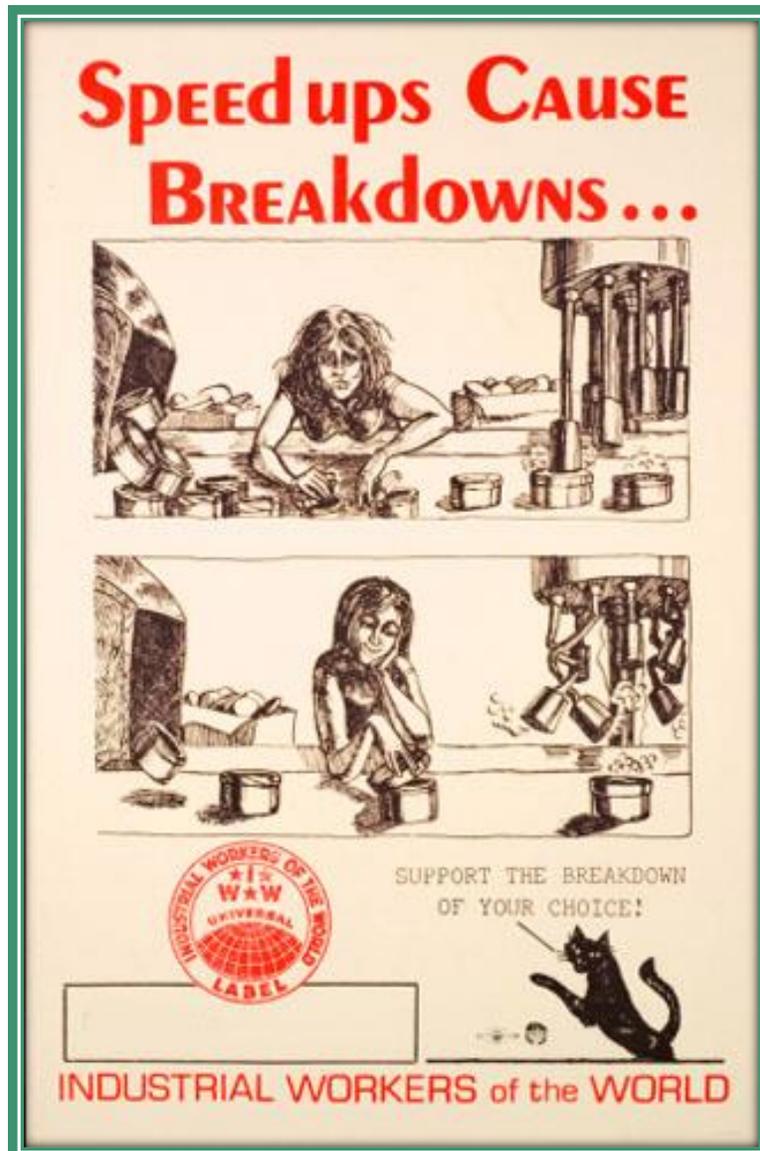


Chapter 19 : Aristocracy Forever



*What do workers hold in common with a labor bureaucrat,
Who's a class collaborationist and a boss's diplomat,
With the money from our paychecks he is sitting getting fat,
While the union keeps us down. ...*

—Lyrics excerpted from *Aristocracy Forever*, by Judi Bari.

Meanwhile, back in Fort Bragg, there was “trouble in union city”—or what was left of it at any rate. Over the course of the previous four years, IWA Local #3-469 Business Representative Don Nelson had folded under pressure to the collaborationist leadership in the IWA, offered no resistance whatsoever to Georgia-Pacific’s outsourcing of its logging operation to gyppos, refused to offer solidarity to the UFCW in its boycott of Harvest Market, and had essentially bought G-P’s story on the PCB spill hook, line, and sinker. Now those chickens were coming home to roost. It was the middle of June 1989, and the union’s contract with G-P for the workers in the mill had expired, and the prospects for a peaceful round of negotiations or a new and improved contract did not look good to the workers.

