

Old Town Strike

I. In March 1966 SDS members from the University of Maine began labor activities at a local woolen mill -- the Ounegan Woolen Mill in Old Town, Maine. For twenty weeks, members of the textile workers union of American had been on strike for higher wages and fringe benefits. Their demands were anything but extravagant --

1. A pay hike to raise the average wage from \$1.49/hr. to \$1.58/hr
2. A hospitalization plan (which had been promised in writing after a strike settlement in 1962.)

Even though these demands were small, Ounegan management refused to negotiate.

The Bangor Daily News, the only newspaper covering local news carried very little on the fight and as a result, students knew little of the situation. The strike finally came to our attention through an article written in the campus newspaper. The article uncovered the fact that a number of university students were scabbing at the mill and jeering the picketers.

Two members of SDS decided to get an insidestory of the strike and, with promises of full coverage by the campus newspaper, entered the mill as union plants. After taking many photographs of extremely hazardous conditions and speaking at length to the scabs, the two emerged (fired) with enough material to the union a great deal of publicity. SDS members began to join the picket line and within a week their (SDS) numbers had grown to about a dozen.

A committee was formed as a "front" to handle the strike -- The Committee to Aid the Ounegan Woolen Mill Strikers. This Committee (SDS) informed the newspaper in Bangor that a large picket line would be massed at the end of the week. On Friday over 200 U. of M. students marched on the line under the eyes, tear gas, and (no kidding) submachine guns of the state troopers and local police. This line and the campus newspaper article were responsible in the eyes of the union, for ending the strike successfully. Local officials and the governor of the state, quiet and passive for 22 weeks, suddenly showed strong desires to end the dispute. A wire from the governor and emergency mediation sessions called by Old Town authorities proved successful and the strike was over on the following Monday. The union won all of its demands and the old manager was promptly fired by the owner of the mill.

II. Although gratifying in many respects, work with labor has also been frustrating and depressing. This has been because of the following factors.

1. Conservatism -- the workers we dealt with were, as they put it, "good patriotic Americans" who were "fighting for the same ideals as the boys in Vietnam." Although we tried, in many subtle ways, to get the point across that this was not the case, it was usually futile to try.

2. Prejudice -- these workers, in a rural setting with an Indian Reservation a mile away were constantly showing themselves to be very narrow in their racial attitudes.

Strong anti-Semitism could also be seen. (The owner of the mill was Jewish.)

3. The hostile attitude of the campus to those opposed to the war in Vietnam --

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Due to the extreme hostility on the part of the campus to SDS (and especially its chapter president) the chapter had to disguise its activities under a front organization. We felt that we had to make this sacrifice in order to win the strike and acquaint the students with social problems without a negative prejudgment on their part.