
UE Local 277's Strike at Morse Cutting Tool



By Dan Swinney

In the Spring of 1982, a small local union took on a conglomerate giant and won. What initially appeared as a battle over concessions at Morse Cutting Tool, a subsidiary of Gulf + Western in New Bedford, Massachusetts, became a broad-based community/labor fight against the rights of capital. Careful research by the Industrial Cooperative Association (ICA) documented G + W's disinvestment and kept the company on the defensive for the strike's thirteen-week duration. The victory of United Electrical Workers Union Local 277 showed that imaginative leadership and militant unionists can overcome corporate power even in the midst of a new depression. This strike deserves close study by all those interested in the labor movement.

Because of the fragmented character of the labor movement and our lack of access to G + W's documents, it's difficult to put the complete story together. But through discussions with UE staff and members, study of the press and literature of the strike, as well as personal experience with G + W's brand of labor-management relations, we can reconstruct this important chapter of the labor movement.

The strike of 1982 had its origins in G + W's decision to reverse Morse policies that were more than a century old. The Morse Cutting Tool company was organized as a family firm in New Bedford, Mass., in 1864. It was this country's first twist drill manufactory, producing the bits used in household drills as well as in heavier industrial models.

When the UE organized the company in 1941, it was still a family firm. Local 277 built its power on the shop floor. When a dispute arose, the local fought at the point of production, by refusing overtime, slowing down, or refusing to cooperate until management resolved the issue. This approach worked; in forty years, Local 277 had to bring only six disputes to arbitration, and struck only once, in 1976. Management would sometimes ask the local, "Why don't you guys arbitrate it?" hoping they would take that route rather than the more costly and effective traditional one.

But when G + W took over the company in

1968, as part of its drive to acquire manufacturing operations, things at Morse began to change. Most obvious was the way management began to milk the plant, using profits for investments elsewhere, rather than for maintaining and reequipping the New Bedford facility.

Labor management relations with G + W were generally normal. This was true in New Bedford and at other G + W facilities around the country. Of course, there were disputes and conflicts, but there were successful efforts by the parties to resolve them. Management would fight at times, but there was formal recognition of the union's integrity and of its right to improve the condition of its members. Then in 1981, G + W decided to take on the union, not only UE Local 277, but all the 26 unions representing the conglomerate's farflung employees. At the stockholders' meeting in 1981, Chairman of the Board Charles Bluhdorn announced that, despite the company's record earnings, "we are going to propose a six-month freeze on all wages at G + W and a reduction of bonuses.... There may have to be a drastic reduction in terms of compensation both at management and at workers' level.... We may have to scrap a lot of the agreements...because we have to be competitive."

Early in 1981, G + W unsuccessfully threatened a Steelworker local at Taylor Forge in Cicero, Illinois, with loss of jobs if it didn't freeze the pension for 10 years and stop criticizing management in the local union newspaper. That spring, they tried to take the Cost of Living Allowance from UAW Local 195 at Windsor Bumper in Windsor, Ontario, and in the process provoked a sit-in strike and were forced to retreat. Other locals like UAW 1271 in Danville, Illinois, also fought their efforts, successfully getting an injunction against moving out jobs after refusing to accept mid-contract concessions. But as time passed, more often than not, G + W squeezed concessions out of the unions. Eight locals including those at Super Tool in Michigan, Eagle Signal in Iowa, and finally Taylor Forge in Cicero all signed agreements representing a retreat from previous gains.

In January of 1982, corporate management

told Local 277 leaders that unless they agreed to meet four conditions, production would be shifted to Super Tool in Michigan, where the local had already granted concessions. When the local agreed, it did no good. On March 12, G+W charged that workers were “all over-paid at Morse” and loaded some equipment on a truck for shipment to Michigan. The local leaders told members in a leaflet: “If there was ever any doubt in anyone’s mind about the Company’s good faith, the company destroyed all its credibility. Apparently their purpose was not simply to cut costs and save money on this project. What they really want is for the entire shop to take the Super Tool pay-cuts and bend to management’s demands, turning Morse into a sweat shop. There will be a noon-time rally for all members today outside the Union Hall to protest this Company double cross.” The union filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, charging that the company had illegally removed the machines.

