He lost the argument, because whatever he put forward it wasn't going to mean more money on the check, or a guaranteed morning break or stopping straight-time Saturdays.

That Thursday the strike started. We got to the parking lot of the Airport, California's biggest construction site, pretty early. It was dark and a few cars' headlights began to show up. Within an hour, from our perch on the back on my pickup truck, dozens of rank and file carpenters were lining up to take the bullhorn and argue for a solid strike. At the Airport job, workers were prepared by days of word and mouth and were ready for this fight. One rank and filer, a former Marine helped line workers up the hundreds of carpenters to send them out to the different job entrances. We were going for a 100% close down. During the first days of the strike I was to head down to the city's new Ball Park to close that job. After that our crew were to march around San Francisco with a growing group of strikers and a bullhorn to shut down any work we would see.

The Strike Begins

The Business Agents began showing up to tell us to go back to work. They were unenthusiastic given the huge crowds of energetic picketers. One Business Agent who is the current leader of the union's organizing Department, clearly felt like he was scabbing and had nothing to say. Our position was he took an appointed job, he has to do what his boss (the Regional Council Executive Secretary) tells him.

Without the restraint of the Business Agents, herding and coralling the picket-lines, as they often do, and without lawyers on our backs we were able to run an efficient, fighting strike. We had no problem trespassing job sites. Workers would show us how to get onto the jobsite avoiding the front gate and we would discuss and debate with individuals and they would feel awful about working and often walked out. At the Ball Park we addressed a meeting of fifty electricians who didn't want to cross our picket-line. Our appeal worked, they all drove off home. On day Two at other jobsites, workers asked us, "where were you? We thought you were coming to close us down yesterday. . . . Okay guys, everyone off the job, we're on strike!"

At one big high-rise jobsite in the city, we circled it, with bullhorns and hardhats and were initially getting no response. A few of us went on site and started climbing the stairs up towards the top floors. As we were half way, workers were coming down the stairs with their lunch pales joining the strike. "Is there anyone else up there?" we'd ask, "Yeah. They're just packing their tools

away." I was surprised that their foremen weren't threatening the workers for joining the Wildcat, but the foremen often sided with us, or simply shrugged their shoulders and didn't put up a fight.

At another job a group of us entered a huge job where a safety meeting of a hundred workers was about to begin. Just as everyone was assembled and the boss was about to open his mouth, we jumped up on a table and addressed everyone. In this situation the workers were a bit intimidated by the direct eye of the boss, but some of the workers picked up their lunches and took off. The bosses brought in video cameras to film us for trespass, we told them where to go. They had footage of us but no names.

Every day in the afternoon we had a mass meeting for everyone to have their say. This is where the strategy was discussed and reservations aired. We elected a Chair, I proposed John Reimann, the Recording Secretary of Local 713.

By Day Two the strike was rising in some new areas and shrinking in existing areas. We would hear word of the strike spreading way beyond the Bay Area with new jobs just coming out. At the same time many of the other Trades workers were being increasingly intimidated by their union officials to return to work and not honor our unofficial/illegal picket-line.

Over the weekend a planned Wildcat picnic was not well attended. We heard that a fairly large number of workers returned to work at the Airport on Saturday. A meeting of some LMV members and wildcat leaders kicked around ideas to keep up the strike's momentum. Given that this was an illegal strike and that the union was pressuring workers to return the trickle back to work on Friday was likely to increase on Monday. One of the things we probably could have done instead of simply electing a Wildcat Chair would've been to organize a more collective body to represent the strike: a strike committee. We had hundreds of phone numbers but not the resources to get out to everyone. The scale of the strike took everyone by surprise. Any strike that is unauthorized is more chaotic and less organized than an official strike, having a lack of a center and of clear lines of communications. However, the strike was also not held back by the union bureaucracy's fear of a rising membership, nor by the dictates of millionaire labor lawyers.

We kicked around some direct action ideas. We seriously discussed going to the Ball Park and breaking into the job and climbing up the Crane Tower. From there we could hoist a banner for the strike and occupy the Crane at the same time. This, we hoped would bring media attention to the strike and get word out to new forces. This remained a good idea and nothing more.

The Lie

"The trouble is that the union is not strong enough to negotiate more."

