Autolite Strike 1934 Essay, Research Paper

Strikes were common place in the early 1930 s in all industrial and

manufacturing corporations. They were used to win power away from the

corporate giants, and put it in the hands of the working class. Labor used

strikes for a variety of reasons, some for higher wages, some for working

conditions, some for safety on the job, and still others for recognition.

In a book entitled, I Remember Like Today: The Auto-Lite Strike of

1934 Philip A. Korth and Margaret R. Beegle compile an oral history

account of this fight for the rights of the working class. To gain the

knowledge acquired for this book, the authors searched high and low to

find the living survivors of this turning point for organized labor in

Toledo. After discovering the individuals who could help, the investigators

interviewed and then recorded the men and women s accounts of the

strike. Then they transcribed the interviews verbatim. This method

provides for a more personal approach to learning what had happened in

the strike. It allows the reader to see what actually happen through the

eyes of the ones involved.

The book is a collection statements, stories, and feelings of the men

and women involved in the strike. Each individual tells their story based on

headings, and that is what complied the chapters. In this method, the

reader gets to hear all sides of the story because Korth and Beegle get

some who were union supports, union organizers, some who were strike

breakers, management. Certainly no critic can say, this book only tells one

side of the story.

All of the forth-coming events, activities, and problems took place in

Toledo, Ohio at the Electric Auto-Lite Company. The Electric Auto-Lite

Company was a part of the automotive assembly industry. It used mainly

unskilled workers to operate the machinery, and the machinery was that

which possessed the skill.

There were two separate strikes at Auto-Lite. The first was used to

force the company into recognizing the union; that was the first step

towards collective bargaining recognition. It stared on February 23,

lasted only four days, and resulted in the reinstatement of the 15 workers

who walked out, and an agreement. The workers won the battle but that

was a long way from winning the war. Auto-Lite gave the union a 30-day

contract, which basically stated the company would recognize the union for

thirty days, but even in that thirty days the company refused to recognize

the union as a bargaining representative of the workers. When this thirty

days reached its conclusion, the union was no better off then when it

started. In fact in those thirty days the company was preparing itself for a

strike. They started mass hiring new workers, so they could keep running

the company if the labor walked out.

The second strike began on April 13, and consisted of some 400

Auto-Lite workers. The strike seemingly divided the work force equally, as

many went in as picketed. Then on May 3, a court injunction restricted the

number of picketers at one time to a minuscule twenty-five. This rallied the

surrounding men and women in the area to unite and break this injunction

that limited all of their freedom. On May 21, 22, and 23 more then 6,000

men and women united in front of Auto-Lite to hear speakers and to

protest the company, along with protesting the court injunction.

This is when the real trouble started for the company and the

picketers. On May 23, A young women by the name of Alma Hand was

stuck by a steel bracket which caused a riot among the crowd, and which

initiated a raid on the building. The deputies fired tear gas at the would be

invaders to stop them from storming the facility. That night a raging crowd

refused to allow the scabs off the premises. After this episode, the Ohio

National Guard was called in to restore the peace. These guardsmen only

worsened the situation. On the next day, May 24, they charged the crowd

wounding 12, then firing their rifles and killing one, then later that same

day, they fired once again wounding two more picketers. By the 26th of

May, with demands that the plant be closed and the Guard withdraw,

another tragic confrontation occurred. The crowd attacked the Guard, 200

were injured and 50 were arrested.

The plant remained closed for the following week and did not reopen

until June 5. At this point, the strikers had emerged victorious. After all the

hardships, injuries, and deaths, the union had been established and

recognized. This was a shallow victory at first due to a number of

circumstances. First of all, the old workers who remained at work

throughout the strike had preference during the rehiring process.

Secondly, betrayers who associated themselves with management formed

their own bargaining organization called the Auto-Lite Council. This

organization acquired for them preference in rehiring.

The Auto-Lite Council soon diminished in numbers, while Local

18384 was increasing dramatically. This was due to the realization that

the strikers were the ones who had won them collective bargaining, not the

Auto-Lite Council. Therefore, their loyalties lied with the organization that

had created the situation in which they had more power, respect, and

better working conditions.

The Auto-Lite strike is a perfect example of how the labor movement

has advanced. The first strike only involved a mediocre 15 men. The

second strike reached out to about 50% of the work force. The men and

women of Auto-Lite had embraced their union and made it their own.

This represents the labor movement because at the start only about

3 million workers were unionized. At the pinnacle of the movement nearly

50% of the work force was organized, the number was in excess of 10

million individuals. Workers saw how the union could help them. They

saw solidarity and unity, which when combined produced a force to be

reckoned with. The union provided for higher wages, more benefits, and

better working conditions. This idea is what attracted more members and

this belief is what united the men and women at Auto-Lite.

The strike also represents the risks and hardships accepted by the

organizers who take on the challenge of forming a union. The 15 who

went out in the first Auto-Lite strike took the chance of losing their jobs and

hampering their families welfare to form a union just to help every worker

in the plant. The men also accepted that they were going to lose their jobs

and would have to fight for reinstatement. But all the risks taken, and all

the brief hardships felt were well worth it considering the ends. Their union

was recognized. Not to the extent they wished, but nonetheless they won

recognition, which catapulted them to eventual complete victory.

This result was not always the case. In some strikes the union failed

and the workers lost big. To the credit of the workers, their supporters,

and their organizers the men and women of Auto-Lite were triumphant and

won the fight of all fights; to gain respect, power, and recognition.

This event was the turning point in labor relations in the city of

Toledo. It gave confindence and self worth to the working class, and

stripped the company management of their unimpeded omnipotence. The

Auto-Lite Strike of 1934 changed the entire way that company operations

were run, and for that, those who work in Toledo should be applauded, and

recognized for the achievements they accomplished.

Bibliography

Korth, Philip A. and Margaret R. Beegle. I Remember Like Today: The Auto-Lite Strike of 1934. East Lansing Michigan: Michigan State University Press. 1988

330