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G+W management, led by Bob Spears, who had been involved in the negotiations at Windsor Bumper and Taylor Forge, faced UE Local 277 determined to change labor-management relations at Morse. Spears told the local that they had been a “thorn in the side of G+W” and that they had been the most militant of G+W’s manufacturing locals. As one UE staff person said, “It was clear G+W meant to play hardball. G+W said, ‘If you don’t give concessions, you will lose your jobs.’” G+W made it clear: Not only did they want to lower labor costs at Morse. They were going to humble UE Local 277.

Ten days later, G+W presented new terms to Local 277 bargainers. Morse Cutting Tool would not remain in New Bedford unless the union:

1. Reduced night shift bonus from 10% of earnings to 25¢ per hour.
2. Cut out 3 paid holidays.
3. Eliminated 3 sick and personal days.
4. Reduced maximum vacation from 6 to 4 weeks.
5. Reduced wages and fringe benefits \$4.40 per hour.
6. Eliminated insurance for laid off workers and early retirees.
7. Eliminated severance pay for retired workers.
8. Established mandatory overtime.

Union leaders denied that wage rates were out of line, publishing data showing that employees of Morse received less than the workers at Union Twist Drill and Greenfield Tap and Die, Morse’s chief competitors. After informing their membership of G+W’s position, the local took a strike vote. Union members voted over several days in the union hall by secret ballot. The final tally was: 415-yes, 7-no.

On April 20, G+W added to its list of demands: the right to re-grade all jobs; the right to transfer temporarily; reduction of breaks; complete control over incentive work and records; reduction in size of the union bargaining committee; elimination of the dental plan; and a requirement that active employees pay part of their health insurance policy.

Local 277 leaders did not want to wage a long

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defensive strike. They knew that with the cutting tool industry in a slump, G + W could easily absorb a loss of production. The political climate was bad, with Reagan in the White House and union locals making concessions throughout the country. Another factor at Morse was the large number of senior workers. In some situations, this strata of workers had played a conservative role around concession bargaining, being willing to concede on wages with the hope of holding on to their jobs long enough to retire. Finally, at \$8.29 an hour, Morse workers' wages were higher than those for other industrial workers in New Bedford. A long defensive strike over wages that were higher than most in the community could sway local public opinion against them and deny them the encouragement they would need in the small tight community of New Bedford.

Despite their recognition that a strike over concessions would be difficult, workers at Morse knew that the problems of Morse were not high labor costs. Over the last 14 years, they had seen how G+W had drained and mismanaged the plant. They knew what they made in comparison to other workers in the cutting tool industry. To identify labor costs as the main problem was a crude move on the part of G + W to opportunistically take advantage of the economic climate. What the local had to do was to meet G + W head on over the real sources of Morse's ills.

But was there an alternative to a traditional strike? Local 277 leaders decided to take the offensive, making Gulf + Western's disinvestment

the issue rather than wage concessions. To help them, they called on the Industrial Cooperative Association (ICA) of Somerville, Massachusetts, to investigate their hunch that G + W's policies were the real source of Morse's problems.

ICA did an in-depth investigation of Gulf + Western's management of the Morse plant, interviewing shop stewards, industry experts, Wall Street analysts, Morse customers, its sales force, and middle-level management. What emerged was a picture of systematic corporate disinvestment. Since 1968, Gulf + Western had drained capital from Morse, using its profits to feed other operations. ICA found that in the years 1977-82, G + W invested less than \$800,000 in new equipment for its New Bedford operation, far less than its competitors were investing in rival plants.

The study not only clarified that labor costs were not the source of Morse's ills but raised a more alarming possibility. Eventually, this "milking process" would leave Morse dry and production would be shifted to new areas, leaving Local 277 members without jobs, and New Bedford without its industrial base. As Local President Rod Poineau told the Providence, Rhode Island, *Journal*, concessions wouldn't solve the problem of Morse: "Instead, they would just be financing Gulf + Western's move."

The ICA study not only convinced Local 277 of the futility of efforts to save jobs by conceding wages, it also suggested the potential to enlist al-

lies in the struggle—the people of New Bedford who were also victims of the destructive policies of the corporate outsider. Together, the union and the community would challenge the sacred rights of corporations to do whatever they wanted with their money, including shutting down a profitable factory. For the local UE leaders, the cynicism so frequently felt by unionists during 1982—“They’re too big. You can’t do anything about it”—evaporated.

After weeks of preparation, the local launched its counter offensive. On April 27, it held a luncheon and press conference at the local Holiday Inn. The study by ICA was presented by ICA business analyst Jan Saglio and reinforced by Bennett Harrison. Over 100 community, political, religious, and union leaders, as well as representatives of the press, heard the presentation. A week prior to the contract expiration date, the battle lines had been clearly drawn.

