

WHO WE ARE: The IWW is a union for all workers. Every worker can, and should, join, regardless of whether you are currently trying to organize a union in your workplace. It is the only union in North America with a vision of an economy run by, and organized for, the benefit of workers, and managed by workers through their member-controlled unions. We are explicitly opposed to the capitalist economy with its inherent exploitation— this system can not be reformed, only replaced.

For information on **workplace organizing** and **IWW membership**

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How to Fire Your Boss



A Worker's Guide to Direct Action

2022 Edition
Industrial Workers of the World



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This pamphlet was first published by the IWW General Administration in 1968 under the title “A Workers’ Guide To Direct Action” and has been updated in 2022 by the union’s Literature Committee. Some of the graphics in the section heads are from the original edition, artist unknown; others were contributed by IWW members. Special thanks to FW Ryan Kowalchik for his original drawing for Demand Letters and the March on the Boss.

!!PLEASE NOTE!!

None of these tactics are guaranteed to achieve their intended results. It is best for you and your fellow workers to assess each possible tactic before using it. All these Direct Action tactics will be effective in the long term only if supported by a stable organization. We highly recommend that you choose to join the IWW.

How Guide to Fire Your Boss: A Workers Guide to Direct
Action
Official Edition– 2022
North American Regional Administration
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1. “1889: The Glasgow dockers’ go slow,” Libcom.org, January 26, 2010 , <https://libcom.org/history/1889-glasgow-dockers-go-slow>.
2. K. Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden, eds, *The Global History of Work*, (Amsterdam: Oldenburg Publishing, 2018).
3. “Union Threatens Protests Over Austrian Post Office Privatization,” *Post and Parcel* (blog), Triangle Management Services, August 31, 2005, <https://postandparcel.info/13491/news/union-threatens-protests-over-austrian-post-office-privatization/>.
4. Garcia, Nicola, “Living Through the Social Explosion,” *Commune* (blog), April 8, 2020, <https://communemag.com/living-through-the-social-explosion/>.
5. Hughes, Sarah, “If Your House Is On Fire You Run’: Workers Strike for Safety At Understaffed Mental Health Center,” *Labor Notes*, September 24, 2021, <https://labornotes.org/2021/09/if-your-house-fire-you-run-workers-strike-safety-understaffed-mental-health-center>.
6. “School Strike is On, No Classes for the Eighth Day”. *Morning Call*, September 26, 1991. <https://www.mcall.com/news/mc-xpm-1991-09-27-2806713-story.html>

Further Reading:

Order these and many other fine books from the IWW store:

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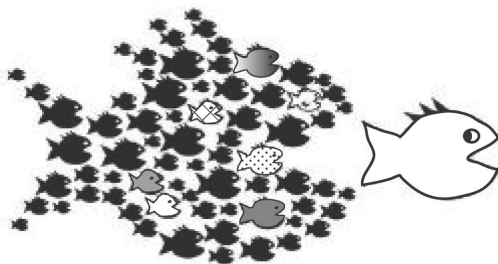
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SOLIDARITY

The best weapon is, of course, organization. If one worker stands up and protests, the bosses will squash them. But if all the workers stand up, the boss will have no choice but to take them seriously. The boss can fire any individual worker who makes a fuss, but they will find it difficult to fire their entire workforce.

All of the tactics discussed in this pamphlet depend on solidarity for success — on the coordinated actions of a large majority of workers. Individual acts of sabotage offer little more than a fleeting sense of revenge, but for a real feeling of empowerment, there's nothing quite like collective direct action by a large number of angry and creative workers.

Once we build up power on the shop floor, direct actions can be combined and adapted to particular workplace situations. These actions may also be expanded into community-based struggles to leverage demands that impact the broader working class. We encourage people to be creative, to mix and match tactics, and to catch the boss off guard. When workers are organized and have each other's backs, we can win.



22.



