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A Second Look at the Hormel Strike

Abstract

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Keywords

Hormel, United Food & Commercial Workers, UFCW, Austin, Minnesota, strike

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A SECOND LOOK AT THE HORMEL STRIKE

I. Two Views of the Strike in Austin

The dispute between the United Food and Commercial Workers and its Local P-9 over the long strike at Geo. A. Hormel & Co.'s meatpacking plant in Austin, Minnesota has put labor activists on two sides of an emotional and strategic divide. P-9 supporters see the strike, which began in August, 1985, as the labor battle of the decade, with a valiant local union taking a stand against unjust concession demands. But besides facing an arrogant boss, a plant full of strikebreakers and the Minnesota National Guard, the local has had to contend with a betrayal of its effort by the national union. The UFCW argued that the local should accept a mediator's proposal that would have ended the strike in January, 1986, and has now placed the local in trusteeship and moved to end the strike with an unconditional offer to return to work.

In the view of P-9 advocates, the strike in Austin is a which-side-are-you-on contest between labor progressives anxious to rebuild militant, democratic trade unionism, and labor bureaucrats unwilling to risk tough struggle to revive their sagging fortunes. Nothing less than the fate of the labor movement is in the balance. In this light, any criticism of Local P-9's strategy and tactics must be suspended to avoid undermining the strike.

On the other side the P-9 strike is viewed as a solo flight to self-destruction by a misguided local union that broke with its counterparts in the Hormel chain and the meatpacking industry to seek a better plant-level, single local deal from Austin management. First, P-9 took its problems to a series of disastrous arbitrations which ended with members suffering a huge back pay obligation to the company. Then the local bought a snake-oil corporate campaign promise from a slick outside consultant, based on a flimsy connection between Hormel and one of its creditor banks. When that failed, P-9 launched the strike that has split the local between strikers and members who returned to work and cost a thousand people their jobs. In all, say defenders of the International, it was a rule-or-ruin crusade doomed to ruin from the outset. According to this view the dispute is not between labor progressives and labor hacks, but between kamikaze unionists and responsible unionists.

The burden of proof is on defenders of the UFCW. A presumption

in favor of the local union is not unfair, given the record of many internationals stifling local efforts to promote more combativeness toward employers and more democracy in union affairs. And even without such a presumption, many unionists around the country see a group of workers in a fight for their lives and rally to their side, not caring who is right or wrong in the war of words between the local and the national union ("Hitlerite," some UFCW officials have called P-9's tactics; "sleazy as the corporate officers" is the rejoinder from P-9 spokesmen).

Unfortunately there is no straddling this gap. Rhetoric on both sides can get overblown, but when it is stripped away two fundamentally different visions of what the strike has meant and what the labor movement is all about remain in conflict. Anyone who cares about American trade unionism -- especially among unionists who have argued for more rank and file involvement and more of a fighting spirit in the labor movement -- has to make an honest analysis of the P-9 strike.

II. Industrial Unionism and Enterprise Unionism

There is much to praise, even to marvel at, in the strike at Austin. Strike organizers have emphasized innovative tactics and rank and file involvement in strike committees and activities. The determination of the strikers, the reaching out to unionists and community supporters throughout the country, all these have been a model of what the labor movement should be doing and has largely failed to do. But the underlying strategy of the P-9 strike is fatally flawed. The result, notwithstanding admirable strike conduct and widespread support, is a plant full of strike-breakers, including hundreds of P-9's members, and the danger of the Hormel company's main plant going non-union.

Despite its sometimes clumsy handling of the dispute, the UFCW is right on the basic issues at stake in Austin. The most important conquest of the labor movement in this century has been the establishment of industrial unionism that unites workers as a class, regardless of race, sex, skills and other divisions, to confront the giant employers that dominate the U.S. economy. In practice, industrial unionism takes shape in industry-wide organizing and bargaining to standardize wages and benefits as much as possible, taking labor costs out of competition so that employers cannot ratchet down contract conditions by pitting one local against another.

