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THE BRUNS STRIKE

A CASE STUDY IN

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN LABOR

by

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One of the strangest anomalies in the current student movement is its estrangement from labor on the operational level. On almost any major campus you can find activists who have clocked hundreds of hours on the picket line for civil rights, defense of Cuba, etc., but try to find one who has recently participated in a labor dispute in his local community. This lack of contact is even stranger when one considers that many of these activists consider themselves to be socialists of one kind or another. At the very least, they consider labor to be "the most liberal 'mainstream' institution."

In hopes of stirring some interest and showing what can be done with just a little effort, I would like to recount the story of student participation in a small strike in Madison, Wisconsin, from June 1963 until the present (October 1963).

Bruns Garage, Inc., the franchised Volkswagen dealer in Madison has a record of anti-labor sentiment. Attempts to unionize the shop several years ago failed, even though the wages of mechanics ran about a dollar an hour below the going rate for union shops in the city. The establishment is a family business with most of the managerial and secretarial spots filled with members of the Bruns family. Thus the people "up front" did indeed present a united front to the men working in the shop. Also profits from the business are expected to support the various branches of the family in the manner in which they are accustomed to living.

In the early spring of 1963, UAW Local #443 succeeded in signing up a majority of the Bruns shop. An NLRB election was held and the UAW local was certified as the bargaining agent for the shop. This period was marked, however, with the use by management for the first time of suspensions for alleged infractions of work rules. All suspensions were drawn by outspoken union men, and the shop steward was suspended for three weeks.

The union submitted a contract to management which was based on an existing agreement with another garage in town. It was summarily rejected by management, who offered a counter-proposal which did little more than recognize the existence of the union.

In the meanwhile, the company charged that the employees were engaged in a slow-down. (At a later NLRB hearing they were unable to provide convincing evidence of any slow-down using their own records. The mechanics were called together and told that they would have to beat the manufacturers suggested times or else they were fired. In particular, they were told to complete a one hour and 55 min. inspection and lubrication in one hour and 30 min. The mechanics interpreted this as the preliminary to firing them all, so all 12 union mechanics walked out on May 24.

A picket line was set up the first day and the firm has been continuously picketed since then. But the first month of the strike was essentially wasted. The garage still had all its management, clerical staff, sales and supervisory personnel, body shop and wash boys. There was some difficulty at first in replacing the mechanics, but soon strikebreakers were being driven in daily from Rockford, Ill. The only troubles experienced by Bruns were (1) a short interruption in service, (2) cessation of many deliveries, as the Teamsters and all other unions were honoring

the line, and (3) a conviction and \$100 fine for advertising for labor without stipulating that a labor dispute was in progress. In short, it was business as usual.

For their part, the strikers were not faring too badly. Liberal strike benefits began at once, and were supplimented by the local until the practice was stopped by the international. The strikers attempted to service cars in their home garages and solicited their services to cars entering the struck garage. But there was no real pressure on Bruns to settle. His business was open and in no real trouble. He was supremely confident that the mechanics would soon get tired of walking up and down in front of his place, and would soon drift away. But the strikers had good reason to be determined. Their wage scales had run from \$1.60 to \$2.32 an hour. Most of them took home less than \$60 a week. They had no job security, grievance procedure, or sick leave. They even had to pay for the VW emblems that went on their uniforms! On the other hand, Bruns was charging the customer \$5.50 an hour for labor, with labor being figured according to the manufacturer's suggested times.

Early in June, I drove my VW out to Bruns for the specific purpose of asking the men on the picket line where I could get my ailing car fixed, since Bruns had something of a monopoly on VW service in Madison. I was delighted to let them work on my car, and got most of the strike history from talking with them. It was quickly apparent that some of them were already ready to give up the strike and had good job offers elsewhere. It was also apparent that the Bruns Garage would never be forced to a settlement if things continued as they were going. So I offered to get some of my friends and come out to Bruns the next Saturday to see if we could close the place down. The strikers were enthusiastic and agreed to bring their wives out.

