

Hormel Strike P-9 Mural

by Denny Mealy, Mike Alewitz and volunteer striking Hormel workers

Austin, Minnesota, 1986

Destroyed by international officers of the United Food & Commercial Workers Union

ON AUGUST 17, 1985, 1500 members of Local P-9, United Food and Commercial Workers Union, struck the Hormel meat-packing plant in Austin, Minnesota. The strike began as an economic struggle by workers to defend their standard of living and fight against giving further concessions to a profit-rich company. It ended as a bitter conflict that galvanized workers' support from around the country and internationally. In the course of their struggle, the P-9ers took on the local authorities, the courts and the press, all of whom acted on behalf of the company. The National Guard was called in to suppress the strike. But the union mobilized its members, often nightly, in a display of democracy not seen in the labor movement for many years. Unionists and activists poured into Austin to participate in the pickets, demonstrations and rallies. P-9 became a fight of rank and file unionists throughout the nation. The lives of many of the strikers became transformed. As they entered into the field of political activity, these "typical workers" became class-struggle militants, willing to face the jails and bullets of the employers in their fight for social justice. They learned to look beyond their own narrow economic interests, and instead viewed their struggle as part of an international movement of workers against all their employers.

In the midst of the fray, Denny Mealy, a P-9 leader and artist, and I led the workers in painting a wonderful mural which came to symbolize the strike. We dedicated the mural to then imprisoned Nelson Mandela, at a time when he was still being vilified as a terrorist by the U.S. government. Eventually the union was attacked by its own national officials, acting in collusion with the company. In their rush to wipe out the memory of the historic struggle, the bureaucrats sandblasted the mural off the wall. Workers were arrested defending the art. When no one in the town would do their dirty work, the bureaucrats were forced to do the sand-blasting themselves. Revealing their true feelings towards the ranks, the officials began by sand-blasting the faces off the workers, then the slogans off the banners. Although the strike was defeated, many of the P-9 strikers and their supporters, changed forever by their experiences, have gone on to organize throughout the labor movement. -MA