**Gary Martin, Regional Council President
(SF Chronicle May 21st 1999)**

Rocked the Bay Area

On Day 4 of the strike, Monday, it was evident we were losing numbers faster than gaining new strikers. My own fear was that Tuesday would be far worse and that a slow petering out of the strike would both diminish the importance of the strike in workers' memories but also result in large numbers being fired. Although the strong construction boom meant the latter was less likely. I proposed a return to work Tuesday in an orderly, structured way. This was opposed by many workers, but accepted by the majority. I proposed we should go back to the jobsites and build for a One-Day strike on July 1st right before the Fourth of July weekend and that we encourage all members to head to their monthly union meetings to take up the fight there.

The strike got widespread coverage in all the Bay Area newspapers. In one the Regional Council spokesperson admitted their own passivity: "the union's not strong enough to negotiate more," he argued. Our strike proved this lie wrong. On the other side the Head of the San Francisco Airport authority was laying down the law: "This (strike) is an illegal assembly. These workers are subject to arrest and fines."

The role of the small number of Marxists in the leadership of the strike was significant but not critical to the strike. The mood of anger, first expressed in the breaking-up of the Regional Council meeting by rank and file carpenters and then becoming the Wildcat strike, was an objective fact. The conscious reformists in the movement were unable to talk-down the strike mood. The role played by LMV was to encourage the strike forward, to help workers see its place in the wider picture and to strengthen attempts to build a more lasting organization out of the strike. If the wildcat had lasted longer, had widened and was not isolated, Marxists could've played a bigger role in helping bring together a united movement. For this, we have the future, and the Wildcat has deepened our small reserve of direct experience with mass movements.

Local 713 was probably the most militant local. Members of 713 sent wildcatters to all the other bay area locals to push for a vote against the contract and resolutions for the return of our right to vote on the contract. In June Local 713 voted 85 to 6 for a One Member One Vote resolution and at a following meeting, in a standing vote, passed a motion against the contract of 182 to 5. I can still see the faces of the 5 business agents up against the wall as their votes were counted. The Wildcat strike had enormously strengthened the back of the resistance to both our union machine and this weak contract.

Taking Back the Locals

On July 1st, what we had hoped would be the follow-up One-Day strike, a couple of dozen workers took the day off to flyer for a Noon Rally at the Regional Council to protest the contract. Armed with thousands of flyers we trespassed scores of jobsites, talked to carpenters and gave out flyers. At lunchtime about 200 workers met outside the Regional Council offices to protest. At the end of the month a far larger crowd was present to try to pressure the Regional Council when it re-voted on the contract. While the crowd was bigger, the angry mood was more diminished than two months earlier. The Carpenters Council passed the contract and the period of struggle against the contract

The Threats

"It's an illegal assembly. It's not sanctioned by the unions at all. These workers are subject to being arrested. They're also subject to being fired by their employers."

**Ron Wilson, Airport Spokesman
(SF Examiner May 21st 1999)**

was over.

What remained was a strong mood to take back the locals, to end the dominance of the business agents in both the Locals and the Regional Council.

In the fall of 1999, John Reimann, the elected Chair of the Wildcat and Recording Secretary of Local 713 was singled out and brought up on charges by the International of the Carpenters Union. The local voted 66-0 against this witch-hunt. In January 2000 John was expelled from the Union and in August the International convention of the union solidly upheld his expulsion.

In July 2000 the Wildcat slate swept both Local 713's Executive Board elections winning 7 out of 10 seats and winning 29 out of 38 positions on the Regional Council from our Local. Within a month 3 Wildcatters were taken up on 23 new charges as a way to attempt to intimidate us. After winning the Local election we initiated simultaneous Spanish translations at our meetings to encourage increased participation of Latino carpenters in the Local and childcare at the local meetings to help women carpenters and parents to come to meetings.

Charges and Expulsions

We also immediately called a Special Called Meeting of the Local to begin a lawsuit against the International to undo the expulsion of our former Recording Secretary. This was, in retrospect, a tactical mistake. We were able to mobilize up to 300 workers for the Special Called Meeting, but only won a slim majority for the Lawsuit. The Business Agents were able to argue that the new Executive wanted to sue their own union and were trying to bring the courts into our union after losing the democratic process at the union's Convention. Over the following 3-month civil war at the Local the middle ground who were against the expulsion, were increasingly won over against the lawsuit and by October the lawsuit was dead.