June 22, almost one month after the start of the strike, was the first day that the garage was really picketed. With about thirty people we were able to turn away virtually every car. Saturday is normally Brun's busiest day, but Saturday the 22nd they didn't take in enough money to even pay their utilities -- and they were plenty mad. They called the police immediately, and three patrol cars were on hand. They also tried to intimidate the pickets by taking individual pictures of them. But the day ended with strikers and students having a few beers in the local pub.

The next Saturday the garage was closed because of a death in the family. But on Saturday, July 6, we were back -- and this time with an added attraction: the first issue of Picket Line News. I had seen the need to convey the strikers' message to the customer in writing, since many people were reticent to stop and talk at length with the pickets. They just wanted to get in and have their car fixed. Hence we began the publication of our weekly sheet, printed at our own expense on my mimeograph machine.

The attack on Bruns now began in earnest. To win the strike, we had to stop customers from going into Bruns. To do this we had to give them some place else to go -- and we had to get the message to them. We continued our big Saturday pickets, hoping at least to cut Brun's business to the extent of his profit margin (there were always pickets present whenever he was open, though.) But the big step was the mechanics renting a building to set up a shop. We were then able to offer the customer an alternative. Then the distribution of Picket Line News began in earnest. We began with the University parking lots, but toward the end of the summer we had central and western Madison divided into 14 distribution zones. If you owned a VW, it was hard to avoid getting a copy on your car each

week. We even printed bumper stickers ourselves. And gradually the effort paid off, until today we have a situation where more cops come to the strikers' garage every day than go to Bruns.

All was not peace and light, however. Students (myself included) were twice threatened with physical violence on the picket line. And Bruns' obsession with violence led him to hire off-duty Madison policemen (in uniform) to guard his establishment at night (nothing ever happened to it.) He paid these cops \$3.00 an hour until the practice was stopped by the Mayor after a stink was made about it in the local papers. Bruns also took to hiding his new cars on a farm out in the country.

What is the status of the strike today? The NLRB has just concluded hearings on unfair labor practices which it brought against Bruns and a favorable decision is expected later this year. Bruns is hurting financially, but would rather lose money than see the union win. They have spent a fortune in legal fees alone for action in court, before the NLRB, and before the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board. The strikers are making more money now than when they worked for Bruns, but they have spent a good deal on outfitting their shop. In short, although student participation has dropped because of school, Bruns cannot win the strike. It is only a matter of time.

And what have we learned from our short-lived fling in labor?

1. The strike would have certainly collapsed without student intervention. Even the strikers admit this.
2. Close relations were easily established with the strikers even though many of the students were known radicals (I was chairman of the Wisconsin Socialist Club at the time). It was only necessary to prove that we were sincerely interested in winning the strike and not using it for some political purpose.
3. We were amazed at the degree of customer support. People seemed to innately despise a monopoly, and many were openly hostile to Bruns. The strike would have been impossible without customer support.
4. We were able to observe the workings of a typical local at close range. Aside from regular financial support, the union was of little or no help. The local has no employees (the president works full time in a body shop) and in practice all negotiations and important decisions are in the hands of the International representative. The rep has a large territory to service and comes by infrequently. The men are completely on their own as to how to conduct their strike. They get no help from other members of their local.
5. Organized labor in Madison as a whole area was of some help. Pressure was placed on the city to get the cops out of Bruns, and many locals in the city donated money to the strike fund. I was able to help some in this since I sat on Madison's central labor body as the delegate from my local of the teacher's union.
6. Late in the summer another UAW local in town struck a local battery factory. I got students to walk on their picket line (even though they didn't need it), and

they reciprocated by sending people out to Bruns on Saturdays. Exchanges of this type are very feasible.

7. We were surprised by the degree of political awareness (class consciousness?) shown by some of the strikers at both strikes. Some spoke spontaneously about automation and unemployment (generally with regard to their children.)

8. It is difficult to maintain student interest for a prolonged struggle, ~~but~~ ^{especially if they} tremendous bursts of energy are available for short run activities. People are available for short run activities. People are now talking about forming a permanent "Friends of Labor" group on the campus, and general interest in current labor problems has picked up.

Question - will the Bruns workers support or fight civil rights activities, Peace, etc.? will they fight the hiring of Negro mechanics?