In contrast, P-9 leaders are clear that theirs is a strategy of enterprise-based unionism, where a single local works out the best deal possible from local plant management. Because the Austin plant is brand new, highly productive and highly profitable, say P-9 spokesmen, the company should pay more to Austin workers than it is paying other Hormel workers in the older plants. And if the Austin plant were unprofitable, or even less profitable, says local P-9 leadership, the union would be offering concessions to management. Indeed, local P-9 proposed to Austin management a kind of reverse profit-sharing plan for the Austin plant, offering to accept pay cuts if profits fell below customary levels. The local union also made proposals that would have resulted in the shutdown of at least two other union-represented Hormel plants.

In other words, this is not an anti-concession strike in principle. Local P-9 wants to take responsibility for Austin management's success or failure in making profits at the single enterprise. It wants to link wages to productivity and profits at the plant level rather than pursue the pattern-bargained, industry-wide agreements of the past. This is precisely what most "enlightened" employers and labor economists are calling for: a turn away from supposedly old-fashioned, 1930's-style industrial unionism to a new era of responsible, profit-and-loss-driven enterprise unionism.

The push for enterprise unionism and the efforts of genuine trade unionists to preserve industrial unionism is the real crisis in the labor movement today. The fight against concessions is just one element in that deeper struggle. Any local union's strike or other battle against concessions must take into account the higher imperative of saving industrial unionism, or there will be no stopping concessions from anyone.

Unions in every industry are faced with the crisis of industrial versus enterprise unionism:

*Autoworkers saw their "Big Three" contract pattern fall apart after the Chrysler bankruptcy threat of the late 1970's. It took a tough strike by Chrysler workers to move back toward parity in the industry. Now the autoworkers are wrestling with company moves to play off one local against another through outsourcing threats, and with the implications of a separate "Saturn" agreement at a new General Motors plant in Tennessee -- whether that contract's plan to tie wages to profits will spread into the other basic auto plants.

*Steelworkers are now faced with separate, company-by-company bargaining with the steel producers after employers dissolved their industry bargaining council to go after the union on a single-firm basis in place of the industry-wide contract that has prevailed for nearly three decades.

*The United Mine Workers conducted a long, bitter strike to prevent Massey coal company from establishing mine-by-mine contracts apart from the national coal agreement. Coal employers would like nothing better than company-based bargaining; that the UMWA has been able to maintain a single national agreement in spite of such pressures has been an important protection for the entire labor movement.

*Teamster local unions are plagued by constant company moves to break away from the Master Freight Agreement to bargain locally. Likewise, the union has been pressed hard to change its biggest national contract, with United Parcel Service, into a series of city-by-city pacts.

*The Communications Workers are trying to maintain national bargaining with the regional telephone companies and other spinoffs of the former AT&T monopoly. They have convinced five of the regionals to bargain jointly, but are faced with two holdouts that want local bargaining.

*Electrical workers' unions that bargain with General Electric, Westinghouse and other big companies are challenged by company moves to turn national bargaining with a multi-union coordinated bargaining committee into union-by-union and local-by-local bargaining. Westinghouse workers had to strike in 1982 to block bargaining on a "business group" basis according to product line. General Electric uses joint ventures and plant sales to local managements to take shops out from under its national contracts.

*Airline unions are trying to find a way back to pattern bargaining after an almost total breakdown in the wake of deregulation of the industry. They have the larger structural problem of several unions representing different employee groups in the same company, with difficulty in coordinating bargaining and strike activity.

*East and Gulf coast shipping employers have announced their intention to bargain separately with the International Longshore-

men's Association, both in divided coastal talks and in separate, port-by-port negotiations to put longshore locals in competition with one another.

III. The Real Threat to Labor

It is this breakdown of industrial unionism and introduction of enterprise unionism, not concessions in and of themselves, that pose the real threat to the labor movement. P-9 advocates will say that any union opposed to concessions should back P-9 or it is selling out the struggle against concessions. But unions have a higher duty than fighting concessions tout court: preserving the unity of their membership and the unity of their movement as a defender of working class interests.