The union presented its recommendations for a settlement asking for a one-year contract which would include:

1. Wage increases of 7.4%.
2. Increases in pension, life insurance, and sickness and accident benefits totalling 7.4%.
3. A settlement agreement if G+W closed the plant.

The company rejected the union proposals. Hours before the contract expired, G+W reduced the latest demand of \$1.90 cut in wages to 51¢ per hour in an effort to avoid the impending strike. Local 277 rejected the gimmick, calling it “blackmail.”

The Strike—The Workers.

On Friday, May 7, at midnight, the contract expired. The following Monday, hundreds of strikers began picketing Morse’s two plants. Their strike was dramatically different from most strikes in these times, for Local 277 used tactics that were more common in the turbulent 1930’s. Members were kept informed about the strike issues; they were mobilized regularly; they organized support among other workers and neighbors; and they worked to meet each others’ needs.

Union leaders informed members about developments daily. Beginning with the negotiating period, more than eleven reports told members what was taking place. Once the strike began, Local 277 held rallies every Monday morning. In these meetings, strikers were kept abreast of the details of the discussions with management. Local President Rod Poineau commented to the press after one meeting, two months into the strike, “We’re even more united. We went down the line, point by point, on every proposal, and there was no opposition [to the union’s original proposal].”

A major part of any strike or negotiation is the company’s effort to negotiate around the leadership of the local. The company tries to influence a part of the membership to fight for a settlement or to challenge the legitimacy of the leadership’s position. In the course of negotiations, G+W leaked a “memo from T.A. Holden” which, from a “neutral” position, defended the company’s stance and cited



“facts” to weaken the resolve of Local 277. The leadership turned this attack to its own advantage by a detailed exposure of the incident in a leaflet. It then became a clear example of the company’s underhanded methods.

The picket line was not a handful of strikers at each gate. Large lines of strikers surrounded both plants each week day. Since the UE doesn’t have a large strike fund, strikers were not paid for picket duty, although when the local started to distribute food, picket line participation was required for recipients.

Leadership initiated other ways to encourage mass participation. For example, the Morse strikers set up their own kitchen to serve meals and snacks. Kitchen work was part of picket duty. Strikers organized the meals, cooked, and washed dishes. They also carried out food drives in the community and at neighboring plants.

Strikers were regularly called on to help, whether it meant attending a City Council meeting or being part of the Speakers’ Bureau which took their story to clubs and public gatherings. A workshop was set up and strikers silkscreened posters about their strike, which would later be distributed throughout the city and displayed in the windows of businesses. During a city festival, strikers manned a table to talk with people about their efforts. There was even a Community Odd Job Committee to solicit part-time work such as painting, roofing, and cleaning yards to

help strikers make ends meet.

Of course, everything didn’t run smoothly nor was everyone fully integrated. Some strikers had real problems that the strike deeply exacerbated, some had a different opinion of what should have been done. Leadership, in anticipation of these kinds of problems, made home visits to the strikers and their families. They solicited their concerns, criticisms, and problems. Six weeks into the strike, which is often a critical moment in any strike, David Cameron, President of Morse Cutting Tool, boasted that there would soon be a “back-to-work” movement. There were a handful of people who could have been influenced by such an effort, but the home visits allowed the local to identify problems and deal with them. The “back-to-work movement” was nipped in the bud. Some union members did see home visits as an invasion of their privacy, but most liked having someone come over, showing concern, and creating an informal context where the awkward and difficult problems of a long strike could be discussed in private.

Everything that was initiated in the strike was geared to maximize the active participation of strikers, getting them directly involved in organizing and serving the needs of the other strikers and in broadening their base of support. Not only were the specific tasks accomplished, but the high spirit of the strikers and their sense of solidarity was maintained.



“... We haven’t got the money to fight them, so the only way is through people.”



The Strike—The Community.

The most unique aspect of the Morse Strike was the ability of the local to mobilize a broad and diverse base of support in the community. All the support wasn't directly for the strike. There were state and local political figures, members of the local Chamber of Commerce, community personalities—all with different interests and certainly not uniform in their support for militant trade unionism. But they could become part of a common front against G+W's policy of disinvestment. This policy, in the long run, would affect their businesses or professions by contributing to the industrial decay of New Bedford. The UE staff and local leadership created a variety of opportunities for these differing levels of support to be expressed.

