



IT DOESN'T HURT
TO BE SAFE

CRANE
AND GRANT

STEEL
WELLS

A RANK & FILE STRIKE AT GE

Frank Kashner

In the summer of 1975 I became actively involved in a rank-and-file strike at General Electric's River Works plant in Lynn, Massachusetts. I participated in the informal group that shared control of the strike with the unwilling leadership of the Local (International Union of Electrical Workers Local 201 — one of the largest in New England). Later I was actively involved with a smaller group that brought the local president up on charges of depriving the rank and file of their legal rights.

The strike, which attracted a lot of attention in the regional press, was typical of many recent struggles in which the rank and file has had to go to the wall on safety and speed up issues, while fighting its own union leadership at the same time. The way the strike developed taught me a lot about the sources of militancy among the workers at GE. The conduct of the trial also taught me a good deal about how the rank and file can make use of legal tactics to fight a sell out leadership. The main reason for telling the story is to show that it is possible to fight both a giant corporation and an uncooperative union leadership. I also want to describe our group of strike activists, to explain how the group formed and what tactics it used.

BEING A COMMUNIST AT GE

I came to Boston in 1967 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. At the time I was a liberal. The Vietnam war was raging. I had been active in a draft resistance union and I opposed the war. When I met the Progressive Labor Party (PL) they explained to me the

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Opposite: Lynn, Massachusetts G.E. Plant. Photo by Jim Green

interests of big business in the war. Through them I became active in the SDS, the Cambridge Peace and Freedom Party and in their rent control campaign. The more I learned about the relationships of the landlords and the banks in the city of Cambridge, the more I saw society as a whole. Those who led the PLP were saying that the working class could quickly make large-scale changes in society. It was an appealing idea. I went to the Everett, Mass., GE plant and got hired there as a move-man in April, 1970.

The Everett is the highest paid GE plant in the world. It is one of the few remaining piece work plants and workers make decent pay by industry standards. I had PL's disdain of rules and regulations and pockets full of *Challenges*. It's great testimony to their tolerance that workers put up with me. I don't think any other group in society would have tolerated someone with whom they disagreed so fundamentally. They not only put up with me; many people befriended me and argued with me for what they considered to be my best interests. My job was to move parts and I got around the plant quite a bit. I quickly found out that people didn't like *Challenge*. PL assumed agreement and never explained the basic issues that people cared about. For example, though there were many stories and headlines about racism, *Challenge* never explained what racism is and why the average person should be against it. The same thing was true about the war in Vietnam and even strike issues. After a short period of time, I didn't bring *Challenge* into the plant any more.

I was laid off in 1971 and bumped over to the River Works plant in Lynn, Mass. It is one of GE's original plants and it goes back to the beginnings of the industry; it was designed to be a giant facility, like the plants in Schenectady and Louisville, Kentucky. During World War

II the Lynn Works employed some 20,000 workers, but since then it declined as GE spread out production to smaller factories in non-union areas like New Hampshire, North Carolina and Puerto Rico. The River Works has two divisions. One division, the Aircraft Engine Division (AEG) makes jet engines. And the other, the Turbine Division, makes turbines for electrical generation, and gear systems for everything from submarines to oil tankers. At the time of the strike AEG had about 3,000 union members and the Turbine Division about 3,500.

The question of minority workers became a big issue in the early 70's when GE was forced to hire more blacks, but as of 1975 minorities held no more than 4 percent of the jobs. Most were older blacks from Lynn or younger guys from Roxbury or Dorchester hired because federal contracts required it. There were even fewer women in our plant at the time of the strike; they were concentrated in hard, low-paying "women's jobs" like the "black job" where women wind black tape around rotors.

At the time of the strike the River Works had many older guys with 30 years service who started working during or after the War. They had a lot of experience, including a lot of battles with reticent union leaders. Since GE still hires mainly from the North Shore, people often know each other from high school. There is a lot of commuting from towns farther out, but many of these people grew up in and around Lynn and still have ties there. Of course many workers have relatives in the plant and some families are so extended that there is a standing joke: "If that family ever walked out, the plant would have to close down!"

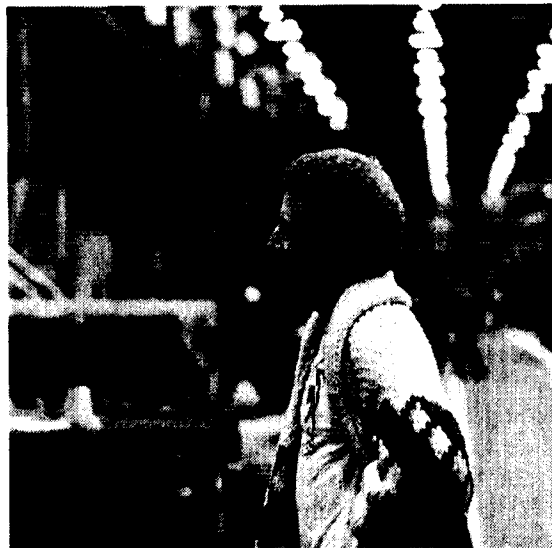
Family connections are important when it comes to getting jobs and when it comes to striking. Certain families are known as strong union people. Some of them of course go back

to the UE war-time period when the CIO was doing radical things. During the War, a foreman in Building 74 hit a worker and 5,000 people stopped working. They wouldn't go back until the Company agreed to fire the foreman.