The key question is how to fight concessions, how to take on the companies? The answer is collectively, on an industrial basis, not by one local union, however militant or heroic, going off on its own. The industrial approach does not guarantee success, or guarantee that unions will never have to accept concessions. But in the long run the unity of industrial unionism is the best guarantee of progress for working people.

To the extent that union leaders commit themselves to enterprise unionism based on the single plant or firm, they tear their members away from identification with other workers as a class. In its place is an identification with the enterprise: labor and management struggling shoulder -to-shoulder against the competitive threat of other workers. This does not preclude strikes or other strife between employers and enterprise unionists. Workers can still think they are getting a raw deal from local management for not treating them better than other workers in the industry. The logic of special, local treatment, however, is the same.

The outcome of the struggle between industrial unionism and enterprise unionism will determine the nature of the labor movement in decades to come. Concessions can be won back in later bargaining, as many unions have shown. But a fundamental shift to enterprise unionism will destroy whatever class consciousness still exists in the labor movement.

P-9's argument that Austin workers deserve more than other Hormel workers, and that P-9 would be offering concessions to management if the plant were in trouble -- is of a piece with the enterprise union offensive of the employers. Calling itself

a special case and demanding a separate Austin-only solution, offering concessions to management tied to a drop in profits, stressing the historic paternalism of Hormel's "flagship" Austin plant with declarations like "George Hormel would turn over in his grave," Local P-9 is clearly in the enterprise union camp.

IV. The Crisis in Meatpacking

The UFCW packinghouse workers division and its young leader Lewie Anderson are trying to maintain an industrial union strategy to restore standard wages and conditions to the industry and prevent employers from playing off one local against another, or one company's workers against another's. They are not having an easy time of it. Meatpacking companies have launched what is probably the broadest attack on a union by employers in any single industry, using plant closings, bankruptcy ploys, divestitures and acquisitions, marketing agreements and other devices to scrap union contracts or cut wages and benefits to the bone.

The industrial union model cracked in the meatpacking industry in the early 1980's. Workers in old, multi-story plants nearing the end of their useful lives, often in small, one-company towns in the midwest, started caving in to local-level concession demands to save their jobs. New, low-wage producers were cutting into market shares of the established packers, creating a prospect of more job loss.

One major company, Wilson Foods, declared bankruptcy and scrapped its union contracts. Swift & Co. sold off many of its plants which were shut down, and then re-opened later as non-union shops. Several meatpacking locals in other shops broke the industry pattern in a frantic underbidding competition with one another. Wages began a free fall from the \$10.69 hourly base pay that prevailed before the deluge hit. It was this disarray that Anderson and the national union sought to repair with a strategy to consolidate forces at the \$8-\$9 hourly wage level, then fight back together toward a new standard.

There would be nothing wrong with a P-9 strike for more money based on company profitability if the Austin plant stood alone. But there are ten other UFCW-represented plants in the Hormel chain, and dozens more among other major meatpacking companies. A union cannot have it both ways: if profitable plants should pay more, then less profitable plants can pay less. That kind of logic is exactly what led to the breakdown of industry-wide standards in the years before the Austin strike.

It is also the logic that the UFCW's packinghouse division and Anderson are trying to refute. The results are admittedly mixed. After all, they are fighting the logic of the capitalist system itself -- hardly an easy task.

He is heaped with abuse from Local P-9 spokesmen as a high-paid labor boss, but Anderson is a genuine rank and file leader who cut his union teeth leading long strikes against Iowa Beef, the toughest employer in the industry. Contrary to P-9's assertion that the national union has followed a strategy of deliberate retreat, UFCW packinghouse workers have been fighting back against the companies' attacks.

