

Fighting Back

Workers challenge plant shut-downs

BY LANCE COMPA

Union workers had little trouble reaching a contract settlement with Black & Decker in April 1984 after the company took over General Electric's main housewares plant in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Negotiations were peaceful, and Black & Decker said it looked forward to a long partnership with Allentown workers. But in November, Black & Decker announced it would close the plant.

The shutdown, planned for early next year, would eliminate the only union operation in the Black & Decker chain. Members of United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) Local 128 called the decision a "betrayal" and, like some other union workers faced with plant closings, they are fighting back.

The union has set its sights on a weak spot—the company's entry into the housewares market. Black & Decker recently bought out General Electric's housewares division and soon must replace the GE label with its own. This may be the biggest brand-name changeover in history, and the tool company is backing it with a \$100 million marketing blitz.

Allentown workers, and their supporters in area unions, churches, and community groups, have responded by holding stormy protests at a Black & Decker stockholders meeting near Baltimore, at the National Housewares Show in Chicago, and outside the offices of a New York advertising agency that is handling the name change. Union members have talked to editors of housewares industry trade journals, arguing that shutdown of the profitable Allentown plant will undermine Black & Decker's entry into its new market. They are also planning to meet with Wall Street stock analysts. "We want to shake investor confidence in Black & Decker's ability to pull off the move into housewares," says Paul Kokolus, president of UE Local 128.

The Allentown campaign is one community's fight to prevent a plant closing in this time of shutdowns and runaway shops. In the past decade, millions of U.S. factory jobs have been lost—almost 250,000 during the first half of 1985 alone. Steel mills, rubber factories, auto plants, elec-

trical equipment shops, oil refineries, and other industrial enterprises have shuttered operations in cities and towns around the country. Semiskilled workers have lost positions that once brought a decent living.

The American labor movement was largely unprepared for this onslaught. Most unions, reluctant to openly question management's right to close a facility, have adopted a strategy of orderly retreat, calling for advance notice of shutdowns, greater severance pay, extended insurance coverage, early retirement benefits, transfer rights, and retraining and relocation funds.

These are important demands, but as a strategy, they concede too much. The plants still close, even as workers learn that shutdowns often stem from management's poor planning, shortsightedness, and greed, not from well-informed company decisions guided by neutral market forces.

The United Electrical Workers union, at Allentown and elsewhere, has tried to develop tactics to block "final" plant-closing decisions. In their battles, UE members have challenged management-knows-best assumptions. Instead of offering concession packages, they have gone on the offensive. These efforts illustrate some possible strategies and tactics for labor in general.

The Westinghouse Air Brake Company (WABCO) announced in 1981 that it would close an outmoded, five-story rubber mill in Wilmerding, Pennsylvania, where gaskets and rubber parts for rail-car braking systems were manufactured. The company told UE Local 610 that it planned to build a new rubber mill in North or South Carolina.

The Wilmerding mill, with 300 workers, was part of a larger WABCO transportation division employing 4,000. Dan Marguriet, UE's business agent at the time, led the union effort against the closing. He organized a drive to gather political support in Pittsburgh and valley towns east of the city, and the union held plant-gate rallies and shop-floor protests in the rubber mill and throughout the WABCO complex.

After nine months of protests and growing political pressure, the company agreed to build a new rubber mill just ten miles from the old one and employ the same workers under the same union con-

tract. "We had some leverage since they were only planning to move part of the operation," says Marguriet. "But it still took strong action to make the company stay."

Aside from saving 300 rubber mill jobs, the victory gave WABCO workers the confidence they needed for a successful seven-month strike to fight givebacks the following year, Marguriet says.

Members of UE Local 277 also won a strike against concessions in 1982 at Gulf & Western's Morse Cutting Tool plant in New Bedford, Massachusetts. In fighting the company, the union mobilized community support against the big conglomerate's practice of milking profits from Morse to finance acquisitions in non-manufacturing businesses instead of reinvesting money in plant improvements.

When Gulf & Western announced plans to close the Morse facility in mid-1984, the union and the community used the networks built during the 1982 strike to fight the closing. New Bedford's mayor said the city would exercise its power of eminent domain to take over the plant and keep it in operation until a suitable buyer could be found. Not since Harry Truman's short-lived seizure of steel plants had a factory been expropriated in the United States.