Another cartoon from the *Working Carpenter*

Wildcat Continued

The Wildcatters adopted the lawsuit strategy when all other avenues were closed. John, as Chair of the Wildcat, had born the brunt of the post-strike backlash. The San Francisco District Attorney had threatened to fine him personally for the strike, which could have meant him losing his home. He was expelled from the union after 29 years membership and above all he was one of our own that had been taken down by our enemy, the bureaucratic union machine. Despite this, the lawsuit proved to be confusing to the members, was unnecessarily divisive and diverted attention from the Wildcat and our struggle to take the union back. Some were against the lawsuit at the time, but did not want to be seen as not supporting our expelled Recording Secretary, if this was the case with Wildcatters then how could we have won over the rank and file to the lawsuit.

The Wildcat Strike's Legacy

The greatest victory of the Wildcat was in the consciousness of the carpenters. The strike deeply rooted the concept of worker self-organization and of working class power in a generation of Bay Area carpenters. Months after the strike we would hear stories of big jobs that had shut down during the Wildcat that we didn't even know about: this was in the days before cell phones. Carpenters also won a huge gain in their pensions. The union machine was terrified of our uprising. They feared that in the upcoming elections for the Executive of the Regional Council that the rank and file could topple the existing regime. Our pension was one area where they were free to make concessions to this upsurge. Before the Wildcat for every year we worked we would get \$40-a-month on our pension pay out. That is less than a dollar and a quarter-a-day. After the Wildcat, the Regional Council upped that \$40-a-month increasingly up to \$205-a-month for every year we worked. This freeing up of tens of millions of dollars in pension money to carpenters was a direct product of our Wildcat uprising.

As Wildcatters led Local 713 we were able to continue mobilizing the membership, but the further away we went from May 1999, the harder it became. In 2001 we organized a joint construction trades meeting of about 200 workers to show that our Local opposed our International leaving the AFL-CIO federation. Not insignificantly 1400 workers and their families attended the Local's union picnic in the summer of 2001. In 2002 to challenge our union's ban on electing fulltime officials, who are all appointed from the very top down, we held a "Preference Poll" election and submitted the winners to the Regional Council. The Council rejected our poll!

Roots of the Strike

The wildcat strike was a product of two opposing forces: the late 1990s economic boom and the extremely poor contract offered to the workers. An explosion on the scale of the Wildcat was not inevitable. What made it inevitable were the changes in the union and the wider labor movement: in particular the ban on a direct vote for the contract and the ban on the election of Business Agents. The bureaucracy prevented any opportunity for an explosion to dissipate. In the past workers would vote on a contract, some small changes would be made, and then workers would be forced to vote again on almost the same contract. Invariably this meant it would pass as workers were worn down. As the Business Agents were all appointed then our "own" elected Business Agents were not there to act as a buffer between the machine and union members. Workers would have listened to their elected full-time officials who would in turn generally try to sway workers towards voting Yes. The repressive changes in the union made an unofficial, unsanctioned strike the only way out.

Under capitalism we are all brought up as workers to accept authority and generally do as we're told. The Wildcat was an expression not only that workers will only take so much, but also of the enormous creative potential and power that working people possess. It is this power that is the planet, and its inhabitants, only hope. The 1999 Carpenters Wildcat is an incredible legacy that is held dear in the hearts of thousands of carpenters and many more who were also touched by it.

Rob Rooke,
Recording Secretary Carpenters Local 713 (2000-2003)

Editorial Continued

generalizing these struggles, for them, can only lead to chaos. It threatens their peace-at-any-cost relationship with the employers.

Lessons of the Past

This not the first time we have been saddled with such leadership or have been under such attacks. In the 1930's, there were no industrial Unions in the main and the employers were vicious in their repression of Union organizing. In 1934 there were three successful General Strikes in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco; followed by the great sit-down strikes and factory occupations, including the 44-day occupation in Flint that Unionized GM.

The struggles of the 1930's were successful because a leadership was present within the movement that had a class perspective. Factory occupations and effective mass picketing halted production and challenged the employer's right to rule and even the sanctity of private property. Non-Union and the unemployed were drawn into these struggles. Demands were not limited to what the employers, the Democratic Party and the Labor Bureaucracy deemed "realistic".

The crisis in the Union movement is a crisis of leadership. It is inevitable that great clashes within organized Labor are ahead, but for any opposition group to avoid becoming like those they want to replace a different approach is necessary; one that challenges the rule of big business and the system itself. The great struggles of the 1930's are an invaluable lesson for us.

- ☐ No givebacks of wages or conditions
- ☐ We need full employment - Oppose and organize against all layoffs
- ☐ All labor leaders on the same wage as the average worker they represent
- ☐ Independent political party for Workers

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