At the heart of the ability to gather this support was UE Local 277's exposure of G+W's disinvestment policy. Citizens from all walks of life in industrial communities have witnessed big companies draining people and resources dry, and then leaving. They have witnessed this form of

economic rape before, but had been unable to really identify how the violation was taking place. The campaign around disinvestment in New Bedford helped them to precisely identify the problem. Not only did the community support open up another front that G+W was forced to deal with. It also contributed to reinforcing the commitment and unity of the strikers. They weren't viewed as greedy union members trying to protect their high wages. Instead, they became the leaders in a fight against corporate policies which were hurting almost everyone in New Bedford.

UE Local 277 set up a Community Outreach Committee, consisting of staff representative Ilene Carver and strikers Ray Cote, Al Strollo, John Waring, and Russ Mello. The effectiveness of this committee stimulated broader interest in the strike in Massachusetts and around the country. The kick-off for their campaign was the luncheon on April 27, where the ICA study was released to the press. The Community Outreach Committee prepared for the luncheon carefully, meeting with reporters as well as community



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leaders in advance, disclosing to them what they were learning about G+W and soliciting help in the campaign. More than 100 local community, religious, labor and political leaders attended as well as the press. They heard President Poineau, Jan Saglio, and Bennett Harrison expose the destructive policies of G+W, and they were informed about the character of negotiations. Such a strong start to their efforts helped to mobilize antagonism to this “outside” company and to shatter the skepticism that nothing could be done about it.

Two days before the contract expired, Local 277 released an impressive list of members of a “Citizens Committee to Support the Morse Workers.” Labor members included leaders from the Longshoremens, Clothing and Textile Workers, Bricklayers, IBEW, Fishlumpers, Garment Workers, Auto and Rubber workers, Roofers, Firefighters, Policemen and others. Politicians included State Senators and Representatives, a U.S. Congressman, the District Attorney, and several City Councilors. Also represented

were clergymen, senior organizations, university faculty, and community representatives. The breadth of this list reflects the efforts strikers made to involve their political leaders and religious and community leaders.

This immediate evidence of support created opportunities for even broader activity. Working with a few members of the City Council, the strikers were able to get a resolution introduced and passed on May 13. This resolution, while not calling for support of the strike, did speak directly and strongly to the problems caused by G+W’s policy of disinvestment. To ensure the resolution’s passage, Local 277 brought 150 strikers to the Council meeting. Getting the point, one councilor commented, “I don’t know where the G+W headquarters are located, but I know where the 500 people in that shop live and they represent 500 votes.” Two weeks later, a similar resolution passed the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Some councilors pressed the disinvestment issue further, one suggesting establishing a picket



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD
IN CITY COUNCIL

May 13, 1982

- WHEREAS, The future of Morse Cutting Tools is in serious jeopardy; and
- WHEREAS, During the last two decades, Morse and almost all the major plants in New Bedford were bought by conglomerates and now are run by people outside our City; and
- WHEREAS, No community can ever achieve economic security when these conglomerates are able to buy up plants, drain them and then close down without regard to the local area; and
- WHEREAS, The results of a recently published study concerning Gulf & Western's investment and management practices show strong evidence that Gulf & Western is disinvesting from Morse and raise serious questions about the company's intentions of continuing to operate here; and
- WHEREAS, Morse Cutting Tools is the first and oldest cutting tool business and has been a major employer for the City of New Bedford for more than a century; and
- WHEREAS, Morse also has provided taxes for our City, payrolls to local merchants, and is a strong asset to the economic health of our community; and
- WHEREAS, The reputation of Morse Cutting Tools continues to be very good and the long-term outlook for the machine tool business is strong and expanding.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That we do everything possible within the jurisdiction of the City Council to insure Morse Cutting Tools will survive in New Bedford under the present or alternate ownership.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That we call on Gulf & Western to state their plans for future investment to make Morse competitive and keep it a viable operation - and to assure jobs for our community.

Councillor Kruger on behalf of United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, Local 277

Carlita St. George
President of the City Council

Spaulding Bellbrooker

Daniel F. Thompson

William Saltzman

Maurice H. Bronough

John P. Kelly

William J. McKeon

John Kennedy

Paul J. ...

Mark ...