Looking back on the UE-IUE fight, when the Communists were purged from the CIO, most of the old timers will say that the UE was a better union, even those who voted for the IUE. While these older workers seem conservative on certain political issues, they are part of a militant tradition, a rank-and-file tradition that continued after the IUE took over. In 1975 many workers were still mad at having been sold out after the long strike in 1969.

When I came to River Works I started as an oiler which again enabled me to move far and wide, and I learned a lot this way. I was still open about my political views and so I also learned a lot about the areas in which people disagreed with me and the areas in which I couldn't defend my views. I found a lot of people who were glad to see left-wing ideas out in the open. Some of these people are friends to this day. Among them are old U.E.'ers, political progressives, union reformers, etc. There were occasions in which these people enabled me to stay in the plant when I was so demoralized that I might have quit. For example, when I started handing out flyers at the Everett plant gate, no one would stop because company guards were photographing everyone. Phil, who became our life-long friend, stopped his car and in full view of the guards handed me a five dollar bill. He was saying to the company 'you will not interfere with my right to take this man's flyer and support what he believes in.'

In the River Works plant, I learned not to let PL know what I was doing. Whenever I began to work with people around any given issue, PL



Frank Kashner. Photo by Jim Green

would leap in and exaggerate or distort the situation to conform to their views. When I questioned their approach, they refused to accept any criticism. Indeed, there was no democracy at all within the organization. I realized that they were even willing to sacrifice their own stated principles to get the party into the limelight. They tried to exploit my work at GE several times with destructive effects.

By mid-1973 I had quit PL completely and at the time of the strike I was a radical but not a communist. As this article is published, I've been at GE almost nine years. Many of my ideas have been changed and I have changed other people's ideas. (We recently did a well-received flyer on nuclear power.) I hope that this story will contribute to a continuing process of political change among my fellow workers and readers around the country.

THE SAFETY STRIKE IN THE GEAR PLANT

In the summer of 1975 I had been working at GE for about five years. I worked in the gear plant at the River Works with about 600 other

people of the Turbine Division. I was in a small area at the center of the building where I was a tool grinder. I had been a steward for a while.

The cranemen and riggers were the most militant group in the gear plant. They operated mammoth cranes capable of picking up gears weighing 60 tons. The cranes rumbled across the top of the three-story bays where the machinists work. The cranes are crucial to production, because they bring steel plate in to be fabricated and then moved to the housing and gears in to be machined and assembled in one of the machine bays. Nothing moves without these cranes.

The crane operators worked with riggers who put the hooks, chains and slings on the parts so that they could be picked up. The job is hard and dangerous. If a lift isn't balanced right, a piece can fall, and people get hurt. If company property is damaged these workers' jobs are in jeopardy. Both the riggers and the crane operators get a bit better than average pay, but they are in deadend jobs. Unlike the machinists they have few ways of increasing their earnings or moving on to better jobs.

In 1973 GE introduced cranes operated by remote control radios. A worker on the floor would wear the electronic controls around his neck, like a bib. The Company decided to eliminate jobs and speed up the lifting operation by having this one worker do the work of *both* the crane operator *and* the rigger. When the Company started installing radio-operated cranes, the Union questioned their safety and resisted the loss of jobs. The early radio-operated cranes in the River Works did some scary things. They would pick up stray radio signals and run away. So you would have a 135 ton crane moving completely out of control over a bay full of workers. It was sheer luck that no one was ever killed by these runaways. There were some very serious accidents though.

From 1973 to 1975 the Union was investigating the crane problem, but in that time the new remote control machinery had been introduced throughout the gear plant. If we had struck around the issue in 1973, the demand would have been: no radio controlled cranes. But by 1975 the demand was that two people operate every radio-controlled crane to make them safe and protect jobs.

Even before this issue developed the cranemen and riggers developed a strong group sense. Many of them worked together for a fairly long time. They knew each other well; they were part of a network that extended through the various buildings. Many were friends off the job. And over the years their unity had helped them win certain things, like coverage for a person who was out sick, or more fair distribution of overtime work.

The Union had been slow to act on the crane group's grievances around the new cranes. The group had had their meetings down the union hall, and nothing had happened except that the Company was introducing more radios into the cranes. The group had a feeling they were getting screwed by both the Union and the Company.

In January 1975 the Union Executive Board accepted an offer from the Company concerning the radio controls. It involved a payoff for 16 members of the group who would get a one-step increase in their pay rates, but the offer was divisive and said nothing about safety, so the crane group circulated a petition rejecting the offer.

Other gear plant workers were also angry at the Executive Board, because their grievances had been stalled and mishandled. Grievances about pay rate, working hours, harassment, etc. all fueled the fire. Also, some people in the gear plant were active in the Union and had experience fighting to protect and extend the

rights of the membership.

The operator of the radio-controlled crane could rig a small piece by himself. But most lifts required two or more people. Without a rigger, who would help? Machinists were pressed by foremen in their bays to do the riggers' work, under threat of suspension. The union leadership told them to do the rigging work under protest while they convened a sub-committee to negotiate, but management had no interest in negotiating since they were getting the machinists to do the extra work.

This was dangerous work, especially for people with no rigging experience, but in order to get a lift to their machine and make their production, the machinists were forced to do the rigging. They were being put into a squeeze.

