

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)
Maytag washer exhibition at the 1926 Industrial Exposition

Maytag Strike “Strike!”

That was the reaction from union workers at the Maytag Washing Machine Company plant in Newton in the spring of 1938.

In early May management at the plant posted a notice to employees that a 10 percent pay cut would soon take effect. The nation was still in the midst of the Great Depression, and Maytag families were more than a little unhappy about the news.

Union workers called for a sit-down strike—a relatively new strategy being utilized by dissatisfied workers all over the country. By staying at their work stations—or “sitting down” rather than walking out—strikers prevented owners from hiring strike breakers to come into the plant. The method had been successful in other strikes including one at the General Motors auto plant in Flint, Michigan, in 1936.

In Newton police reacted to the sit down strike by arresting some union leaders and charging them with kidnapping when they refused to let foremen and company officials leave the factory. But this didn’t stop resolute striking employees.

The strikers closed down the plant on May 9, and by late in July tempers were flaring. A fight broke out in the area around the plant when some of the striking employees had a change of heart and wanted to return to work. An “ugly mood” persisted amidst a mob of about 600—about 200 of whom were women—who milled about the blocks surrounding the plant. Sporadic fist

fighting grew in “volume and intensity.” When the “loyal employees” tried to enter the plant, pickets beat them back and into the arms of the local police who had been called to keep order.

Things took a turn when the National Guard troops appeared in their armored trucks and with bayonets fixed at the crowds—by order of Governor Nelson G. Kraschel. Throughout the night of July 21 the troops tried to keep order. However, 34 people were injured in the “free-for-all” street fighting—including 30 of the returning workers, one picketer, a police officer, and two special deputy sheriffs. One worker knocked unconscious from a blow to the head was sent to the hospital.

The National Guard formed lines across the street from the plant driving the crowd back from the ruckus. No autos were permitted within two blocks of the plant. National Guard troops were on duty in the county courthouse, and armored vehicles patrolled the streets. Town folk were prohibited from gathering, and loitering was forbidden. All club meetings were canceled, and even softball games were outlawed. While shops and theaters were open, the state liquor store was closed.

On August 3 workers said they would return to work with the pay cut in effect—but with the condition that they could recover lost wages if profits warranted such a move within the next two years.

It was reported that Maytag owner Fred Maytag II had this to say about his striking employees: “Apparently, our employees weren’t so happy as we thought!”

Sources

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