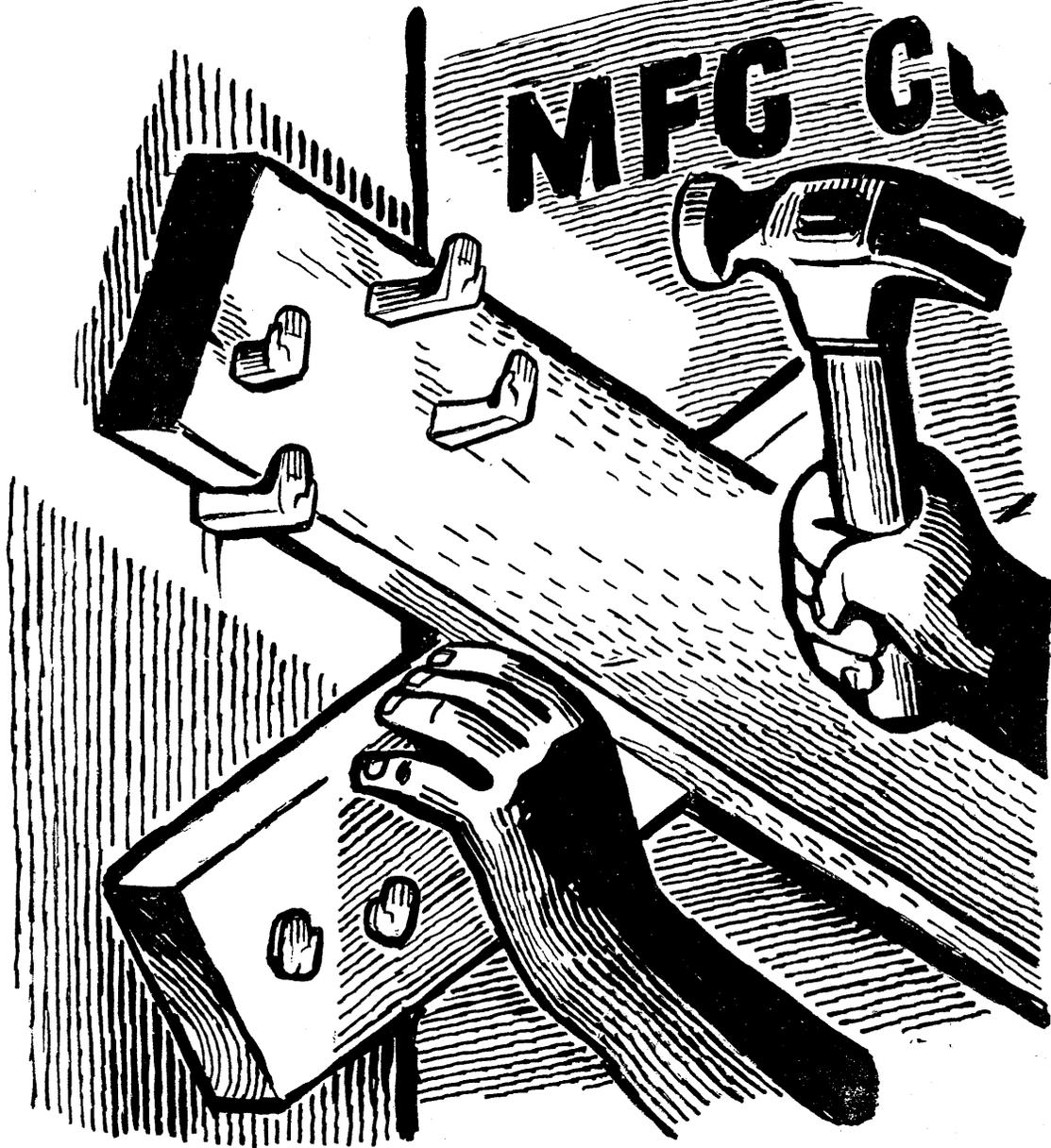
"Without our work in the strike and our educational job in the community, we could never have gotten the political support to make the eminent domain threat a credible one," says Local 277 President Rod Poineau.

Faced with the threat of seizure, Gulf & Western stepped up its own efforts to sell the plant. It found a buyer acceptable to the union and the city, and the plant remains in operation today. Labor relations are "excellent," Poineau says.

Even an unsuccessful fight can have a positive effect. In Charleston, South Carolina, a UE local took action in June 1984 when General Electric gave notice that it would close a facility that manufactured steam turbine generator parts.

