

Bakers Use Heads to Keep Bread in Waterbury

by Jeremy Brecher*

American unions have by and large accepted the idea that they should "let management run the company." That principle is enshrined in labor law and many union contracts as "management's right to manage." But when the consequence is failing companies, layoffs, and closing workplaces, workers are having to take a second look.

A case in point right here in Waterbury is the Raymond Bakery on East Main Street. It was started 77 years ago by Adolph and Albert Raymond, and was run for many years as a family firm. Old timers recall the days when the company drivers used to deliver bread with a horse and cart. Hours were long but the Raymond family had a reputation for looking after their workers: lending them money to buy homes, sponsoring dances, and even, legend has it, bringing them beer at the blisteringly hot ovens.

Over the past few years, workers have noted warning signs that all is not well. The company's latest contract proposal asked for concessions based on "the company's losses during the last three years and its difficult financial situation." Raymond workers are currently on strike, primarily over those concessions.

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Workers at Reymond are worried about their jobs. They put much of the blame for the company's situation on poor management, ~~which more than one of them described to me as "like a ship without a captain."~~ They tell how the company won awards for its products from the Quality Bakers of America, but failed to capitalize on them through promotion or advertising. They claimed that the company hires inexperienced managers who have to be taught by the workers on the job. According to a union-hired auditor, an unsuccessful attempt to move into a new market area put the company about half a million dollars a year into the red.

Particularly rankling to Reymond workers has been the growth in the number of managers and supervisors. A management chart shows an increase from ten a few years ago to twenty-five ~~five~~ today. Workers note that where one person formerly supervised the office, now there are five supervisors for 13 office workers. In production ten years ago there was one superintendent and five assistant foremen; today there are 11 supervisors -- although the unit produces fewer pounds of bread now than it did then.

While these complaints would be difficult to verify without access to company records, the sincerity of Reymond workers' belief in them is attested by the actions they have taken. They might have simply drawn their pay and let the company be run into the ground -- but it was their own jobs that would have been lost. Instead, in a startling

break with tradition, they began pressuring management to manage more effectively.

I saw the minutes of one discussion between union and company in which the union raised such matters as a more secure contract with a major distributor, the hiring of a customer relations expert, an end to cutting smaller routes, job evaluations for sales people, and excessive staffing. The union went so far as to prepare a customer survey to see if the company could better serve its market. Bakers I talked with felt highly frustrated at the failure of the company to deal with such concerns -- when it was the workers' jobs at stake.

Out of this frustration, bakery workers finally came up with the idea of buying the company themselves. According to Bakers union president Ron Napoli, they concluded several years ago that they would only have long-term job security if the company was employee owned. Since then they have carefully watched the progress of workers at Seymour Specialty Wire, down the river in Seymour, who bought their company and have been running it successfully ever since. Says Napoli, "They have long-term job security. They don't have to worry that they will be closed or sold."

Given Raymond's current difficulties, workers are concerned that the company will be sold to a larger corporation that will close the production facilities and use the property merely as a delivery depot. In their pursuit of job security, they made a remarkable proposal at

their recent negotiations -- one that so far as I know is a first in the history of American collective bargaining. It's a contract clause to secure their "right of first option":

"The Company agrees that it shall not sell, offer for sale or cease operating the Reymond Baking Company without first offering the same to members of the B C & T Local 155 at fair market value."

Bakers union president Ron Napoli is quick to say that he and his members have no desire to be in the bakery business; they would prefer that a competent management take over the company and run it. But given overcapacity in the regional market, they believe that ~~as~~^{is} unlikely. An option to buy the company gives them an alternative.

Napoli says, "We've got people who worked here 20, 30, 40 years. They built this company; they deserve to have it offered to them when and if it is sold. That's the only decent thing to do. It may not be viable for them to buy it, but they should have a right to have it offered to them. 'First option' should ~~almost~~ be the law of the land."

Reymond employs about 400 people, most of them in the Waterbury area. A closing of the plant would not only be a disaster for the workers, some of whom have worked there more than 40 years; it would also be a tremendous cost for the community, as Waterbury has learned from the long series of Naugatuck Valley plant closings like Chase, Lux, American Brass, Seth Thomas, and Torin. It would mean lost wages,

increased unemployment and welfare payments, reduced tax base, and the social problems like alcohol abuse and family violence that are the predictable companions of long-term unemployment.

Since September 1, the bakers at ^{Reynolds}~~Reynolds~~ have been on strike. They have offered to extend the existing contract for one year, thus accepting a wage freeze, but the company has demanded further concessions.

The Bakers' proposal for a "right of first option" is an innovative approach to job security that may well be copied by workers elsewhere. By ignoring the old adage that "workers aren't paid to think" and trying to keep their plant viable and in business, they are performing a public service to this community.

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