

Forged in Solidarity

Local 1505 Members' Unity Wins Solid Contract at Raytheon

In the Fall of 1995, IBEW Local 1505, Waltham, Massachusetts, accepted a labor agreement with the electronic company Raytheon that allowed the company greater flexibility in moving employees between departments, made changes in overtime distribution, and implemented a two-tier wage system and a three-year pay freeze. These changes, judged necessary to remain competitive, failed badly. Production suffered, morale plummeted, and in effect, both sides lost. Nearly three years later, a new business manager and a predominantly fledgling negotiating committee faced a management which had fattened the company to a \$20 billion corporation during the last contract and was threatening to close the Waltham plant. Bringing home a contract to be proud of was going to require membership solidarity to bring the union to full strength.

Business Manager Michael Zagami involved the membership by scheduling informational pickets outside the various Massachusetts plants, the first time membership would take such an active part in negotiations. The first picketing on July 1, 1998, was arranged hurriedly, with perhaps 30 people expected to attend. But at 5 a.m.—30 minutes before the scheduled start—a dozen people were already holding signs in the darkness of night. This number increased to over 100 as start-up time for the first shift approached. Later that morning, the plant buzzed about the rally. Many members who were not contacted in time demanded that they be notified if another such demonstration was to be held.

Each of three more such rallies exceeded the previous turnout. Passing cars beeped long and loud in support. Smiles and cheers were coming from members on the line. A sense of pride began to emerge.

A management that started by deriding Local 1505 members (average age 47) as too old to rally was now in a state of panic as new lines were clearly drawn—and the negotiating committee had serious leverage. Members were prepared to stand tough, and the feeling was electric. The peaceful picketing showed a membership clearly determined to get a return on the investment they had made in the company over the past three years.

During the third rally, a tragic car accident claimed the life of Sister Carol Labadie while she stood on the line. Her passing horrified members throughout the state. The tragedy became a rallying point as members became more united than ever, now fighting not only for themselves and their families, but also for a fallen co-worker. Many members

shifted schedules on child care or second jobs in order to attend the rallies. The negotiating team was fending off attacks on all benefits by a company determined not to hand back its previous gains without a struggle.

The members were kept informed about many of the company's proposals, which served to inflame the rank and file. They were determined that their voice would be heard. As the deadline approached, most thought a strike was imminent.

A last minute contract offer by the company on a Saturday evening was hurriedly printed before a special meeting the following morning. Most members arrived expecting to vote strike only to be told a tentative agreement had been reached. The new agreement included a 9 percent raise over two years, improvements in flex-time, vacation time, overtime distribution, pension benefits, the 401(K) plan, on-the-job training programs, vending language, creation of the new position of benefits councilor, the strengthening of seniority rights and other improvements in several areas. Members overwhelmingly ratified an agreement that was forged with strength and pride; theirs was a contract that solidarity built. ■

Local 1505 members show their solidarity during contract talks.

(Ed. Note—Brother Michael Noetzel, press secretary, Local Union 1505, Waltham, Massachusetts, contributed the information used in this article.)

