

USA: Wisconsin Crane Strike Crumples

Thursday 7 June 2012, by [SLAUGHTER Jane](#) (Date first published: 20 January 2012).

Machinists at Manitowoc Crane in Wisconsin voted 112-59 yesterday to end their nine-week strike over union rights. “The outcome isn’t what we wanted,” said bargaining committeeman Craig Holschbach.

Dues check-off and the union shop will end. New hires will have the option whether to join the union, and members will be asked annually whether they want to continue belonging. Management’s “freedom of choice” campaign was widely seen as copycatting Governor Scott Walker’s successful assault on public employees.

This week’s threat by the employer to permanently replace them convinced a majority of members to return to work. Just six days earlier they had voted to stay out, 140-37.

Permanent replacement is legal unless a union is striking over unfair labor practices—so many unions avoid that risk by waiting till the employer commits ULPs. Holschbach said an unfair-labor-practice strike had been “our business agent’s intent, but the company has a chance to appeal.” A few dozen temporary replacements had been working on the cranes since soon after the strike began November 15.

Holschbach said the strike did back management off somewhat: Its earlier demand was that workers be allowed to opt out of the union every month. He thought the strike was worth it: “We showed them how strong we are on this issue, if they want to do this to anyone else, what it’s going to take.”

He noted that dues check-off at the plant began only about 15 years ago. Before that, workers had paid their steward or put their dues in a drop box. Now they’ll be looking into bank drafts, automatic deductions that Wisconsin’s public sector unions are also promoting as check-off has disappeared.

Workers had been receiving strike pay from the Machinists international, and a rally on December 10 drew union buses from around the state. But, said Steelworkers sub-district director Bill Breihan, “the unions are so engaged in the Walker recall effort, not a hell of a lot was done after that.”

Dave Poklinkoski, president of a Madison Electrical Workers (IBEW) local, said the Wisconsin labor movement was gearing up to provide material and other aid. The South Central Federation of Labor, based in Madison, had formed a support committee.

Help at Home

But the Machinists were slow to respond to offers of help. One observer said their strike strategy seemed stuck in past decades: “Go on strike and stand on the picket line till you lose.”

Workers were also hurt by a lack of support from within Manitowoc Crane. The three other unions on the property had language allowing them to honor picket lines but chose not to. Instead, they wore black armbands in the plant and picketed with the strikers at lunchtime and after work. Participation from the Boilermakers, the largest union, was reportedly sparse, while members of the two small unions, the Electrical Workers (IBEW) and office employees (OPEIU), were strong. An all-

unions meeting wasn't held until January 8.

"It's a setback for labor," Breihan said. "Now the employers know all they have to do is take a two-month strike and they can be rid of union security."

"There's no reason a local union should fight all by itself," said Poklinkoski, a veteran of last year's demonstrations of 100,000 against Walker's attack. "Not when we've learned there are lots of people ready to rise up and support them."

"The labor movement is doing a great job mobilizing people for the recall—it's historically phenomenal," he said, "but at the same time, unions have their individual struggles with particular employers, and we've got to win those fights, too."

Jane Slaughter

P.S.

* From Jane Slaughter's blog, Labor Notes, Fri, 01/20/2012 - 5:03pm:
<http://labornotes.org/blogs/2012/01/wisconsin-crane-strike-crumple>