The union has allowed more than thirty plants to shut down by refusing to agree to concession demands that would undercut a movement back toward industry standards. Several of those locals have sued the national union for not letting them accept concessions. In addition, there have been more strikes in the meatpacking industry over the past five years than in any other single U.S. industry, not counting the P-9 strike. The UFCW has had sixteen major strikes involving 27,000 workers, nearly one third of the workforce, since 1982. The strikes have averaged four months' duration. Obviously the union has not succeeded fully in restoring industry standards or returning to the \$10.69 base wage. But Anderson and the meatpacking chain locals know they are in a long range struggle that cannot be decisively won in a single stroke.

V. Background: History

Some history and some numbers are overdue here. While Armour, Swift, John Morrell, Wilson Foods and other meatpacking companies negotiated single, company-wide agreements covering all their locations before the 1980's, Hormel always negotiated plant-level contracts. In the early 1970's, however, a de facto chain bargaining process began. Hormel and its UFCW locals negotiated a single "memorandum for agreement" covering the chain shops. That agreement was then signed and implemented locally, including in Austin.

Hormel's chain-wide agreements of the 1970's were consistent with the industry standard set in bargaining, often after a long strike, in another company. The UFCW and its Hormel locals were making progress toward a master agreement in Hormel, a longstanding goal of the union and its members. A 1978 special agreement in Austin covering the construction of a new plant

there was seen as a temporary deviation from chain bargaining. Even that agreement was based on continued application of industry standards.

A small history of meatpacking unionism is also important in understanding the current mess. The UFCW is really an amalgam of three major unions with distinct traditions: the staid Retail Clerks, an old American Federation of Labor union that took shape among store clerks and other white-collar employees; the AFL Meatcutters union which had a conservative outlook common to highly skilled tradesmen, but a nonetheless rich history of tough strikes over bread and butter issues; and the Packinghouse Workers union, one of the CIO industrial unions founded in the strikes and sit-ins of the 1930's. Both the Meatcutters and the Packinghouse Workers organized packing plants. After three decades of rivalry they merged, forming a single union to represent packinghouse workers. Since they also represented supermarket meatcutters, a merger with the Retail Clerks took place so they could confront the big supermarket chains with a single voice.

Within the UFCW workers in Hormel and the other packing plants shape their own bargaining program and policies through a national packing committee, consisting not of Washington union bureaucrats but of delegates from local unions throughout the industry. Most of the locals, including most Hormel locals, are solidly behind their union in the P-9 dispute, believing that their only hope lies in rebuilding unity in the industry.

P-9 supporters point eagerly to a few locals that support the Austin strike as proof that they must be right, but this really begs the question. One can look at any national union, from the worst to the best, and find locals that take an anti-international stance for all kinds of good and bad reasons. It proves nothing about the merits of the Austin debate. The point here is that it is not the UFCW as a whole, but packinghouse workers through their packing committee, that are the protagonists in their struggles with the packing companies. To argue, as many P-9 supporters do, that the UFCW's record in the supermarket industry or some other sector is proof of the union's surrender in the concessions struggle is to misunderstand the structure of the union and to misrepresent the fightback efforts of the packinghouse division.

VI: Background: Numbers

Now for some numbers. The anti-concession nature of the Austin strike is complicated. The figure most often used is the pay cut from \$10.69 per hour to \$8.25 per hour in October, 1984, a nearly 25% cut. But when Austin workers went on strike in August, 1985 they were making \$9.25 an hour -- 25 cents an hour more than the rest of the Hormel chain. In fact, Austin workers' pay was never cut to \$8.25; an arbitrator's decision in March, 1985 raised the permitted pay cut to \$8.75 an hour effective September 3, 1984, and provided a 50 cent raise to \$9.25 in July, 1985. Meanwhile the rest of the chain, bargaining without P-9, had reached a settlement in October, 1984 that set a \$9.00 base wage effective September 1, 1984, with a \$1.00 per hour increase on September 1, 1985. All these movements involved cuts from the \$10.69 standard, which had been already eroded in other meatpacking companies after the wave of attacks of the early 1980's.