GE said it was forced to consolidate steam turbine operations at the company's base in Schenectady, New York, because of a drop in construction of new power stations. At the time of the announcement, the productive, fifteen-year-old Charleston plant employed 450 workers, 330 of them represented by UE Local 1202.

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Under a national collective bargaining agreement between UE and General Electric, the company provided one year's advance notice of the shutdown and would give hourly wage earners severance pay ranging from \$12,000 to \$15,000, as well as twelve months' extended insurance coverage and \$1,800 each for retraining courses.

But the workers did not want to go quietly. Local 1202 formed an Alternative Use Committee to explore product lines that could take advantage of the skills and equipment at the workplace. The committee's economic conversion plan concluded that the Charleston plant could manufacture parts for alternative energy systems, environmental protection devices, and tanks, containers, and piping for the treatment and transport of hazardous waste. The union presented its plan to General Electric in October 1984 and demanded that the company either convert the plant or find a buyer who would.

At the same time, UE launched a state-wide campaign to build support among labor, religious, political, and community groups. Catholic Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler, who led a community forum on economic conversion, said that the UE plan reflected values expressed in the U.S. bishops' draft pastoral letter on the American economy. A Charleston legislator introduced a bill that would require economic conversion planning by any company contemplating a shutdown of operations in South Carolina.

"It was the biggest labor-community alliance in South Carolina since the '68 Charleston hospital strike," says State Senator Herbert Fielding, who played a key role in building the coalition that included participants ranging from Jesse Jackson, who led a plant-gate march and rally at the GE site, to Republican Senator Strom Thurmond.

General Electric went through with the Charleston plant closing in May, but UE

members vowed to stay together and offer their economic conversion plan to potential employers. "We've got a ready-made force of skilled workers who can hit the ground running in a new operation," says Local President Carnell Gathers. "Sooner or later some company is going to want into this plant, and we'll be waiting for them."

UE's 1982 fight to save the Simpson Dura-Vent plant near Oakland also ended with a closing. Shortly after UE organized workers there, the union learned that management was planning to shut the facility down and move operations seventy-five miles north to rural Vacaville. Labor and community pressures delayed the closing for six months and succeeded in securing severance pay, extended insurance, and transfer rights for the workers.

What's more, the publicity and lobbying by Dura-Vent workers and supporters convinced the Vacaville City Council to adopt the nation's first municipal plant

closing law. The ordinance barred public financing for companies seeking to run from other California locations to Vacaville, thus stripping Dura-Vent of its industrial revenue bond. It also established transfer rights for workers caught in a runaway shop and guaranteed resident status for employees transferring into Vacaville, making them eligible for low-income housing assistance. Similar legislation is now being considered in Santa Monica, Santa Cruz, Berkeley, and Oakland.

Workers in other unions have fought hard against plant closings, too. The United Steelworkers and their community allies in the Tri-State Conference on Steel have used twenty-four-hour vigils and mass rallies to rescue U.S. Steel facilities in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, from an appointment with the wrecking ball. A Bakery, Confection-

ery and Tobacco Workers local, in solidarity with locals at nine other plants around the country and backed by an aggressive community organizing effort, persuaded Nabisco in 1982 to reverse its decision to close a Pittsburgh facility. That same year, the United Auto Workers (UAW), with help from the University of Alabama, put together a plan for modernizing GM's parts plant in Tuscaloosa and convinced the automaker to keep the facility open. Chrysler, too, put aside plans to close a Detroit forge plant after UAW members there outlined ways to renovate and rebuild the facility without interrupting production.

Unfortunately, corporate executives still hold the trump card—the legal right to shut down facilities regardless of objections from workers, unions, or communities. Unions lost the combative influence of communists, socialists, and other radicals

in their Cold War rush to conformity, and now the mainstream labor movement fights over workers' share of the economic pie without challenging the system that bakes it.

Perhaps that will change as unions begin to look carefully at each plant closing and fight back with tactics that take advantage of companies' vulnerabilities. The record surveyed here shows that victories are possible—even under current conditions—and that important political education can be carried out, win or lose. Labor resistance, political pressure, and public relations warfare hurt employers in the marketplace and force them to think twice about shutdowns. Such techniques can build momentum for a Federal law stripping companies of the absolute right to close plants, and help reestablish a spirit of militancy that can animate the labor movement. ■