

University Of Wisconsin- Eau Claire

United States Rubber Company Contract Negotiations of 1955:
A Look at Labor Relations

Shelby Ackerman

Submitted to Professor Eugenio Pinero

Cooperating Professor: Patricia Turner

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how the United States Rubber Company sought to improve relations with their employees and the union that represented them going into their contract negotiations in 1955. The purpose is to demonstrate that there was effort put forth to create these positive relations that would last past the negotiations. Contract negotiations occurred at a national level; however, this paper will look specifically at plant in Eau Claire to understand how the strike and contract negotiations occurred at a local level.

Introduction

Throughout history, labor and the work force has changed in the way it is structured and the roles played by the people that partake in its endeavors. The nation may be different in the subcultures, customs, resources and industry but there is one thing people involved in the work force can agree on. Everyone wants to work in safe and healthy conditions, receive fair pay and be treated like a human being rather than a machine. This is a struggle that has been fought for many years and still continues to this day.

Many industries in different time periods had their own struggles after unionizing to agree to create a contract that both parties involved could be content with. In 1955, the contract between the U.S. Rubber Company and its union workers was about to expire. Negotiations occurred, however, when an agreement was unable to be formed before the deadline. This resulted in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) Rubber Workers Union calling for a strike that affected 19 plants across the United States. The people the union represented may have been spread out across a map but they shared a common goal. Although other items were still on the table to be sorted out, vacation time was the hot item that had people fired up.

Through the examination of the 1955 strike, this paper will explore the idea that labor relations between companies and unions were striving to improve and retain optimistic attitudes. Positive relations between the company, union and employee were in the best interest for all involved. U. S. Rubber, while looking out for its own interests as a business, understood the importance of positive employee relations in negotiations and through the entire process. The comprehension of company leaders of the value of good relations lead to improvements for workers then and to come.

The negotiations and the strike that followed will be examined at a national level by examining what occurred during this period to explain the larger happenings. The U.S. Rubber Company affiliate Uniroyal, located in Eau Claire, WI and their union, the United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum, and Plastic Workers of America: Local 19 chapter will demonstrate the perspective of what was going on at a more local level. The author of this paper acknowledges that each individual plant associated with U.S. Rubber had its own experiences during this time. However, it can serve as an example of what was happening on a smaller scale. Using this contract renewal and the events surrounding it is simply a snapshot in a larger window of labor relations. Previous contract negotiations shaped the way people interacted during the 1955 conference just as future contract negotiations would be impacted by the company and union interactions of 1955.

This paper will begin with the histories of the labor movement in the United States, Wisconsin and the company Uniroyal associated with U.S. Rubber. Following the history of strikes in the U.S Rubber Company will be the negotiations and meetings on contract renewal that lead up to the 1955 strike. I will then focus on the strike itself and the implications that came from it.

Historiography

The history of labor has been documented throughout much of the 20th century. Beginning to study labor began at the turn of the century in Wisconsin when an economist by the name of John R. Commons studying and documenting the labor movement and its

history in the United States with his team.¹ Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall's work *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century* was heavily consulted for this paper. The ideas presented emphasize the turbulence faced by businesses and workers throughout history as companies fought for more efficient labor and unions fought for the rights of their workers. Zieger and Gall express that it was not an easy road for either side and that the labor movement was a combined effort of many parties.

Relating specifically to this paper's focus on U.S. Rubber and its sub company Uniroyal, John B. DeRosier focuses his thoughts on the idea that Uniroyal, along with U.S. Rubber by association were a machine that treated their laborers as such in his thesis *Nothin' but a Machine: A History of the Eau Claire Rubber Workers on Strike*. The company addressed the issues but never the underlying causes. His focus is more on the economics of the strikes and company, in which he explains well, but in a way mostly belittles the human relations efforts that were made between the company and union. He describes the strikes almost as a cycle of making demands, striking, negotiations, and then a period of calm again before the next issue arises. His work brings to light the issues but does not agree on the level of effectiveness the strikes had as this paper will argue.

General History of Labor and Unions in America

The beginning of the early 20th century sparked a change in which the United States government and society began to evolve the way labor worked. Child labor was decreasing and more students began enrolling in school. Women were beginning to see more

¹ Darryl Holter. 1999. *Workers and unions in Wisconsin: a labor history anthology*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin. P. 3

opportunity after graduating by taking work in offices as typists and secretaries.² 1912

Democratic presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson said “nothing is done in our country as it was done twenty years ago... we have changed our economic conditions, absolutely from top to bottom.”³ These words rang true throughout the nation.

