



The 1986 Gainers Strike: Alberta Workers Rise Up

Justice for Gainers Workers

On June 1st, 1986 at 12:01 a.m. workers walked out of the Gainers plant on Yellowhead Trail and 66th street in Edmonton, beginning what would become one of the most violent strikes in modern Alberta history.

The six and a half month strike of 1080 meatpackers generated a level of solidarity both within the labour movement and among the general working populace of Alberta that made it a key moment of class struggle in the long, hot, and contested summer of '86.

It also highlighted a strike wave across the province as industrial and public sector workers in Fort McMurray, Slave Lake, Red Deer and Calgary participated in confrontational disputes with employers demanding concessions.

Meatpacking

The Gainers meatpacking plant was owned by Peter Pocklington (local business opportunist and owner of the Edmonton Oilers), and since he acquired it in 1980 he had been squeezing his workers and the farmers who supplied hogs to the plant in pursuit of high profits.

The 1980s, however, was not a good time to have purchased an old, multi-story, gravity-fed plant like Gainers. The meatpacking industry across Canada and the US was in disarray due to technological innovations that allowed a single new plant to process more animals than a whole slew of older plants combined. The excessive processing capacity that resulted from too many plants became a serious problem for meatpacking companies during a time of declining meat consumption. Consumers were buying

The 1986 Gainers Strike

less meat both in response to declining working-class incomes during the 1980s recession and new concerns about health risks linked to meat consumption.

Since 1947 there had been a system of national pattern bargaining in Canada. The major meatpackers, predominantly Canada Packers and Swifts, would meet in Toronto and arrive at a basic consensus on wages and benefits. While local agreements might include clauses meant to address local issues, the broad outlines of the national pattern were followed by both major packers and the smaller independents across the country.

2 In the early 1980s the national pattern began to unravel as Burns, based in Western Canada, decided on its own to demand major concessions from workers. Burns closed plants when workers refused to accede to the company's demands, and this precedent allowed them to intimidate workers in their remaining plants to accept concessions. The national pattern disappeared in the West. By 1986 both Burns and Swifts had shut down their operations in the province, leaving only

the Fletchers plant in Red Deer and the Edmonton Gainers plant in operation.

Concessions

Pocklington embraced Burns' example, and in 1984 demanded concessions from his workers in Edmonton, including dropping the starting rate from \$12.99/hour to \$7.00, and freezing the base wage after dropping it from \$14.99/hour to \$11.99. When UFCW 280-P showed signs of resistance, Pocklington hired strikebreakers who lined up outside the plant. This "gun-to-the-head" tactic, as the union characterized it, intimidated the union into signing a concessionary agreement, but with a mere 52% approval.

Pocklington claimed that Gainers was in dire financial straits and everyone needed to make sacrifices to ensure the survival of the company. If workers helped save the company, he claimed, they would be saving their jobs. According to striker Vicky Beauchamp "Pocklington pled poverty," and made the promise that when the company was profitable again, workers would share in the wealth.



Alberta Workers Rise Up

Workers indeed sacrificed in 1984. Anyone with less than five years of service with the company received no Alberta Health Care, dental care, or Blue Cross coverage. Workers who had been with the company for five to ten years had their coverage cut back to 50%. Only workers who had been with Gainers for more than a decade continued to receive full coverage. Sick pay was slashed in half and kicked in three days later than before. Vision care was eliminated.

The dizzying concessions also included replacement of the former overtime rates of 1.5 times the hourly rate on all Saturdays and double time on Sunday with a flat 1.5 times on the sixth consecutive day of work, with no provisions for weekends. Another concession extended the probationary period and allowed the company to fire and rehire workers, ignoring seniority provisions. Workers also lost a holiday.

Besides the benefit losses, the most serious concession was the introduction of a two-tier wage system to match the newly tiered health benefits. Although common in the US, two-tier wages and benefits were not yet widespread in Canada. The tactic was meant to break down union solidarity. In this, the company was monumentally unsuccessful.

Two years later, with Gainers once again generating profits, Pocklington asked for more concessions. The workers knew precisely how well the company was doing since the 1984 line speed-ups and drastic wage cuts. Gainers bragged of its efficiency under the 1984 collective



agreement and according to the union the company had conceded it was virtually impossible for the plant to further increase its efficiency through worker effort.

