

LOCAL 1445 - PROUD LEGACY OF LABOR HISTORY

Fifty-five years ago, several hundred workers from the Colonial Provision Company in Boston engaged in an economic war with their company that defied all odds and marked an important cornerstone in Massachusetts labor history.

On October 27, 1955, more than 200 union meatpackers from the Colonial Provision Company walked from the plant's North End location across the street to Haymarket Square to spend their lunch hour at a union meeting, discussing the strategy for upcoming contract negotiations with management. When their lunch hour was over and they started back across the street, they were shocked to see armed guards in front of the plant. "You're fired!" yelled the boss. "Get out!" Colonial's owner had decided to lock out the 300 union members and replace them with nonunion workers.

At that time, Colonial Provision was one of the major meat processors of hams, cold cuts and hot dogs, established in New England forty years earlier, in 1915. The plant became unionized in 1936, right after President Roosevelt passed the National Labor Relations Act giving workers the right to join unions without fear of retaliation from the boss and ending an era of labor unrest, strikes, and confrontations between workers and management that often turned violent. Colonial owner Sidney Rabinowitz had never liked having his business unionized and fought the union each year at negotiations, precipitating strikes in 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1939. World War II brought an uneasy truce to workplace hostilities at Colonial, but once the war was over, the company started its offensive again, causing another strike in 1949.

Sidney didn't like the idea of the workers having the rights that a union contract guaranteed: seniority rights for promotions and layoffs; pay raises, benefits, vacations, overtime pay, holiday pay, and other perks; a grievance procedure to resolve workers' complaints; reinstatement of workers, often with backpay, in cases of firing without just cause; and the right to be treated with dignity and respect and have a voice on the job. Most of all, Rabinowitz wanted complete control over his workforce, similar to Wal-Mart's CEO Lee Scott, who knocks unions by saying; "I want to drive the car and I don't want anyone to share my wheels."

After the strike in 1949, both parties were able to reach agreements without a dispute until 1954. That was the year the owner declared all-out war against his own employees and their union, the United Packinghouse Workers of America, Local 11, CIO.

The company, hellbent on breaking the union, used an old-fashioned weapon to divide and conquer the workers who were picketing the plant around the clock: racism. The owner began recruiting as strike breakers young African-American men from nearby predominantly black communities, and from the Deep South; many of them had just returned from the Korean War to an America that was struggling with high unemployment and they were desperate to find jobs. Supervisors herded them into the plant under the cover of night to replace the locked out regular workforce, who were a diverse group of Italians, Irish, Poles, and Jews, as well as African-Americans. During the day the "replacement workers" were escorted in by armed guards to protect them from the angry picketers outside.

The strike went on for weeks and months as the members continued to picket the plant and began a boycott campaign against Colonial Products. Management tried to lure strikers to cross the picket line by organizing a "back-to-work" movement but were successful in recruiting only about 30 scabs. Episodes of violence erupted between the strikers and scabs, but the strike/lockout dragged on.

After five long grueling months of picketing through all kinds of weather, the worst possible news hit the strikers like a bomb: The company had petitioned the National Labor Relations Board for a decertification election to officially throw out the union and permanently end the strike. The Labor Board conducted an "election", allowing the scabs and strike breakers to vote but disallowing participation by the regular locked-out employees! The

Taft-Hartley amendment to the NLRA actually permitted this travesty of justice, and the union was voted out. Sid Rabinowitz's dream of busting the union had come true, and seemingly with the government's blessing. Needless to say, the regular workforce felt their government had let them down by denying them the right to vote.

Ninety-nine out of a hundred unions would have packed it in, taken the loss, and walked away, but not the United Packinghouse Workers Union. The union had to change their strategy; obviously violence and name calling were not effective. Strike leaders such as chief steward Jim Bollen, John Mitchell from the Regional Union, business agent Ben Magglozzi, and a large strike committee of rank-and-filers met to devise a new game plan. The International President of the UPWA, Ralph Helstein, came to support the strikers and stated, "If it takes six months or six years, Colonial will have to sign a contract with the union or go out of business." Owner Rabinowitz was shocked at the news that the strike had NOT ended. Much to his disbelief and chagrin, the picket lines and boycott campaign continued throughout the spring and into the summer of 1955. Some strikers, disheartened by the government's betrayal, crossed the picket lines and surrendered to the boss; a few others found work elsewhere; but the battle raged on.