Industrial companies began to rely heavily on advanced technology to make work faster and the practice of dividing labored tasks. The division of labor forced people to specialize in one mundane task that could be repeated for hours on end to produce product in a shorter amount of time with smaller production costs. In fact the nation’s manufacturing production had almost tripled between 1899 and 1925. ⁴ For example, the rubber industry was made up of 300 small factories that used a labor intensive technology to produce rubber products. Around the 1910’s and 1920’s specialized machinery allowed for tires and other rubber products to go off the line faster and cheaper. Because of this by the 1920s the rubber industry was divided into two main divisions: a tire sector with four big businesses with large factories and small firms working underneath them; and a non-tire sector with a few large companies and smaller firms. The constant upgrading of mass production technology allowed for companies to have competitive edges over each other.⁵ In the tire sector the Big Four as they were commonly referred to included Goodyear, Firestone, Goodrich, and U. S. Rubber. An example of a smaller unit working with U.S. Rubber is the Uniroyal Tire Company in Eau Claire, WI.

² Robert H Zieger, and Gilbert J. Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. P. 5

³ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. P.2

⁴ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. P.6

⁵ Daniel Nelson. 1988. *American rubber workers & organized labor, 1900-1941*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. Pp. 3- 4

Although production levels began to see better results, the laborers were not seeing improvements. Long hours, poor conditions, work related accidents and fatalities were all part of the daily life of an industrial worker being pushed to ones limits all for the sake of higher levels of productivity. Although wages may have increased for some, families remained in poverty and poor conditions.⁶ It wasn't until March of 1911 when tragedy struck at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company for the government to start taking more action. When oil soaked rags caught fire, flames quickly consumed the building. The one fire exit quickly became blocked up and doors that had been locked by managers to prevent workers from leaving early held their prisoners in. Other safety hazards that had been overlooked were quickly brought into consideration .Although changes had been made through government action; the safety of workers would still be put at risk throughout the following decades.⁷

Though it may have seemed like workers stood alone and powerless the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was working to unionize the workers of different industries. Founded in 1886, the AFL had been working to bring laborers better pay, conditions and more say in their companies and industries. Membership in the early 20th century was on the rise. Numbers rose from under 300,000 in 1898 to over 4 million in 1919, not including the rail road unions. Other union organizations were present including ones sponsored by the companies themselves as an alternative to unions that would empower employees like those affiliated with the AFL. Many issues during this time period were issues of union

⁶ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. P.8

⁷ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. P.13

recognition as a bargaining agent for the people they represented.⁸ The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) also organized unions under its influence. It would be the CIO that would rival the AFL for membership and authority over the next couple of decades until its merge in the late 1950s.⁹ An important union to recognize in this paper is the United Rubber Workers Union. From the 1880's organized labor and rubber workers worked together for improvement. Although the AFL supported rubber workers, it would be the CIO that would be the ones to speed up the alliance of unionized rubber workers in the United States.¹⁰

The Great Depression took industry and the labor force for a negative turn. Unemployment skyrocketed as protests at the outrage of the situation increased. Unions were unable to assist the situation and were forced to retreat into the shadows focusing primarily on membership retention. The AFL continued to convince companies that maintaining a wage standard would help but even the AFL could only do so much as they began to watch their numbers slip. In the early 1930s the AFL lost 336,000 members of the construction union in whose membership was a significant amount of the total population affiliated with them.¹¹ Just as quickly as numbers plummeted they rose for union membership as the decade progressed. From 1932 to the end of the decade membership rose from 3 million to 9 million as workers rushed back to join unions. This can be explained by the idea that when job opportunities become available and the future holds a

⁸ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. Pp. 19-20

⁹ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. Pp. 66-67

¹⁰ Nelson. 1988. *American rubber workers & organized labor, 1900-1941*. P. 6

¹¹ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. PP. 62-63

more promising view, people will be quicker to join a union.¹² The rise in steel, rubber and other core industries was also new.¹³

Important government action took place during this time period for union- company relations. In 1935 Senator Wagner proposed a bill that would create the National Labor board which would be an independent agency sat in on by three members who were appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. This agency would be responsible for enforcing employee rights and avoid simply mediating disputes. Under Section Seven of the bill, employees would have the right to join unions along with directing employers to allow collective bargaining. The bill was passed and signed into office in the summer of 1935.¹⁴ In 1938, the same year the CIO became an independent agency, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed. The importance of the Fair Labor Standards Act was to establish the first minimum wage in American history and reduce long hours to the standard 40-hour week.¹⁵

During WWII Labor sored as the demand for industrial war goods increased. The CIO and ALF made a voluntary agreement with each other and the government called the No-Strike Pledge stating that they would avoid promoting any strikes during the war. This move was good publicity in the eyes of war time politics yet criticized claiming the union's fundamental weapon was being given away. In response to this the National War Labor Board was created to solve disputes over industrial matters. At the end of the war labor

¹² Nelson.1988. *American rubber workers & organized labor, 1900-1941*. P. 6

¹³ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. Pp. 66-67

¹⁴ "The 1935 passage of the Wagner Act." National Labor Relations Board , September 17, 2013, <<http://www.nlr.gov/who-we-are/our-history/1935-passage-wagner-act>>.