Dorothy E. Reaney



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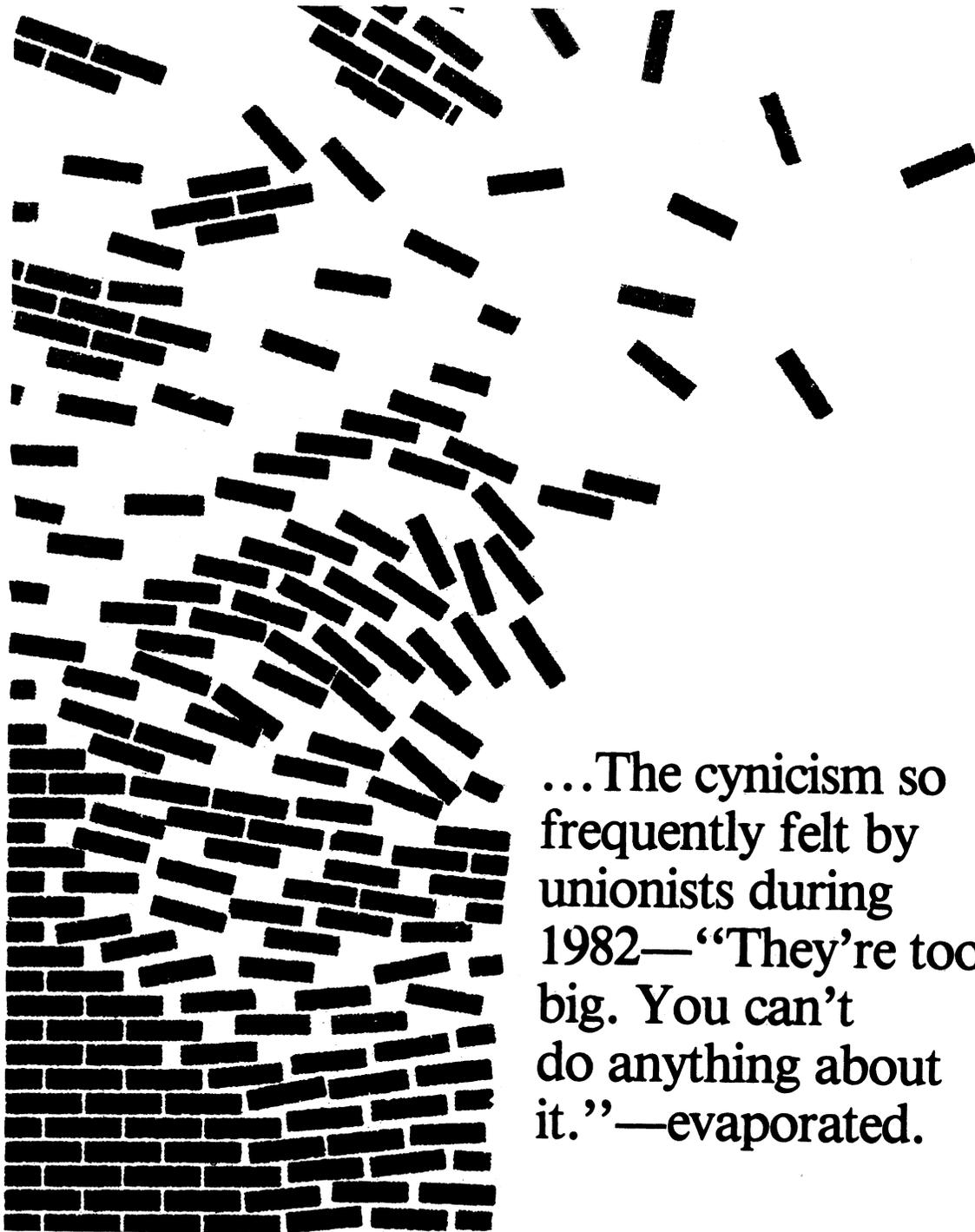
line in front of corporate headquarters in New York City. In an effort to break the strikers' initiative in the community, G+W set up a special meeting inside the plant for the Council with four people from corporate headquarters. Despite a full presentation from G+W aimed at refuting the ICA study, the Councilors held firm.

In July, the City Council invited G+W to use industrial revenue bonds to modernize the plant. At a meeting of more than 100 strikers, ten weeks into the strike, Councilor George Rogers said, "Our people should not be sacrificed. New Bedford should not be a Little Big Horn. We should keep [G+W] from walking out." Councilor Saltzman suggested that if the company refused the revenue bonds, the city could help workers get tax-free bonds to buy Morse. "If the company is going to take that attitude," he said, "the union should take over Morse Cutting Tools."