Collections were taken up at other union shops, such as the General Electric Plant in Lynn, the Fore River Shipyard in Quincy, NEPCO, Columbia Packing, Morrison and Schiff, other packinghouses, and other worksites, to assist the strikers. A major boost to morale came when the members of Teamsters Local 25 voted to support the strike and refused to carry Colonial products. Jimmy Johnston, a young and energetic black man, the president of Local 11, was instrumental in winning support from the NAACP, the Boston Ministerial Alliance, the Urban League, and two black weekly newspapers - the *Chronicle* and the *Guardian*. Support also came from the two separate labor federations; the AFL and the CIO. Norman Furman of the radio station WBMS, currently known as WILD helped get the strikers' message out by accepting union commercials when other stations refused; and Cy Jacobs provided sound trucks to travel through Massachusetts neighborhoods, loudly broadcasting, "Don't Buy Colonial Scab Meats!". The boycott had gained a higher level of effectiveness and began to cut into Colonial's profits. Furman was also connected to the old Fine Arts Theater on Norway Street and organized concerts to raise money for the striking families, featuring such big name attractions as Duke Ellington, who spoke in support of the strikers; LaVerne Baker; Sabby Lewis; comedian Freddie Ross; and many other stars and celebrities. Famous folk artist Pete Seeger entertained strikers at the union hall.

The new union strategy was to send a "striker" into the plant pretending to want his job back. Once rehired, he could gather information from the inside and convince the strikebreakers to support the union. This proved to be one of the turning points in the long union struggle. The undercover union agent quickly learned that the strikebreakers were earning \$ 1.10 per hour less than the regular workers had received and had to put up with the same harsh and grueling conditions that the strikers were protesting. This inside information prompted the union to draft leaflets to pass out at the plant entrances every day, creating a common bond with the people inside the plant and educating them as to why they needed the union in the first place. The union also sent workers into Roxbury neighborhood bars at night, to meet and talk to the strikebreakers. A charismatic young African-American strike leader named Shelton Coates, along with other union members, helped win the trust of many of the strikebreakers, which began to stir up trouble for Rabinowitz inside the plant. Sidney's strategy of using racism to divide and conquer the workers was beginning to backfire. The strikebreakers on the inside realized they were being used to hurt the

SECRETARY-TREASURER'S REPORT



JEFF BOLLEN

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Labor History (cont'd)

workers on the outside, and at the same time were being exploited themselves and being paid less than the regular union workers.

In August of 1955, the International Union sent in Don Smith, a large African American man who had a major influence on the outcome of the strike. Smith was a strong union leader who had the knowhow to win a strike. He assigned the strike committee members to certain tasks: two were assigned to speak at different union meetings around the state; two others were to meet with different supermarkets about getting Colonial products off their shelves; and others went to all packinghouses to drum up more pickets to put signs in front of stores carrying scab meat. A Boston candidate running for mayor, John Powers, gave a speech on top of a truck that displayed a sign, "Don't buy Colonial!"

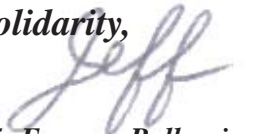
Word of the workers' struggle had spread throughout New England, and the company showed signs of weakening. Strikers were gaining momentum and the strikebreakers on the inside were causing turmoil. Rabinowitz attempted a very shrewd last ditch effort to finally win the strike: He offered the rival AFL union, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Local 592, a contract and an opportunity to pick up several hundred new members in an unprecedented move to save face with the public and block the victory of the militant United Packinghouse Workers Union. Bill Kelly, the president of the Meat Cutters local, adamantly refused the offer stating, "I would never interfere with the struggle of another union."

On December 10, 1955, Colonial surrendered and signed a settlement agreement with the original union. During the strike, Sid Rabinowitz had made the statement, "I will never sign another contract with Local 11!" So the union made the small concession to him of changing the number of the local from 11 to 616 for the members at Colonial. The new union contract contained all the wages and benefits the union had been seeking before the strike, and all strikers were offered their jobs back. Shelton Coates was elected president of Local 616 and Jim Bollen was reelected chief shop steward. Some of the strikers turned down the offer to return to Colonial because they had found work elsewhere; many of the strikebreakers who filled those empty slots had been won over by the solidarity and protections of a great union and went on to become active union officers.

The Colonial strike's claim to historical significance is that not only was it the longest strike in Massachusetts history, it was the only time that a union was decertified by the National Labor Relations Board and came back to win a major strike and recertification under a great contract!

Coincidentally, twenty years after the historic strike, a young Vietnam veteran returning from the war was hired at Colonial Provision and was subsequently elected president of Local 616. His name is Rick Charette. The former chief steward and rank-and-file leader of the fourteen-month historic strike, from 1954 to 1955, was the late Jim Bollen, my beloved father.

In solidarity,



Below: Celebrating a victory in the Colonial strike, 1955. Frances Bollen is standing 3rd from the left in the back row, Jim Bollen is to her immediate left; Shelton Coates, standing, is the 3rd man from the right in the back row.

