

Worker strikes down union at Lancaster parts maker

Mac-It Corp. machine operator led move to have United Steelworkers decertified.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, Pa. - Machine operator Mike Walton remembers arriving at work that Monday morning in September 2005.

He recalls walking toward the entrance to Mac-It Corp., which had hired him just seven months earlier, only to be greeted by fellow employees holding picket signs.

"Everybody was standing out there," Walton said. "They said, 'We're striking.' I said, 'Well, you guys are. I'm working.'"

With that, the admittedly "hard-headed" 21-year-old crossed the picket line and went inside the East Liberty Street plant to his metal-cutting machine as usual, undeterred by being called a "scab," sneers, profanities and threats.

"I didn't strike because I didn't like what the union was about," he said.

The walkout at the maker of specialty metal fasteners and miscellaneous parts came to an end in five weeks, without a new contract, after a half-dozen other workers also crossed the picket line.

But Walton's dissatisfaction with the union, Local 1035 of the United Steelworkers, didn't end. It grew.

Finally, this summer his feelings motivated him to do something that had a far greater impact on the manufacturer and the union than crossing a picket line.

He got employees to sign a petition to the National Labor Relations Board, asking it to hold an election to decertify the union as the representative of the small firm's production workers.

The board did. And the vote was 11-6 in favor of cutting ties with the union.

That ended an estimated 37 years of representation by the Steelworkers. Mac-It was officially notified last week of the Aug. 23 election's results.

"Hopefully, everything will work out for the better," Walton said Friday. "I think it will be a change for the good."

Mac-It president Mike Stillman called the employees' action "a vote of confidence in me and my management team. They're taking a leap of faith that we're going to treat them well, like we always have."

Steelworkers spokesman Joe Pozza could not be reached for comment on the decertification vote, which is a rare event at unionized workplaces.

The key issue in the 2005 strike was the Steelworkers' desire to keep Mac-It a "closed shop," meaning hourly workers who were covered by the union contract had to be union members.

Management wanted to delete the "closed shop" provision, contending it caused some workers to leave Mac-It and made it hard to recruit new ones.

"We wanted people to have a choice," Stillman said. "This is America. People should have a choice."

Walton concurred with management. He wasn't happy that he had to join the Steelworkers.

He wasn't happy that 1.3 percent of his gross pay, including overtime and bonuses, was deducted for union dues.

And he wasn't happy that the union contract, not his productivity, set his pay, and that the contract, not his willingness to take initiative, set what tasks he could perform.

Now 23, the East Ross Street resident said his decision to launch the decertification effort was triggered by "a mixture of everything (involved in union representation)... The bad outweighed the good for me."

He went to a Web site of a "right to work" organization, which advocates for "open shops," meaning employees can choose whether to join a union.

There the McCaskey High School graduate learned how to get the NLRB to conduct a decertification election. As the law requires, he got employee signatures on a petition and gave it to the NLRB.

"I even asked the union guys (if they wanted to sign), because I didn't want any hard feelings," said Walton, who runs a computer numerical control machine and is taking evening classes to learn how to program it.

With the union decertified, Mac-It immediately gave workers a 1.5 percent raise, the increase they would have received over 2005 and 2006 had the company's contract offer been accepted by the Steelworkers.

Future raises will be determined by "annual reviews of everyone," Stillman said. "We'll look at everyone individually. That's the way it should be. People should be evaluated on their own merit, not as a group."

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