

Success Story: Coordinated Bargaining at GE

After years of competition, disunity and infighting, workers at GE formed the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition (CBC) in 1966. The big breakthrough came with the 1969 national strike when all unions stuck together and emerged from the strike in coalition, one that has lasted from then until the present, having bargained as a group through numerous contracts in the last forty years or so.

History

But it was not always this way at GE. Throughout the 1950s and into the 60s the unions at GE were badly divided. GE had a field day, instituted "take-it-or-leave-it" bargaining, and essentially dictated the terms of six consecutive national agreements. The wages and benefits of GE workers fell well behind the workers in other major industries where the workers had stayed united in one union. By the late 1960's the situation for GE workers was desperate while the Company was profiting handsomely from the disunity they helped to create.



The unions at GE put an end to this sad state of affairs in 1969 with the 102-day national strike, when virtually every unionized GE plant was shut down. The negotiations, strike, and eventual settlement were coordinated informally between the various unions. It was the first time since 1946 that GE had faced a strike by all of its unions, and the result was a tremendous breakthrough for GE workers. All negotiations since the 1969 strike have achieved progress for GE workers and demonstrated the value of the CBC, a vast improvement from the days when different unions were each trying to tackle a huge corporation like GE on their own.

The GE Coordinated Bargaining Committee (CBC) is comprised of 13 unions which represent GE workers. These are the UE, IUE-CWA, IBEW, UAW, IAM, USWA, SMW, IBT, UA, NABET, IFPTE, IBFO and AFTRA. The CBC is a way for the unions that repre-

sent GE workers to coordinate their work on behalf of their members. It allows the different unions to exchange information systematically, to coordinate their bargaining proposals, and to work together to win the best possible contract settlements from GE. The CBC does not negotiate with GE per se and does not have a union contract with GE. Each union negotiates its own contract. The CBC operates by consensus among the various unions, and does not make any decisions that are binding on the unions involved. Each union maintains its independence and its right, if it chooses, to do something different from what the other unions in the coalition decide to do. However, the CBC assures that all unions at least know what the others are doing with regard to the negotiations.

How The CBC Works

The Steering Committee: Composed of one representative from each Union in the CBC. The CBC Steering Committee is the body with primary responsibility for coordinating the work of the CBC and the member unions.

Contract Proposals: Prior to the start of negotiations, each CBC union has the opportunity to discuss contract proposals. Each union, in their separate negotiations with GE, is free to submit whatever proposals their members want, but through the CBC they try to achieve unity on the key bargaining issues. A union that feels strongly about a particular bargaining goal will try to convince the other unions to adopt it as a proposal so that the union will face GE as a united front on the issue.

Negotiations: During the national negotiations, only the UE and IUE-CWA National Agreements are actually being formally negotiated. However, the other unions send representatives as a sign of unity, and they are given input into the discussions because the UE and IUE-CWA national settlements set the pattern for what the other unions will receive in their local negotiations. For several years, all CBC unions have insisted, and GE has agreed, that the basic settlement with the UE and IUE-CWA be extended to all other CBC unions whose contracts expire at or near the same time as the two national contracts.

When a conclusion is reached at the bargaining table and a tentative agreement is at hand, each union reports on the details of any company offer to the CBC Steering Committee for discussion. Thereafter, each union follows its own procedure for voting on a contract settlement.

Conclusion

The union bargaining experience at GE is a valuable one for workers in other industries such as rail, where the workforce is fractured into numerous different - and sometimes competing and hostile - labor organizations. A culture of solidarity has been built up where workers understand the need for solidarity and a united front in the face of huge corporate power in contract negotiations. While we in the rail industry would necessarily tailor our own "coordinated bargaining coalition" to suit the specific laws, condition and nature that govern rail labor negotiations, the CBC at GE certainly serves as a successful model which we can learn from.