Support came from surprising places. The Police Union supported UE Local 277 strongly. There was real solidarity between police and strikers, so much so that President David Cameron threatened to bring in State Troopers. The threat brought Cameron into conflict with another strike supporter—Ronald Pina, the District Attorney. Pina commented, "I control the state police in Bristol County and I will never allow them to be used to break a strike."

To consolidate their public support, UE Local 277 launched a petition campaign calling on G+W to modernize Morse or to sell it to someone who would. Local President Rod Poineau commented, "...We haven't got the money to fight them, so the only way is through people." The petition concluded, "G+W has no right to milk Morse, run it into the ground and then liquidate it." The strikers took the petitions along with thousands of leaflets to the streets, to plant gates, to the city festival, to shopping malls, and to churches. Their silkscreened posters, with a Fred Wright cartoon depicting a Morse cow being milked, advising people to "Sign Petition Here" were displayed in businesses throughout the area.

G+W didn't like this approach. One vending machine company which serviced the Morse Tool



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plant put up one of the signs; David Cameron personally called and ordered them to remove it.

Local 277 created ways for the community to show their support, such as donating food to the strike kitchen or directly to the striking families. St. Mary's Orphanage not only contributed food but hooked Local 277 up with their food suppliers. Our Lady of the Assumption Church let the local use its kitchen. Davidson Meat Produce gave hot dogs, Wonder Bread gave bread, Meta Fish Company gave fish, and Stan and Paul's Atlantic Appliances gave a microwave oven.

Churches and clergy were actively involved, giving supplies, services, and space to the strikers. Father Joseph Mulligan, a Jesuit priest from Detroit who has written extensively on G+W's policies in the Dominican Republic, came to New Bedford in June. He spoke to a number of the local clergy as well as to a rally of 250 people. He assured his audience that they were not alone in opposing the conglomerate's exploitative policies.

Late in June, G+W tried to break the momentum of the strike. The company announced it was cutting off insurance to strikers and to those who had retired before age 65. Local 277 immediately took the offensive, announcing it would file suit in U.S. District Court. More important, the union mobilized public pressure. Retirees set up a protest picket line around the plant and turned up in large numbers for an informational rally on July 8. City Councilor George Rogers told the rally that G+W's actions were "unconscionable." Two days later, the company reinstated its insurance coverage, because the issue was "detracting from the...central issues...." UE

staffer Illene Carver commented, "It shows that G+W is susceptible to public pressure. The company canceled the benefits, but the people organized themselves with public pressure and won them back."

Bob Spears, one of the corporate architects of the anti-union campaign, asked UE staffers, "You're not playing fair. Why not just a regular strike? Even if we settle, how can we run a business in this community after you have ruined our reputation?"

Favorable press coverage reinforced community support for the strikers. By cultivating good relations with local reporters, Local 277 got excellent coverage in the press. They had consistently good coverage in the New Bedford *Standard Times*, the Providence *Journal* and the Boston *Globe*. G+W's aggressive pursuit of the press was less effective. Early in the strike, the company took out two full-page ads. The more it tried to deny its disinvestment, the less it was believed. G+W held a long press conference in response to the ICA study: it was so ineffective, one local business editor walked out after half an hour.

Furthermore, the union leadership's work with the national media paid off in favorable coverage in *Business Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and on National Public Radio. This publicity reinforced the strikers' resolve, gave strength to their strike support activities, and tarnished G+W's reputation.

“Maybe it’s a long shot, but if we go out of business, we’ll go out with our dignity.”

The Strike—The Labor Movement.

Over the years, UE had built strong ties with the rest of organized labor in the New Bedford area; now, practically every local union joined the Citizens Committee to Support the Morse Strikers. On July 26, Local 277 organized an all union support rally which reflected the strength of their ties. The *Standard Times*, under the headline, “Union Speakers Cite Class War at Rally for Morse,” reported on speeches given by the president of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, representatives of the New Bedford and Cape Cod Labor Councils, strikers from Browne and Sharp in Rhode Island and Westinghouse in Pittsburgh, and representatives from a variety of other unions. Rank-and-file unionists in New Bedford regularly received informational leaflets at their plant gates about the progress of the strike and were solicited for money and food.

