

Mike Alewitz



The Local P-9 mural inauguration ceremony. The mural was dedicated to Nelson Mandela, then imprisoned in South Africa, as an expression of international labor solidarity. The mural project was organized, designed, and directed by Mike Alewitz and Denny Mealy. It was painted by striking members and supporters of Local P-9 UFCW.

The Hormel Strike at 35: A Retrospective for Our Times

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Years ago, at an academic conference, a labor historian friend asked panelists, “Why, if so much of our labor history consists of tragedy, do labor historians tell stories as if they are triumphs?” His question has haunted me. Now, as I reflect on the Hormel meatpacking strike of 1985–1986, it seems clear that the Hormel story reflects both tragedy and triumph in labor history.

The strike became the subject of multiple books and an Academy Award–winning documentary film (Barbara Kopple’s *American Dream*). It also became an iconic story of the impact of the transition from Keynesianism to neoliberalism for American unions and workers. This year marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of the strike. It comes as the nation faces challenges posed by Covid-19, a heightened societal awareness of the role of systemic racism in the development of our country, and concerns about white working-class support for Donald Trump. A reconsideration of the Hormel struggle in light of these challenges gives us an opportunity to draw lessons from both the tragic and triumphant sides of this story.

In August 1985, 1,700 meatpacking workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9, struck the flagship plant of George A. Hormel and Company in Austin, Minnesota to protest a company demand for a 23 percent wage cut. The dramatic themes and issues, twists and turns, of the strike captured the national imagination and led to the creation of more than thirty support committees across the United States. (One of these was the Twin Cities Local P-9 Support Committee, which I chaired from 1985 to 1987.) Aid for the strikers came from nineteen countries. This strike touched a raw, deep nerve in Ronald Reagan’s

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While the Keynesian approach had seen the boosting of demand as central to economic growth and success, the neoliberal strategies of government and corporations sought to reduce all costs to maximize profits. Corporate managements threatened workers and unions with the relocation of production facilities to low-wage regions, inside or outside the country, while demanding concessions on compensation and work rules. At times, their actions provoked strikes, to which they responded by hiring “permanent replacements” and removing a union presence altogether. Local and state governments were challenged by such threats, and to entice corporations to stay, they often offered tax breaks and infrastructure development along with putting pressure on unions to accept pay and benefit cuts or freezes.

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A Union with Deep Roots

By the late 1930s and 1940s, the meatpacking industry's workforce had become well organized. Unionization of the industry grew from its origins as the AFL's Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (which maintained a presence in packinghouses from the 1890s through World War I) to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)-influenced Independent Union of All Workers (IUAW) (born in Austin in 1933 and spread throughout the Midwest in the mid-to-late 1930s) and the CIO's Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, emerging as the United Packinghouse Workers of America during and after World War II. The union's logo, a white hand clasping a Black hand, was more than symbolic, as the descendants of Irish, German, and Eastern European immigrants joined forces with African-American migrants from the South and the children of Mexican immigrants to form a substantial workplace presence along with serious strength at the bargaining table. In major meatpacking cities like Chicago, Omaha, Kansas City, South St. Paul, and Austin, the union's influence extended into city halls, state capitols, and the halls of Congress.

The seismic macroeconomic shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism that began in the late 1970s had reached the meatpacking industry even earlier. Corporate ownership had shifted from family-owned firms like Armour, Swift, Wilson, Cudahy, and Oscar Meyer to conglomerates like Occidental Petroleum (Iowa Beef Processors) and Greyhound (Con-Agra). Old urban-situated plants were closed, and new facilities were constructed in smaller communities—closer to the sources of animals, to be sure, but also further from the influence of the diverse workforce and its well-organized unions. At the same time, the major union in the industry was restructured, first when the United Packinghouse Workers of America merged with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen in 1968 and then when the Amalgamated merged with the Retail Clerks International Association to form the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) in 1979. The Austin Hormel local maintained its identity as Local P-9—"P" standing for

packinghouse—but it found itself being absorbed in ever more generic organizations. The UFCW did maintain a "Packinghouse Division" and, within it, a "Hormel chain" of locals at the company's seven plants. But there was neither a unified contract nor a unified strategy for locals and workers throughout the industry.

