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UE 610 Finds Another Way to Beat WABCO

Abstract

[Excerpt] UE Local 610 attracted a lot of attention in 1982 when in the teeth of the worst recession since the 1930s and as the first wave of concessions contracts was reaching its crest, it endured a six-month strike to beat concessions at Westinghouse Airbrake Co. (WABCO) in the Pittsburgh area.

Keywords

UE, WABCO, Westinghouse, Pittsburgh, strike, labor dispute

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UE Local 610 attracted a lot of attention in 1982 when in the teeth of the worst recession since the 1930s and as the first wave of concessions contracts was reaching its crest, it endured a six-month strike to beat concessions at Westinghouse Airbrake Co. (WABCO) in the Pittsburgh area.

Three years after the strike, however, the local was still scarred by its ordeal. With savings accounts depleted and with fresh memories of the strains involved in a long strike, members were in no mood to go at it again. WABCO and its companion plant, Union Switch & Signal, are among the few manufacturing facilities providing steady work in the area, and there are plenty of skilled and unskilled workers around who haven't had much work in the past few years.

The company came at the union with a full array of concessions demands—including a \$1.70-an-hour wage cut—and then at the last minute dropped off most of those demands and went for a straight wage freeze and the elimination of COLA. The company knew the membership was divided and weak, and was banking on its "final offer" seeming moderate against the background of its initial demands.

Local leadership recommended rejection of the contract and in one Sunday afternoon membership meeting explained the basic concept of "in-plant strategies." The idea caught on among the membership and spread spontaneously beginning with the Monday morning shift. The ban on overtime was complete, and management was thrown off guard. By the third week, production had been cut "by at least half," and the company agreed to a no-concessions contract with a modest boost in wages.

According to union leaders, the local is "more together" now than at any time since the 1982 strike. Unfortunately, in July WABCO announced it is shutting down part of one plant, eliminating 1,200 of the local's 2,300 members—a subject which never came up in negotiations. The fight has now moved to different terrain, as the local mobilizes to contest the shutdown, looking for another way to "stay in."