¹⁵ "Labor History Time Line ." ALF-CIO Americas Unions. September 17, 2013. <<http://www.aflcio.org/About/Our-History/Labor-History-Timeline>>.

faced the challenge of replacing returning soldiers back into the field while still keeping on the men and women that had replaced them. Wages continued to be the main issue of strikes and conflict between unions and companies.¹⁶

In 1947 labor took a step back when the Labor- Management Relations Act of 1947 or Taft Harvey act was passed. In this unions were required to sign anti-Communist statements and had their right to strike limited. This act was a step back for the progress that labor unions had made with government. This was seen as a response to the Wagner Act that supported labor. Although collective bargaining would remain the rights of employees were no longer encouraged and supported as strongly.¹⁷ This type of political action continued on leading into the 1950s.

Brief History of Labor in Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, labor issues were not only present in the urban and industrial settings but in the rural areas as well. Farming, lumber and industrial areas all have a history in the state's labor movement. Starting back in the 1840's strikes began to occur in places like Milwaukee with the Ship Carpenters and Caulkers Association and the Cabinetmakers and Joiners Union.¹⁸ Known for its heavy involvement in the lumber industry, Eau Claire lumber mills went on strike in 1881 which resulted in the first state strike to have state troops to report causing a controversy throughout the state.¹⁹

¹⁶ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. Pp. 128-131

¹⁷ Zieger and Gall, 2002. *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century*. Pp. 152-153

¹⁸ Holter, Darryl. 1999. *Workers and unions in Wisconsin: a labor history anthology*. P.13

¹⁹ Holter, Darryl. 1999. *Workers and unions in Wisconsin: a labor history anthology*. Pp. 22-23

Throughout the next few decades unions in the state fought for the many of the same issues that were fought for on a national level however their approaches and timing had points of difference. For example, during the Great Depression the executive board of the AFL opposed unemployment insurance and similar programs to lessen the hardship felt by workers. In Wisconsin, however the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor (WSLF) recognized this issue and with the assistance of newly elected governor Philip F. La Follette a work relief program was created to begin to stimulate the economy and give relief to workers. This was two years before Roosevelt's New Deal Plan would come into action.²⁰

The approach of Wisconsin based unions also differed at times from those on a national level and focused on having state legislature passed. In their demands they included child labor, unemployment insurance and workers compensation, limits on employer' use of injunctions during labor disputes, prohibits against labor spies to disrupt unions, and collective bargaining. The AFL and CIO originally did not have these policies in their plan but did end up incorporating them in. Differing from the national level also was the way that Wisconsin Unions organized themselves. Rather than form craft unions (where members of a union are specialized and grouped by craft leaving those that were unskilled on the outside,) many state union leaders formed industrial unionism to organize workers in an industry no matter what level of skill their job entailed. Many unions were formed as a result of this and have been associated with federal unions such as the AFL rather than national unions. Labor history was made by over eighteen members of

²⁰ Robert W Ozanne. 1984. *The labor movement in Wisconsin: a history*. Madison, Wis: State Historical Society of Wisconsin. P.60

local Wisconsin unions that were sent to the national level to fill top ranking leadership positions.²¹

Overall, Wisconsin's labor history for the most part mirrored other parts of the country throughout the years of investigation for this paper. The incidents and certain legislation may have been unique to Wisconsin but the overall ideas that unions and companies worked together to find a solution to the issues of wages, vacation, long hours, holidays and personal days through the use of negotiations and strikes.²²

U.S. Rubber, Uniroyal and Local 19 Histories

From 1865 to 1892 the rubber boot and shoe business took off. Technology allowed workers to take the raw rubber and transform it with other materials into an everyday product. Creating foot wear was a labor intensive and competitive job that created a hazardous environment. In 1892 Charles R. Flint combined nine individual rubber shoe and boot companies into one to create the United States Rubber Company. U.S. Rubber continued to acquire more companies in the process of developing and became one of the leading producers of the time. The company also expanded into mechanical goods. Conditions in factories varied depending on the location. Some workers experienced lead and benzene poisoning. Hours and wages also varied depending on skill level and status. Women and inexperienced men made significantly less than skilled workers. The average wages changed depending on location in the country.²³ The 1880s began the production of rubber tires for bicycles expanding the rubber market greatly. 1905 introduced the period

²¹ Holter. 1999. *Workers and unions in Wisconsin: a labor history anthology*. Pp. 3-4

²² Ozanne. 1984. *The labor movement in Wisconsin: a history*. P.242-243

²³ Nelson, *American rubber workers & organized labor, 1900-1941*. Pp. 8-11

of time in which tire and tube production surpassed all other goods combined. Although boot factories could produce these new products, tires and tools requires extra machinery, stronger work force and the will to expand which many companies were not able to transition to successfully. ²⁴ The demand for tires and tubes pushed for factories to expand and create machinery to allow mass production at an efficient rate.