To get the initial cut to \$8.25 in Austin Hormel invoked a "most-favored-nation" or "me-too" clause that Local P-9 had agreed to in 1978 as part of a "New Plant Agreement" promising three years with a no-strike clause upon the opening of a newly-built plant in Austin. In exchange for the no-strike clause, Austin management agreed to match industry pay standards set in packinghouse workers' bargaining with five major Hormel competitors (Wilson, Swift, John Morrell, Oscar Mayer and Armour). The new plant geared into operation, and the New Plant Agreement took effect, in August of 1982.

By mid-1984 industry standards had dropped after individual locals began cutting plant-level deals to save jobs. To end what was becoming a panic, Anderson and the council sought to stabilize the standard in the mid-\$8.00 range. The union undertook several tough strikes and let many plants shut down to try to end the fall. When it entered chain bargaining in Hormel, a still-profitable company, the UFCW meatpacking division hoped to settle higher and begin ratcheting wages upward again.

When Anderson and the other Hormel locals asked P-9 to add its weight to mid-1984 chain-wide negotiations with the company (the Austin plant accounted for over 40% of Hormel's total production), P-9 leaders declined. They cited the no-strike clause in the New Plant Agreement and the company's vow to sue P-9 for damages if it joined a strike. P-9 leaders told the other chain locals they would rather have the company implement the me-too cuts in Austin and take it to arbitration than to risk a possible strike in chain bargaining.

The national union advised Local P-9 to stick with the chain and not rely on arbitration, saying the local did not have a strong case to begin with, and that the consequences of a separate arbitrator-imposed settlement in Austin would hurt chain bargaining in the long run. Hormel took the position that it would apply a chain settlement in Austin if Local P-9 participated in chain bargaining, but that if P-9 wanted to hash it out in arbitration they would have to live with the results and deal with the company on a local basis. For P-9, as it would be for any proud local union, this was a challenge hard to duck.

VII. From Arbitration to the Corporate Campaign

As noted above, the rest of the Hormel chain settled on a \$9.00 rate as of September 1, 1984 with a \$1.00 increase a year later. P-9 went to arbitration (actually, a series of successively more damaging arbitrations) and got stuck with an \$8.75 pay rate effective September 3, 1984 with a 50 cent raise set for July, 1985. Unfortunately, the arbitrator also ruled that Austin management could cut pensions, medical coverage and other benefits in line with industry changes under the me-too clause. His decision in March, 1985 made all such contract changes retroactive to September, 1984. As a result, Austin workers had to pay back over \$600,000 to management for their higher benefit levels from September to March, by means of a payroll deduction. In fact, they never received the \$8.75 and \$9.25 per hour pay set by the arbitrator.

Whether P-9 and the union could have brazened out the Austin local's participation in chain bargaining and a possible strike in September, 1984 is now just a matter of speculation. But it is a matter of record that the national union gave Local P-9 sound advice about the arbitration gambit. At that point, after the arbitration decision, the local might have taken its lumps and rejoined the chain to prepare for 1986 negotiations. It could have developed a program of "in-plant struggle" which many unions have turned to in similar circumstances. By then, however, P-9 had engaged an outside consultant to wage a vaunted corporate campaign against Hormel and one of its creditors, First Bank System, Inc. Perhaps the arbitration route had failed, said P-9 leaders, but a corporate campaign to "Break the Hormel-First Bank Connection" would force the company to settle with the Austin local and restore the \$10.69 rate separate from the other Hormel locals.

Much has been made of the large fee that Corporate Campaign,

Inc., the New York-based consulting firm that ran the Hormel-First Bank campaign, reportedly charged to Local P-9, and reports of an even large "bonus" if the \$10.69 wage rate were won. But money is really secondary to the issue, as in arbitration, of a union substituting outside forces for its own resources and its own collective strength in an industrial union setting.

Corporate Campaign, Inc. specializes in campaigns focused on banks and other lending institutions that finance corporate operations. By cutting off a company's source of credit, or at least by frightening management with the possibility of a cut-off, goes CCI's theory, the company will be forced to settle a labor dispute.

