



'ANGUS BARKS'

By Jeff Francis
AEG Executive Board

Local 201 History

75th Birthday

Our union local was founded in 1933. The following year, a membership vote made Lynn the first location in the GE chain to win bargaining rights. You and I benefit every day from the wages and working conditions produced by seventy-five years of industrial unionism.

It took great skill and courage to start a union in 1933, as it does today. By remembering the choices made by the leaders and members who founded our union, we can learn some lessons that will help us with the choices we make in the future.

INDEPENDENCE & UNITY

Long before 1933, GE workers expressed their strong desire to belong to unions of their own choosing. In 1918 at the end of WWI, several key GE plants were hit by a strike wave of workers demanding union recognition. In Lynn, the Plant manager declared that Riverworks employees didn't need a union, because his door was always open to the individual worker who had a grievance. Apparently that approach didn't cut the mustard, because 10,000 Lynn workers struck in July for 18 days.

In response, the Company established the Plan of Representation. Workers were granted the right to elect their representatives. The representatives could present complaints, but they had no right to negotiate, because there was no written contract, and no right to strike. Often the foreman was your representative. This was the Company Union.

Throughout the 1920's, union minded workers at the Riverworks and West Lynn experienced the limitations of the Company Union. They also tried organizing through the old AFL craft unions. The craft unions insisted on splitting Riverworks employees into many separate unions, such as electricians, carpenters, machinists, pattern makers, die sinkers and plumbers. These separate unions didn't get along with each other, had no bargaining power with the Company, and they considered most production workers too stupid to organize.

By 1933 Lynn workers were ready to form an industrial union that included all workers, elect representatives of their own choosing, and fund their organization so it would act independently from the Company.

STABILITY

Also during the 1920s, corporations like GE, US Steel, and Standard Oil consolidated their power and gained the upper hand on labor. Profits expanded, government took a back seat, stock market speculators ran amok, and banks overextended credit. GE's President Gerald Swope boasted of GE's liberal and progressive labor policies. Along with the Company Union, GE sponsored dances and concerts in the Plant, and many traveling sports teams. The Company claimed it knew best how to take care of workers.

All that came crashing down in 1929 during the Great Depression. Half the Riverworks workforce was laid off. Wages were cut 10%. Vacations and NSB were eliminated, and all GE's promises went up in smoke. A decade of profit excesses and credit sprees by corporate tycoons ended in years of deprivation and starvation for working families. As workers trickled back to work in 1932 and 1933, many decided that winning a union and securing a written contract were the best ways to protect their families from economic instability.

When you vote for your representatives in the Union election on October 28th, you are participating in some very important history.

Happy Birthday Local 201.

(to be continued)