In 1917 Raymond Gillette jumped on the rubber band wagon and created a tire plant in Eau Claire, WI. On May 23, 1917 the Gillette Safety Tire Company, later renamed Gillette Rubber Co., produced its first tire. Gillette had contracts with General Motors Corporation in 1931. Along with the



First Gillette Company Tire

Gillette brand of products the company was producing brands by Ward and Atlas. U.S. Rubber's label U.S. Royal was also included in this mix. ²⁵ In 1919 Gillette workers organized as Rubber Workers Union #16454. Later in 1933 workers formed Federal Labor Union No. 18684 which two years later in 1935 became Local #19 due to the International Union of United Rubber Workers of America's (UWRA) formation. It was not until 1937 that URWA Local #19 became the collective bargaining agent for wage employees at

²⁴ Nelson, American rubber workers & organized labor, 1900-1941. Pp. 15-18

²⁵ Becky Seelen . Eau Claire Chamber of Commerce Business Hall of Fame biography, "Raymond B. Gillette (1865-1934)." Last modified 05 23, 1934. Accessed October 15, 2013. <http://www.chippepedia.org/Gillette, Raymond B.&highlight=uniroyal>.

Gillette Rubber Company. A year later in 1938 the first written contract between Local #19 and Gillette was created.²⁶ Since its formation in 1919, the union representation at Gillette began working to improve the conditions of workers. In 1929 a wage incentive plan was initiated. In 1936 the United Rubber Workers of America became affiliated with the CIO.²⁷

Although faced with some setbacks, Gillette Rubber Company was doing alright on the business end of things at the beginning of the Great Depression. In 1931, U.S. Rubber bought a substantial amount of stock in the company. However, Gillette continued to be its own separate company and continued to expand outward. It was not until 1940 when U.S. Rubber took full control over Gillette Rubber Company. It was incorporated into the larger company and renamed the United States Rubber Company, Gillette Tire Plant.²⁸ Under the name Uniroyal, the plant would become one of the leading producers of automobile tires and the largest employers in the city of Eau Claire.²⁹

The 1950's began a series of strikes for U.S. Rubber and Uniroyal. The first occurred in July of 1950 when workers wanted a better contract that would include negotiated terms on wage increases, the definition of overtime, hiring rates, and job classifications. The next one occurred almost a year later in May of 1951 over pay increased and the two tiered wage policy. Workers argued that the cost of living was increasing while wages

²⁶ Local #19 Finding Aid, Uniroyal, inc. Uniroyal, inc. Eau Claire plant records. 1917.
<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=wiarchives;view=reslist;subview=standard;didno=uw-whs->

²⁷ Local #19 Finding Aid

²⁸ John Baptiste DeRosier. *Nothin' but a Machine: A History of the Eau Claire Rubber Workers on Strike*. Thesis (M.A.--History)--University of Wisconsin--Eau Claire, 1998, Pp. 6-7

²⁹ Lois Barland, Sawdust City and The River Flows On, Chippewa Valley Museum,
http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term_id=5702&keyword=carver

remained the same. The next strike was a short one only lasting two days which did not officially start until the end of the two year period of the 1951 contract expired. Grievances addressed in the 1953 agreement included vacation time, sick days, stream line grievance procedure and company-financed life insurance. ³⁰ These issues negotiated between the unions and companies were the bases for issues in the strike of 1955. They were also part of the progress of building better relationships between the unions and the company by working together to find solutions that were in the best interest of all involved.

Preparing for Contract Negotiations

In March of 1955 the company was reaching the date by which a new contract needed to be negotiated or the old one reinstated. Company and union members from around the nation planned to meet to discuss the best plan of action in addressing this issue. Both sides had issues that they wanted addressed in negotiations. Other Big Four rubber companies had gone through contract negotiations recently. Goodyear just renewed their company-wide contract earlier in 1955, Firestone's was good until 1956 and Goodrich's contract would not expire until 1957.³¹ Because of the competition's previous negotiations, U.S. Rubber officials were able to gain an idea of what to expect in their own meetings. Since U.S. Rubber's competitors would not be dealing with negotiations for a while, the decisions the company made would be long standing and impact the rest of the

³⁰ DeRosier. *Nothin' but a Machine*. Pp. 29- 38

³¹ 1955 Contract Negotiations—Possible Strike Issues and Recommended Program of Preparation for Bargaining. Nov18, 1954, Uniroyal Collection. Box 41 Folder 9. University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Special Collection

industry. The negotiations made for this contract would be looked to by other companies and unions as a sign of the changing times.