The P-9 dispute at Hormel was a laboratory test of CCI's bank-targeting strategy. Officials of Hormel and First Bank System, Inc., one of the midwest's largest banking companies, sit on each other's board of directors. With over 10% of Hormel's common stock, First Bank is Hormel's second-largest shareholder. The bank also maintains a revolving line of credit for Hormel. The relationship went back for decades, too. In the 1920's Hormel and the bank bailed each other out of financial difficulties. Since then they have always had interlocking directors and a debtor-creditor relationship. Based on this background, CCI declared that if First Bank told Hormel to end the dispute in Austin the company would settle. CCI guaranteed success of a corporate campaign against Hormel and First Bank when Local P-9 hired the firm late in 1984.

The UFCW is no slouch in these matters either, with one of the best research departments in the labor movement. The union did its own analysis of the Hormel-First Bank link and concluded it did not provide enough vulnerability to move the company. Again, the union asked Local P-9 to drop the solo effort to take on the company in Austin and to rejoin the chain setup. P-9 rejected the union's advice and launched the corporate campaign.

As later with the strike effort, P-9's corporate campaign was a model of rank and file activity and coalition building. For months hundreds of members wrote letters, leafleted homes, rallied and demonstrated to "Break the Hormel-First Bank Connection", the campaign's slogan. The problem was, the connection held, as the UFCW had predicted.

CCI claimed to "uncover" the relationship between Hormel and

First Bank. But there was nothing novel about it. The act itself of revealing such a tie means little. The key variable is actual dependence, not the mere fact of a financial relationship. With just three directors in common out of more than twenty on the two boards, with Hormel management firmly in control of its stock voting powers, with credit relationships with many other banks in the midwest, Hormel was not so dependent on First Bank as to do its bidding even if the corporate campaign had succeeded in cracking the bank.

But the bank, too, was impervious to a corporate campaign-style attack. First Bank is a decentralized holding company with 152 banks in five states, most with thousands of small depositors. The leverage just was not there to shake the bank with calls for deposit withdrawals and letters of protest to bank officials.

Several months of campaigning against First Bank and Hormel throughout 1985 failed to bend either of them. The effort ran into legal trouble when court injunctions scuttled plans to picket First Bank branches. A National Labor Relations Board judge later found that First Bank's connection with Hormel was not sufficient to make the bank a primary employer in the dispute, which meant that any picketing of the banks would be an illegal secondary boycott.

The legal problem alone does not explain the failure of the corporate campaign in Austin. After all, the federal courts and the NLRB are not in business to help workers. But in any large scale anti-corporate campaign many such legal, financial, logistical and other obstacles arise. It was versatility, not a single overwhelming tactic, that helped union campaigns prevail in J.P. Stevens, Litton Industries, Beverly Nursing Homes, Yale University and other targets of other union corporate campaigns while the bank-centered specialty of CCI foundered in Austin.

Suppleness in tactics is not the only issue here. Those other union campaigns were carried out by union staffers under organizational discipline in an integrated program that reconciled diverse union interests. Union affairs contain so many subtleties of relationships among local, regional and national bodies, relations with other unions, with employers in an industry, with government officials and so on that only a leadership with a firm grasp of all the elements and all the interests can rightly guide a campaign against corporate power. Staffers conducting the details of the campaign have to accept leadership on this basis.

But what if leadership is corrupt, or afraid, or just plain wrong? These problems are common in the labor movement. But it is up to workers in an industry to correct them through the procedures and structures of their union. They cannot be corrected by a single local declaring itself a vanguard. In any event, Lewie Anderson and the packinghouse workers union have shown neither corruption, nor fear, nor error on the question of the corporate campaign or other facets of the P-9 dispute. They gave the local their best advice, which is the obligation of a national union to provide. As it turned out, they were right.

VIII. P-9's Response: The Telegram and the "Missing Language"

P-9 partisans will argue that this whole analysis stands truth on its head. It was the national union that hung P-9 out to dry, they say, isolating the local because P-9 would not go along with the union's concessionary policy. P-9 cites two incidents as evidence of UFCW perfidy: a telegram supposedly excluding P-9 from a meeting of Hormel locals involved in chain bargaining in 1984, and what P-9 leaders call the "missing language" betrayal that let the company cut Austin pay and left P-9 out of the 1984 talks.