As the strike continued, word spread to other locals across the country. UE Local 277 is part of a multi-union Cutting Tool Conference. After being appraised of the situation at Morse, the conference passed a resolution in firm support of the Morse workers: “The member locals of this conference will participate in demonstrations, rallies, and other methods of support when needed, until such time as the companies withdraw their uncalled for concession demands.” Unions at G+W plants were particularly interested. Locals from the Steelworkers, Machinists, Auto-workers, as well as the UE asked their Internationals to request a conference to be convened by the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO to discuss G+W’s strategy and to establish a union response. Although neither the IUD nor the International unions called a conference, the channels of communication G+W locals developed during the strike enabled them to begin exchanging information. In a very real way, the battle fought by UE Local 277 became a model

and a symbol for other unions facing the demand for concessions or suffering the effects of disinvestment.

The Strike Ends.

On August 9, after 13 weeks of the strike, facing growing mobilization against its disinvestment policies, and facing the determination of the UE strikers, G+W backed down. It withdrew its demand for concessions in wages and benefits, and proposed a contract with modest wage, pension, and insurance improvements. The workers ratified the new 33-month pact overwhelmingly and returned to work. Two weeks later, they and their supporters packed the biggest ballroom in New Bedford—the Lincoln Park—and celebrated their victory with a ham and bean dinner. They had won the battle against a huge conglomerate.

Lessons from Morse.

In today’s complicated struggles, many unions and union leaders look to a high tech approach, to professional consulting firms, media packages, and direct mail campaigns. At the heart of the battle in New Bedford, by contrast, was a low budget effort with hard work, courage, ingenuity, and a lot of shoe leather. Old-fashioned qualities. But these old-fashioned qualities, combined with a concrete analysis of corporate exploitation, provided the basis for an aggressive campaign.

At least some of the major lessons from the Morse Strike are:

1. **Think strategically:** UE leadership read the early warning signals and prepared for G+W’s attack. Before their contract expired, they had commissioned and released the ICA study, held the community luncheon, formed a community support committee, gained a pledge of support from the Cutting Tool Conference, and established their various strike committees. But there



as much more to their leadership than simply planning ahead. They not only organized their principal force—the local members—in carrying out a strike. They also developed a broad secondary base of support—the sectors who were mobilized against disinvestment but not necessarily in support of militant unionism, such as the City Council. Effectively developing the interrelationship between these principle and secondary forces helped to at least neutralize segments in the community who are traditionally against labor such as the Chamber of Commerce, parts of the press, and political figures. The Morse Strike, as determined as it was, did not include police violence, strong negative reaction in the press, red-baiting, or other ingredients frequently seen in sharp labor struggles.

2. Take the Offensive—Define the Issues: UE Local 277 did not wait for G+W to charge that union greed was threatening Morse Tool's viability. Instead, the UE went on the attack. By releasing the ICA study to the press before the strike began, Local 277 defined the issue: The conglomerate was milking New Bedford dry, while preparing to abandon it. This approach enabled the UE to challenge capital's "sacred rights" to move wherever it pleased. Although that sounds like a radical thing in these times, it worked. Strike activists were energized by the attack on G+W. Combined with tactical aggressiveness on the picket line, in the press, in the courts, and in the community, UE Local 277 was able to keep the conglomerate giant stumbling and on the defensive.

Equally important, townspeople joined together against the unbridled power of an outsider whose behavior violated community norms. G+W may have a lot of economic power, but in New Bedford, it lacked legitimacy.

By planning ahead, and defining the issues in the strike as corporate disinvestment, UE Local

277 ensured that its members' spirits would not break. But probably the most important sentiment which made all of this possible was the gut feeling in the workers of Morse. Preserving the integrity and advances the union had made through decades of struggle was worth a bitter fight to the end, even facing possible defeat. Victory in this battle was by no means guaranteed. Particularly in the beginning, there had to be lonely and difficult moments for some leaders who fought for a course which was leading into some unfamiliar and possibly dangerous territory. This spirit was best expressed by Local President Rod Poineau, who commented, "Maybe it's a long shot, but if we go out of business, we'll go out with our dignity."

It was a long battle, and strikers suffered severe financial pressures. By holding out, strikers offered a beacon of hope to trade unionists around the country who are wracked by economic depression and political defeat. The militant, democratic unionism of Local 277, backed up with the research of the Industrial Cooperative Association, provide hope that American labor can do more than retreat with dignity in the hard times ahead. □