

Shell Strike: Ecologists Refine Relations with Labor

The interest of the labor and environmental movements are often diametrically opposed, with labor favoring economic expansion and environmental groups seeking to limit it. This circumstance lends special significance to the fact that, for the past 2½ months, 11 environmental groups have been supporting a strike by the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union of America (OCAW) against nine Shell Oil Company plants.

The strike is about a health and safety clause in a new, 2-year contract covering some 5000 OCAW workers; it has already been accepted by more than 15 other oil companies. The clause would establish a joint labor-management committee, with each side equally represented, to approve outside surveys of health and safety conditions in the plant, make public reports, recommend medical examinations where necessary, and determine what changes should be made if hazards are found to exist. Should disputes arise within the committee, normal grievance and arbitration procedures can be followed. Barry Commoner, of Washington University in St. Louis, regards the clause as highly significant. "By working for environmental quality at the workplace, and developing new ways to improve it, these joint committees will help control environmental pollution at its source," Commoner has said.

Shell management maintains that the real intent of the clause is not to protect the workers' health, but, rather, to give OCAW leaders undue influence in management questions pertaining to such things as the proper size of the work force and the need for new plant facilities.

Why is Shell holding out while most of the other major U.S. oil companies have agreed to an identical clause? According to Shell spokesmen, the timing of OCAW's demand, in January, when a national fuel crisis loomed, may have been a determining factor for other companies. Shell spokesmen say that they decided they could operate at 90 percent capacity even with a strike; hence the decision to face down OCAW.

But the other oil companies are saying that they do not see the joint committee proposal as a threat. Says Gulf Oil Corp.'s vice president for industrial relations, William B. Billock: "We felt we didn't see anything wrong with the unions being involved in health and safety. We're all interested in health and safety, like we're all for motherhood." Should there be any abuse of the clause by union leadership, Billock points out, Gulf can take a different stance in 2 years when the contract is renegotiated.

But one of the most interesting features of the strike is the union's relative success in winning some—but not all—environmental groups to its side. Behind the effort to enlist environmental groups is the OCAW legislative director Anthony Mazzocchi, who has many friends among university professors, scientists, and who even sits on the board of directors of SIPI (Scientists' Institute for

Public Information). Mazzocchi called together representatives of about 20 environmental groups in early January when the union was negotiating the health and safety clause with many oil companies to outline why it related to environmental aims. Later, when most of the companies had agreed, but Shell was settling in for a strike, Mazzocchi reconvened the environmentalists, who drew up a statement supporting the impending strike. Listed as supporters of the OCAW were: Environmental Action, Friends of the Earth, Izaak Walton League, National Parks and Conservation Association, Environmental Policy Center, Public Interest Economics Center, Environmental Defense Fund, Ecology Center Council, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Wilderness Society. The Izaak Walton League later withdrew its endorsement of the strike when it appeared that the league and the other environmental groups were also being associated with a boycott against Shell, contrary to a long-standing league policy against participation in boycotts.

The Sierra Club, which was not on the original list, held an open meeting in San Francisco where Shell's chief industrial hygienist tried to convince his audience that Shell's plants were safe and environmentally sound. Club leaders were given a tour of the nearby Martinez refinery. In the end, however, the executive committee of the Sierra Club board of directors voted to support the union.

The National Audubon Society, on the other hand, after staff discussion, decided that supporting the OCAW strike was not its bag. Its president, Elvis J. Stahr, wrote Mazzocchi saying that with few exceptions "the public interest is best served by the Company making fully available—not just to the union but to the public generally—information as to health and safety matters."

One mountaineering society, the Skagit Alpine Club in Washington state, happens to have among its members some who, when not hiking, work at a local Shell plant. Brock Evans, the Sierra Club's Washington, D.C., representative, says that some of the Skagit climbers protested when the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs, an umbrella group to which Skagit belongs, came out in favor of the Shell strike.

At this point, it remains very much a question whether the Shell strike and related boycott will succeed. Union funds cannot hold out forever; even now, the workers are drawing only \$25 a week for strike relief. The boycott has received considerable publicity, partly through the help of environmental groups, but Shell would have one believe that, thus far, its effects have been negligible. According to company spokesmen, out of the 7 million Shell credit cards in circulation, only 2000 have been returned by boycotters.

Successful or not, the Shell strike represents a significant collaboration between a union and environmental groups. Unionists and environmentalists have collaborated before—the OCAW was one of the few unions to join the fight against the SST, for instance—but this new common front may be the first to be concerned solely with conditions at the workplace.—DEBORAH SHAPLEY

* According to OCAW literature, companies which have accepted the clause include: American (subsidiary, Standard Oil of Indiana); Atlantic Richfield Co.; Gulf Oil Corp.; Texaco Inc.; Mobil Oil Corp.; Union Oil Co. of California; Citgo (Cities Service); Exxon (Standard Oil, New Jersey); Sohio (Standard Oil, Ohio); Continental Oil Co.; Phillips Petroleum Co.; Ashland Oil Inc. Marathon Oil Co.; Husky Oil Co.; Skelly Oil Co.