

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

Lessons of the Hormel strike

Either strikers will take on the International Monetary Fund, or be crushed.

Meatpackers at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota got a brutal lesson in what International Monetary Fund austerity policies, being imposed by Congress and the Executive branch on the U.S. economy, mean to the future of trade unions. On Jan. 20, Minnesota Gov. Rudy Perpich called in the National Guard to break a strike by meatpackers of Local P-9 of United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW).

The Hormel strike began last Aug. 17, when about 1,500 P-9 members walked off their jobs to dispute Hormel's attempt to cut wages and repeal most contract benefits in order to "stay competitive." Local P-9 organized the strike from the beginning as a grassroots support effort, and also launched a boycott of Hormel's major creditor, First Bank Systems, which it considers to be the "power" behind Hormel.

The battle began to escalate during the week of Jan. 13, when the company began hiring "replacement workers." More than 1,500 job applicants, driving cars with license plates from as far away as Iowa, crossed picket lines Jan. 14 at the Hormel plant, seeking jobs starting at \$8.00 per hour. Most union strikers had rejected the company's offer of a \$8.25 wage—down from \$10.69 an hour before the strike—and loss of most union benefits, if they would return to work Jan. 13.

On Jan. 17, international union head William Wynn refused permission for picketing Hormel's other plants and told strike leaders they were leading a "mass suicide." In a mail-

gram to Local P-9 president Jim Guyette, Wynn said, "In the name of human compassion, I urge you to put a stop to the suffering P-9 members and their families have endured for five long months before it is too late. I will not sanction an extension of P-9's picket lines to other Hormel plants."

But local union spokesman Ray Rogers said in an interview: "They [the international union] have been working extremely closely with the company. It's become very evident. They don't want these workers to succeed down here. The biggest obstacle to getting the settlement here has been the international union."

The conditions that provoked the strike, according to Rogers, would not have been tolerated by any honest union leadership. "The strike goes way beyond the wage and benefit cut. The safety conditions in this ultra-modern plant are abominable. For the end of 1984, 33-38% of the workers suffered a major work-related lost-time injury.

"And the company is trying to gut the entire contract. Seniority system, two-tier wages, bogged-down grievance procedures, end all past practices, and the company has refused to sit down and bargain since the inception of this strike. And the only reason they're getting away with this is because of the pact with the international union, not to make one move, but to be willing to destroy this local union, because they were willing to challenge the international and go out and fight the kind of fight that they knew needed to be fought."

Union picketers were sent in rov-

ing squads to other Hormel plants in the Midwest, contrary to the stated orders of the international president of the UFCW, William Wynn. An estimated 97% of the workers at the Hormel Ottumwa plant in Iowa refused to cross picket lines on Jan. 21, jeopardizing their own jobs.

According to Ray Rogers, "Ever since the beginning of the campaign, even before the strike, [IFCW head] William Wynn and the packing house director, Louie Anderson, have expended a lot of resources trying to undermine the campaign here. . . . It's rotten politics at the highest levels of the labor movement."

Early on Jan. 21, six troop trucks of guardsmen arrived and took up positions around the plant. The pretext for Gov. Perpich to call out the National Guard was that workers had encircled the Hormel plant on Jan. 20, and slashed tires and broke a car window in protest against the hiring of scabs. But picketers denied charges of heavy violence: "There's about as much violence here as Saturday night downtown. All we want to do is bargain with the company. They won't bargain."

On Jan. 23, twenty-five union officials demanded that Perpich withdraw the national guardsmen and close the plant for "the sake of public safety." Perpich refused, but ordered representatives from company and union to meet with a federal fact-finder to resolve strike issues.

The situation is ripe for the Hormel workers to internationalize their strike—by extending support to Argentina's nationwide strike against the International Monetary Fund, for example (see page 4-5). If they don't, the Hormel story will go down exactly as the media wants it played—an example of how "radical" efforts to defend the industrial workforce will lose.