On the night shift of July 15, 1975, a foreman told a drill operator named Peter Terabassi to rig up a piece in order to get it out of his drill. Terabassi had injured his elbow earlier during the same job, so he refused. He was suspended. Next, two other crane operators who had at first been ordered not to help Terabassi were now ordered to do the lift. They both refused. When these two were suspended, the entire bay walked out.

Now at this point the workers were not on an illegal wildcat strike; this was very important for what followed. Under the GE-IUE contract we have the right to strike around some grievances *during the term of the contract*. If a grievance doesn't go through arbitration (and many don't under our contract), then a strike notice is served on the company until the grievance is resolved. That strike notice says that the "union is liable to go out on strike around this case at any time during the next year" if it's not resolved. Now in this case of other people being ordered to do the riggers' work, a strike notice had been served some months before. So you see the workers in bay 9

were really involved in what you might call a "legal wildcat" strike; it was a rank-and-file strike the leadership hadn't approved but really couldn't oppose.

When I came to work on the morning shift the next day, our building was in turmoil. The most militant union members in other machine bays wanted to go out in support, but others weren't sure. The day shift workers in Bay 9 did strike, because they were closely connected to the night shift guys in their work site already on strike, but others were looking for leadership.

The crane operators and riggers in other bays called a meeting and the foremen ordered them to disband. They said: We will either meet here or down the union hall. It's up to you." When the foremen again ordered them back to work, they headed for the time clocks.

I stayed in the plant to discuss the issues with the majority still in the shop to try to come up with a strategy and act on it. I had a lot of contact with people in the various bays, because I was a steward at large and could handle grievances throughout the gear plant. I walked around and talked to workers having small group meetings. The news of the bay 9 walkout was spreading fast so people would gather around me as I walked through the bays. There was a lot of excitement with small group meetings taking place all over. Nobody was working. Since the cranemen and riggers had all walked out, the foremen went to run the cranes. Everybody was talking about what they would do if they were asked to accept a lift from a foreman. (It is a contract violation for foremen to do union work.)

The gear hobbers in Bay 10 were the first to refuse lifts. They were one of the oldest groups of workers, and were generally considered one of the most conservative. They were also highly skilled workers who cut gears to watchmaker dimensions. Like the crane group, they had

worked together for a long time. The first gear hobber to refuse a lift was one of the most conservative members of a very conservative group.

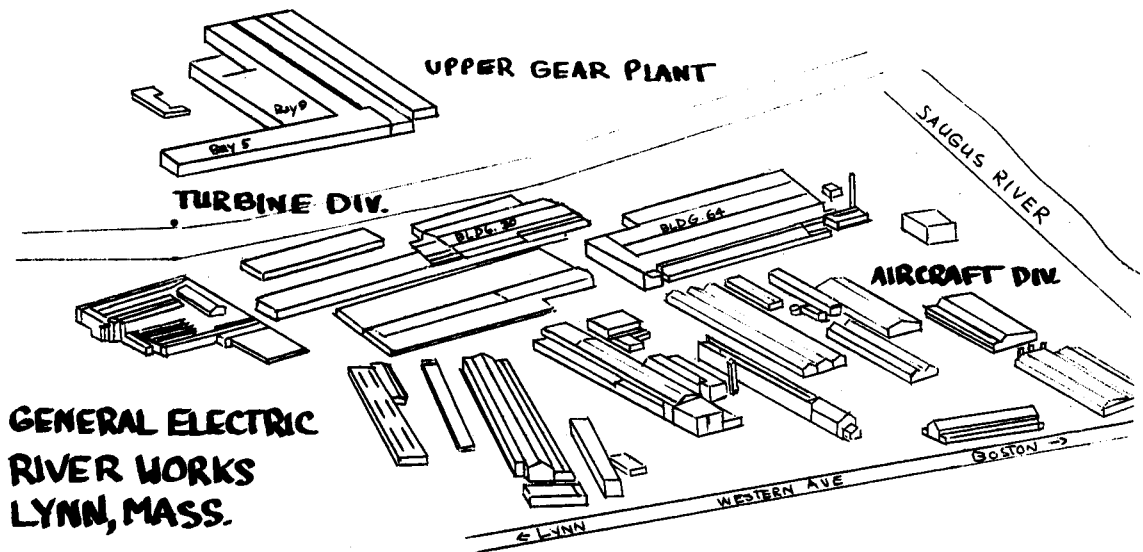
While all this was going on, the crane men and riggers were meeting down the union hall, demanding that the leadership pull the whole gear plant. This meeting got larger and noisier as more people joined the strike. Eventually the leadership, including Local 201 President Bertram Farnham, did come into the plant to announce the strike. I walked around with them from bay to bay. Most people were just waiting for the officers to appear and were glad to leave.

The leaders faced a problem when they came to Bay 5 which is a fabrication area separate from the rest of the gear plant. The cranes there were not radio operated, and the type of work done there is different from that done in the rest of the gear plant. So when the union leadership announced the strike in Bay 5, they were met by jeering; many of the workers there

did not want to be drawn into the problems of the upper gear plant. Some people did go on strike, but the most outspoken people in Bay 5 opposed it. Some of them were "scabby" individuals, but they were also reacting to the fact that they had been sold out many times by the union leadership. Instead of trying to reason with people in Bay 5 the leadership withdrew and wrote the bay off as anti-union. So by July 16, the entire upper gear plant was on strike (that is, about 500 workers) while Bay 5 and other Turbine buildings remained at work, along with the whole Aircraft Division.

