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The Strike of the General Electric Company Employees

Earl Clement Davis

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The Strike of the General Electric Company Employees.

Thursday morning, Dec. 19, 1918 at 10 o'clock, the employes of the General Electric Company at the company's plants at Fort Wayne Ind., Schenectady N.Y., and Pittsfield Mass., laid down their tools and walked out. The employes at the company's plant at Lynn Mass. remained at work because, it is stated, they were in the midst of adjusting an award made by the War Labor Board Oct. 31, 1918. The union employes at Erie Pa. plant of the same company had walked out Dec. 10 on account of alleged discrimination by the Erie plant management against ten men, more or less, who, as delegates, had attended a meeting of the Electrical Manufacturing Industry Labor Federation held at Erie Pa. during the week end of Nov. 30 to Dec. 2. This Federation is composed of delegates of the Metal Trades Councils and craft unions of employes at the various plants of the General Electric Company.

The alleged discrimination at the Erie plant against employes for attending a meeting of the delegates from all the General Electric Company plants was regarded by the employes as an issue between the General Electric Company as a whole and its employes, involving a situation that threatened the organization of employes in all the plants. The Executive Committee of the Federation addressed a letter to the President of the General Electric Company, calling his attention to the situation at Erie, asking the Company to cause the men to be reinstated, and requesting a conference between the executive Committee of the Federation and the President. Failing to arrive at any adjustment of the Erie difficulty in this way, the Committee presented the ~~six~~ matter to the employes of the various plants with the result that a general strike was called for Dec. 19, 1918.

As the strike developed it became clear that the real issue was to bring out the labor policy of the General Electric Company. In a telegram to the War Labor Board Jan. 3, 1919 the President of the Company stated that the labor policy in the various plants of the Company was left to the manager to determine. The employes stated at the beginning of the strike that a real settlement must be accompanied by a declaration of labor policy by the company as a whole. This undercurrent issue came clearly to view several times during the strike. At a public hearing held in Pittsfield Jan. 15 by the Massachusetts State Board of Conciliations and Arbitration the manager of the Pittsfield Works in reply to a question as to the causes of the strike said, "The causes of the strike were the formation by the employes of the Federation of Electrical Employes and the ambitions of certain labor leaders to become larger figures in the general field of organized labor." The same point of dissatisfaction with the present leaders of employes was expressed by the Vice President of the Company in a public statement. To these statements the employes respond that they have had a long and bitter struggle to establish the right of collective bargaining and organization in the various plants, and that it is necessary to have a federation of all employes and to establish a labor policy in the company as a whole.

The juxtaposition of forces in this strike and the real issues involved are brought out clearly by the growth of organization during the past two years. The meeting of the Electrical Manufacturing Industry Labor Federation at Erie, Pa., Nov. 30 to Dec. 2 1918 was the culmination of an interesting chapter of industrial ~~organization~~ history. Prior to 1916 the only General Electric Company plant in which it had been possible to develop

a union organization , was at Schenectady N.Y.. At that plant, after several strikes, a Metal Trades Council was organized several years ago. The Metal Trades Council is a central delegate body composed of six delegates from each organized craft in the plant. In 1916 the employes in the Pittsfield Works began to organize. A metal trades council , similar to the one in Schenectady, was formed. Several of the leaders in the movement were discharged. The management stated through the press "that he will not officially receive a committee representing any of the so-called national or international unions." A strike was called Sept. 2nd 1916 on the main issue " of the General Electric ~~Company~~ officials dismissing old employes who might be members in various labor organizations." The strike lasted for four weeks . ~~The strike lasted for four weeks.~~ It was settled by a compromise agreement. The management agreed to reinstate all men who had been discharged , with the exception of those who had been sentenced in court during the strike. The employes agreed to accept a plan submitted by the management for the election by secret ballot of a shop committee of 26 to handle grievances. This shop-committee plan at Pittsfield worked very satisfactorily for more than a year. The statements of both employes and management agree on this point.

This era of comparative stability continued until early in 1918 , when, shortly after the Supreme Court rendered its decision on the validity of the individual contract between the employer and employe, the management caused to be circulated among the employes a very strong and carefully drawn individual contract. Employes were requested to sign this contract if they wished. Trouble began to brew. Most of the opposition centered about Article five, as follows:--" The employer agrees that it will not lock out its

employees , and the employe agrees that ~~he~~ will neither quit work because of a grievance of any other persons, nor engage in any strike with co-employees except ~~for~~ after a sixty days notice in writing to the other party to this agreement, but no such notice shall be served until one year from the execution thereof."

A threatened strike was averted through the efforts of a Federal Conciliator . He formulated an agreement acceptable to both parties.