The results of the just-expired contract, including its wage rollbacks in exchange for “productivity bonuses,” had been disastrous. G-P had not honored their promise to restore the wages they had cut the previous round of negotiations in 1985. The bonuses had only been paid the previous year and amounted to less than a third of the wage cuts for that year alone.¹ An anonymous rank and file worker elaborated:

“We never got any (wage restoration) until this last year, and for this year’s bonus I’ve probably got about three thousand bucks, but for every year they took 30 percent from me, I lost seven thousand...what they’re doing is they gave you half of your first year’s (1985) wages back in bonus but kept the other three and one-half (years) that they got from you from the steal...that’s what it is.”²

The union officialdom had pushed the bonus system, arguing that it was necessary to save the union from demise (especially in light of the successful union busting by G-P’s offspring, Louisiana-Pacific), but in fact, it had substantially weakened the union further. The bonus system put the workers in a “damned if they did, damned if they didn’t” position, because the drive to productivity created incentives to ignore safety protocols (such as OSHA regulations on PCB spills). It eroded solidarity in favor of cutthroat competition. Worst of all, it economically tied the workers into the cut and run philosophy of logging, as more

cutting theoretically meant bigger bonuses. It undermined the very principles of unionism.³ It led many to ponder the question, “who needed gyppos when G-P could destroy the union with the union’s blessing?”⁴

It’s not as though G-P hadn’t increased its productivity. Indeed, it had, more than ever. During the course of the now expired contract, Georgia-Pacific had modernized a portion of the mill, which allowed the company to automate tasks and downsize its workforce. It was understood that the new quad mill had been financed through the previous contract’s wage cut. Essentially, the workers had funded their own demise.⁵ Plans were afoot to implement further automation in the new quad mill, including the installation of an automatic stacker. Many of the workers perceived that the quad mill (#2) would be duplicated in the older, more labor intensive mill (#1) and even more losses would follow.⁶ Indeed, it signaled a trend that was likely to affect the entire industry, as more and more mills were computerizing their entire milling process.⁷

Georgia-Pacific wasn’t offering to restore the wage cuts, however. No, indeed, they weren’t. They were pushing for further concessions! The company was offering only a 3 percent annual wage increase each year for a four year deal, a 12 percent increase, which only amounted to half of the rollback.⁸ The onetime bonus didn’t come close to bridging the gap, and much of that was surrendered in state and federal taxes.⁹ The company was adamant, however, that there would be no restoration of the 25-30 percent wage cuts taken three years previously. There would be no signing bonus and no increase in health and welfare benefits.¹⁰ It wasn’t as though Georgia Pacific couldn’t afford to be more generous. The company was charging record prices, and earning record profits.¹¹ One of the mill’s planers stated, “(I) bought lumber last year and it cost two hundred and sixty dollars a thousand for Doug fir. I bought the same

³ “Workers of Mendoland Unite!”, by Roanne Withers, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, July 26, 1989.

⁴ “GP Workers Want Change: Federal Mediation in Fort Bragg”, by Crawdad Nelson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, July 26, 1989.

⁵ Koepf, June 21, 1989, op. cit.

⁶ Crawdad Nelson, July 26, 1989, op. cit.

⁷ “High Tech Moves Into the Woods; Computers Replace Men at Mills,” by Jeff Peline, *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 28, 1989.

⁸ Koepf, June 21, 1989, op. cit.

⁹ Crawdad Nelson, July 26, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁰ Koepf, June 21, 1989, op. cit.

¹¹ “Workers of Mendoland Unite!”, by Roanne Withers, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, July 26, 1989.

¹ “G-P Earnings Earn Employees Wage Restoration for 1987”, staff report, *North Coast News*, January 21, 1988.