On close examination the telegram proves nothing. It is more a prop for theatrical effect of the "I have in my hand..." type. P-9 spokesmen rarely quote it because it would leave listeners scratching their heads as to whether it is an invitation, a non-invitation or a dis-invitation. At any rate, P-9 leaders attended the meeting they were supposedly not invited to. It was there they announced that the local would prefer to arbitrate the Austin contract rather than participate in chain bargaining. Ambiguities in the oddly-worded telegram hardly prove the "icing" of P-9 that its leaders decry.

The "missing language" issue is equally murky. An interim wage agreement reached in 1981 with major meatpacking companies, including Hormel, froze cost-of-living adjustments and wage levels through September, 1985, but provided a wage re-opener with a right to strike in September, 1984. A summary of this 1981 "COLA Agreement" prepared by the packinghouse division and sent to all locals in the industry, including P-9, stated "there will be no increase or reduction in rates" through September, 1985 except as might be negotiated in the 1984 wage re-opener.

When the COLA Agreement took effect in 1981, Local P-9 was

still working under the Old Plant Agreement that was part of the overall chain settlement. But when the new Austin plant went into full production in August, 1982, P-9 switched to the New Plant Agreement with its me-too wage language and a three-year no-strike clause.

When Hormel locals entered chain bargaining under the September, 1984 wage re-opener provision of the COLA Agreement, Austin management declared that P-9 was bound by the New Plant Agreement and thus had no right to strike with the rest of the chain. The company did say it would apply a chain settlement in Austin if P-9 accepted it, but if P-9 refused the company would go ahead with its proposed cuts under the me-too clause, defend its position in arbitration and deal with P-9 on a local basis. After that came the lost arbitrations, the failed corporate campaign and the broken strike.

P-9 leaders argue that the UFCW misled Austin workers with its 1981 summary of the COLA Agreement, and that the national union was derelict in not enforcing the 1984 wage re-opener and right to strike in Austin. The national explains that it was negotiating an industry-wide agreement with all the major packers, and that the summary accurately reflected the overall agreement. It was Local P-9's responsibility to inquire how the COLA Agreement would affect the New Plant Agreement since it was clear that the new plant would open in 1982. P-9 never raised the issue. In fact, P-9 did not begin raising the "missing language" problem until long after the local discovered the language was missing, when they began looking around for clubs to smack the national with.

P-9 tested its position on the missing language issue with yet another doomed arbitration in early 1985. The arbitrator ruled on the central issue in the missing language dispute: whether the 1981 COLA Agreement with its 1984 re-opener and right to strike superseded the 1982-85 New Plant Agreement with its me-too and no-strike clauses (which had been negotiated, remember, in 1978). The arbitrator decided in favor of the company, ruling the New Plant Agreement supreme and saying it was P-9 that was derelict in not seeking to clarify its rights.

Frankly, both the local and the national make valid criticisms of the other in connection with the telegram and "missing language" controversies. But what we have here are really run-of-the-mill lapses in a complicated bargaining situation, more or less normal screw-ups in a process that is

never smooth. A lot of Biblical scholarship has been applied to the ambiguities in the telegram, the COLA Agreement, the Old Plant Agreement, the New Plant Agreement and other documents that swirl around the P-9 strike. But the chicken-and-egg, who shot John, so's your old man, you-can't-fire-me-I-quit nature of the argument on both sides misses the basic issue.

IX. Fundamental Issues, Fundamental Lessons

The basic issue is this: what is the best way for workers to confront a big, multi-plant company like Hormel -- in solidarity as a group, requiring some sacrifice of local goals for the good of the whole, or in a single local, flagship plant shootout with the company? Local P-9 opted for the latter approach. They made a mistake. There is nothing shameful in that; unions make many mistakes, and try to learn from them.