W.C. Proctor at the Gillette Tire Plant received information that discussed the issues that impacted the other Big Four Rubber Companies. This allowed U.S. Rubber to look into what potential topics may arise during discussions. Vacation and holiday pay was one thing that they needed to be aware of. Both Goodrich and Firestone negotiated minor changes in their plans so the company should expect union officials to request at least one more paid holiday, and a change in the amount of vacation time a person receives as their time with the company increased. Lunch periods, overtime, and aspects of wages were also big items that the company should have expected to see on the table.³²

In order to continue to keep the company moving forward and competitive, U.S. Rubber officials understood that they needed to continue to work on developing positive relations with Union officials. To prepare for the negotiations, many memos were sent around to company leaders as early as January explaining what may be encountered in the next few months and how to handle these situations in a positive way that would reduce tension and continue to create strong relationships. In a memo from a leader at the Detroit plant explains to Mr. W.C. Proctor at the Eau Claire Plant “there is a critical need for an active and expanded employee relations program at the Detroit Plant. We must individually and collectively develop awareness of the need for creating good employee relations.”³³

³² 1955 Contract Negotiations

³³ Employee Relations Preparation for Negotiations- Detroit Plant Jan 25, 1955, Uniroyal Collection, Box 41 Folder 9, University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Special Collection

To fulfill this goal of creating good employee relations, company officials and managers were encouraged to take the following actions in order to make sure that the company was giving its best effort to go into negotiations with open minds and positive feelings. When this was accomplished it would make sure that union and company talks went smoothly and quickly for both sides. In order to make the most of this critical time period before the negotiations, company memos show that they wanted to implement an immediate program that would help to insure:

1. Improved relationships
2. Mold employee attitudes
3. Make the Union and employees aware of our present competitive disadvantages
4. Awaken a realization of the benefits that are available for employees
5. Get across our sincerity and desire to get along to fulfill our contractual obligations.³⁴

Now it may seem that some of these points may not be so friendly towards the union compared to other ones. However, upon examination it is easy to see how the points will help make negotiations go smoother. Items one and five are obvious that the company wants to work together. Items two, three, and four are where questioning comes into play. Molding employee attitudes doesn't mean that the company is saying that workers need to be very pro-company, rather to have an attitude that the company is in fact going to work with the Union to find a middle ground. This connects with competitive disadvantage and realizing the benefits because in order to stay in business at a competitive level, there are

³⁴ Employee Relations Preparation for Negotiations

certain issues that U.S. Rubber cannot be as flexible with. Though they want to work with employees it is also crucial that they maintain items in the contract that will allow them to stay in business and not take an enormous loss when everything is said and done. By taking into consideration what benefits are provided and what the company need also can help Union employees see where the company's perspective and adjust their requests accordingly. In a memo to W.C Proctor, "the rules of good conduct and fair attitude in the handling of employee problems and communicating out story to them are rules that must govern our everyday conduct of our jobs—they are vitally important to us in the period ahead."³⁵

This was just the first in a series of programs that were designed to work on improving employee relations. Other ways the company planned on working with employees to maintain positive relations were through prompt and effective handling of grievances, early notification of changes that would be happening in the plants so there were no surprises, and including everyone that should be informed of certain information at staff meetings. They also wanted to make sure there was understanding between management and employees. It was important to upper level officials that management explained, reviewed, and explained again to make sure that everyone understood. One explanation did not mean everyone was on the same page.³⁶ Although these phases of company action were labor relations based "it should be kept in mind that any of the

³⁵ Employee Relations Preparation for Negotiations

³⁶ Employee Relations Preparation for Negotiations, P. 10

principles which are basic to this phase of relationship can and should be used in every phase of the broader aspect of employee relations.”³⁷

Another important reason to work on employee relations and focus on the positives of items two, three and four, was to avoid a strike. When Firestone was reworking their contract they had a three week legal strike. According to an official with U.S. Rubber, their relationship with the union had appeared to be rocky or have bad blood between parties. It was important to the company to continue operating through negotiations. The company predicted that Detroit, Chicopee, Naugatuck Chemical and Synthetic, Indianapolis, and possibly Mishawaka, Eau Claire, and Passaic could give them potential trouble and go on strike. It was especially important to have each factory manager find out if their plant would potentially join a strike movement so management at that location could make sure they doubled their efforts in maintaining good relations throughout the negotiations and on.³⁸

