

1938 Maytag strike



Account of 1938 Maytag strike in Newton, Iowa by workers affiliated with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). The strike involved anti-communist rhetoric from state politicians and the company, political maneuvering by the Democratic Party, and eventually, military intervention, which broke the strike.

As layoffs hindered workers' momentum in late 1937 and throughout 1938, District 8's greatest hope for demonstrating the potential of for its vision of unionism developed in Newton, Iowa. But Maytag sought to contain the union movement that had taken it and the town by storm in mid-1937.

Maytag, which had started as a farm implement dealer, became a player in the electrical industry through an innovation in washing machines made by one of their employees. By 1929, 20 percent of all washing machines in the country were made in Newton , Iowa , located thirty miles east of Des Moines, and now dubbed the "workshop of Iowa ."

While General Electric (GE) and Westinghouse made some washers, they did not dominate this market in the 1920s, when the washing machine industry was composed primarily of independents in the Midwest. Maytag was one of the niche market companies that lay on the margins of the oligopolistic electrical industry. The major innovations that catapulted Maytag to the top of the industry were made by Maytag worker, not the management. One invention of an "unschooled mechanic in the company's employ," produced superior results for the wash. Maytag also benefitted from the sales to rural farm wives far from access to urban laundries.

Maytag's rise in the industry transformed the town of Newton, Fred Maytag and his family poured money into Newton at what seemed an astronomical rate, in part to attract and accommodate the increased number of workers who brought the town's population to nine thousand by 1937.

Maytag dominated local institutions, including banks and car dealerships, and Newton seemed to embrace Maytag's control. The company found a ready supply of transient labor from the declining mines and agriculture of the area. Maytag's factory workforce was almost all male, and work was intermittent.

Maytag utilized the rural labor market as a reservoir to draw from during peak production times, when the company hired an extra four to five hundred workers and ran shifts of ten and sometimes fourteen hours. One worker claimed that some workers' average annual wages amounted to only five hundred dollars a year due to these practices.

Many workers resented the "benevolent autocracy," which involved pressure to buy only through Maytag-affiliated car dealers and home loaning agencies, take out a membership in the Maytag YMCA, donate to various Maytag charities, even buy from the designated milk delivery. Assembler Siebert Chestnutt later described it as a feudal "direct tribute" for keeping a job. Workers did not easily endure the petty empires of foremen, who selected and fired workers and set piece rates unilaterally.

The "farm boys" who came to work at Maytag seldom adjusted easily to the grueling work discipline they found at the company. The company also hired workers with experience in railroads and from declining Iowa mines who were "union-minded." A few of these led the drive to organize Maytag. While an early 1930s American Federation of Labor (AFL) union drive disintegrated rapidly, resistance continued sporadically. In 1936, Maytag assembly line workers engaged in at least one sit-down.

In April 1937, after hearing of the Emerson strike, twenty-five hundred Maytag workers called on the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and organized Local 1116 within one week's time. In early 1938 Maytag decided to throw itself on the front lines of the corporate counteroffensive against the CIO, despite (or perhaps driven by) healthy profits of 42% the previous year.

The company hired attorneys who had guided the Republic Steel Company's antiunion drive, resulting in the infamous 1937 Chicago Memorial Day Massacre, where ten workers were killed and many more wounded. In early 1938, Maytag management refused to settle grievances and was hostile to all union contract proposals. Management sought to provoke a strike, initiated a drive for a company union, and forced the union to hold another election proving representation.

In early May, Local 1116 passed a resolution connecting its wage demands to the goal that "human rights and human welfare must be given precedent [sic] over property rights." Sentner argued that the CIO must take a stand against the corporate counteroffensive with one of its most well organized group of workers, those who had a solid base of community support, such as those in Newton.

Meanwhile, workers implemented work-to-rule strategies that eventually led to a lockout and strike that began in late May 1938. Maytag orchestrated an effort to brand their resistance to wage reductions in the face of massive profits as "un-American" and foisted upon them by Communist leadership. Labeling the CIO union movement itself as "foreign" and its supporters as "outsiders" to the community was essential to this strategy. Thus it reinvented the methodology of the American "countersubversive tradition" from the earlier NMTA-CIA era which suggested that all efforts to transform the social order or reduce employers' power were the work of foreign ideas and alien forces.

Workers responded to claims that Maytag "had built the town" with retort that their labor had built Maytag and the town, and that their civil and human rights to expression were being denied to keep the company in power and their democratic rights suppressed.

