

Mott's strikers are increasingly rare breed

Matthew Daneman • Staff writer • June 17, 2010

For four years, Gary Manktelow headed each work day from his Wayne County home to the nearby Mott's plant where he ran a forklift and was a group leader.

Now the 57-year-old Williamson man heads there daily to stand outside the plant property along Route 104 and raise a ruckus about not being at work.

Manktelow is one of about 300 Mott's workers who have been on strike since May 23, picketing the applesauce plant over cuts in pay and benefits. And he and his fellow strikers are increasingly a rarity.

According to the U.S. Labor Department, 2009 saw five major strikes or work stoppages involving 1,000 or more employees — the fewest since the federal agency began tracking such data in 1947. And the numbers have been on a long slide.

According to Labor Department figures, there were on average 20 major work stoppages a year between 2000 and 2009, down from an average of 35 a year during the 1990s and 83 in the 1980s.

Strikes by smaller unions have followed the same downhill path, said Howard Foster, professor emeritus at the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Management and an expert on labor disputes.

"There are fewer unions, so you're going to get fewer strikes," Foster said. "The costs are high. The alternatives to the employer are greater. The threat to the union's survival if they go on strike is greater."

Meanwhile, the motivation behind strikes has shifted from forcing concessions by employers to preventing concessions employers are seeking, Foster said. "In a lot of cases the union is perfectly satisfied with the status quo," he said.

Indeed, striking Mott's workers would have been happy with the status quo, said Michael Leberth, president of Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union Local 220.

"We weren't asking for anything more than what we already had," said Tom Leach, 58 and a truck driver from Wolcott as he stood on the picket line. "We can't afford to lose any more."

The strike started as the company was about to impose a new contract that would have seen the plant's hourly workers receive a \$1.50-an-hour pay cut, a freeze in their pension and a reduction in the company's 401(k) match.

According to Texas-based Dr Pepper Snapple Group, which owns Mott's, workers' average wages — \$21 an hour — are 50 percent higher than the going rate in the Rochester region for comparable work.

No further negotiations between the union and company are scheduled.

Now the striking employees are living on \$300 a week from the union's strike fund, their savings and donations from the community while they wait for unemployment benefits to kick in.

"I'm going to take a beating on my credit report for sure" because of late bill payments, Leberth said. "We're all going to suffer."

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One group that also could suffer is the region's apple growers.

The Mott's plant, which also produces apple juice and apple concentrate, is one of the largest buyers of local apples, while Wayne County is one of the nation's largest counties for apple production.

"There are concerns as far as the uncertainty (of the strike) and where it's heading and how it will get resolved," said Wayne County Farm Bureau President John Sorbello. "If it carries into the harvest season, there will be some impact."

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Tammy Battaglia of Rochester, left, and Jose Maldonado of Lyons picket on Route 104 in front of the Mott's plant Wednesday. The strike has lasted for nearly a month. (JAY CAPERS staff photographer)

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