AN ACTIVE STRIKE GROUP FORMS

Local President Bert Farnham and the leadership had called the strike reluctantly. At the time Farnham was the undisputed ruler of Local 201. He was also vice-president of the state AFL-CIO, president of the North Shore Labor Council, an officer of the United Way and of OSHA, a friend of Governor Michael Dukakis, and a contender for the District 2



presidency of IUE. Many of us who had contended with the Farnham leadership before knew that we would have to take an active part in the strike if we were to get anywhere versus the Company.

I had worked in the past with two other stewards named Charlie and Peter in writing leaflets about grievances and in calling for more rank-and-file participation in union affairs. Charlie was an experienced steward and had a reputation of persisting until he got a grievance resolved. He worked in Bay 9 where the strike started and was very familiar with the crane groups' issue. Charlie and I differed mainly on how much to work through the union leadership. He was more willing to work through channels than I was. Peter was tied to the faction that preceded Farnham in office, a group headed by former Local 201 business agent Peter diCicco who is now president of District 2. Peter was also a steward like Charlie and I but I think he was being coached by the District who saw Farnham as a threat to diCicco's presidency. Peter was quite conservative in discussions of women and minorities but he was strongly in agreement with the issues of the strike.

Although we were all stewards, other militant workers who were not stewards often started the actions in this struggle. Some of the activists were ex-stewards who quit out of frustration. Others were natural group leaders, especially older workers, who had never been stewards.

When we gathered down at the union hall on the first day of the strike the three of us and our friends gathered in front of the podium ready to deal with the union leaders if they got out of line. I guess the activist group started forming here among a variety of people who knew this would be a rank and file strike that would involve a hard struggle with the leadership.

At that meeting the leadership said, "the

whole upper gear plant is on strike, so go home and we'll take care of it." Most people did go home, but a group of 20 or 30 of us stayed. We decided to set up an informational picket at the gates, because, except for the upper gear plant, the rest of the River Works was still operating. We also wanted to picket the gear plant gate and talk to the people in Bay 5 about supporting us.

It was a mixed bag who went down to the gates. I was the only left winger. There was a range of other people from real conservatives to populists like Sully who was an Irish nationalist, a steward in Bay 5 and big socializer who helped build camaraderie in the group. We were very high spirited. We had started down at the union hall as just a group of concerned individuals aware of the need to become active. At the gates, we became more organized. The political differences among us were enormous, but with people working together and sharing beer, we were able to joke about our differences and get serious about our unity.

The next day, July 17th, we returned to the gates to maintain the picketing because many people still didn't know what was going on. That was pay day and about noon people who were on strike started gathering to look for their pay checks even though the union leaders said the company would not pay those on strike. The crowd got very large, and suddenly a couple of people decided to lead a charge into the plant to get the checks. One was black and the other white, but neither was involved in our group. They just wanted to get their pay, and were very sure about what to do. People were up for action and so everyone followed. We walked through and told them: "We don't trust the leadership either, but it's the membership that's on strike. So join us." They didn't join us, but we made an impact.

Once we got into the plant, we decided to

march as a group from one manager's office to another and stick together until everyone was paid. It was a very hot day and we all jammed into the manager's air conditioned office. We all got paid that day, agreeing to stick around until we all got what was coming to us. It was an immediate and obvious victory and it generated a great spirit, a very independent spirit too, since there wasn't a single union officer present.

The next day, July 18th, Friday, was the day before the entire works was to shut down for vacation. The union leadership said that this was not a good time to conduct a strike. They wanted to go on vacation. The company wanted to go on vacation. There was a meeting of 200 strikers. The union executive board recommended that we return to work. They wanted us to terminate the strike so they could have a sub-committee after the vacation ended. We voted 199-1 — to not go along with the executive board's recommendation.

That same day the company turned around and laid off 482 people in the Turbine Division, saying that the upper gear plant strike was affecting production. We later found out that the company hoped these workers would vote against the strike and send us back to work.

At that point the vacation shut down started and most of the union and company officials went off on vacation, but we kept meeting down the union hall or at one of the local clubs. So while the leaders were on vacation — during a strike — we discussed what it would take to win the strike. The group that had gone to picket the gates had now grown a bit. We had exchanged phone numbers, and set up meetings. Leadership was assumed by those who were willing to take responsibility. It was a lot of hard work; and it was hard on family life. The people who stayed around during those weeks were sacrificing their vacation.

The press, the local *Lynn Item* was doing a terrible job on us. They were getting stories from the then-assistant business agent, Peter Teel, and from Farnham, stories that were basically threats to the strikers. They said that the strike involved terrible timing; that the strikers ignored the recommendation of their executive board; that it looked like the strike would last for weeks; that the insurance benefits of the strikers were now in question; and that the vacation pay of the strikers was now in question. Even though we knew that the leadership was against the strike, we felt that we could force them to publicly support us. They were on record as being for us. Our case was legal. We confronted the union leadership — especially Peter Teel — over the terrible press we were getting. He was quick to tell us how anti-union the *Lynn Item* was and how you can always count on them to give the company's side. Yet they were running direct quotes from him.