INTRODUCTION

Anyone who works for a living knows how degrading and alienating it is to be yelled at for doing your job, maybe just because your boss is having a bad day. The daily grind devours our time, exhausts our energies, and reduces our lives to a treadmill of survival. Work is imposed on us.

With no say over what we produce, or how that production is organized, and with only a small portion of that product's value finding its way into our paychecks, we have every reason to be pissed off at our bosses.

Ultimately, we need to create a society in which working people make all the decisions about the production and distribution of goods and services. In the meantime, we need to develop strategies that both increase the power of working people over our own lives and counteract the day-to-day drudgery of wage slavery.

We believe that direct action in the workplace is the key to achieving both these goals.

What do we mean by direct action?

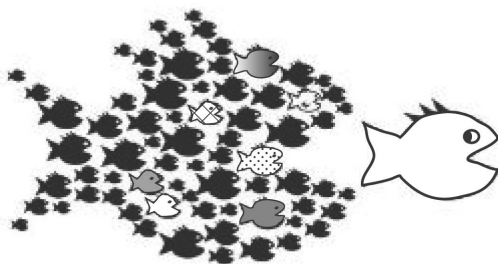
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Direct action is a form of worker activity that is aimed at getting improvements on the job. Direct action is workers themselves using their collective workplace power to win their demands, without relying on external support mechanisms, such as social media campaigns or government intervention. It is workers reclaiming their innate workplace power. It is this direct agency that gives workers their power, and what makes it so difficult for the boss to defeat. Direct action, by definition, means those tactics workers can undertake themselves, without the help of government agencies, union bureaucrats, or high-priced lawyers. Appealing to the Labor Relations Board for assistance may be a helpful form of supplementary indirect action, but it is *not* a form of direct action.

"By direct action is meant any action taken by the workers directly at the point of production with a view to bettering their conditions...Sending the shop committee to demand of the boss a change of shop rules is direct action. To oppose direct action is to oppose labor unionism as a whole with all its activities." Frank Bohn, "Some Definitions: Direct Action, Sabotage" (Solidarity, May 18, 1912)

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Walk-offs can be coordinated so that only a portion of the workers "take a hike" at a time. This tactic is often called a "rolling strike." The largely female public employees union in Oregon wanted pay equity in their contract with the State. But instead of the full-on strike the state government anticipated, over a period of eight days workers in different departments and different regions of the state walked out for short periods on a carefully coordinated schedule. This only inconvenienced a small portion of the citizenry for short periods, but it felt unpredictable and chaotic to state government. The state settled and granted pay equity in a major wage increase⁷

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The selective strike, or intermittently striking and returning to work so as to make it difficult to replace workers with scabs, may be less well known, but striking teachers have used it to overwhelming effect in the past. In 1991, Pennsylvania teachers walked a picket line on Monday and Tuesday, reported for work on Wednesday, struck again on Thursday, and reported for work on Friday and Monday. This on-again, off-again tactic not only prevented the administrators from hiring scabs to replace the teachers, but also forced administrators who hadn't been in a classroom for years to staff the schools while the teachers were out. The tactic was so effective that the Pennsylvania legislature promptly introduced bills that would outlaw selective strikes.⁶

Both of these tactics have been stripped of their status as a form of protected concerted activity in the United States and Canada, and the risks associated with such an act are much higher now. It is fully within the boss's power to request sitdown strikers be arrested and charged for trespassing, and it is well within the State's power to use their force to break such a strike immediately. Given the wide variety of safer and more powerful tools discussed above, we cannot recommend engaging in either of these tactics in your workplace.