Contract Negotiations

On March 14th, 1955 the United States Rubber Company Company-Wide Contract negotiations began at 10am at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York City. Local union representatives were sent along with members of the union executive board to the meetings with company leaders. The overall goal of these negotiations was to work together to come to an agreement and to move forward with this agreement. Knowing that the group was under a time constraint before the March 31st deadline, only 18 days away, the company decided that although they had items they wanted to bring up, they would refrain from presenting them. They did reserve the right to make counter-proposals on any

³⁷ Employee Relations Preparation for Negotiations, P. 1

³⁸ 1955 Contract Negotiations

item based on union proposals or negotiation developments. Another thing that the company wanted was for the unions to give reasoning for proposed changes to contract so that company leaders could see the logic behind the motion. The majority of the first day the union focused on Article IV to remove the language permitting the company to take disciplinary action for work stoppages along with the Union's responsibility in maintaining efficient operation of business. This was not a new battle between union and company leaders.³⁹

The next day when negotiations resumed the focus was on local grievances, specifically on language of overtime in the contract, along with the addition of 2 more paid holidays. Justification for these additional holidays was that other similar unions received them already so it was only fair that they did as well. The company argued that this was not the prevalent circumstance in most cases and those locations that did participate were small operations that did not pay hourly wages. Day three began with the argument that the call in pay policy had unfair limitations and should be removed from the contract. Part of this was out of company control due to government regulations and restrictions. The company defended itself by stating that if workers would comply with the no strike provision of the agreement there would not be this problem. The next item up for debate was the removal of the wage incentive program. Union officials argued that it would help do things such as eliminate the arguments over standards and rates, eliminate strikes, and simplify wage payments. This was something that the company was not willing to remove

³⁹United States Rubber Company -Company Wide Contract Negotiations, Henry Hudson Hotel Meeting Minutes. Box 41 Folder 9

from the contract but would gladly discuss any content that would be helpful in reaching a better understanding in regard to its operation.⁴⁰

Days four, five and six of negotiations dealt largely with language in parts of the contract such as including the words “sex” and “union activities” and revising the language for equal work you will get equal pay, and eliminate good housekeeping. It was agreed that the present language was fair and adequate in the wage payment section while the lunch period payments were inequitable and inadequate. Another big issue that was on the table was vacation time. Union leaders demanded employees receive three weeks paid vacation after 10 years of employment and four weeks after 25 years which was instantly opposed.⁴¹

On days seven through eight many of the same issues continued to be discussed. The minutes for days nine and ten are missing from the collection but it can be inferred that mainly it was a continuation of the same topics already being discussed. On the 11th day the author of the minutes for the company felt that there was little progress. The Company argued that negotiations were a two way street and that they couldn't make certain changes if they wanted to remain competitive. When the company tried to get down to business and focus in on unresolved issues the murmurings of strike flowed through the Union side of the table. Progress was slow to be made throughout the next few days as the

⁴⁰ United States Rubber Company -Company Wide Contract Negotiations, Henry Hudson Hotel Meeting Minutes. Uniroyal Collection. Box 41 folder 9. University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Special Collections.

⁴¹ United States Rubber Company -Company Wide Contract Negotiations

threat of a strike loomed over everyone and became an increasingly pressing concern. On the 13th day the company proposed a package deal that included:

1. A 7th paid holiday which would be November 11th
2. Additional vacation pay of one day each year after ten and up to fifteen years of seniority
3. Continuation of present contract in all other respects except agreement to change union check off authorization and include new clause permitting cancellation of the labor agreement in event agreement is not reached on the pension matter.
4. 30 month contract terminating September 30th, 1957

The next day union leaders came back with a counter proposal saying that if it was a package deal, everything must be approved in order to prevent a strike. The list of remaining grievances they brought was 15 items long. After a short break the company offered a new deal after which the Union took a short recess to consider. At 11:35pm the company received a call affirming that the Union would be taking strike action and at midnight the plants shut down.⁴²

Strike

The company until this point had attempted to make compromises with union leaders so that everyone would be able to walk away from the situation with something they wanted. Unfortunately, U.S. Rubber was at the losing end of the deal when 35,000 workers in 19 plants around the country in states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, California, Connecticut, and Rhode Island went on strike. Many other states housed U.S. Rubber Company plants but these are just to name a few. The Pennsylvania Reading

⁴² United States Rubber Company -Company Wide Contract Negotiations

Eagle reported that company spokesman said this morning no new negotiation meeting has been scheduled. Both company and union officials were on hand in New York for an eventual resumption of talks. At the time of the interview the company stated that the chief issue was the union demands for four weeks of vacation time for workers with 5 years of service. Other relations related to working conditions were in negotiation but the company did not elaborate on what they were.⁴³ This demonstrates that the company and union were both narrowing down issues to determine which were the more important to deal with.