On the 25th of July we decided to go to the *Item*. Of the about 20 people who went down, most had lived in this area for years and represented *Item* subscribers in Lynn, Peabody, Danvers, Revere, etc. We represented a significant number of people to the *Lynn Item*. The editor told us that they were simply printing what they were getting from the union leadership. He offered to sit us down with one of his reporters and take a story from us on the spot, which he did. The resulting front page story the very next day was some of the best publicity we got during the strike. We did not attack the union leadership in that article, but they attacked us for doing it; they knew we were taking leadership of the strike: we were being the union.

It had been a week and a half since the strike began and there was still no official communication from the leadership to the strikers. Our next move was to collect some money to

take out an ad in the *Item* calling for an unofficial meeting at the Union hall. About 150 people came to discuss the strike, but we weren't well organized and little was accomplished.

We continued our informational picketing at the gates, and, two weeks into the strike we got our first break: we received a tip from a member of management who was sympathetic to our cause. He had just been at a meeting with one of the company officials, Sid Cushing, who told the meeting about a strike settlement offer he'd made to the union leaders. Cushing also bragged that he had laid off almost 500 people who would vote for the phoney offer just to get back to work. The union leadership would not tell us what was in the offer. They said we would find out at a meeting on August 4 like everyone else... as if it would be an act of democracy not to tell us. They wanted to prevent us from formulating our arguments. We didn't tell them we already knew about the offer. The offer was a very tricky document that left us exactly where we were. The most interesting part said the machine operator would have to help rig in lifts pertaining to his machine. Of course, this is what we were fighting against!

We knew pretty much what to expect at the mass meeting called by the union for August 4 at Lynn City Hall. We organized speakers and rehearsed what they would say on all topics. We were going to try to convince those at the meeting that our issue was just, that they should support us. The day of the City Hall meeting came around. The executive board came forward with this company offer and a unanimous recommendation — to accept it. The business agent presented the offer. There were about four hundred people in the City Hall. The business agent had a very slow and tortured manner which made it hard to follow

him. As he read the offer, he left out the worst part. Our speakers lined up at the microphone and exposed the offer. Other people from the audience spoke and supported us. People in the meeting got madder as the attempt to sell us out became obvious. We appealed to those people who were laid off because of our strike: If they allowed the company to use them as pawns against us, the company would continue that tactic whenever the opportunity arose. In any strike, the company could lay some people off to vote the strikers back to work. Our appeal worked. The vote at City Hall was 208 to 95 to reject the executive board recommendation and the company offer. This was better than a 2 to 1 vote and it was a tremendous boost to us. The strike was on. We found a certain strength among ourselves in our ability to meet, discuss, work out a strategy, make plans, and proceed with them.

GROUP DYNAMICS

After the vacation ended the group became more politicized because Al Hamilton joined it. He was the only person in the group who had been a union officer and he was already recognized as the leader of the anti-Farnham faction. It was pretty clear to us that Hamilton wanted to be the next union president. He saw the strike as a vehicle to discredit Farnham and he hoped to make the group his future campaign organization. Hamilton had a lot of influence. He and his close followers had ties to Peter diCicco and the District office. Hamilton favored a more secretive approach for the group — working behind the scenes, etc. Others favored a mass approach of going to the rank and file with the issues. So we became adversaries on many issues. If you divided our group politically the most interesting division would not be radical-conservative, but between those who had ties to the district and opportunist

political motives and those who didn't.

Hamilton opposed my role in the group. He said I should keep a "low profile" so we wouldn't get red-baited. I was known as a radical, but also as a gear plant steward who could deal with the issues on their own merits. When I proposed to the group the idea of putting an article in a left newspaper called *Spark*, we discussed the issue in terms of whether or not it would help the strike. The group decided that it was a good idea to spread the story of the strike. It also decided that anything published by anyone concerning the strike had to be approved by the group as a whole. So I submitted anything I wrote, including *Spark* articles, to the group before they were published, and they were approved.

I don't think a leftist has to abandon socialist politics to function in a group of non-leftists. Workers are capable of recognizing good ideas when they hear them. And if we can put forth ideas that help people understand their own collective strength, ideas that give them a stronger sense of class, then we are talking about ideas consistent with socialism. But it is hard to get support for progressive ideas about women, minorities, nuclear power, etc. that don't emerge directly from the situation.

The left people in the group had just as good a chance of winning people over as Hamilton did, even though he was a union influential with lots of contacts, and potential patronage.

For example, Charlie, a Vietnam vet, had had dreams of strangling PLers with his bare hands when he had first been exposed to PL, but as the strike progressed we voted together in the group more often than not. Charlie was active in the group because he had learned about the union leadership after seeing them murder case after case as he tried to fight through the grievance procedure. In the group he took the mass approach I advocated instead of taking

Hamilton's more secretive approach. Ronnie was another steward who started out more sympathetic to the union leadership than many of us were. But like Peter he came to back our mass approach.

I can't begin to do justice in describing the qualities of group members, but here are a few sketches. Danny was a rigger and the great socializer in the group. He could turn any situation into a party and usually did. He had been involved in the crane group's struggle for a long time. And there was Paul who was a rigger and crane operator, but not a steward. He was working in Bay 5 where the radios had not yet been installed. But he still saw the strike as his issue, and worked hard to spread it to the anti-strike workers in his Bay. Al was a rigger in Building 64 who helped bring the strike to that key area. In short the crane group was well represented in our group as were the machinists in Bay 9 who had originally supported them.