Another tactic is the quickie strike. In Sacramento, California, workers at a retail store objected when management relaxed Covid-19 mask requirements for customers. The workers objected and demanded masks for everyone. They marched on the boss. The boss replied, "Who's in charge here anyway?" and by prior agreement all the workers, on all shifts, walked out. This closed the store on the state's official "reopening day." Management gave in when they couldn't get a few scabs to work efficiently, and agreed that

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The best-known form of direct action is the strike, in which workers simply walk off their jobs and refuse to produce profits for the boss until they get what they want. It may come as a surprise that this is one of the least effective ways of confronting the boss. The bosses, with their large financial reserves, are better able to withstand a long drawn-out strike than the workers. In many cases, court injunctions freeze or confiscate the union's strike funds. And worst of all, a long walk-out only gives the boss the chance to replace striking workers with a scab (replacement) workforce or to move the company out of town.

Often it is far more effective to take direct action while still on the job. By deliberately reducing the boss' profits while continuing to collect wages, you can hurt the boss without giving some scab the opportunity to take your job. If you make it more expensive for the boss to continue to say "no" to your demands than to give in, it becomes a matter of good business sense for them to say "yes" instead.

Even if a strike is a necessary step, it is not the best first action, in part because once you're on strike, there are no further forms of concerted activity to escalate to.

What follows are some of the most popular forms of direct action that workers have used to get what they wanted. Many of these are taught in the IWW's Organizer Training 101 workshops. Every major victory won by Labor over the years was achieved with militant direct actions that were, in their time, illegal and subject to police repression. After all, until the 1930's, the laws surrounding labor unions were simple — there were none. Most courts held labor unions to be illegal conspiracies in restraint of "free trade," and strikers were routinely beaten and shot by police, state militia, Federal troops, and private security goons.

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The legal right of workers to organize is officially recognized in North America, yet so many restrictions exist that effective action is as difficult as ever. For this reason, any worker contemplating direct action on the job — bypassing the legal system and hitting the boss where they are weakest — should be fully aware of labor law, how it is applied, and how it might be used against workers.[1] At the same time, workers must realize that the struggle between the bosses and the workers is not a badminton match — it is war. Under these circumstances, workers must use what works, whether the bosses (and their courts) like it or not.

Here, then, are some forms of direct action that can be used if well planned. Where no citations are provided, these examples come from the direct experiences of IWW members that have been shared around the union.



"So....WHAT'S WITH THE BLACK CAT?" The IWW's famous 'sabocat' has been a symbol of direct action and radical unionism since early in the 20th century. The hissing black cat with the arched-back on the cover was designed by Ralph Chaplin, an IWW writer, editor and artist.

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Workers at a brewpub in Chicago in 2017 were under constant pressure from their boss to get off the clock once the last customer left, and were often expected to clean the restaurant for free, sometimes for up to an hour. When the boss refused to pay them to finish their work, they identified the coffee and espresso machines as one of the most time consuming tools to clean. The workers reported to their boss that the espresso machine was broken every night one hour before closing. Even when the manager showed them that it worked, no coffee was sold in the final hour of business. Desperate to recapture the lost desert business, the owner eventually relented and agreed to pay the workers for their time spent cleaning the shop after closing.

SITDOWN AND SELECTIVE STRIKES

Over the decades, the power of the sitdown strike has been etched into the history of the labor movement, and with good reason. This powerful tool has won workers advancements not only in factories, but also the entertainment and hospitality industries. Its power is well documented and hard to combat. In 2020, IWW restaurant cooks in New York City demanded a wage increase, and they got it by sitting down in the kitchen during the lunch rush. The boss knew the rest of the workers would escalate if she didn't give in.

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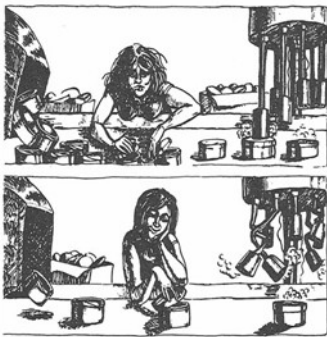
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Pickle packers at a plant in Massachusetts were overworked when the boss sped up the conveyor belts to “increase productivity.” For some reason, over the next several days there was a rash of partially

