

UE STEWARD

FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

UNITED ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS OF AMERICA • DECEMBER 2019

The strike is back!

After decades of retreat, workers are fighting back now using the most powerful weapon in our arsenal: the strike. The strike wave that began in 2018 when nearly 500,000 workers went on strike in 20 major work stoppages continued in 2019.

More workers went on strike in 2018 than at any time since the 1980s - led by teachers and school support personnel in West Virginia, who didn't even have the right to strike. Over 300,000 teachers in five other states would join the West Virginia teachers in going out on strike in 2018 in what came to be known as the RedForEd movement, a movement to fight budget cuts, low teacher salaries and overcrowded classrooms.

The strike wave carried over into 2019, starting in January when more than 34,000 teachers in Los Angeles went on strike for the first time in over 30 years. During the year, the LA teachers would be joined by tens of thousands of Chicago teachers and more than 46,000 UAW members who went on strike against General Motors in their longest strike in more than 50 years. Nearly 2,000 UE members also went on strike in 2019.

In what was at the time the largest strike by manufacturing workers during the Trump presidency, nearly 1,700 members of UE Locals 506 and 618 went on strike at the end of February against their new employer, Wabtec Corporation, after it tried to impose new terms and conditions on the workers that stripped away 82-years of contract gains that members of those two locals had fought and won against their previous employer, General Electric. The nine-day strike at the Wabtec Transportation facility in Erie, PA would later be ruled a lockout by the State of Pennsylvania.

UE members at Locals 1018, 274, 625 and 626 also went on strike during 2019, using short warning strikes against their employers.

It's important to point out here that while the strike is our most powerful weapon, a strike is always our last resort. As UE members, we know that there are hundreds of ways to put pressure on an employer to settle a good contract. But the strike — or the threat of one — remains the single most powerful incentive to force employers to deal with the demands of workers. Because of this, every UE local — even one that has never gone on strike —

must keep its strike machinery well-oiled. Remember - only your local membership can decide to strike - not UE officers, staff or workers from other locals or shops.

A strike is the acid test of a local. It tests a local's ability to confront the company. During a strike, a local also tests itself. A poorly-organized strike can leave resentments that will take a long time to heal, even if the strike itself has been a success. A well-organized strike, on the other hand,

Wabtec was buying General Electric's Transportation Division that included the Erie facility, the locals' members and leaders were optimistic that the Pennsylvania-based Wabtec would be the start of a better relationship than what they had experienced under GE in recent years. Instead of a better relationship, the locals were facing a fight right from the start.

As the sale got nearer to closing, Locals 506 and 618 were informed by Wabtec in December 2018 that it would be imposing new terms and conditions on their members that included mandatory overtime and arbitrary schedules, wage reductions of up to 38 percent for recalled and newly-hired workers, and the right to use temporary workers for up to 20 percent of the work in the plant - among the many proposed take-a-ways.

When it became apparent that the locals would not be able to reach a long-term or short-term agreement with Wabtec after a month of unproductive negotiations, the locals began preparing for a strike. Ideally, a local union should begin preparing months, if not a year, in advance of a possible strike. Unfortunately, given the timing of the negotiations and the closing of the sale, the locals had less than a month to prepare before Wabtec took over their facility and imposed its new terms and conditions on their members starting on February 25.

During the month of negotiations that preceded the strike, the locals had reached out to other unions that represented Wabtec employees. The locals received letters of support from UE Local 610, which represents Wabtec workers in Greensburg and Wilmerding, PA, the IndustriALL global labor federation which represents 50 million workers around the world, unions in Canada, Great Britain, France, Italy, Brazil, Mexico and Turkey, and from Railroad Workers United, a cross-craft alliance of union railroad workers in the U.S. and Canada, all of whom had written to Wabtec CEO Ray Betler indicating that they were following the negotiations in Erie closely and were prepared to take action if called upon.

Senator Bernie Sanders also weighed in, calling on the Wabtec CEO to treat the Erie workers with respect and honor their existing collective bargaining agreement. Sanders would use his vast social media network to mobilize support for the locals after they went on strike.

UE STEWARD 2019 IN REVIEW

can bring a local much closer together.

While each one of our UE locals that went on strike in 2019 has important lessons to share, this *UE Steward* will be highlighting our union's largest strike during 2019 — the strike by our 1,700 members at Locals 506 and 618 who brought national and international attention to their successful nine-day strike against their new employer, Wabtec Corporation.

Preparing for and Conducting a Strike: A UE Guide

More info on preparing for and conducting a strike is available on the UE website: ueunion.org/strikes. Not all sections of the strike guide have been put online yet. If you are a member of a UE Local, this guide is reproduced in its entirety in the *UE Leadership Guide* chapter on strikes.

Meet the New Boss, He's Worse than the Old Boss

In June of 2018, when they first heard that

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Sanders also invited Scott Slawson, UE Local 506 president, to speak at his presidential campaign kickoff rally in Brooklyn, NY, where Slawson spoke to an estimated 15,000 attendees about the locals' strike.