² “Fort Bragg Mill Workers Want Change”, by Mike Koepf, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, June 21, 1989.

damn lumber this year and they're charging me four hundred and six dollars a thousand!"¹²

The membership was angry, and they were letting Don Nelson know it, but the union official seemed quite unwilling to challenge the company line. In meetings held Wednesday, June 14 during the day and Thursday night, June 15, over 100 rank and file mill workers outspokenly excoriated G-P's demands as well as Nelson's leadership. The leadership may have still been willing to slit its own throats, apparently, but the rank and file were openly discussing striking and taking direct action:

"The lumber industry is boomin' now. We got to stop' em from shipping it out. They got six or seven months worth of lumber stored in those sheds down there. They could last us out just by having their bosses ship it out on trucks. So all it is, is a matter of gettin' on Highway Twenty and stopping the trucks."¹³

Nelson argued that the majority of the union membership endorsed his strategy, although members countered that what he actually meant is that the union's leadership committees, which were composed of older, better paid, higher seniority members—members who shared Nelson's collaborationist "don't make waves" philosophy—had endorsed it. Although these committeemen were elected, they had recently enacted a policy that they served indefinitely until they stepped down or were removed by a vote of the membership—a vote that required a two-thirds supermajority. "This is the majority right here, and we're tellin' you right goddamn now what we want," said another worker who stood up in defiance of Nelson's definition of what constituted "a majority". Some of the members hinted they might start a recall drive against him. All of the rank and file rancor and talk of direct action evidently rattled the embattled union official. At one point, during the second meeting, Nelson almost walked out, because the pressure of being questioned and scrutinized by his membership overcame him.¹⁴

It seemed as though a sleeping giant was indeed ready to awaken. The 1985 contract had been approved by an almost four to one margin, and similar concessions had been gained throughout the industry, making the G-P offer industry standard. Harry

Merlo's phalanx of union busting had initiated the rising wave of concessions and givebacks. In 1985, however, many of the workers seemed willing to believe that they had interests in common with their employer, but they had discovered, much to their dismay, that the company had deceived them. Don Nelson who "refused to negotiate in the press" (no doubt lest he be exposed further as a collaborator) even if one member of the press were his own son, Crawdad Nelson, still insisted that G-P's offer was well within industry standards. However industry standards were in part determined by the unions' willingness to collaborate with capitalist demanded concessions, and so far, both the IWA and Western Council of Industrial Workers (WCiW), the two largest unions representing lumber industry workers had done nothing but capitulate. To make matters worse, the leadership of both unions had uncritically accepted the cut and run forestry of the employers. In Fort Bragg, however, the vast majority of the rank & file wasn't sharing in that vision after all. Less than one month following the contentious June meetings, despite the presence of a federal mediator, the workers voted by a 400-55 to strike.¹⁵

The vote was a shocking development. Corporate Timber had thus far successfully beaten the business unions into submission. G-P spokesman Don Perry publically doubted that the workers would actually follow through on their vote. Don Nelson likewise downplayed the significance of the referendum, but in all likelihood this was a front.¹⁶ Sensing that his political future was in serious jeopardy, Nelson and his cronies, assisted by a federal mediator, told the rank & file that if they chose to strike, G-P would close the mill, and everyone would lose their jobs. They then purged the dissidents from the vote counting committee, and voted a second time. This time, the contract was accepted.¹⁷ Once again, "a trade union had aided the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class had interests in common with their employers." The IWW had been vindicated, albeit in a backhanded way, once again. Sadly, the rank and file, whom sorely needed a union like the IWW, at least for the time being, were out of luck.

¹⁵ Crawdad Nelson, July 26, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁶ "G-P Strike Threatens Fort Bragg Mill", by Keith Michaud, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, July 21, 1989.

¹⁷ "Mediators Intervene in G-P Negotiations", *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, August 7, 1989; and "Timber Wars", by Judi Bari, *Industrial Worker*, October 1989.

¹² Crawdad Nelson, July 26, 1989, op. cit.

¹³ Koepf, June 21, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁴ Koepf, June 21, 1989, op. cit.