In 1977, Hormel management announced to Local P-9, as well as to city and state government, that they were planning to close the Austin plant and were considering the construction of a new facility far from Austin. Only concessions in wages and work rules from the union and tax breaks and infrastructure support from the government would keep them in the city in which they had operated since 1890. In exchange for building a new plant in Austin, Hormel demanded—and received—from the government property tax forgiveness for seven years and the construction of new exit and entrance ramps and new service roads to Highway I-90. Management pressed the local union leadership not only for a seven-year wage freeze but also for a restructuring of the entire contract, a contract which had, since 1933, provided workers with stable earnings in a notoriously seasonal industry. The former system, which had been introduced by the IUAW, included a group piecework bonus arrangement, which drew upon and reinforced solidarity on the job, department by department. It also included the "banking" of overtime pay to subsidize earnings during slack weeks and months. The 1933 contract also included a fifty-two-week layoff notice. These payment schemes and work rules had enabled workers to maintain considerable control over the pace and speed of production. Hormel management demanded elimination of all these benefits. On the basis of these concessions, they built their new plant in Austin.

As bad as the deal might have seemed on paper, when the new plant opened in 1982, workers found working under the new conditions to be hell. Work was reorganized; the workforce was reduced by a third; production lines were sped up; and injury rates skyrocketed. Veteran workers quit and were replaced by inexperienced new hires. Workers' complaints were rebuffed by management. Turmoil

spread from the shop floor to the union hall, where a new, younger leadership team was elected in 1984 to lead the local. New President Jim Guyette and Business Agent Pete Winkels had deep roots in Austin. They had learned the long history of the union from hours of listening to IUAU founder Frank Ellis at Lefty's Bar. They identified themselves as part of the "Vietnam War-era generation," claiming that label as a way to associate themselves with dissent and protest. They blamed the older generation of leadership for not having organized resistance to management's demands in 1977 and for management's implementation of an intensive shop floor regime in the new plant.

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When contract negotiations opened in the fall of 1984, instead of offering a wage increase, management demanded a 23 percent wage cut from the 1,700 workers in the Austin plant. After a seven-year wage freeze, the demand for a wage cut was seen by workers as an insult added to the injury they had already sustained. UFCW national officials, at the top of the union and its packinghouse division, urged the new leadership to accept Hormel management's offer. They argued that locals at other employers had accepted wage concessions and that a "controlled retreat" was the only way to maintain a high rate of unionization in the meatpacking workforce nationally.

P-9's new leadership rejected this advice and made plans for the union's first strike since the one in 1933 which had established the union. They argued that not only was it wrong and unfair to ask their members to take concessions, but also that Austin was the place where the UFCW could begin to reverse the downward trend in workers' wages and conditions throughout the meatpacking industry. In preparation for a strike, they built a thick internal network of committees responsible for a range of activities from public speaking and mobilizing picketers to running a food pantry and a Christmas toy

shop for the children of strikers. They mobilized retirees; reached out to locals at other Hormel plants; solicited the support of union activists in the Twin Cities and across the country; and hired consultant Ray Rogers, founder of Corporate Campaign, Inc. With Rogers, they developed a strategy that emphasized the economic links between Hormel and key regional banks; sought a very visible public presence; and put their members forward as their greatest resource, not just as picketers but also as public speakers, artists, toy makers, cooks, and strategists. More than a hundred strikers collaborated with artist Mike Alewitz and Local P-9 member Denny Mealy in the design and painting of a huge mural on the exterior of the Austin Labor Center, and they voted to dedicate the mural to then-imprisoned Nelson Mandela.

The ensuing strike galvanized the attention of a labor movement that was reeling from Ronald Reagan's firing of unionized air traffic controllers in the summer of 1981; the closing of factories and the export of jobs abroad; widespread employer demands for concessions; and the weakening of labor laws, ranging from the right to organize to workplace health and safety regulations. When Hormel workers stood up for themselves in a very public and creative way, they inspired other workers who were facing—or fearing—similar threats, demands, and pressures. And when the strikers, who were receiving meager strike benefits of \$45 a week, asked for support—to make car and mortgage payments, to keep the heat and lights on, to buy groceries, and, later, to join picket lines, participate in rallies, and boycott Hormel products—the response was unprecedented. Following the example of the Twin Cities Support Committee, thirty solidarity committees were organized across the country. This support not only enabled strikers to survive materially for months and months, but it also inspired them to stand firm, knowing that they were fighting for more than themselves. At the same time, this process inspired hundreds of workers in the Twin Cities—autoworkers, printers, railroad workers, teachers, steelworkers, teamsters, bus drivers, and more—who were themselves facing demands from their employers for concessions, not only to support the Hormel strikers

but also to stand firm against their own employers. This process was replicated in other cities, and, in 1986, a new organization, the National Rank-and-File Against Concessions, held its founding convention.