3

In the months leading up to the strike company president Leo Bolanes, a union buster from the US, threatened plant closure and tried to sow discord between the local executive and the rank and filers. Bolanes failed to understand that the negotiating committee was not a fringe element, but rather accurately represented the anger and militancy of all the workers in the plant who had been transformed by their experiences in 1984.

One worker, Rubin Bobb, circulated an open letter in response to Bolanes's letters, writing: "the Union Executive has been the object of much abuse and criticism over the past two years and have received a clear message as to the type of settlement which the membership will accept." In 1986 the workers were prepared for Pocklington's

The 1986 Gainers Strike



tactics and committed to striking for a return to the national pattern, for parity with Canada Packers.

4 On the Picket Line

The first days of the strike were characterized by massive picket lines as workers showed up in the dark hours of the morning to stop both trucks carrying hogs into the plant and school buses filled with strike breakers. With numbers on their side, the boarded up buses of strikebreakers were easily driven away by the determined workers wielding picket signs, rocks that came to hand, and bottles filled with paint. The picket line swelled to hundreds of people during the day, reinforced by trade unionists from dozens of different locals as well as other Edmontonians who came out to support the strikers.

Faced with worker militancy and an almost unbelievable level of solidarity among the meatpackers, none of whom

crossed the picket line, the company turned to the coercive power of the state to help them win their conflict.

The violence on the picket line escalated dramatically after the company sought and was granted a court injunction on the second day of the strike and the Edmonton city police came to the aid of the company by clearing a path for buses and trucks to enter the plant. In the first eleven days of the strike over 300 people were arrested, including 115 on June 3 alone in a clear effort to intimidate strikers and their supporters.

The Gainers strike saw the first deployment of Edmonton's riot squad, and in the early days of June one-third of the entire police force was tied up in escorting strikebreakers across the picket lines. The annual police overtime budget, \$500 000, was used up in the first month in a partisan intervention by the police that many Edmontonians criticized. Not only were the police exposed as tools of the political and economic elite, but their

Alberta Workers Rise Up

presence on the picket line precipitated much of the violence.

According to the Alberta Federation of Labour's president Dave Werlin, who was one of those arrested on June 3, the police were directly responsible for the violence that made the national evening news: "If the police had never shown their faces at the picket lines," concluded [Dave] Werlin, "no one would have tried to run



buses through, there would have been no violence or arrest.'" Werlin also argued the police presence and violence on the picket line was a manifestation of the underlying alliance between state and employers that shaped Alberta labour relations.

While critics of the labour movement decried the violence by workers, most people understood that the labour laws put workers in an untenable position as they struggled to keep strikebreakers out. "We're not out for blood . . . but we've got to stop

those buses," one striker told the media.

The stacking of the system against workers became even more evident with the second injunction of June 10, granted because the first injunction had not succeeded in reopening the plant for production. The second injunction limited picketers to 42 people, all of whom had to be members of UFCW 280-P, and made it illegal for three people or more to gather at any point near the strikebound plant. While this unfair and blatantly undemocratic ruling helped to generate solidarity among Edmontonians and the Alberta working class, it also resulted in mounting fines that succeeded in pressuring UFCW into giving in to the injunctions in late June. This disarmed the workers' ability to exert economic pressure on the company.

On Saturday, June 7, a march from the nearby Catholic Church, St. Francis of Assisi, to the Gainers picket line, attracted 3,000 people with only a couple of days' notice. Throughout the strike there was outstanding support for the strikers from the ecumenical community in the form of the Edmonton Churches Coalition for Labour and Justice, which spoke out for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and justice for the workers. Linda Winski, a Catholic Social Justice advocate, called Gainers "an explosion in our community that just reeked of injustice," and described it as "an invitation" to take action to create a better society. The group supported the Charter challenge of

The 1986 Gainers Strike

the second injunction, held public forums to discuss the strike and attempted to mediate the dispute. Throughout the summer they held daily morning prayer sessions at 6:30 a.m. on the picket line.

On June 12 the labour movement organized a massive march and rally at the legislature for its first session since the spring election in which the NDP surged to a then-historic 16 seats. Over 10,000 attended the rally, as large as the turnouts during the Great Depression and seldom seen since. At stake was not simply the resolution of the Gainers strike, though

6

that struggle was massively inspiring to many, but the entire state of labour relations in the province which had deteriorated since the onset of recession in the province in 1981.

Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired

In 1986 workers in the province reached a breaking point. According to one observer, “something does seem to have snapped in Alberta, and not just in the minds of the Gainers strikers. There is a do-or-die atmosphere in the province’s labor circles these days, a feeling that the setbacks have gone far enough. Usually, people run from a picket line where there are arrests, now we have people saying they want to get arrested.”

Tired of endless concessions that did nothing ultimately to save jobs, the downgrading of employment standards

and lack of occupational health and safety enforcement, the crushing weight of debts and unemployment, and angered by being blamed for the poor economy of which they were the major victims, workers revolted.

Even right-wing Representative leader Raymond Speaker commented that there was a noticeable new resolve, stating “People have used up their unemployment insurance and their savings. There was a time when they tried to fight their problems privately. Now they’re coming out in public.”

The summer of 1986 saw more than just the Gainers strike: workers at Zeidler Forrest Products (International Woodworkers 1-207) in Slave Lake and Edmonton had been out since the previous year, McMurray Independent Oil Workers at Suncor (MIOW) in Fort McMurray struck on the first of May, UFCW 1118 members at the Fletchers meatpacking plant in Red Deer walked out on June 1, and Alberta Union of Public Employees members across the province working for the Alberta Liquor Control Board struck on July 31.

Although none of these strikes were as violent as Gainers, they all felt the coercive weight of the state coming down on the strikers and on the side of companies. Court injunctions to limit picketers, contempt of court when these were ignored, criminal charges for incidents on the picket line, and police harassment all overwhelmingly oppressed workers and benefited companies, making the close ties between the government, judiciary,

Alberta Workers Rise Up

police, and major capitalists evident to workers across the province.

In the summer of 1986 workers across sectors throughout the province realized the political and economic system was not serving their interests. They felt the devastating personal impact of capitalism's boom and bust cycles. The request by Gainers workers for equality in the form of parity with Canada Packers was a demand for simple fairness and justice, something in short supply in the Alberta economy.

The Gainers strikers' struggle resonated with many working Albertans who were facing hardships brought about by concessions. The strike wave of '86 reflected widespread fear for the future in an uncertain economic climate with high unemployment and a government making little apparent effort to guarantee working people's welfare. There is no question that the other strikes taking place were also crucial confrontations taking place between workers and employers. However, they generally were not as accessible to mass picketing and they never attained the stature in the minds of Albertans which the Gainers strike did.

The Gainers strike became a focus and symbol of class struggle in Alberta because of the courage and commitment of the striking workers, because Pocklington was an almost stereotypically callous and greedy capitalist, and because people knew they could concretely act in solidarity by showing up on the picket line and boycotting Gainers products.

Gainers was a fight Alberta workers were determined to help the strikers win.

Boycott Gainers!

The boycott campaign proved extremely effective. It started locally in the early summer with strikers leafletting outside local grocery stores. Appealing to potential consumers as workers, in July UFCW 280-P members and the AFL urged people in the province to boycott meat products labeled 18B.

The boycott was a crucial step to put economic pressure on Pocklington to bargain after the union decided to obey the court injunctions. With the plant now operating without contestation, workers had to find another way to cut into Pocklington's profits, and a consumer boycott was the next best option. Locally, the boycott was so successful stores had to throw out 18B products because they could not sell them before their expiry date.

Inspired by the California grape boycott, UFCW decided to send workers to major cities across Canada to speak to other unions to publicize the strike, extend the boycott, and raise money for the strike fund. Fourteen dedicated strikers travelled across the country during the fall to spread the boycott, collecting over \$100 000, and even conducting a toy drive for Christmas presents for the children of strikers at both Gainers and Zeidlers as their disputes dragged on. According to one tour



U.F.C.W.
ON
STRIKE
FOR
INCREASED PENSIONS



The 1986 Gainers Strike

participant, “the support was phenomenal” across the country and was one of the most successful Canadian boycotts.

Change the Law

According to AFL president Dave Werlin in a 1987 interview, “you could get on a bus tomorrow, and sit down beside a total stranger and strike up a conversation about labour legislation in this province, and that stranger would very likely have something to say about it – intelligent or otherwise – but certainly they would not say ‘Hey, I don’t know what you are talking about.’”

10 The labour laws in Alberta were never designed to curtail employer offensives like those of the 1980s, as evidenced by the rise of part-time and casual jobs, the busting of unions, particularly evident in the construction sector, layoffs, speed-ups, and a general increase in the exploitation of workers made possible by high unemployment rates. Just as importantly, the labour laws meant to control workers were unable to deal with mass militancy that arose in the summer of ‘86.