On June 3, one hundred workers held a sit-down at the office of the county Board of Supervisors, demanding that Governor Nelson Kraschel intervene. Kraschel agreed, that "food should be given to families in need" and the supervisors began to provide relief on an individual basis rather than automatically denying aid to workers who were on strike. In

response, Maytag helped to organize the Jasper County Farmers and Taxpayers Association, led by farmers with major debts to Maytag's banks, to oppose relief to strikers. On the day after the sit-down, the association issued a resolution opposing relief to strikers, calling the CIO a "selfish un-American institution opposed to the best interests of our county, . . . committed to a policy of violence and intimidation"

Through its connections on the city council, Maytag forced the resignation of Mayor F.M. Woodrow, who had cooperated with the strikers. An attorney with close ties to Maytag replaced him. The police chief, who had allowed special union deputies, was forced to take a thirty-day vacation, and he was replaced with another Maytag friend. Local UE president Wilbert Allison concluded that "the stage was set for the wholesale arrest and beating of our pickets."

But the the union's strategy catalyzed on the morning of June 23. A group of back-to-workers marched toward the plant, and it appeared that union supporters who had given up the fight were joining them. But once inside the plant, union supporters, identified by blue flannel tied to their shirts, forced the outnumbered back-to-workers out of the plant. Union leader Hollis Hall yelled out, "We're taking over the plant!"

It was a dramatic turn of events.

Sentner asked the UE national office to send President James Carey to Newton "because of the red scare" as well as growing "attacks on me for being a [J]ew. . . . Lets give them an Irisher and a [C]atholic--like our attorney Connolly." Speaking to workers at a union meeting, Carey said that "when they quit calling my boys Communists, I'm going to start looking to see what's the matter. They're not doing their job." Sentner wrote to Matles that Carey "was a big help and assisted in overcoming much racial and political prejudice."

Throughout July the governor seemed determined to enforce a neutral position. Under military order, he made relief available to the strikers, denouncing the attempt to deny it "as a means of clubbing the employes into going back to work." Asked again and again if he would consider using the Iowa National Guard to open the plant he continually said he would refuse to allow it." Kraschel made an even more remarkable statement to the Democratic Convention in late July: "ownership of property by a non-striker does not exempt that property from its responsibilities to the worker who produced it."

Sentner was elated, interpreting this as a signal that the struggle had escalated the workers claims to rights: "It's quite apparent that the gov will stick to his guns and make a real campaign issue out of the question of human rights versus property rights."

Shortly after St. Louis-based anti-labor operative Fred Bender offered his services, the local police officials called for a vigilante force, outraged that the governor would not send in the guard. The strike gained national attention when, in the aftermath Prosecuting Attorney Luther Carr brought charges of criminal syndicalism against Sentner, Carey and union vice-president Hollis Hall, accusing them of orchestrating the plant occupation that had occurred in June. The charges brought more national attention to the union, but also focused on Sentner's politics, as well as the workers' cause.

District Attorney Luther Carr, who brought the charges against the union officers, was also attorney for the back-to-work group, against which the union had staged the occupation, in order to foil the back-to-work movement.

Criminal syndicalism statutes had been passed in thirty-four states during World War I and the "red scare" of the early postwar era. These laws made it a penalty to advocate or teach "by word of mouth the use of violent sabotage, crime, or other acts of terrorism to accomplish

industrial or political reform." Iowa 's law carried a maximum penalty of ten years in jail and a fine of five thousand dollars.

Carr cited Sentner's speech suggesting that the injunction against the union was "not worth the paper it was written on" as evidence of the threat of "terror" necessary to indict him under the law, which, like the later Smith Act, necessitated only that speech and beliefs that could result in violence.

When workers discovered that Sentner was in jail and that no bond was being accepted for his release, James Carey had to persuade them not to storm the jail to free Sentner. Arrests continued against dozens of workers for kidnapping, violations of the injunctions, and various other charges over the next week. District Judge Homer Fuller offered to drop the numerous injunction violation charges against union officials if they would call off the strike.

On July 13, Fuller convicted the union leaders of contempt of the injunction, sentenced each to six months in jail, and fined each five hundred dollars. Fuller offered to lift the fines and sentences if the leaders would use their influence to persuade workers to go back to their jobs. He warned that if they refused, he would continue proceedings against all the others who had violated the injunction.

On July 18, the county sheriff resumed arrests, jailing twenty-one unionists for violation of the injunction. When union members were brought before Judge Fuller, he repeated his offer to forgive the fines and release them if they would try to persuade Maytag workers to take the pay cut. The sheriff resumed his call for 1,000 deputies, a move Sentner described as a strategy for "vigilante warfare."

Judge Fuller added fire when he warned that there would be an uprising in district court the next day when the men were arraigned. He told the governor that "this is not a case of capital against labor. It is communism versus the good people of Newton . If you'd send fifty men, I'll guarantee we'll put the fear of God into these fellows."

