

A little conquest in Lansing

Cargill, Inc., a multinational empire, seeks free rein in the local salt mine

One hundred mineworkers in central New York (in Lansing, just north of Ithaca) are engaged in a struggle against a handful of people who remain strangely anonymous despite their enormous power. Ordinarily, the workers would be extracting rock salt from deep under Lake Cayuga, mostly for winter use on roads and highways. Since April 2 of this year, however, they have been on strike against the mine's owner—Cargill, Inc., the largest privately-owned corporation in the U.S.

Cargill, with operations in at least 36 countries, makes the bulk of its money by buying grain in one country and selling it in another. Last year, total sales were in the neighborhood of \$32 billion. The company is reported to have cleared somewhere between \$19 million and \$26 million in profit from the Lansing operation last year. (Precise figures are hard to come by, since privately-held companies—with no stock on the open market—are not required to publish publicly-available stockholder reports.)

Cargill aims to bust the union

Apparently, some member (or members) of the two Minneapolis families that control Cargill decided that the time is ripe to drive out the union in the salt division, Local 1607 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. Of course, it would be illegal—technically speaking, it would be an Unfair Labor Practice—for management to say that they were trying to bust the union. For this reason Cargill's management claims that their dispute with Local 1607 revolves around narrow economic issues of wages and benefits.

That is what they say. What they've done is another story. Their behavior both within and outside the context of negotiations, including the very terms of this year's contract offer, is too systematic to be an accident: management aims, by any means necessary,

to gain complete power to determine who works in what job and for how long, for how much pay and for what benefits, and with what hazards to life and health. In short, they want to get free rein in the workplace by consolidating their control over the lives of the workers.

What Cargill is really "offering"

The terms of management's offer indicate Cargill's aims clearly. Wages are not the issue: Cargill has already agreed to a wage increase. The major sticking points are four Cargill proposals that, taken as a package, would render the workers powerless even if the union were somehow to survive.

It is important to look at the proposals in detail, since newspaper accounts that describe the dispute as "involving issues of seniority" can make it sound as though Cargill is simply trying to rescue the career opportunities of newer workers from the entrenched privileges of older workers. As such, busting the union might seem like a favor to the workforce, since Cargill would be replacing a policy of "protecting the dead wood" with a system of rewards by merit. In this way, superficial reporting can serve as propaganda for the cause of the Cargill empire.

One part of Cargill's package involves the way new job openings are to be filled. At first glance, the proposal seems like it would fulfill the American dream of advancement according to merit. Bids for jobs would be judged according to the skills that the bidders possess. If no single bidder excelled the others by this criterion, Cargill would use the criterion of "overall ability to perform the job." Finally, if these criteria produced no winner, Cargill would look for the most senior bidder among those bidders who are currently employed in the mine.

By comparison, the current system, which ranks seniority first in consideration, skills second, and

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general ability third, may seem irrational and unfair. It isn't. For most jobs in the plant (exceptions include positions like electrician), the skills are fairly easy to learn, so management can be fairly arbitrary in judging which of the bidders is best qualified at the time of the bidding. Thus the proposed scheme would allow Cargill to hire mostly new people if they wished, or, if they wanted to draw from within the current workforce, they could use their considerable discretion in judging current skills and ability to award bids to their favorites. In fact, Cargill could choose workers according to their docility or their willingness to take special risks with their health.

The strikers favor the terms of the old contract, under which a worker who wins a transfer to another classification is allowed 30 days to prove the acquisition of the necessary skills. Since most of the necessary skills are not special, the system of seniority provides a safeguard against management manipulation, and it gives new workers a reasonable hope of eventually moving into the most attractive jobs. Far from making new opportunities for worthy workers to advance, Cargill's plan would reserve the rewards for those workers who are most servile.

Cargill's second major proposal is to do away with the time restrictions on transfers of workers out of their job classifications. (Currently there are twelve classifications in the mine.) Such transfers are a way to fill a job temporarily without having to open bids, and they are now limited to five days.

In asking for power to switch people around "temporarily" for indefinite periods, Cargill is in effect asking to do away with the classification scheme altogether. As a result, Cargill would not only be able to avoid hiring extra workers to fill new openings—it would also be able to set up a system under which favored workers could be rewarded with attractive "temporary" jobs on a permanent basis. Likewise, the "trouble-makers" (union organizers and other undesirables?) could be relegated to the most demeaning or dangerous jobs forever.