Although we were a young group, there were some older guys, reflecting the age composition and experience of the plant. Besides Hamilton, who was no spring chicken, there was Hutch who is from New Hampshire and is very conservative. He is a member of the National Rifle Association and favors nuclear power, so we disagreed about a lot of things. But we found it very easy to work together during the strike; he was very honest and straightforward. He was more trustworthy than some of the local opportunists who sought union office. Bill was another older guy in the group. He had started with a procompany view. He had just received the Company's highest awards for community service, and he thought that if he could get the issue to management, he could get it resolved. But as doors were slammed in his face, he became more active in the group.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

The 2 to 1 vote against the Union's offer at the Lynn City Hall showed that we were capable of winning support, so the group gained confidence. The information to the plant had been terrible. We asked the union leadership to write flyers, and they stalled, so we got together and wrote our own.

We also decided that if the Union was going to meet with the Company again, we wanted our people there. So when we heard that the Union officials were going down to meet with the company, we called Labor Relations and demanded that our witnesses be present. They said there would be no need for witnesses that day because they were just setting ground rules, etc. but Charley told them that if we didn't have some witnesses present, all 30 of us would show up. They then agreed to let four witnesses attend. We picked people we thought would stick to their guns and we didn't just send them on their merry way. We talked with them continually and kept track of what was going on, what was being said, what the offers were, what the company position was, what the union position was. Until the very last minute, when they kicked our people out, our group maintained witnesses at the negotiations because we knew that otherwise the union officials would agree to things unacceptable to us.

On Saturday night, August 9, Paul organized a party at his house. The strike had generated a lot of enthusiasm. Most of the women there had never met each other. They had been isolated and now they had a chance to meet other people who were going through the same thing. The strike meant trouble for the families of course, but the women supported the strike and when they started talking, they decided to do something. They were especially angry at GE's policy of appealing to wives through the mail to turn them against the strike.

Since the strikers' picketing was limited by the fact that the Aircraft Division was still working, the women decided to have a demonstration and mass picket. They organized very quickly and effectively raising money for ads announcing a demonstration around the safety issue. Then they made up a list of shop stewards so that they could contact their wives. One woman became a "media seeker" who traveled by bus all over the Boston area to get TV and radio coverage.

They organized a very good demonstration at 6 a.m. one morning on Western Avenue at GE's main gate where they leafletted the Boston bound traffic. An off-duty nurse stood between the lines of traffic in full uniform and got many cars to slow down so that they could be leafletted. They hung a huge banner over the street between the light poles; it said "rigging this high kills" and it effectively dramatized the safety issue of the radio controlled cranes. They brought out more than 100 pickets that day and got good media coverage. Up to that point our group had been all male; it made a big difference to us to have women involved, because the strike had become a family issue.

On August 10 the strike spread. We were continually on the phones into the plant. The cranemen and riggers in Building 64 came out. The Executive Board met the next day and was asked to pull the rest of Building 64, so that they weren't in a half and half situation, but the board voted to do nothing. The next day, Bay 5 cranemen and riggers came out, paralyzing the Bay. Some from both Bay 5 and Building 64 became stalwarts in our group. On the 13th crane crews in two other buildings came out in support of us. This was a tremendous boost to our morale and our strike, because now the crane crews had spread the strike to the largest Turbine buildings and no production could





move.

Our group decided to have a demonstration. Since the new union hall was in a prominent position near the most widely-traveled gate to the River Works, we marched there with the banner that said, "Rigging this high kills." We marched from the old union hall to the new union hall, up onto the roof and hung the banners. A lot of people who were still working at this time saw the gathering, saw the banner. We then went to the gate and encouraged more people from Turbine to join us.

While we were at the gate, a company ambulance came through, and Charlie looked in the back window and saw heart massage being given to someone lying down on the table. Later, we found out it was a man named Theodore Phillips. The Company had sent him into a pit with a dangerous solvent. This was normally a job done by two higher-rated people, one stayed out of the pit, and they relieved each other and watched over each other. But the company sent Phillips into the pit by himself. He died as a result of being asphyxiated. This became an issue in the strike, insofar as it illustrated what the Company would do without a Union in the shop. They had absolutely no care for the safety of the workforce.

THE TURBINE DIVISION CLOSES DOWN

On August 14 the executive board had an emergency meeting and voted to do what we had demanded: call a meeting of stewards from all of Local 201 to consider the strike issue. Some were from other plants, West Lynn, Everett, Wilmington, but all of the stewards were behind us. They asked what we wanted them to do. We asked them to pull the rest of the Turbine Division, but not Aircraft. We needed time to leaflet AEG and get support for our strike over there. The stewards supported

us with a unanimous vote. The entire Turbine Division was out — 4,000 people, everyone whose work was connected to the crane group.

The Turbine strike was strong. We had dozens of people anxious to help with the day-to-day strike work. People were in high spirits. We put out flyers to the Aircraft Division, got some good press coverage, and ran daily information meetings at the union hall. There was no back-to-work movement.

This was too much for GE. That Sunday night Executive board member Richie Gallo, Farnham's good friend, pulled part of the Aircraft Division out on strike. He claimed that "scab" work was being done. We saw it as the same move Sid Cushing had tried earlier — pull out enough people in Aircraft to vote the gear plant back to work.