The tragedy in the P-9 situation is the failure to learn. First the local was going to whip the company in arbitration. Then the corporate campaign became the path to victory. Next, the strike would force the company to concede. Now a boycott is going to do the trick, or a \$13 million lawsuit against the national union. It has been one false promise after another.

The basic lesson that Austin workers must draw is that their enterprise union strategy is insufficient no matter how militant or creative or involving its tactics have been. Their belief that the modern, productive, profitable Austin plant compels Hormel to pay more to P-9 members than to other Hormel workers in older plants is the wrong starting point. That is why the entire effort has flopped in spite of its marvelous tactics.

In the early, heady days of the corporate campaign and the strike, P-9 proclaimed a "100% victory or 100% defeat" effort, in contrast to the short-selling compromises of the labor bureaucrats. They have backed away from the term now, but it was a standard part of the pump-'em-up rhetoric.

A strategy of 100% victory overlooks the fact that we live in a capitalist system. Working people cannot win 100% victories in this economy and this society. By definition, victories come in half-loaves. Progress is slow and often uneven. Sometimes even the most militant union has to take a step back.

Any union leader who declares 100% victory as the objective of a collective bargaining struggle is deceiving himself or

herself and the membership. Any unionist who has led workers out on strike, and then led them back to work with a settlement, knows it takes high goals and lofty rhetoric to pump up sentiment for the strike. But it also takes a margin of compromise to settle it. The result is often a charge of "sellout," and indeed negotiators sometimes misjudge, or shrink from struggle, or sell out, settling for less than could have been achieved. If an honest labor leader doesn't lose sleep wondering if he or she settled too soon, collective bargaining is the wrong line of work.

The final struggle of song may one day come, but it will be a political struggle, not a collective bargaining dispute. In the meantime, the labor movement and its allies must settle for partial victories at best and sometimes, as unions are often forced to do in the current economic and political climate, for orderly retreats to fight another day.

None of this is meant to detract from the personal heroism of P-9 leaders and members and their example of a militant, active strike effort. UFCW spokesmen condemn P-9 for "tactics that would have made Goebbels proud." But it is just such effective propaganda and zeal -- in the non-perjorative senses -- that the labor movement needs to win more strikes and organizing campaigns. Nonetheless, all of a union's resources and all the possibilities of militant, creative tactics must be measured against the power of the employers and the power of the state in formulating a strategy for labor.

X. The Final Argument

The ultimate argument of P-9 supporters, and really the most compelling one, goes like this: Screw all this high-falutin' theory and strategy and second-guessing and armchair quarterbacking. Whatever mistakes they made, P-9 members are locked in struggle with the boss, and that's what unions should be about. They're doing something to fight concessions, not just making statements. It's the duty of every genuine unionist to support them, and anybody who doesn't, or who at least doesn't keep quiet if they disagree, is betraying those workers and objectively siding with the company.

But supporting the Austin strike on the "P-9 right or wrong" basis is an abdication of responsibility. If one truly believes that P-9 is right to bargain locally for a better deal than other Hormel workers, then unstinting support is in order. But

if one believes that UFCW packinghouse workers are trying to fight concessions on an industrial union basis, however imperfectly, and that P-9's enterprise union approach is wrong, and that the reason P-9's fine tactics have failed is because of this strategic error, and that it can only result in worse damage to workers in the industry and to the labor movement generally, there is an obligation to say so.

The entire Austin story is a drama with no villains and many heroes. They include the P-9 strikers who have conducted an inspiring struggle against overwhelming odds. They also include workers throughout the meatpacking industry who have also been struggling, perhaps with less flair for the dramatic but with as much determination, to maintain industrial unionism in the face of equally tough odds.

What is needed now is an acknowledgement from P-9 that the local can only make progress against a big company like Hormel in industrial union chain bargaining with their national union. Correspondingly, the UFCW could apply the tactical lessons of P-9's spirited struggle and welcome the local's participation in future bargaining with Hormel and throughout the industry. In this light, the responsibility of labor allies is to support such a reconciliation.