SPEEDUPS CAUSE BREAKDOWNS



SUPPORT THE BREAKDOWN OF YOUR CHOICE

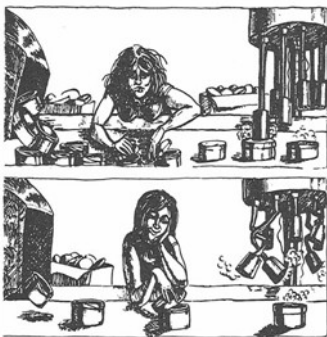
filled and spilled jars at various points all along the line. Sadly, this meant that the line had to be stopped because the sideways jars jammed up the capping and labeling machines; some jars even broke, spewing sticky sweet pickles on the equipment. The crew often had to take five while the jams were cleared and the mess was cleaned up.

When confronted with dangerous machines or disrespectful bosses, many workers have chosen to simply act as if some of the tools of their trade were broken or missing. They get the benefits of monkey-wrenching without breaking the law. Many workers have, in the face of a dangerous machine the boss refused to fix, simply announced to their managers that the machine was broken — even though it’s still operable. Consequently, production drags to a halt as workers continue to refuse to use the unsafe machine, despite the boss demonstrating that it can still run. Eventually the boss must concede and provide the long-requested safety improvements.

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THE SLOWDOWN



The slowdown has a long and honorable history. In 1889, the organized dock workers of Glasgow, Scotland, demanded a 10% increase in wages, and after being met with refusal, they went on strike. The bosses brought in scabs, and after a time the dockers had to acknowledge defeat and return to work under the old wages. But before they went back to work, they heard this from the secretary of their union:

"You are going back to work at the old wage. The employers have repeated time and again that they were delighted with the work of the agricultural laborers who have taken our place for several weeks during the strike. But we have seen them at work. We have seen that they could not even walk a vessel and that they dropped half the merchandise they carried; in short, that two of them could hardly do the work of one of us. Nevertheless, the employers have declared themselves enchanted with the work of these fellows. Well, then, there is nothing for us to do but the same. Work as the agricultural laborers worked."¹

Workers followed this plan to the letter. After a few days the contractors sent for the union secretary and begged him to tell the dockworkers to work as before, and that he would grant the 10% pay increase.

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Members of the Aircraft Engineers union at Qantas Airlines pressured the bosses for a wage increase by using only their left hands (if right handed, right hands if left-handed) when they used wrenches, screwdrivers and other one-handed tools. This was an effective slowdown, and completely legal.²

"In the case of 'passive resistance' for example, as shown on the government-owned railways of Austria, the workers simply obeyed the LAWS OF THE NATION governing traffic to the letter. They took no risks, they observed signals, they did exactly what the law told them to do. As a consequence, the railways were congested with rolling stock and traffic was practically impossible outside of 24 hours. No destruction of property occurred. That was 'legal sabotage' and far from being 'of no value,' it resulted in getting the men what they wanted." Ben H. Williams, "Sabotage" (Solidarity, February 25, 1911)

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Finally, one afternoon the printers got a moving dolly and wrestled the press onto the elevator to take it upstairs. The manager found them just as they got it into the elevator, and though he turned livid at this blatant usurpation of his authority, he never mentioned the incident to them. The space where the press had been was converted to an "employee lounge," with several chairs and a magazine rack.

In 1984, IWW apple pickers in Eastern Washington responded to a boss's 10-percent reduction in piece rate by filling apple bins only 90% full. Faced with firing his entire crew during a worker shortage, the boss caved the same day and went back to the original rate. The tactic spread to other nearby orchards and within a week several hundred apple pickers in the region actually gained a 10% wage hike.

In 2019, IWW fast food workers in Portland Oregon complained that management would not provide forms to claim sick pay. So the union printed and distributed their own "Union Sick Leave" forms to document work time lost to illness. These were later used as evidence in complaints to the labor board.