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Though the strikers persevered, in the end, they could not prevail. The UFCW allowed Hormel to shift production to its seven plants in other parts of the country, despite contract provisions that allowed workers to refuse to do “struck work” and despite the willingness of workers in some of these plants to make such a refusal and walk out instead. In Austin, the depressed regional farm economy became a source of replacement workers. When picketers, backed by thousands of supporters from the Twin Cities and elsewhere, tried to block strikebreakers from entering the plant gates, Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich sent the National Guard to escort them through the lines. With the support of the international union leadership, a core group of opponents to the strike from within the union organized a back-to-work movement among the strikers, leading about five hundred of them to cross their own picket lines, reclaiming their jobs and working alongside a thousand “permanent replacements.” The UFCW placed the local in trusteeship, made officers out of the leaders of the back-to-work movement, and allowed management to subcontract the “kill and cut” operations and pay workers in those jobs even lower wages. They also sandblasted the mural dedicated to Nelson Mandela from the wall of the Austin Labor Center. More than thousand strikers were forced to retire or take a place on a recall list. Three hundred workers were fired from the recall list for picket line actions during the strike or for advocating a continued boycott of Hormel products. The strike was defeated, and the militant activists of Local P-9 were banished from the plant and the local union.

Despite this defeat, Local P-9’s resistance inspired hundreds of thousands of workers, not just in the United States but across the world, who were feeling the economic and political lash that would drive the new corporate global strategy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Hormel strike signaled a fight back against the neoliberal corporate agenda: free trade, plant closings, capital flight and the export of jobs, the reorganization of employment relationships through subcontracting and contracting out, deregulation and privatization, and the exploitation of immigrants.

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From 1985 to 2010, the influence of the Hormel strike reverberated in the Twin Cities by encouraging new thinking and new expressions of solidarity. Labor activists and academics (including me) created the St. Paul “Labor Speakers Club,” hosted monthly by the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly, and the annual “Meeting the Challenge” conference, which not only celebrated labor history but also explored issues such as labor-management cooperation and the North American Free Trade Agreement. Visions of solidarity inspired railroad workers to band together in the Intercraft Association of Minnesota and postal workers in the Workers for One Postal Union. Hotel workers, reflecting not only the influence of the Hormel strike but also the energy and experiences of new immigrants, linked a strike at a local hotel in January 1993 to efforts by the American Indian Movement to challenge the nickname of the Washington football team. On Super Bowl weekend, strikers sat down in the lobby of the hotel and then leafleted the football stadium. Four years later, 1,500 workers—one-third of them immigrants, speaking seventeen languages—struck nine Minneapolis hotels. Local activists who had built the Twin Cities P-9 Support Committee organized a support committee for

the striking hotel workers. The influence of the Hormel strike was also manifest within local unions, as activists who had experienced the passion and energy of the Hormel strike became leaders of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), SEIU, and United Auto Workers (UAW) locals as well as a number of rail union locals. This energy also inspired Twin Cities activists to join their sisters and brothers at the Wisconsin state capitol in 2010 in protest against Governor Scott Walker's "budget bill." Activists in that period often referred to "the solidarity virus" that they had caught in Austin—the idea that workers should support other workers when they take the risks of standing up to management.

As of 2020, most of that energy is gone. Nationally, employers' persistent neoliberal practices have combined with parallel government policies (underfunding and understaffing of regulatory bodies like Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA], appointing anti-union ideologues to oversight agencies, elevating anti-labor judges to higher courts, and more) to reduce the size and power of unions and workers. Locally, Ford Motor Company's closing of its St. Paul truck plant removed a great source of energy and progressive action from the labor movement. Campaigns to unionize faculty and graduate students at the University of Minnesota failed, as did a campaign to organize adjunct faculty at local private colleges. A particularly disturbing sign of the ebbing progressive energy came in Austin itself.

The decision of commemoration planners not to invite the workers currently employed and exploited in the plant to share in the solidarity they had experienced during the strike was a grim nadir for the legacy of the Hormel strike.

At the time of the strike, the Hormel workforce was almost entirely white, and all the replacement workers in 1986 were white. Immigrants of color began to be hired in the early 1990s as the white replacements quit. In the summer of 2010, a group of veteran strikers

made plans for a twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration of the strike. They debated whether to invite the largely Latinx workforce then employed in the plant. Someone said, "They took our jobs!" A few argued that "their" jobs had been taken by other white Midwesterners, much like themselves. Over the next dozen years, they pointed out, these white replacement workers had quit because of lousy working conditions and low wages. Only then had Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan immigrants been recruited to work at Hormel and its internal subcontractor, Quality Pork Products. But this argument went unheeded. The organizers of the event allowed the dominant xenophobic narrative to override their actual experience and to erase what they had seen on the picket line in 1986, as impoverished white people, protected by the National Guard, drove beat-up cars through the plant gates. The decision of commemoration planners *not* to invite the workers currently employed and exploited in the plant to share in the solidarity they had experienced during the strike was a grim nadir for the legacy of the Hormel strike.