The Uniroyal plant in Eau Claire, Wisconsin was one of the plants impacted by the strike. The Leader Telegram began coverage of the events beginning on April 1st, explaining that trouble was brewing if the company and union could not come to an agreement. The union had been raising membership dues from \$2.50 a month to \$7.50 to raise a 25- million dollar strike fund.⁴⁴ The strike fund would go to pay workers for the time they were on strike. Although this was a nationwide strike and the 25 million dollars would be spread all across the nation the fact that the union was raising this large amount of money could only mean that they were serious about this strike and would see it through until they were able to negotiate what they wanted. The Leader Telegram on April 2nd reported that the Local

⁴³ "U. S. Rubber Plants Closed By Strike." *Reading Eagle*. April 1, 1951. No. 64. Pg. 1 news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19550401&id=SAwrAAAIBAJ&sjid=VJoFAAAAIBAJ&pg=3675,10385 (Accessed November 26, 2013)

⁴⁴ Sam Dawson, "Auto Industry Tieup Would Be Serious," Eau Claire Leader Telegram, April 1, 1955. Microfilm, University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Collection

19 Chapter of the Union located In Eau Claire members had voted in favor of participating in the strike if one was to occur. ⁴⁵

Local radio stations were given news releases to broadcast informing employees and community members of the strike. Some employees did not find out about the strike until they got to work that morning. This was the case for Melba Baehr who worked at Uniroyal with her sister, Avis Baehr. In her diary for April 1st, 1955 Melba wrote “the deadline on the contract was last night at midnight, and when we reported for work this A.M. we learned that the plan is on strike. So are all the other U.S rubber company plants.”

The strike continued on as negotiations occurred in New York to settle on a contract. On April 4th Mr. Proctor of the Eau Claire Plant held meetings for foreman, daytime supervisors, and general foremen to brief them on the New York meetings. The next day on the first pickets were stationed outside of the plant beginning at 4am. Picketing continued outside of the main gates. The workers involved staged a peaceful demonstration and did not disturb anyone entering or exiting the plant. Roy Brown was an employee at the time. When reflecting back on the strike in an oral interview, he remembered that when they closed down the plant they would picket in pairs at the front gates. There were no firing due to the strike and they did not bring in scab labor (people that replace the striking workers to continue with production).⁴⁶

⁴⁵“Rubber Plant Here One of 19 Closed”, Leader Telegram, April 2nd, 1955. Microfilm, University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Collection

⁴⁶ Roy G. Brown, Stanley Rosebud Rosen, and Nancy Brown-Martinez, *Oral History Roy G. Brown, Belen, N.M.* Santa Fe, N.M.: Rosebud Video Productions, 2003.

On the 6th, the Leader Telegram reported that 200 office workers, who claimed their separate contract was also expired even though this was not to be discussed for another couple of months, joined production workers on strike who continued to picket. Monday was the stumbling block of negotiations according to the Leader Telegram. Vacation time was still the biggest thing being discussed at the New York negotiations. Up until this point, about 300 salaried people continued to work in the plant.⁴⁷ Finally on Thursday April 7th, Harry Brown called at 4:45 pm and stated that an agreement was reached in New York and the union would be calling off picketers at 5pm.

That night a meeting was called to discuss startup again.⁴⁸ A radio announcement along with press releases to the Eau Claire and Chippewa newspapers



Signing of 1955 Contract, New York City

declared that Friday, the plant would partially be opening again on Friday with full operations beginning again on Saturday morning. This one week strike was settled when the company and the union signed a back-to-work agreement pending the signing of

⁴⁷ Leader Telegram, April 6th

⁴⁸ United States Rubber Company -Company Wide Contract Negotiations

today's new contract. It is effective immediately but is subject to ratification by local unions.⁴⁹

Implications of the Strike

A Leader Telegram article predicted before the strike began that the impact of the walkout would be quick to show on the communities they live in. The strike would slow down other businesses in the community or surrounding area that supply parts to the companies and rely on their business. If the company doesn't operate, then there is no need for the other businesses to be making excess parts. The payrolls of those involved in these secondary companies would shrink and affect their families. This trickledown effect is especially common in the Midwest where the Eau Claire plant was located.⁵⁰ This prediction would be correct.