If management won the power to move workers freely from job to job, they would also be able to move workers from one shift to another, for indefinite periods and on short notice. Currently there are two

shifts at the mine, and a worker can expect to work one shift regularly—and can move to the other shift when a truly permanent position opens up. Under the proposed system, a worker could never tell for sure which shift she'd be working the next week, and someone hired to work the second shift could not rely on her chances of ever getting a regular day job.

Cargill's third disputed proposal is to create, and eventually to enlarge, a category of seasonal workers. Currently there are two wage levels in the mine: \$9.11 per hour for people who started work before April 1982, and \$8.64 for "late bidders." The proposed seasonal group would receive \$8 per hour—saving money for Cargill at a yearly rate of at least \$1280 per job. More importantly, the seasonal workers would have no claim to the benefits won by the union in previous negotiations, and, unlike current workers, they would have no rights to callback after being laid off.

Strikers see the proposal as part of Cargill's overall plan to make the mineworkers interchangeable, underpaid, powerless, and disposable. The strike committee's counter-proposal was that workers hired as "seasonal" be allowed to join the union after 60 days on the job. Cargill said OK to this—as long as their membership in the union does not entitle them to the benefits won by the union! It is hard to understand how a union could survive when all it offers to its members is the freedom to pay dues.

Cargill's fourth proposal confirms the suspicion that the company wants to root out the union and any vestige of the workers' power. The proposal, like two of the others, "involves issues of seniority": callbacks of permanent workers after layoffs (or strikes), says Cargill, should be determined by seniority in a classification and not by seniority at the plant.

The strikers have already seen this policy in action. In a recent offer (rejected May 31 by a vote of 89-1), Cargill said it would guarantee to take back 47 strikers to fill the jobs not currently filled by scabs. The policy of seniority-by-classification allowed Cargill to manipulate the positions of the new workers to exclude everybody they wanted to exclude from the callback. For instance, no member of the union's bargaining committee was called back. Further,

women workers and workers of color, who comprise the most militant segments of the rank and file, were disproportionately left out of the callback. Here are the precise figures: nine of the ten women strikers, three of the six black strikers, and the only hispanic striker were missing from the callback list. (Cargill has since reduced its callback roll to 15.)

What Cargill hopes to gain

The company is hoping to pick up some profit, of course. If Cargill won, profits would climb—for two reasons. First, the contract would give Cargill some direct economic benefits in the short run, and second, there are the long-term benefits to be gained from breaking the unity and power of the workers.

Cargill's most obvious early return would come from the clause creating a caste of seasonal workers who would receive low pay and no benefits, but the biggest boost to profit would probably come from the clauses giving Cargill the freedom to move workers around at will. No doubt Cargill's executives are talking among themselves in terms of "enhanced productivity through efficient allocation of labor resources in a more fluid workforce." What this means is: "if we can move people wherever we like for as long as we like, we can get the same output with fewer workers." Profits would increase if management cut back on wages and benefits, but profits would skyrocket if management got rid of lots of workers. And if Cargill were to win the changes it wants, no one should be surprised if the workforce were cut from 140 to, say, 100.

To employ this traditional profit-boosting tactic of "lay off and speed up," Cargill aims to consolidate its power over the workers. In this light we can see that union-busting is an essential feature of Cargill's program. Although the people who control Cargill (and other corporations) may claim that their disputes with labor are simple matters of economics, these are essentially social and political issues: management is seeking more power over the lives of its workers, for without such power there would be no profit.

What the miners stand to lose

Many mineworkers stand to lose their jobs, es-

pecially women workers and workers of color. Those who kept their jobs might never be able to regain even the slight measure of power that they now have. New workers would have no reliable prospect of, for example, getting out of the night shift, or into the job they'd most like. The union would be unlikely to survive, since a sizable proportion of the workforce would have no claim to gains won by the union. Consequently, wages would go down, not up—and the amount of work for each worker would increase, since her time would be used "more efficiently."

The point about efficiency is important: this kind of efficiency for management is *overwork* for the miners. Mine work is already tiring and dangerous enough as it is. In a situation of speed-up, especially when miners' sleep schedules are irregular (as they would become under the proposed contract), people are going to die. The last major accident at the mine, which cost two lives in 1980, occurred because of a temporary speed-up while Cargill was trying to fill an order on schedule. Cargill's plan is to increase productivity by making such dangerous—and avoidable—conditions a permanent feature of work in the mine. The possibility of a major disaster in salt mining is very real: Cargill itself shut down its salt mine in Belle Isle, Louisiana, following a 1978 accident that wiped out an entire shift of workers. Let's put it bluntly: sooner or later, the "calculated risk" that two Minneapolis families are now taking is bound to look like premeditated murder in Lansing.