Class and economic justice became topics of everyday conversation in Alberta and a radical AFL used the opportunity of greater class consciousness generated by the Gainers strike to put labour laws on trial. Signs were printed that read “Change the Law” on one side and “Boycott Gainers” on the other, tangibly linking the two struggles together. The AFL pushed

for revised labour legislation, including provisions against strikebreakers that would parallel those in effect in Quebec and Ontario at the time.

The consistent message from early June was that it was the labour laws that were creating the violence on the Gainers picket line and the whole labour code needed to be reviewed, including the restrictions on public sector bargaining rights, and the ability of employers to create so-called spin-offs (non-union sub-companies of unionized parent companies doing the exact same work) or use the 24 hour lockout to unilaterally terminate collective agreements.

In response to the agitation around the labour laws, the government launched a Labour Legislation Review Committee (LLRC) on July 23. While the LLRC may have validated labour’s concerns, it also served to contain discontent. The LLRC traveled overseas (and spent double its budget, over \$500 000) in what seemed to be a clear attempt to avoid hearing first-hand the consequences of poor labour laws from affected workers including Gainers strikers.

The LLRC’s eventual recommendations delivered in February 1987 celebrated the idea of a free market, but amounted to a return to extensive government intervention in order to contain and control future strikes that might expand, like Gainers, from a local economic dispute into a broader political issue capable of mobilizing the working class. The underlying premise of the new laws

Alberta Workers Rise Up



was that the economy would swing up again and sweep class conflict away with it. Labour's calls for better protections for workers' rights to unionize and to strike were completely rejected.

Disputes Inquiry Board

On June 10th Minister of Labour Ian Reid announced former Labour Relations Board chair Alex Dubensky had been appointed as a one-man Disputes Inquiry Board to examine the strikes at both Gainers and Fletchers. Dubensky was to draft recommendations to act as the basis of settlements. He took so long that Fletchers settled independently weeks before he reported. The Fletchers agreement included a few worker concessions, but was very close to parity with Canada Packers.

While Dubensky declared in his Gainers report on July 9 "there is no doubt that the [1984] concessions given by the Union were a major factor in the Company's

fortunes being turned around," he would not consider parity. Despite criticizing an attitude of production at all costs, Dubensky was not receptive to the idea that after sacrificing benefits and wages to secure higher profits for Pocklington, the workers had a right to expect Pocklington to sacrifice some profits for their wages and benefits now that Gainers' economic position had improved.

Furthermore, Dubensky's 17 pages of recommendations had no provisions to deal with picket-line incidents, and offered no clear method for the reinstatement of striking workers. In fact, his initial recommendation was that strikers only be recalled as positions alongside strikebreakers became available. He later amended it to call for the dismissal of strikebreakers, but the overall weakness of the recommendations and their lack of reference to the pension resulted in a 94.6% rejection in the government required vote.

The 1986 Gainers Strike

Labour Relations Board and the Pension Plan

During the course of the Inquiry it came to light that Pocklington was attempting to terminate the workers' pension plan and seize the surplus. At this time the workers' and public's attention turned to the Labour Relations Board hearings. On June 20 the LRB issued an order that no further steps were to be taken by Gainers to change the status of the pension plan or withdraw funds until the Board reconvened on June 27.

12

On June 26, VP of Corporate Affairs Dan Harrington drew up a corporate resolution to terminate the pension plan effective May 31, 1986 and then had it couriered to the Superintendent of Pensions for his approval on June 27. The LRB was outraged by this "flagrant disregard" for its orders. The Alberta Labour Relations Board stated in its decision on October 24 that given a collective agreement offer was only put forward by the company after pressure from the government, the company was in "breach of the duty to bargain in good faith."

Although the ALRB found the union's stubbornness with regards to parity distasteful, this did not excuse Gainers' failure to make every reasonable effort to enter into a collective agreement (as prescribed by section 139 of the 1980 Labour Relations Code). Although happy to declare, multiple times, that Gainers had not made the effort to negotiate, and therefore failed its duty to bargain in good

faith, the ALRB refused to force Gainers to bargain honestly. The toothlessness of the ALRB in this and the other disputes that summer laid bare the underlying employer bias of the Alberta labour relations system.