During times when the plant would shut down, employees would not be guaranteed a time when they would return to the plant. Past strikes in the United States had been known to last anywhere from a couple of days to several weeks. This caused workers and their families to be unsure of when they would be getting a steady paycheck again. Some of the Uniroyal employees would seek other jobs when strikes became long in order to keep bringing in a steady income. Roy Brown was forced to seek employment at the Eau Claire

⁴⁹ Company Wide Strike- April, 1955, Eau Claire Plant, April 8th 1955. Uniroyal Files. Box 42 Folder 11. University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Special Collections.

⁵⁰ Dawson, ""Auto Industry Tieup Would Be Serious,"

Oil Company during a later strike.⁵¹ The sisters noted in their diaries about how their yearly paychecks varied because of lack of work because of union and company issues.⁵²

Now, a person could argue that the company gave into the union's demands because they felt pressured to compromise rather than because they were striving to improve relations. The union did have a large strike fund in order to help support their workers. This could result in pressure on the company to give in because they would prepare to wait and the company would not afford it like they could. I do not deny that they is could be a factor in why the company did make a compromise only after a week, however, it was not the only factor. It is inaccurate to say that the company was fully shut down. There were still people in the office and plant working just not at full operations. The company had not brought in scab work at that point but there is no reason to believe that this would not have been a possibility if the strike would have lasted longer. However, the brining in of scab work would be a way to ruin company/ employee relations because it would be a sign to the workers that they are replaceable and just workers.

The company did not have to work with the union to make a compromise. Although they could jeopardize their competitive advantage with other companies, U.S. Rubber understood that by working with the union now it would lead to effective communications and dealings in the future. In a memo to Mr. Proctor of the Eau Claire plant, a Detroit plant representative said "it is our responsibility to do everything that we can in every contact with employees through effective communications to establish good relationship between

⁵¹ Brown, Oral History: Roy G. Brown

⁵² Zais, *Diaries of the plant sisters*

Company and Union—between company and employees.”⁵³ Yes the company was planning the best way to be prepared for negotiation but in a previously mentioned statement from company officials, this was more than needing to be nice to employees to get through the negotiations. Rather, it was a decision they were making that would be implicated in everyday decision going forth that would be continued after the meetings no matter how they went.

In his interview, former employee Roy Brown reflected on how the strikes impacted the way of life for workers. Roy began working at working at US rubber in 1936. Hired as general labor, he worked eight hour days for 35 cents an hour. He was laid off after six months and had to start over with gaining rights and time off. Roy was an active member of the union as a union steward by attending meetings, reading newsletters, union activities such as attending picnics. During his many years at Uniroyal, Roy participated in three strikes and helped to negotiate many contracts that would help the men and women he worked with. When the union would strike he said that people in town thought they were “nuts”. Uniroyal was one of the biggest and best paying employers around. The company did offer higher wages and the opportunity for overtime. Roy was a hard worker that could be trusted to take someone’s overtime shift for them. As a result of taking extra shifts, he accumulated enough cash over the years to get 7 new cars and travel during the winter for 10-12 years after he retired.⁵⁴ Uniroyal was a company that was fair with their wages.

⁵³ 1955 Contract Negotiations

⁵⁴ Brown, Oral History Roy G. Brown

If this was the case why then was it that union members voted to go on strike? Roy said that they were striking more for benefits than they were for wages. In his interview in 2003, he told the interviewer, “we wanted more pension and more unemployment and that stuff. Young people wanted a raise right away. Old people fought for retirement benefits. I get good benefits now. Our drugs are \$1. No hospital cost at all.”⁵⁵ Yes the company paid them well but they were not content with the benefits. This unrest is why there was a push for changes in the contract regarding items like vacation. Without this discontent there would be no reason for the need for improved relations. It was due to this that the company recognized that there needed to be a change in the way relations and negotiations occurred.

After the negotiations the contract did include the vacation time and other points of interest that the union asked for. Many factors played into the decision of the company to take the action to approve these changes in a relatively fast time frame. However, the overall reason that the company took the swift action it did was to keep the positive relations between the company and its employees going.

Conclusion

It was because of negotiations between the company and the unions such as the one of 1955 that Roy and his fellow laborers were able to get better benefits like vacation time and later low drug and health care costs. The company’s attempt to get through contract negotiations as quickly as possible is not only because they wanted to be able to get production back up and running or felt pressure from the union. This is can only be seen as

⁵⁵ Brown, Oral History Roy G. Brown

a possible contributing factor. Rather, it was because company officials understood that it was important to work with the union to get employees a contract they were content with. When workers were receiving the benefits they wanted, they were more invested in their work. By working with the union and employees to find a balanced ground for the two parties, the company created positive relations that lasted. Although there were strikes later on, the progress that was made during this negotiation laid a foundation for working together to improve future contracts. Because of the positive relations the company formed with its employees, the company was able to stay strong, continuing to be one of the leading tire producers and top employers in the area until its closure in the 1990's.

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