INEFFICIENCY, or THE "BROKEN" TOOL

Sabotage, the physical destruction of property or equipment used on the job, is illegal. But sabotage, as in the other direct action tactics described in this pamphlet, has been in the workers' toolbox for as long as there have been bosses. "Sabotage," in this sense, is described in Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's pamphlet "Sabotage, the Conscious Withdrawal of The Workers' Industrial Efficiency," published by the IWW in 1916. Flynn's work laid the foundation for this pamphlet.

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CHANGE the BALANCE of POWER or IGNORING THE BOSS



The best way to get something done is to simply organize and do it ourselves. Rather than wait for the boss to give in to our demands, we often have the power to make changes on our own.

In a small print-

ing shop in San Francisco, a decrepit offset press was finally removed from service and pushed to the side of the press room. It was replaced with a new machine, and press operators began to cannibalize the old one for spare parts to keep the other presses running. Soon enough, it was obvious to everyone but the manager that this old press would never see service again. The printers asked the manager to move it upstairs to the storage room, since it merely took up valuable space in an already crowded press room. He hemmed and hawed and never seemed to get around to it.

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WORK TO RULE

Almost every job has a maze of rules, regulations, and standing orders — many of them completely unworkable and generally



ignored. Simply to meet the goals of the company, workers often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority. There is often a tacit understanding, even by the managers whose job it is to enforce the rules, that these shortcuts must be taken in order to meet production quotas on time.

But what would happen if each of these rules and regulations were followed to the letter? Confusion would result, and productivity would plummet. And best of all, the workers gain some security by claiming they are, after all, "just following the rules."

To oppose privatization and a loss of 1,000 jobs, in 2005 the Austrian postal workers began to strictly observe the rule that all mail must be weighed to see if the proper postage was affixed. Formerly they had passed without weighing all those letters and parcels that were clearly underweight, thus living up to the spirit of the regulation but not to its exact wording. By taking each separate piece of mail to the scales, carefully weighing it, and then returning it to its proper place, the postal workers had the office congested with unweighed mail on the second day. Managers were forced to concede to workers' demands.³

Workers at an understaffed Starbucks store in New York City agreed to "work to rule" to protest understaffing and a do-nothing abusive manager. They followed every picky rule about how to brew coffee

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to order, how long to heat each pastry, and how thoroughly and how often to wipe down tables and the counter. They watched as every 5th customer walked out in frustration. The lazy manager was suddenly forced to actually do some work. The regional management investigated the store when the workers' actions had cost \$10,000 in lost revenue in one week. The result after only one week was more workers to cover shifts, and the boss knew he couldn't abuse his workers any more.

Work-to-rule can also include workers refusing to do additional work not required in their contract — buying supplies for their classrooms, bringing their own tools to the job, or agreeing to overtime or travel. Work-to-rule makes visible the various hidden and often unpaid contributions that workers routinely make to keep workplaces running efficiently. By ceasing to volunteer these undervalued contributions, they make a clear statement about the value of their labor.

GOOD WORK STRIKE

One of the biggest problems for public service workers is that many forms of direct action, such as slowdowns, end up hurting those in need of services more than the boss. One way around this is the "good work strike," in which workers provide better or cheaper service — at the boss' expense.



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During ongoing contract negotiations in 2021, seventy workers at a behavioral health center south of Seattle launched a sickout, aimed at remedying unsafe working and patient conditions. The initial seventy workers organized the sickout, without union approval, using group texts, phone calls, and weekly meetings. After the sickout started, workers were terminated in retaliation, but the action snowballed into a strike.⁵

At a nonprofit in Washington D.C., a union got around an established no-strike clause with management using a sick-out. Embroiled in a long negotiation over cost-of-living-adjustments in one department, the union called on members in the other departments to schedule time-off or sick time right before a big fundraising event for the organization. Besides costing them money, a union fight in front of their patrons would have cost them their reputation as well. Therefore, the next day when management sat down at the negotiating table, they were suddenly much more willing to go along with a cost-of-living-adjustment.