The kernal of the agreement was contained in the clause,--"it being understood that no individual contract or agreement will be offered or required by the ~~company~~ . " It is claimed by the employes that the next day after this agreement was signed the manager caused copies of the Individual Contract to be posted on the bulletin Boards in the factory together with a notice to the effect that the ~~contracts~~ might be obtained from the foreman. Another strike vote ~~was~~ was taken, but the National War Labor Board took the situation in hand on May 6. Its award was rendered July 31. The award provided for a wage increase, the elections of department committees, ~~of grievance~~ and a prohibition of individual contracts.

During ~~ixk~~ 1918 the employes at Fort Wayne, Ind. organized and were operating under an agreement arranged by a Federal Conciliator. The employes at Lynn, Mass. attempted organization with the result that difficulties arising brought the War Labor Board into the field. An award was made Oct. 31, 1918.

At Erie Pa. which , it is claimed, was operated as a closed non-union shop prior to the war, an organization of about 20 % of the plant had been affected when this present difficulty arose. On or about Dec. 6 1918 the management at Erie installed a plan for a local union including the election of a shop committee to ~~handle~~ handle grievances. The evidence given at the War Labor Board

hearing in New York Jan.8 seemed to show clearly that this new plan at Erie was installed by the management without consulting the wishes of the employes , and that it was done after some of the alleged discriminations had taken place, and just prior to the strike of Dec 10 .

Thus the real issue of the strike , the labor policy of the General Electric Company , emerged in the general strike of Dec. 19. The general strike assumed such proportions that on Jan. 2nd. a telegram was sent to all concerned to the effect that the Department of Labor, regarding the situation as an emergency, had referred the entire matter to the National War Labor Board for settlement. The employes were advised to return to work pending a hearing by the War Labor Board in New York Jan .8. A vote was taken Jan. 3 by employes of all the plants ~~in~~ return to work at once. At Schenectady the manager issued a statement that the men could not be received before Jan. 6, and ~~that~~, because of "cancellation and reduction in orders" not all of the strikers could be taken back, but that they would be returned in order of service and needs of dependents. Most of the men returned Jan.6 and in a manner apparently satisfactory to both parties. The same held true at Fort Wayne. At Pittsfield the men went to the shop Jan. 4, and were told that there was no work and that they would be sent for as they were needed. Saturday evening's paper in Pittsfield carried an announcement by the manager almost identical with the Schenectady announcement. The essential variation was the statement that all employes who had remained at work would be given first preference in reinstatement. The employes regarded this action as a lockout, and voted to go back in a body or not at all.

Meanwhile on Jan. 3 the manager of the Erie plant sent a reply

telegram to the War Labor Board , reviewing the situation at Erie and concluding as follows :-

"Therefore we are unwilling to submit this controversy to the national War Labor Board , or to be bound by any finding it may make, and accordingly we respectfully ask to be excused from appearing in New York city on the 8th in regard to matters pertaining to the Erie Works."

On the same date a telegram was sent to the War Labor Board by the President of the General Electric Company , reviewing the situation, ~~explaining the situation at the various plants~~ , developing the point that the strikes at the various plants were sympathetic and in violation of the awards of the War Labor Board. It concluded as follows;-

" ~~The~~ ... "the manager of the Erie Plant has advised you of his decision not to submit to the jurisdiction of the ~~board~~ board. In that decision I concur. As a matter of courtesy to the board , however, a representative of the company will appear, if you still decide the hearing to be necessary, and give the board any ~~an~~ additional information. "

The War Labor Board Hearing was held in New York , Jan. 8. ~~Both~~ the employes and the Company were represented. The Board made public its decision Jan. 16. The report of that decision states that a War Labor Board Examiner will be placed at Erie to settle matters there. Concerning the Pittsfield and Schenectady situations the Board held that the strikes were in violation of the awards of July 31 last, ~~but~~ examiners would be sent to these plants to adjust matters and settle grievances and discriminations in terms of the awards already in operation there.

At Pittsfield a local complication made matters difficult. The

employees who had attempted to return to work on Jan. 4, again, at the request of the ~~Labor~~ Department of Labor, voted to return to work Jan. 13. A second time they were told that there was not work and that they would be sent for as needed. This action by the company caused very bitter feeling. But on Jan. 18 the Appeals Committee and the manager reached an agreement providing that all employes would be returned on or before Jan. 27, and, in case of inability to place all the men on or before that date, those not so placed would be put on the pay-roll for one half day.

Thus the matter rests. The results of the conflict which lasted almost seven weeks are not yet clearly defined. Whether the Company accepts the decision of the War Labor Board to place an examiner in the Erie Plant is not fully clear. Neither the War Labor Board Decision nor the outcome of the strike ~~has~~ brought forth a defined statement as to the labor policy of the Company except in so far as the fact that, operating under the awards of the War Labor Board in four of the plants, the company accepts the principle of collective bargaining and the right of organization. On the other hand, so far as now appears, the employes have gained a point at Erie, have demonstrated their ability to call a general strike, and have brought the Company as a whole into the controversy.

Earl C. Davis.

The Strike of the General Electric Company Employees

Earl Clement Davis

Pittsfield, MA

January 27, 1919

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