Meatpacking Workers: Essential or Sacrificial?

Many activists, observers, and analysts have noted that Covid-19 has ripped the veil off the deep structures of inequity in American life. From the limits in our health care system and the miseries of our long-term care facilities to the racialized inequities in home ownership and access to quality education, the pandemic has revealed how deeply, deeply unequal our society is. It has also laid bare the inadequacies of our workplace safety protocols, processes, and protections. In September 2019, six months before the pandemic hit, Human Rights Watch issued a hundred-page report, "When We're Dead and Buried Our Bones Will Keep Hurting: Workers' Rights Under Threat in the U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants." This report not only emphasized the high rates of serious injury and chronic illness among meatpacking workers but also provided these eye-opening numbers: that in 1983, for the first time since statistics were kept, meatpacking workers' wages fell below the national

average for manufacturing workers; that in 2002, their wages had fallen 24 percent below the national average; and in 2018, meatpacking workers' wages had fallen 44 percent below that average! While there is plenty of blame to put on employers and the government, we must recognize that meatpacking workers are *unionized at a rate of 60 percent*, compared to U.S. private sector workers on the whole at 8 percent! Yet, as news reports on the "PBS News Hour" and National Public Radio as well as in *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* have recognized, unions have been ineffective in protecting workers in meatpacking plants. This ineffectiveness, as this essay has shown, has historical roots.

Unionized or not, pity the workers whose status in this pandemic has ascended from "invisible" to "essential." In May 2020, New York City subway conductor Gabriela Bhaskar wrote in a *New York Times* essay that she considers herself and her fellow workers "sacrificial" rather than "essential." Nowhere has this been clearer than in meatpacking. Counties across the United States with meatpacking plants have Covid-19 infection rates *five times* the national average. Forty-one thousand workers employed in five hundred plants have been infected. In late April, the federal government responded due to a wave of negative publicity. On April 26, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and OSHA issued a set of "recommended guidelines" for meatpacking plants. While workers have filed eight thousand complaints, OSHA's inspections are *down by two-thirds* over their inspections in 2019. A day after the CDC/OSHA press release, President Trump, invoking his powers under the Defense Production Act, termed meatpacking workers "essential" and ordered them back to work.

These meatpacking workers continue to work—and continue to die. They also continue to fight back. In the six months since the pandemic began, there have been 230 strikes and job actions in meatpacking plants. They are organizing into unions, within their unions, and in umbrella organizations linking unions and worker centers, like the Southern Workers Assembly (southernworker.org) and Venceremos—in Arkansas (<https://www.facebook.com/venceremosarkansas/>).

It would be remiss not to note the emergence of *new energy* in the labor movement, from local unions supporting protests against police brutality and new organizing among hospitality workers to multi-stakeholder projects like the Athena Coalition, which seeks to rein in Amazon. The energy and leadership is coming from a new generation—people of color, women, LGBTQ+—with new identities and ideas. Their emergence betokens a new wave of labor activism, to which labor historians and educators can contribute by sharing the story of the Hormel strike and the ensuing twenty-five years of activism it helped to inspire.

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In 2013, my partner Beth Cleary and I founded the East Side Freedom Library in St. Paul's most diverse and economically challenged neighborhood. Our mission was to "inspire solidarity, work for justice, and advocate for equity." Our programs are designed to facilitate bridge-building: between immigrants and the labor movement; between white working-class people and people of color; between Native people and whites, people of color, and immigrants; and among different immigrant communities. One of our programs provides mentoring for middle and high school students in National History Day projects. Two years ago, students were asked to address the theme, "Triumph and Tragedy in History." Most of the earnest young scholars came to the Freedom Library with a story in mind that they intended to categorize as *either* a "tragedy" or a "triumph." Over weeks and months of conversation with them, I began to suggest, at least as process, that they consider how their chosen events could be *both* "tragedy" and "triumph." I would suggest that we can best serve the emergence of a new wave of labor activism by

commemorating the thirty-fifth anniversary of Hormel strike with an awareness of both its tragic and triumphant dimensions.


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