Throughout the lockout/strike, the company and most of the legal apparatus of Newton tried to portray the labor struggle as one created by outside agitators. In reality, Sentner understood that the workers themselves were militant and ready to fight back against the corporate attempt to role back the CIO, and agreed with his idea that the workers of Newton would signal the potential of the CIO movement.

Maytag worker Ralph Seberg countered the company's rhetoric : "They talk about outside agitators, but the company also brought in outside agitators." William Cuthbert, a union steward who had worked at Maytag since 1925, countered the charge that Sentner and others were "outside agitators," arguing that the strike was what workers wanted, and refuting the charges of impending violence: "I have sat with William Sentner in many private meetings, and he has never done anything but stress law and order. He forbids us from using violence, not once but numerous times." Turning to the businessmen in the courtroom, he declared, "I believe Sentner is as good a citizen as any of you."

At a union rally on the night of July 19, a Pentecostal spirit took hold. An older worker testified that "I protest the ten percent cut in the name of my home, my crippled wife, in the name of not enough clothing, food, and poor houses. I protest that wage cut now and forever." Workers escalated mass picketing in anticipation of an attempt to reopen the factory. Carloads of miners from Pershing , Iowa , and union supporters from distant Estherville traveled to Newton to prevent the plant from opening, employing what they called a " Minnesota picket line," or mass action.

Eighty women, mostly wives of union workers, marched in a circle in front of the east gate. When L. A. McCall, the assistant police chief, attempted to drive a company official though a

picket line at the east gate, the women and some men lifted the rear end of car so that the wheels spun in the air. After McCall retreated, pickets tore up a brick sidewalk outside the plant, piled the bricks up, and distributed them among the strikers.

In response, Governor Kraschel declared martial law "only for the benefit of the public," pledging troops would keep the plant closed pending a settlement. But the National Guard's leaders, including Major General Matthew Tinley, played a key role in ending the Maytag strike. Tinley, served at the Mexican border in 1916-1917, then in the war in Europe. He was a prominent Democrat with significant influence on Kraschel. He was chair of the Democratic veterans organization in Iowa, and had even been suggested as candidate for VP of the US in 1932. He viewed protest as subversive. In April 33, he had commanded Iowa guardsmen in quelling farm protests at Denison, Iowa. He was President of the National Guard. Tinley's focus on Sentner's Communist Party affiliation countered that of John Connolly in the Democratic Party. Tinley brought it into focus in his hearings, and ultimately blamed it for the troubles in Iowa.

In line with the concept of a Popular Front, Sentner and union officials appealed for unity with Governor Kraschel at a late July Farmer-Labor party convention, where Kraschel's role in the strike was a central issue. Wallace Short, the iconoclastic Farmer-Labor candidate for governor, criticized Kraschel for recommending that the workers go back to work under the 10 percent pay cut and called for the repeal of the criminal syndicalism laws. But a delegation of Newton and state CIO unionists asked the convention to "do all in your power to defeat the Republican party in the state of Iowa ." Delegates loudly applauded the appeal.

While Short refused to withdraw, the appeal had its intended effect of defusing the third-party attempt. The Democratic governor was more susceptible to conservative forces in and outside the party than to workers' entreaties and their nascent influence in the Democratic Party. One can clearly see in hindsight that Kraschel turned away from workers' concerns as soon as the Farmer-Labor Party was no longer a challenge to him. The CIO's refusal to back a third party was fatal to the Farmer-Labor Party, which never again fielded a ticket and thereby reduced the kind of leverage that was possible against a wavering governor such as Kraschel.

When the NLRB insisted on hosting hearings in Newton on Maytag's illegal violations of the Wagner Act, Kraschel used it as an excuse to order workers back to the plant with under force of arms. Workers debated for hours how they should respond. One worker proclaimed, "I never worked under bayonets, and I never will." But Sentner and other union leaders urged workers not to defy martial law, as it could only result in violence.

Deciding to return to work but not accept the contract, the workers issued a resolution: "We only have our labor to offer to the Maytag Company at a fair price. Our wives, our homes, our children and the City of Newton depend upon our wages. We have no reserves--we cannot gamble with our wages against stock dividends. We stand firmly for the princip[le] that human rights take priority over property rights." The union emphasized that they were "returning to work under the compulsion of military force."

The next morning, union members marched single file into the plant. They were surrounded by armored cars and guards stretched for two blocks around the plant gate; guardsmen on rooftops were armed with bayoneted rifles, tommy submachine guns, tear gas weapons, and automatic pistols. The night before, ten rounds of ammunition were distributed to each guardsmen, and the union hall was prohibited from having more than two people in it at a time.

Taken from http://www3.niu.edu/~td0raf1/radicalunionism/maytag_1938.htm