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Cover Story

Blaming the Workers until the Bitter End Company has a Long History of Not Being the Hostess with the Mostest A View from the Battlefield

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BC Editorial Board**

Hostess Bakeries was recently allowed to close its doors when mediation between the union and the company failed. In St. Louis, the company never really changed its image or racist practices in 40 years. The ITT conglomerate was hit by a boycott back in 1971 from ACTION, an interracial, direct-action protest organization. Because all the ACTION demands were never met, the boycott remained in effect.

There were three unions that represent the 18, 500 workers across the country. They are the Bakers, Confectionery, Tobacco and Grain Millers Union (BCTGM), United Food and Commercial Workers Union and the International Teamsters Union. Union workers stood tall and firm in their refusal to be intimidated by the bullying tactics of the company. They now all face unemployment.

When Hostess Brands announced it was seeking bankruptcy (again) in the midst of contract disputes with its union workers, the workers went on strike. To add insult to injury, the company announced it intended to pay \$1.75 million in bonuses to 19 of its executives. The company has been in bankruptcy for about eight years of the last decade. It had stopped paying into the workers' pensions, and decreased health benefits but seemed to be taking good care of its top execs.

Even as it was throwing the blame of the company's dismal future at the feet of the workers, Hostess had already given its executives pay

raises earlier this year. The CEO's salary tripled from \$750,000 to about \$2.5 million. This doesn't exactly sound like a company in financial trouble. It sounds more like a company who wants to maintain superprofits for the top execs and its shareholders on the backs of its workers.

Back in 1971, a boycott campaign against Hostess and Wonder Bread, led by Percy Green and ACTION, proved to be incredibly successful even without the internet and cell phones. Within a few months, stores had snatched Wonder Bread and Hostess products off their shelves. The protests and subsequent reactions dominated the local news for months.

Those brand names fell under ITT which stands for International Telephone and Telegraph. At one point the ITT portfolio included a number of seemingly unrelated industries such as bakeries, hotels, insurance companies and electronics for weapons of war.

The company brought out its few black employees as the front guard of their fight, including its PR man, Sam Wheeler, (former Harlem Globetrotters basketball player), who called the protest "black against black." The black drivers who received commissions from the sales of the delivered bakery products were encouraged by Wheeler to set up a protest at the ACTION headquarters. The drivers who were misled by the company apparently hadn't realized an important element of discrimination uncovered by ACTION: that the black drivers' routes included small black convenience stores while the white drivers got the big grocery chain stores.

When the company tactic to pit their black employees against ACTION didn't work, the corporation tapped into its buddies in higher places. Then Missouri Attorney General Jack Danforth filed an injunction and conspiracy suit against ACTION. The antitrust suit claimed that ACTION and Colonial Bread were in cahoots with one another to bring ITT Continental Bakeries down. Colonial Bread was Wonder Bread's competition and it became an unintended beneficiary of the ACTION boycott. It also became a surprised co-conspirator in the AG's anti-trust law suit.

This tactic backfired as well. It catapulted the conglomerate and all its dirty linen into the national spotlight for several years. It put the resources of a peer corporation into action (no pun intended) and forced the state attorney general's office to settle the suit that there was no wrong doing on Colonial's part.

The conglomerate became a target of antitrust groups but more volatile was being a target of the anti-war movement that prompted a national boycott of Wonder Bread with the slogan, "Don't Buy Bombs when You Buy Bread!" ITT's ugly ties to the CIA's topple of the democratically elected Chilean leader, Salvador Allende, were also uncovered during this time.

The historical struggle of workers against companies like Hostess is a testament that we must stay vigilant in our efforts to uphold racial and gender equality and pay equity, along with issues of worker safety and product quality. These greedy corporations don't get better with time. Let's make sure we are fighting for immediate victories for workers but also for worker security and rights that will endure well into the future.

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