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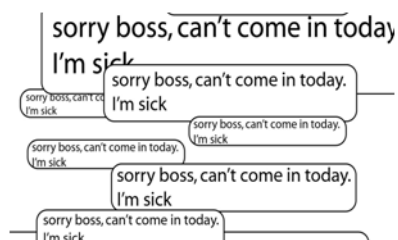
charging these groups an 18% gratuity, but it was taking a 3% sales commission out of that for a manager. When parties were unhappy, management would lower the bill but take that out of the gratuity, instead of the restaurant's cut. A group of servers, hosts, bussers and runners marched on a manager during a rush and delivered a demand letter that the full 18% gratuity be given to service staff, and that staff would have access to party contracts to make sure they were getting their due. They gave the management team a deadline of noon on Monday, with two escalating actions planned for the week. Just before noon, the General Manager sent a notice to all staff, meeting their demand. They have been getting their full 18%, and access to party contracts, ever since.

SICK-IN

The sick-in is a good way to strike without striking. The idea is to slow down your workplace by coordinating workers to call in

sick on the same day or days. Unlike a formal walkout, calling in sick is often something workers are allowed to do. It is the traditional method of direct action for public employee unions, which may be legally prevented from striking.

At a New England psychiatric hospital, just the thought of a sick-in got results. A shop steward, talking to a supervisor about a fired union member, casually mentioned that there was a lot of flu



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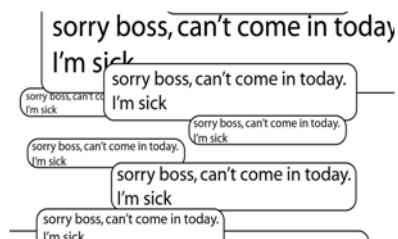
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In 2019, bus operators in Santiago, Chile refused to collect fares from riders as part of a large-scale series of protests over fare hikes and lack of wage increases. Throughout the protest, the buses would still run on time and throughout the city, yet no fares were collected at the fare box. This won the workers huge support from the community, and gave them security in continuing their direct action.⁴

In New York City, IWW restaurant workers, after losing a strike, won some of their demands by heeding the advice of IWW organizers to "pile up the plates, give 'em double helpings, and figure the checks on the low side."

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DEMAND LETTERS AND THE “MARCH ON THE BOSS”



Workers with an issue can send a ‘demand letter’ to the boss, perhaps anonymously. This is a relatively safe tactic, but is easily ignored. It is more powerful to deliver a demand through a “march on the boss.” This tactic is far more confrontational and requires planning, rehearsal, and bravery. An organized group of workers

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confronts a boss directly by cornering them in their office or the shop floor. This is an outright intimidation tactic demonstrating that the workers are organized and united on this issue, and they want it dealt with.

By assigning speaking and acting roles to specific workers, the committee can make certain the boss hears their gripes. The roles include a person to present the demand and a person to interrupt the boss (“you’re not listening to her!”) if the boss tries to interject or take control of the confrontation. Others crowd in to lend a sense of power and solidarity to the proceedings, witness the boss’s response, and spread the results around the shop. Often the very sight of a vocal crowd of workers speaking directly to the boss can inspire others who have been uninvolved or intimidated to join in the organizing effort. This may be a good tactic for healthcare workers who are concerned that more disruptive tactics could affect patient care.

In the 1990s, workers in a small sewing shop in Bellingham, Washington were tired of bouncing paychecks and inefficient business practices that hurt their piece-rate wages. After an evening’s role play practice, five of them marched into the office and presented a list of shop floor practices to be immediately reformed. This occurred in plain view of all the other workers in the business. The boss was so overwhelmed at the audacity and solidarity of the “marchers” that he gave in to everything right on the spot. The result was quicker distribution of materials to the machine operators, an established minimum piece rate on top of a minimum wage, and a letter posted that paychecks would never bounce.

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