Conclusion

From the very beginning Pocklington had taken an aggressive, anti-union stance. In June Pocklington told reporters that he planned to have a non-union plant, compared his workers to terrorists, and stated he was "not going to have another collective agreement with anyone." The repeated refusals of the company to bargain and Pocklington's statements made it clear that they wanted to bust the union. Pocklington's intransigence, his transparent contempt for his workers, and his profit at all costs policies, all served to make the lines of class conflict too clear for the government's comfort.

The Disputes Inquiry Board, the ALRB, and the courts all proved unable to resolve the Gainers strike because they would not force the employer to act. It took government fears about the growing rejection of the entire labour relation system by Alberta workers, evident in the LRRC hearings finally underway in the province, to force the government to put pressure on Pocklington to bargain. It took the threat of continuing working class solidarity to stop the strike.

In December, a beleaguered Premier Don Getty pressured Pocklington to negotiate

Alberta Workers Rise Up



with the union. After months of delays and motions before the provincial courts, Pocklington himself finally reached an agreement with UFCW's national representative Kip Connelly through the mediation of the premier. Pocklington, it is clear from subsequent events, was bribed by the government with a loan of over \$65 million that he defaulted on a short two years later.

Some members were bitterly disappointed by a deal they claimed was "worse than what we rejected in July" and felt a keen sense of betrayal at not only the deal, but also the autocratic way they were informed about it. Others, however, saw the agreement as a victory because their pension was reinstated, they saved their jobs, and kept their union.

There are a couple of conclusions one can reach about this strike. First, never underestimate the power of worker solidarity to inspire others to join the struggle for a better society, or the ability of workers' struggles to jump from the

picket line to the community. Second, the power of labour in a strike is primarily on the picket line and secondarily in the boycott, not in the technical-legal labour relations process which in practice persistently denies workers justice.

According to one trade union activist, after the Gainers strike and the long, hot summer of '86, workers in Alberta were aware of their collective strength and proud of their solidarity. The strike proved that the Alberta working class was capable of great action, of solidarity, and of fighting for justice.

The strike wave in Alberta in the summer of '86 attracted national attention and it offered inspiration and hope to workers across Canada. If a strike like Gainers could happen in sleepy Edmonton in conservative Alberta during a recession, then anything seemed possible. Further Reading

Timeline

1984

1986

June

1

Strike begins at both
Gainers and Fletchers;
picket lines go up

2

First
injunction

7

3000 march from
St. Francis Church to join
the picket line

10

Disputes Inquiry Board
appointed; second
injunction limits picketers
to a maximum of 42

July

9

DIB reports

23

Labour Law Review
Committee struck

December

1

Gainers Inc. tables
an offer

12

Memorandum of
understanding signed

UFCW 280-P signs concessionary agreement to save Gainers, breaking with the national pattern.

1985

Hog Wars: Pocklington declares war on Alberta farmers' marketing board in an effort to lower hog prices.

May

11

Gainers places anonymous ad in Edmonton and Calgary papers for industrial workers willing to cross picket lines

14

UFCW 280-P strike vote: 979 of 1017 voters are in favour; those in favour are 91% of the total membership.

11

10,000 march to Legislature; Labour Law Review Committee announced

19

Fletchers settle, achieving near parity with Canada Packers

September

UFCW's national boycott campaign begins

October

24

LRB decision: Gainers Inc did not bargain in good faith, ordered back to table

14

Workers ratify new agreement

15

Workers return to work

Further reading

Alberta Labour Relations Board. "The Labour Relations Act, 1980, as amended and UFCW local 280-P and Gainers Inc." File L.R. 302-G-1, October 28, 1986.

Anne Forrest. "The Rise and Fall of National Bargaining in the Canadian Meat-Packing Industry." *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations* 44, no. 2 (1989): 393-408.

Gainers and the Churches: 1986. Edmonton: Edmonton Church Coalition on Labour and Justice, 1987.

David C. May. *The Battle of 66th Street: Pocklington versus Local 280P*. Edmonton: Les Editions Duval, 1996.

Alain Noël and Keith Gardner. "The Gainers Strike: Capitalist Offensive, Militancy, and the Politics of Industrial Relations in Canada." *Studies in Political Economy* 31 (Spring 1990): 31-72.

Andrea Samoil. "Class Struggle and Solidarity in Neo-Liberal Times: The 1986 Gainers Strike." MA diss., Trent University, 2014.