When the Executive board announced a plant-wide strike vote (i.e. of both divisions), we demanded a membership meeting to discuss the vote. This was our constitutional right, but the leadership denied it to us. It was the first time in the history of the local that a strike vote was called without a prior meeting, and this later proved to be Farnham's undoing. It was clear to us that the Leadership didn't want a meeting because of our previous success in convincing people to support us.

The Company and the Union were playing the same game. A GE spokesman said that the union leadership was being responsible and cooperative but that "dissidents" had seized control of the strike and had pulled Aircraft for their own interests. Farnham was quoted as saying that he had tried to contain the strike but that it was escalating.

At this point we were in a crunch. There were 7,000 people out on strike, many of them angry and confused. We were unable to reach most of the new strikers from Aircraft in the time before the vote took place. We continued to

demand an open meeting to discuss the issues to the new strikers, but we didn't get it, and the vote went against us — 2,800 to 1,661. After a period of great confusion the Company and the union met at the Holiday Inn. Our witnesses felt that an agreement had already been reached because everything was done so fast. They ordered our witnesses from the room, reached an agreement, and then had a party. The Company bought the dinners and the local officers bought the drinks.

After the Executive Board ordered everybody back to work, hundreds of us met down the union hall and there was some sentiment for continuing the strike anyway. But at this point it would have been an illegal strike and we would have been threatened with disciplinary action. There was a heart-breaking scene. Some people were crying openly. People were furious. There was some violence. But we decided that there was no way to maintain the strike, and the thing to do was to return to work and try to maintain the struggle as best we could from within the shop. Wednesday we returned to work.

Everything was supposedly back to normal, but the atmosphere in the gear plant was incredible. Rather than a building full of workers who were beaten, we had a building full of workers who were as militant as I have ever seen. For the next weeks, they were waiting for management to sneeze so they could walk out on strike again. Most people felt that they had been betrayed and not defeated. Management sensed this and in those following weeks, we won major concessions on questions of safety. As far as the physical plant goes, any staging, apparatus, ladders, railings, staircases, anything we asked for in those coming weeks, we got, perhaps things that saved people's lives. The company walked on egg shells. Those of us who were active got quite a sense of our own

strength even in this situation, even having been sold out, and losing on the jobs issue. We were able to get immediate inspection of rigging equipment; we were able to get new hooks, and these are very large hooks for the main hoists and the secondary hoists in Bay 5. We were able to get systematic inspections, checking for cracks in the hooks. We were able to get new slings. A procedure was set up where these things were done regularly. Many things we had often fought for and failed to win, we won following the strike.

During this time, the group of strike activists changed, most people had only been committed to seeing the strike through. As they left others joined who were more interested in political changes. The new group was weaker and less united.

Months later our people realized that the Schenectady workers had actually won an earlier fight to keep two people on the cranes in their Turbine Division. When the radios were first introduced in Lynn, the Union sent a subcommittee to Schenectady to investigate the situation out there. The subcommittee *did not* report that at the Schenectady plant every crane still had a crane operator and rigger. Throughout the strike our Executive Board contended that we couldn't win what had already been lost at Schenectady. It was only after the strike that we learned that through their militance the Turbine Division at Schenectady had maintained two people on the cranes after several strikes on the issue.

THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE

On September 5 people in our group wrote up charges against Farnham for having violated our constitutional rights by not allowing a meeting to discuss the vote on the Company's offer. The Executive Board met and found no

probable cause to try him. We then appealed this decision to the membership, another point at which the democratic rights won by our local helped the rank and file.

The membership met on October 16. It was a larger meeting than usual. Farnham organized people to come and we organized people. We put out leaflets explaining that our right to strike was at stake. If people went out on strike on an issue and then could not vote on whether or not that issue had been settled to their satisfaction, they would be reluctant ever to take on a fight because they would feel that they would always be sold out. The membership voted 54 to 21 to send Farnham to trial, to overturn the recommendation of the Executive Board. This vote should have sent Farnham right to trial, but he pulled a parliamentary maneuver to reconsider the question at the next monthly membership meeting. November 16th was the next membership meeting. This was to be a tremendous showdown. Farnham called in all his political debts. We put out leaflets again explaining the importance of the vote.

November 16th was one of the largest membership meetings in the recent history of the union. The membership again voted to send farnham to trial. People voted not just to protect their right to strike, but they were voting for revenge for having been sold out. The jury was picked at random. We took a day and a half to present our case against Farnham. Farnham stalled. He took from January all through May of 1976 to present his defense; he dragged in everybody he could to testify that he was wonderful and that we were horrible, that the strike was a conspiracy of communists to discredit him. But he vacillated and at times he told the jury the strike was important, and that he supported it. It was during this time that the jury really came to understand the strike issues and the constitution because they had these

months to think about it and to hear discussion during the trial: What'd the constitution say and mean? What was the past practice?

Although the group of strike activists no longer existed, we had mass support for our work. Farnham's defense was paid for while we worked without pay. We took up collections at the plant gates to pay for the days we lost from work. Our efforts got results. Farnham was found guilty as charged!

It would take a 2/3 vote of the membership to uphold the conviction, however, so there was further stalling. Farnham waited until June when the IUE contract with GE expired. He thought a big membership meeting to consider the contract would defuse the issue of his trial and open up the "Turbine radicals" to red-baiting. The Union even advertised to get people to the June meeting-which is unusual.