The Strike Machinery

With less than a month to prepare up for a strike, Local 506 transformed its executive board and shop steward system, which has more than 100 stewards in nine divisions throughout the 4.5 million square foot locomotive facility, into the local's strike machinery. Local 618, a much smaller local, had its members join the Local 506 strike machinery. The locals set up the different strike committees – the picketing committee, financial support committee, publicity and education committee, and the strike kitchen/food committee, which worked out of the Local 506 union hall, located down the street from one of the facility's main gates. The Local 506 divisional chief stewards and assistant chief stewards became the picket captains who were responsible for coordinating picketing at the facility's 10 gates.



In full view of the company, Local 506 started gearing up for a strike, gathering port-a-johns, burn barrels and fire wood at the union hall. The Local 506 shop stewards circulated the "UE Picket Line Do's and Don'ts" flier to their members throughout the facility. A practice picket was organized, which garnered a lot of media attention. Throughout the month-long negotiations, the locals kept their members informed with regular updates and membership meetings. The weekend before the strike, Local 506 rented out a nearby firehall, large enough to accommodate its 1,700 members, for a strike authorization vote. More than 80 percent of the local's members turned out to vote and voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. Local 618's members voted to authorize a strike at the same time.

Even though the two locals' last open-ended strike occurred 50 years ago during the historic 1969-70 nationwide strike against General Electric that lasted 102 days, the locals' members were ready to strike again. Local 506 recreated a sticker commemorating the 102-day GE strike and had its stewards pass it out to each of their members to wear the day before the strike as one final structure test to see if their members were indeed ready to strike.

On Strike for the Jobs Our Community Deserves

After last ditch negotiations broke down around 3 a.m. on February 26, the Local 506 negotiating committee members notified the local's executive board which includes the divisional chief stewards, who in turn contacted their shop stewards, who in turn notified their members. The Local 618 negoti-



ating committee members contacted their members. In less than two hours, picket lines were set up at each gate with burn barrels and port-a-johns. Despite a snow storm and frigid temperatures in the teens, the members were mass picketing at each gate. The huge facility was shut down. Traffic was backed up for blocks around the facility as management and salaried employees tried to enter the facility. Members carried picket signs that read "On Strike for the Jobs Our Community Deserves." The strike kitchen at the Local 506 union hall was humming. Hot coffee and food were being prepared to deliver to the picketers.

Even after the company was able to get a court injunction two days into the strike, restricting picketing, the locals' members continued to man the picket lines around the clock with the same militant determination for the duration of the strike. The members were not going to let a court injunction undermine their strike. No member crossed the picket line and production was ground to a halt. Although the company tried to resume some production using management and salaried employees, everything they produced was later scrapped.



Community support for the strike was overwhelming. Labor and community organization were dropping off food, water, fire wood and other supplies every day at the union hall. Community members would drop off pizza, sandwiches and doughnuts at the picket lines. Passersby would honk their horns in a steady stream of support. A community

rally, organized by a local teachers' union, brought hundreds of labor and community members out to one of the facility's main gates to show their support.

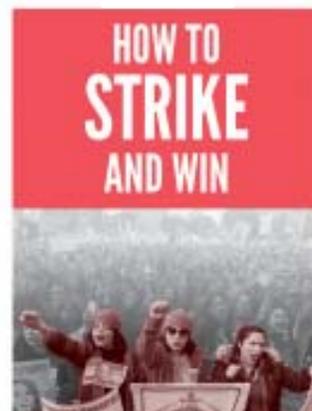
UE members have played a vital role in the Erie community over the past 82 years, volunteering in many organizations and making financial contributions to many community organizations, including the VA Hospital.

"The community support was incredible," Mike Ferritto, UE Local 506 business agent, told the *UE News* after the strike. "We developed a campaign that was directly linked to our community because so many people in our community are directly linked to this facility and UE. There are generations of our members' families who worked at the facility over the past decades and they could see their connection to our struggle."

As negotiations continued during the strike, a rally was held at Wabtec's corporate headquarters in Wilmerding, located a couple of miles outside of Pittsburgh. Union and community allies, including UE Local 610 and other UE members, stood shoulder to shoulder with striking members of Locals 506 and 618, demanding that Wabtec settle the strike. A delegation from the Canadian union Unifor also attended the rally after visiting striking members on the picket lines. Wabtec settled the strike later that day.

Unity, Militancy and Solidarity Win in the End

In the end, the members' unity, militancy and the solidarity that they received from other unions, the community and other allies forced Wabtec to settle the strike, largely on the locals' terms with a 90-day interim agreement. It would take another three months of tough negotiations and the members' continued support and collective actions to win a four-year contract that largely preserved the gains that their members had fought for over the past 82 years. The strike also brought the locals' members closer together. They had passed the toughest test that workers can face – a strike - and won.



How to Strike and Win

A Labor Notes Guide

Labor Notes has published a booklet for anyone who wants to know how to strike and win. The stories and quotes included are drawn mainly from Labor Notes reporting, often from the frontlines of the strikes described, and from their handbooks. More info: labornotes.org/strikes.