

DASCO STRIKE SUMMED UP

This article is taken from *Getting Together*, an Asian community newspaper in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The wildcat strike which idled the paper reprocessing facilities of the Dasco plant in Oakland ended on May 17 with most of the company's 250 workers returning to work.

The calling-off of the strike which began spontaneously on May 1 after the company fired one of the Teamster shop stewards, left many issues unresolved. Some 80 workers were fired by the company during the course of the wildcat and the demands of the strikers were never met.

At a meeting of predominantly Asian students on the U.C. Berkeley campus after the strike, Roberto Hernandez, the shop steward whose firing by the company sparked the walkout, Hector Pena, Ben Martinez, and G.T. Wong, all of them strike organizers talked about the wildcat and tried to analyze the different factors which led to the end of the strike. All of the students who attended the meeting had at one time or another walked on the picket line to show their support for the workers.

HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS

Recounting the history of Dasco, Hernandez noted that the plant was notorious in its treatment of the workers. Poor pay and hazardous working conditions sparked earlier walkouts, and the poor ventilation and leaky roof of the plant even raised the brow of federal investigators last year.

It was, however, the treatment of the Third World workers by the company which both Roberto and G.T. rapped the most. The majority of the workers at Dasco are Latino and there are also many Chinese workers. In both of these groups, immigrant workers account for many of the laborers.

Hernandez recounted how the supervisors of the company had a policy of recruiting workers from villages in Mexico, sometimes hiring whole families to work. The paternalism of the company and the need for the immigrant families to survive economically in the country, allowed the workers to be paid substandard wages of \$2.20 an hour.

Even when the plant was unionized by Teamsters' Local 853 several years ago, the company still retained a free hand in its treatment of the workers. Conditions and wages changed little, and the workers remained divided because of language and cultural differences.

It was not until the company started hiring more young, bilingual workers that the workers began to organize. While the company wanted to hire young workers in hopes of speeding up production and their profits, they got workers who could read contracts and explain workers' rights to immigrant workers instead.

With the influx of these younger workers, the plant experienced its first walkouts. Last summer, a one-day walkout



Strikers at Dasco faced dozens of Oakland police who attacked their picket lines and tried to break the strike. (Call photo)

was staged because of poor ventilation and another one was held during the winter when the company lowered the thermostat in response to President Nixon's plea for energy conservation. And in both instances the spontaneous walkouts were successful, the demands of the workers being met.

One of the most significant changes to occur at the plant during this time was the election of Hernandez to the position of shop steward for the Teamster union. Many of the Third World workers saw his election as a step forward, especially since he was bilingual and could communicate with many of the Chicano workers about work and the union.

When Hernandez was fired on May 1 for allegedly refusing to transfer to another machine, 41 day-shift workers immediately protested and they too were fired. Refusing to submit to the company's unfair practices, a picket line was set up at the change of the shift. The wildcat was on.

As the strike continued, Dasco revealed the extent to which it would go to break the strike. Hiring the notorious Richardson Security police, the same private force which was used to break up picket lines during the Sears strike and the bottlers strike, Dasco had the police force use dogs and clubs to tear down the strikers' signs and flags and break up a pot luck dinner held by the workers on May 8.

POLICE ATTACK PICKETERS

Oakland's own police force, constantly patrolling the area since the beginning of the strike, attacked the peaceful picket line on May 9, injuring six people and arresting three pickets. While such an outburst of police force was meant to demoralize and intimidate the workers, the response from the workers and the community was one of outrage.

Besides relying on physical force to break the strike, the company also obtained court injunctions to halt all picketing from around the plant. And the union, Teamster Local 853 refused to sanction the strike citing legal problems which would open the union to legal action from the company. Even after a heated union meeting with 150 of the workers at Dasco attending, demanding some sort of action, Teamster officials would only pass a resolution to approach the company about the firings.

"We learned some important lessons," commented Hernandez, "and that is that the courts and the police would only act in the interests of the company. They certainly weren't out there to protect or to serve us. Some of the women workers who were on the picket line for the first

time were shocked by the actions of the police."

What finally broke the strike was the lack of organization among the workers to maintain economic support of the striking workers. Whereas the walkouts in the past were settled in a day or two, the nature of this strike—the refusal of the company to rehire personnel they had fired—made prospects for settlement very dim after the first ten days. Many of the workers had families to support and with no strike fund there was no way for the strike committee to keep up the welfare of the strikers.

LACK OF ORGANIZATION

After more than two weeks on a strike without union support and no financial means of supporting the striking workers, the strike committee called off the wildcat, allowing the workers to return to their jobs.

"We have to admit a lot of errors in the way the strike was carried out," said Hernandez. "This strike was a very spontaneous one—there was no planning or preparation for it on our part. Once it began it was hard to see where it would go."

Even while admitting the failure of the strike, organizers at Dasco were anxious to sum up the lessons. "It was primarily a question of organization, or the lack of it. There was no organization in the plant which could carry on communication between the different shifts of workers, and the unity that existed between the workers was very minimal. Without that type of organization, our spontaneous unity could not last too long."

While the end of the strike was a setback for the Dasco organizers, the fired workers plan to carry on the struggle to get rehired. An organization of the fired workers is in the making and while the use of the strike had been discarded to win their demands, the workers have two main focuses in the coming months.

First, make links with those workers within the plant to carry on a petition campaign for their rehiring and secondly, focus in on the upcoming arbitration between the union and the company which will decide whether or not they will be rehired. Even if the arbitration fails, the workers are preparing for a long struggle that will even go to the contract negotiations in November to get rehired.

"The wildcat showed that you can't always win, workers have to be organized and prepared. But it did show that workers, regardless of race or nationality could be united. Our potential is there . . ."