On June 27, 1976 the membership of Local 201 met; it was a large meeting. The room was packed. I had never seen most of the people before. Our strategy was to discuss the contract first, because that affected everyone, and leave the business of Farnham's trial until later. The leadership blew it. Once the discussion of the contract started, it was clear that the union didn't have an offer from GE. They also revealed that secret negotiations had taken place, despite the fact that our Local officially opposed secret negotiations.

The membership meeting turned against the officers very quickly. People were mad that they had been brought there on false pretenses. They were also mad that the leadership knew so little about what was going on between the negotiating committee and the company. The tone of the meeting was rebellious. Several motions were passed concerning the contract and how we wanted the officers to conduct it. And then the vice-president — Flash Gordon — stood up and said, "Mr. Chairman, there's



Photo by Jim Green

been this terrible charge hanging over this local for months now, and it's about time we got rid of it, and the people who've been putting it forward." And he moved the agenda to a discussion of Farnham's jury trial.

The room was full of electricity. The tension was incredible. We were worried that we would lose, but we spoke as best we could. Richie Gallo, the Aircraft Division Executive Board member got up and charged that PLP had led the strike, that these "commies" should not be allowed to run this Local. The meeting broke up. People shouted him down in almost one voice. They didn't want to hear it. They knew that he was lying. They held the officers responsible for screwing up the strike. Even those who didn't want to strike understood that the officers had done the Local great disservice in the way they had conducted the strike. They voted to support the trial committee's recommendation. Farnham was found guilty by an overwhelming margin.

As the union elections approached in 1977 Al Hamilton forced a split in what remained of our group. He knew most of us would oppose the deals he was making with the Executive Board in order to get himself elected Local president.

Four of the people from our group ran together on a slogan that we stood for the membership's rights. Hamilton campaigned for president on financial issues, and this enabled him to ignore the issues raised by the strike: union democracy. We put out flyers on the issue of democracy, on how the Local had lost so many jobs, and on how the membership had asserted its rights during and after the 1975 strike. But our flyers were lost in the glut of publicity. Hamilton and Farnham both red-baited us. Hamilton wrote: "The members are being tantilized by radicals whose prophets promise a blue-collar garden of eden provided they have exclusive rights to the apple concession." His flyer said: "Al Hamilton is a veteran of World War II and Korea, serving in the elite U.S. Paratroopers, where he learned to recognize a red." Hamilton, when faced with the opportunity to hold union office, was willing to throw to the wind any principle he ever supposedly had. Anyway, Hamilton easily defeated Farnham for the Local 201 presidency. Charlie ran for assistant business agent and did very well, winning almost 2,000 votes in a head-to-head contest with an opponent who got elected with 3,000 votes. I ran for Executive Board from the Turbine Division and came in fourth (3 get elected) in a field of nine with 573 votes, about 100 less than the second and third finishers. At the time I was demoralized, but looking back on it, I think it was an excellent vote. The Turbine Division had been devastated with layoffs after the strike, and many of our strongest supporters among the younger workers were gone. I was the only candidate opposed by both slates. Farnham ran a cartoon showing "Red" Kashner of the PLP as the puppetmaster pulling the strings of *Hamilton's campaign!* Farnham waited until the 11th hour with his red-baiting to make sure we didn't have a chance to respond. We should have anticipated

it.

We failed to deal with some other key issues in our campaign: we didn't put together a view of what the whole gear plant strike meant to show that both Hamilton and Farnham side-stepped the issues raised by the strike. One reason I wanted to write this article, was to show how the mass approach taken by the strike group was the right one, the one we should still be fighting for in the Local. At the time of the election GE workers did not realize what we accomplished in the gear plant strike. There had been a leadership betrayal but the rank and file's efforts prevented a complete sell out. The victories around safety, the increase in the members' rights — those were rank and file achievements. But it was difficult to translate the strike issues into the issues of a union election.

Some members of our group joined Hamilton's campaign, people like Peter who was elected to the Executive Board, but most group members were not active in the election. They had become active around a particular issue in the gear plant, an issue that led to a strike. They saw this through and some of them extended that commitment to overthrowing Farnham, but most did not have a permanent commitment to activism. Many of the strike activists have been upgraded or bumped to other GE buildings, but even those who stayed put are not committed to continuous activism, because the Union does not occupy a central place in their lives. They go to work and then try to forget about work and work issues at the end of the shift. If the Union addressed more issues in their lives perhaps it might be different.

The limitations of the unions are linked to the lack of a broad left movement. Most union leaders I know agree with the 'new right' on various issues like nuclear power and affirma-

tive action; they disagree of course on those issues related to unions, right to work laws, labor law reform, OSHA, etc. People of all political beliefs can unite around shop issues, as we did in 1975, but this unity does not necessarily extend to broader social issues. A left movement that reached into the shops could help a great deal in raising these broader issues that affect people's world view beyond the workplace. The labor movement needs a left view on energy, foreign policy, the environment etc. just as much as the left needs to see labor as the heart of any new society. The left should broaden the discussion of what a union could be because that's the only way people will see a union as important in their lives — that is, if they see the union as the CIO was seen in the 1930's, as an agency that could not only affect wages and working conditions, but also their environment, their children's education, and health care, and their prospects for racial justice.

FRANK KASHNER welcomes comments and correspondence about his article. People can write to him c/o Radical America.