Cargill's special advantages in the struggle

All companies that survive do so because to own capital is simply to have the social power to extract profit from the labor of people who have no capital. Cargill, however, is a special, extreme case of such concentrated power. Like other giants, of course—Exxon, for example—Cargill has so much money floating around that it can afford to take some losses while a few of its workers deplete their own meager resources during a strike. But Cargill has extra money, for two reasons.

In the first place, the bulk of Cargill's business is trading (it is the largest grain trader in the world). This means that the bulk of its capital is not tied up

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in fixed assets like buildings and machinery: Cargill deals with cash, and lots of it. As a result, the company finds it easy to move its assets around, and this means that Cargill can afford to pour money into operations that are losing money temporarily—as the Lansing mine may be doing right now. Thus, Cargill, as a trading company, resembles a big bank as much as it resembles a big manufacturing company: to lay out a large amount of cash (to buy a million tons of wheat, or to survive a strike) in order to reap a huge profit later (by selling the wheat abroad when prices go up, or by busting the mineworkers' union) is Cargill's standard business practice, and the company is specially set up to operate this way.

Cargill's other money advantage comes from being privately owned. As such, the MacMillan and Cargill families do not have to attract stockholders by paying large dividends. In fact, families controlling such empires tend to shelter themselves from taxes by undervaluing their assets and paying themselves low dividends. The extra money is reinvested in the company, and in the case of Cargill, the capital is reserved as cash for contingencies like a sweet purchase of soybeans—or for weathering a strike.

There is another advantage to being privately owned: secrecy. Cargill is not required to publish detailed figures on any of its operations. In fact, when the mineworkers' negotiating committee asked to inspect the books that Cargill keeps for the mine (a standard practice to insure that a company is really in the shape it claims to be in), Cargill refused. The Cargills and MacMillans lead very private lives, after all, and the world's largest grain traders are not accountable to anyone.

Aside from its riches and its secrecy, Cargill holds a third advantage over the mineworkers. It looks as though the strikers' jobs may depend on a case pending with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and all five of NLRB's national board members are Reagan appointees. The point of law in question is whether the strike is motivated by the miners' economic demands or whether it is a response to Unfair Labor Practices (ULP's). If the strike is declared economic, Cargill is not obliged to re-hire any strikers, but if it is judged a ULP strike, Cargill must

take everyone back. (When Cargill offered to take back the 47 miners, it also demanded that the ULP cases be dropped. Cargill was asking a minority of the strikers to sell out the jobs of the majority.)

The union has already won a ULP case charging Cargill with bad-faith bargaining; Cargill cancelled out on six negotiating sessions and then sprang its "offer" on the union just a few days before the last contract expired. The regional NLRB told Cargill to behave better in the future. The Reagan-appointed national board is to decide whether this ULP, plus another charge of bad-faith bargaining (Cargill negotiators held up the start of a bargaining session until 2 a.m.), substantiate the union's claim that this is a "ULP strike." A victory at the NLRB would not settle the strike in the union's favor, but it would assure the mineworkers that they won't lose their jobs permanently while bargaining continues.

Why others should join the fight: the imperatives of solidarity

Members of the community, of course, have a moral obligation to help out their neighbors in time of need, but there are imperatives of self-interest, too. The dispute is not an isolated disagreement between a company and a few workers; its outcome will have effects on similar struggles elsewhere. Labor defeats in a few local industries can depress wages and affect employment patterns throughout the area. We stress again that the miners' struggle is a *political* struggle for power over their lives, and it is part of a broader local and national struggle in which a wealthy minority has the upper hand against the majority. The front line of this struggle is often the picket line, and we know from experience that broad-based support for those at the front line *can* turn the tide. In this area, the front line is now in Lansing.

To join the struggle, contact the Cargill Strikers' Solidarity Committee (CSSC), care of the Tompkins-Cortland Labor Coalition, 109 W. State Street, Ithaca, NY 14850 (phone 607-272-4108). CSSC meets Mondays at 7:30 p.m. in the Labor Coalition's office above the State Theater.

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Part of a continuing research project of CSSC.

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